Doctoral Dissertation

Digital Flea Markets in Post-Industrial Japan:
Anthropological Study of Insecure User-Workers and Their Survival

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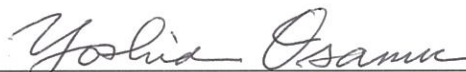of the Requirements for the Degree of
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This work is about precarity and digital media. I looked at precarious individuals' uses of a particular corner of the Japanese technosphere: digital flea markets (DFMs), and observed analogies with the users in my home country of Italy. I engineered a framework to explain how and why Japanese users engaged with these platforms in comparison to their Italian counterparts.

Previous studies have delved into the validity of such comparisons amontg the two countries (e.g. Beretta et al. 2014; Schulz 2014). As noted by Watanabe (2013), Italy and Japan both underwent explosive economic growth during the initial three decades of the post-war period, a phase that both countries commonly refer to as "booms." Starting from the early 1980s, the political elites of both nations initially exhibited restraint in implementing economic reforms that were being enacted by other neoliberal regimes, including deregulation and the privatization of public assets. During this time, both Italy and Japan shared certain characteristics, such as a relatively narrow income gap between different social classes. This was largely due to robust salary policies and a dense landscape of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

It is important to note that Italy and Japan also shared similarities in their political systems. Both countries grappled with comparable issues, including frequent scandals that led to government reorganizations and changes in leadership. These challenges caused public disapproval of the political elites in both nations, a sentiment exacerbated by the fact that the central political power in the post-war era was predominantly held by two major political entities: the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan and the Christian Democracy in Italy. The introduction of neoliberal economic reforms would have impacted such entrenched systems, potentially further diminishing the popularity of political parties adopting these reforms.

The burst of the 1990s economic bubble in Japan shattered the illusion that had enveloped the country's economy. This exposed many vulnerabilities, such as high labor costs and taxation, particularly in the context of an export-led growth strategy. Concurrently, Italy underwent similar phenomena during the same decade. Furthermore, a significant criminal investigation exposed an illicit contribution system that implicated all political parties constituting the government. The resulting economic instability fueled social unrest, prompting the elite classes in both countries to turn to neoliberal strategies as a response to mounting dissatisfaction. Within these analogous contexts, the number of precarious workers experienced an unprecedented surge.

Since the late 1970s, the emergence of unstable forms of employment and production catalyzed the attention of cross-disciplinary researchers. While its use among European critics of capitalism is much older, precarity became an umbrella term for the multifaceted struggles that emerged with the neoliberal economic order. Italian Marxian thinkers have debated precarity as early as the post-war era as the "stable instability" or "the secure insecurity." These concepts entered everyday Italians' conversations during the 1980s, and their diffusion peaked during mid-1990s, and they still come up in discussion about labor.

Although the two expressions are often interchangeable, and many scholars use them in this way, I prefer the latter terminology. This serves to differentiate the terms from other meanings associated with stability in economics and political science. I also find the word "stable" problematic in discourse about precarity due to its etymology, which implies

"immobility."[1] The word insecure,[2] on the other hand, better depicts the incapacity of control future that precariat experiences in fast-paced societies. If there is a feature self-evident of contemporary precarity, it is flexibility or adaptivity. It is this everchanging nature of precarity that makes it hard to comprehend.

Another struggle with conceptualizing precarity is coherently delineating it. The heterogeneity of definitions impacts the clarity of what is precariousness today. The same confusion muddles figures of precarious workers according to what categories are included by the samples of diverse studies (e.g., temporary workers, seasonal migrants, unregistered labor, unemployed, underemployed, and so forth). In fact, if some approaches consider contemporary precariousness as the "normal condition of the working class" (Moody 2017: Ch. 2-1), others see it as inextricably connected to current state of capitalism (e.g., Harvey 2005, Fumagalli 2015a), or even as an "instrument of governing" (Lorey 2015:1). Skeptics question the very existence of precarity or dismiss "the idea of increasing insecurity" since it "relies on an exaggeration of the amount of security enjoyed by earlier generations" (Fevre 2016: 237). All these points of view nonetheless recognize the growing number of people experiencing employment unpredictability, disproving the myth that precarity merely results from the market's evolution.

Over the course of a few years, precariousness has come to be more than a condition that part of the population or the workforce deals with. Precarity has become a state of mind, a transboundary status surpassing professional and economic life, and now enveloping the whole existential sphere. Where to live, what to study, what to produce and consume, when to reproduce are just examples of the ubiquity that precariousness took in modelling life. Influencing every decision that the contemporary workforce must face, precarity became the key component of the modern modus vivendi. To use Berardi's words, it became the "dark core capitalist production" (Berardi, 2009: 191). Standing (2014) refers to this idea of precarity as Italian (Standing 2014: 9), which may be why I find it natural to incorporate it into my approach.

Similarly, digital media has enveloped every aspect of human existence and capital worldwide promptly subjected them to its advantage. Neoliberal logics of profit have hijacked the original ideals of openness that characterized the internet in the 1990s. The Project Gutenberg, the first open-access digital library, was substituted by Amazon. Google obscured the suggestion forums in favor of its paying customers, and parts of Linux—an open-source operative system—were cannibalized by Apple's OSX. Digital capitalism has swiftly adapted to this rapacious way of doing business. Taking advantage of the unexplored corner of the market and the so-called deregulation policies, which Berardi notices being just regulation in favor of neo-liberal capital (Berardi 2009:186), digital industries continue to create new forms of exploitation.

In response to this trend, digital platforms have become spaces in which precariat interphase with other economic, social, and political actors. From an anthropological standpoint, it is hard to find any tool that has influenced practices and theories about the contemporary era as much as digitality. Here, these are intended as the whole system of apparatuses operating through information technologies: hardware and software.

"Sharing economy," "smart working," and "cryptocurrencies" are just some of the buzzwords floating around today's technosphere that randomly impact economic performance. Yet, they are not purely digital or off-line objects. Transcending their original, intended use there is a multilayered functioning beyond these phenomena' self-evident

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[1] From the Latin: *stare* and *stabilis*, not to move and to stand firm.

[2] From the Latin: formed by *im/in* (negational prefix) *securus* (*se* contraction of *sine* without and *cura* preoccupation/care, that do not require preoccupation); that always require/never cease to cause preoccupation.

features; a networked process emerged from and envelopping back the material life. In this in-betweenness precarity also manifest with new faces.

Online interactions and their dynamic bindings are made possible by the same technologies that enhance the informalization of employment at the disadvantage of the workers. The so-called gig economy promoted a trend of unprotected piecework for services that time-based employment had replaced for a long time. While it allowed keeping fragments of all the productive sectors, particularly the tertiary, active during the 2020-21's pandemic, remote employment came under scrutiny with the accuse of fueling mental health problems and alienation. Criminal organizations benefited immensely from the untraceable trades made possible by bitcoin and similar digital currencies.

These are just a few examples of how, not the technology itself, but rather the humans engaging with these convoluted artifacts produce intricate byproducts. People work to improve and further develop these digital tools that, in turn, connect with every sphere of human existence.What seems not to change is the human tendency to regroup and fragment. This tribalistic drive is still in us, highlighted as never before through digital media. On the web, all types of communities, subreddits, forums, or clubs separate themselves from others similar in everything but a few infinitesimal differences. The digital sea shattered in virtually infinite micro-islands. Thanks to learning machine algorithms, the more we search for specific queries, the more groups will emerge and, consequently, the deeper our often-marginal dissimilarities will appear.

This fragmentation is enthralling for an anthropologist. The millions of communities out there are just waiting for exploration. Moreover, the openness of the media drastically lowers the necessary conditions for engagement with those communities. My thesis argues that in the ontological instability of postindustrial economies, precarious individuals seek a sense of permanence—or an illusion of permanence—in the networks that surround us and their structure in particular digital technologies. While, for several decades, personal and professional networks provided an efficient compass for individuals' identities, today the de-structuration of labor and the following destabilization of private sphere necessitates that the same individuals look elsewhere for confirmations about their own persona. All this happens while they still scout for a professional identity they consider significant. Essentially, I believe many are revisiting digital platforms to overcome their identification with precarity and, thus, renegotiate their own identity within those digital locales as users while providing their labor. Doing so, they update their identities from workers and from users to a new, intermingled identity of user-worker. By "user-workers," I refer to the masses of users who engage with digital platforms with the conscious or unconscious commitment to creating income.

1-1: Statement of the Problem

Japan's economy has undergone a transformative journey over the course of three decades after the burst of the economic bubble in the 1990s, a phenomenon that wielded profound societal changes. The ranks of Japanese individuals engaged in non-standard labor arrangements expanded exponentially, ascending from fewer than nine million to an excess of 19 million by 2014 (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2014), cresting at nearly 22 million in 2019 (Ministry of Health and Labor, 2019). Simultaneously, the configuration of precarious laborers underwent a substantial metamorphosis. Although historical data had consistently showcased that since the mid-1960s, married women constituted nearly 70% of the contingent in precarious employment within Japan, the overarching escalation in the collective of precarious labor delineated a conspicuous shift. Specifically, the count of males occupying vulnerable occupational roles burgeoned by 300% relative to the statistics from

1985, whereas the contingent of female non-standard laborers expanded by approximately 150%.

In the Italian context, the encroachment of precarity upon the labor market has older origins. As affirmed by the Italian Institute for Statistics (Istat), the proliferation of irregular laborers started back in the 1970s, and since then had a perpetually oscillating trajectory (Istat, 2017). By 2022, this trajectory reached an apex, even amid the relatively optimistic economic landscape (Istat, 2022). It is imperative to acknowledge that the internal schisms within Italy, demarcating the gaps between the Southern and Northern regions of the nation, wield a pivotal influence in shaping the composition of the domestic precarious laborers.

In this climate of growing precarization, many insecure workers have turned to side gigs and precarious forms of self-employment. The expansion of digital services and the rise of the reuse culture, fostered by the so called "sharing economy", have coincidentally provided them with ample opportunities to easily trade products. Both Italy and Japan have witnessed explosive growth in digital sales through platforms specializing in the exchange of secondhand products—though not exclusively thanks to this category of recycled goods.

Statistics pertaining to the digital precariat, referring to individuals who employ digital platforms to supplement their insufficient analog income, remain sparse and fragmented in the context of DFMs. The primary explaination behind this scarcity lies in the heterogeneous nature of the individuals engaged with these platforms, as well as in the privacy agreements that often veil the users' data within these digital enterprises. Interestingly, publicly traded platforms facilitating secondhand digital trade tend to be relatively forthcoming about their general data –particularly in instances where positive outcomes are observed. While a single study may fall short of offering a comprehensive understanding of the intricate and multifaceted realm of the digital resellers' community, a focused endeavor can contribute to the delineation of certain user profiles recurrently associated with these practices.

In the early stages of my 2019 study, I engaged in a conversation with an employee representing one of Japan's prominent DFMs during a company seminar. The discourse revealed they approximated "professional sellers" being anywhere from 10% to 20% of the total user base. In a similar vein, the chairman of Italian largest DFM conveyed comparable figures in 2018 at an event hosted by Confcommercio, Italy's preeminent business association, and added that thanks to the platforms many had renewed their professional self. Intriguingly, despite these congruent perspectives and the heightened discourse surrounding the sharing economy, a notable gap persists, and the the lack of scientific research investigating these sellers within either of the countries is now evident.

DFMs introduce an additional complexity when aiming to conduct a study of "professional" sellers. Unlike platforms that oversee the interactions between service providers and clients—think Uber or TaskRabbit—where roles are readily distinguishable within a worker-consumer framework, the delineation of roles on DFMs is notably less distinct. Within this ecosystem, those who self-identify as "professional" sellers can seamlessly transition into the role of buyers, using the earnings garnered from their own sales to purchase new items. Moreover, the distinction between private and professional realms is further blurred by the convergence of domestic spaces in which personal and business activities predominantly unfold. This conflation of user and worker identities adds an intricate layer to the very quandary I am seeking to unravel in this context. The spheres of private and professional life seem to be undergoing a reconfiguration within a singular existential space akin to the pre-industrial revolution era—a space where the lives of user-workers unfold today.

Considering the observations made, three primary issues come to light. Firstly, there exists a significant gap in our comprehensive understanding of the composition of

professional users within the realm of DFMs. Secondly, there is a pressing need for a systematic analysis to discern the motivations driving their involvement in such trading activities as professional engagement. Lastly, a conspicuous concern arises from the emergence of an undefined and precarious identity stemming from their concurrent roles as both workers and consumers within these platforms. Even though majority of my initial observations were derived by Japanese informants I have virtually everytime encountered analogous cases in Italy without the need to squeeze my informants in a comparative binomial. This last observation might suggest an interesting universalization of the forms of precarity which a comparative study might help illustrate.

1-2: Objective of the Study

This work is about precarity in Japan and how it can be understood comparatively to precarity in Italy. To be more specific: the focus is on the intricate relationships that emerged and are still evolving among precariat and digital media, as well whether this engagement can be qualified as labor. Departing from the problems I observed I have set a quatripartite objective for this study.

The first objective is comprehending the makeup of the digital resellers as it holds the potential to illuminate their motivations, particularly concerning the professional identities they strive to assess. Exploring their composition in its entirety and subcategories can provide insight into the driving factors behind their engagement in these activities and the construction of their professional personas.

Additionally, I aim to investigate whether the transactions conducted by these resellers accentuate the existing disparity in wealth distribution, amplifying the extraction of resources from already financially insecure individuals towards a diminishing fraction of capital owners. This inquiry is central to my research agenda, as it delves into the economic implications of informants' practices.

Furthermore, it is imperative to delve into the self-perception of users who participate in these practices. Understanding the extent to which they consider themselves "professionally" engaged offers a glimpse into their individual perspectives on the nature of their involvement and its role in their overall livelihood. This also provides me with the chance to discuss what "professional" identity came to signify in the context of the sharing economy and within the labor dynamics of postindustrial Japan and Italy.

Lastly, a pertinent discourse emerges concerning the role adopted by these traders within the framework of these platforms. This necessitates an evaluation of whether they actively contribute as stakeholders to the broader accumulation of wealth facilitated by these platforms or whether they are mere subjects of a newly emerged form of economic exploitation. This multifaceted inquiry demands nuanced consideration, encapsulating various dimensions integral to the contemporary landscape of digital commerce and its intersect with labor dynamics.

This blend of social insecurity and digitality is also worth paying attention in its messy entirety. From precarity combined with the tech, new forces emerge to resist the contemporary logic of accumulation. In practice, these can become disabling and enabling energies used to carry those whom one would expect to struggle the most on a path for redefining themselves or to new toils. These are not just anecdotal stories of entrepreneurial success or individual failure. On the contrary, I believe there is a pattern. In some cases, this leads to personal requalification, which is accessible thanks to new information, means, and openness of rediscussing social order. Nevertheless, at the same time, new traps are laid ahead on the ways that promise success and wealth. These are part of critical, collective experiences shared through those digital realities that need to be documented.

That is not to say that the era of capitals polarization that perpetuates classes inequalities is over, but rather, that those who were more penalized by it are now reacting. The hyper-flexibilization of the working class created a hyper-flexible virtual worker. This new actor is trying to grapple with issues coming forward despite all the forces at work against their interest. The precariat, sadly, erased many of the class differences in a downward spiral that unite lower and middle class – or the little part that remains of it; however, as a social actor, the resilience that this group shows is worth recording and exploring from a perspective of anthropology.

1-3 Research Questions

It would be impossible to delineate not only an appropriate genealogy of the digital resellers but to articulate any speculation about their practices without a general comprehension of the profiles of members active on the DFMs. These typifications are imperfect categories, nonetheless helpful to understand broader and multileveled problems. I aim to focus on those users for which digital trades provides essential income – or what they describe as such. As discussed, the exponential rise of precarious digital workers has drastically complicated the the composition of this group. Japan and Italy's traditional employment architectures, which mainly consisted in one job for person often primary provider for a nuclear family, are disappearing. These structures have been consistently comparable since the post-war period, but it is now uncertain if modern changes have altered their similarity. The role that members had within that family, for example, are also quickly shifting toward new paradigms of insecure labor and DFMs might play a role in this type of change. My first set of research questions are sequential to these key observations and aim to provide a first general picture of those who compose "professional" users of the DFMs and how these individuals compare in the context of Italy and Japan.

This general understanding can help me to move the discussion inward to tackle the users' degree of agency in relation to the platforms. With this I intend to investigate to what extent is the engagement fruitful or exploitative for the informants. I will focus on what role the traders hold not only within the DFMs but also in the communities they belong. Furthermore, there should be attention on how these roles mutate among informants' profiles and subgroups. Lastly, while I intend to focus on their productive identity (i.e. their self-idealization as workers) I also would like to explore the particular significance, if any, that DFMs related activities have in their personal sphere, such as mental, emotional or social wellbeing.

In conclusion, I aim to delve into the hybrid nature of the user-workers' activities and compare them to contemporary theories of production systems and labor, particularly within the framework of biocognitive capitalism. This exploration seeks to illuminate the intricate interplay between digital trading activities and broader socio-economic structures, emphasizing the need to situate these practices within the context of evolving modes of labor and production.

To address these issues I built a set of questions. Who comprises the Japanese digital precariat, and how do these individuals compare to their Italian counterparts? What type of impacts do ages and classes have on their digital engagement? What is their role within the digital economy and their relationship with digital enterprise? Does their use of the DFMs characterize as cognitive labor?

These questions stand as fundamental pursuits aligned with the objectives outlined for this study. They have acted as guiding threads, preventing me from navigating aimlessly through the intricate paths of semi-structured interviews. Additionally, there are sub-questions that have been explored to varying degrees within the chapters. These inquiries

delve into what factors influence individuals in adopting or rejecting roles within DFMs, how disparities manifest across genders and age groups, how they establish connections with fellow users, and what defines their understanding of profit. While there are numerous other avenues worth exploration, some have been set aside to ensure coherence within the present work, with the optimism that they may pave the way for future research endeavors.

1- 4 Literature review

I will discuss the literature most relevant to this work, along with a condensed genealogy of essential issues. This task, which should be linear, became a tripartite analysis. It is, in fact, necessary to address three different sources. First, there are studies about precarity and precariat, along with essential political discourses on the subject. Second, there are publications about media and technology within media studies and anthropology. Third, there is an emerging literary corpus which speculates over the connections between technologies, digital economy, and the new forms of precarity.

References that organically explore the relationship between precarious individuals and the digital media have been scarce until recently. While empirical data and quantitative analysis about unstable workers and IT usage are abundant in both academia and institutional records, qualitative data are often missing. Official statistics and figures can offer points of reflection but are often lacking speculative connections among the datasets.

Likewise, until recently in academia, particularly within humanities, there has been a predilection for treating precarity and media separately rather than for their correlation (Dahlgren 2009). For example, explorations about regional or culture-based experiences tangential in one way or another to precarity are copious and meaningful. The same can be said about indigenous uses of digital media that for a long-time attracted transdisciplinary scholars' interest. These studies are essential steps in a discourse about technology and citizenship, now moving at a fast pace. This tradition is naturally taken into great consideration in the present work; nonetheless, the scarcity of organic deepening about precarity within digital ecosystem is troubling.

Another usual setting in academia has been to look at precarious agency and identity in tandem. These scholars focus on the relationship of the precariat and digital media through identity frameworks such as race, gender, and ethnicity rather than class (Mirchandani 1999, cf. Larson 2019). Their work remains important in its own cosmos; however, it lacks the holistic ambition of looking at precariat as a group, sometimes playing along with an underlying logic of "divide and conquer" that further benefits higher classes.

In the first section, I will discuss the literature deployed about precariat. Studies about insecurity and political analysis about Japan and Italy will be central. Before that, I will dive into the discourse regarding "precarious work" that started in Italy during the 1950s and spilled over the contemporary debate about private, public, cultural, and moral spheres (Muehlebach 2012). Then, I will try to pinpoint similarities and differences from the Japanese counterparts based on qualitative data, since, as mentioned, it has been explored often through quantitative data (e.g., Watanabe 2013). In doing so, I took upon the stream of theories I felt more appropriate to tackle present issues such as social immobility (Ishida 2010), the shift in the employment paradigm (Osawa and Kingston 2015), and precarization of the workforce in Japan (Allison 2015).

In the second section, I will explore the existing literature about media and culture. There are countless valuable contributions surrounding technology and society. From Polanyi (2014 [1973]) to McLuhan (1975), from Baudrillard (1988) to Appadurai (1994), from Bauman (1998) to Agamben (2004), many speculated ahead of time about the new man, the *homo digitalis*. Diverging visions of the challenge this evolution meant appeared

since the 1990s, and the internet merged with social became the arena for articulate and innovative and democratic discourse (Formenti 1999, cf. Castel 2000 [1995]) and a dangerous locum to cast the workers into absolute silence and drown them into the digital realities (Virno 1995; Turkle 1995). Other scholars explored the impact of early digital technologies, their cultural value as artifacts (Ginsburg et al. 2002), and their fetishization and de-fetishizing agencies (Miller 2003). At ease with deploying the traditional toolset in new scenarios, anthropology has given numerous contributions to this discourse.

In the third section, I will look at the studies about socio-cultural architecture existing between precarious individuals and digital platforms. With few exclusions, these sources are relatively recent and, for the most part, the products of sociology. Only after the 2010s, academia's interest consistently drifted, yanked by the economic and political centrality that digital media took in the last decade. Books and collections of essays continued to appear in recent years and are very much advancing the ongoing debates about working conditions, digital citizenship, and social technosphere. Their contribution is immense, and this study deeply relies on their progress. This is so with particular emphasis on the renegotiated agency of precariat (Briziarelli 2018), the valuable heuristic about precarity (Kergel and Heidkamp 2017a), and the new manifestations of the self in the counter-cultural spheres (Fader 2017).

1-4-1 Literature on Precarity

The current theories about precarity are deeply intertwined with the history of Italian Marxism, and especially *operaismo* (workerism) and *autonomismo* (autonomism). The use of the word *precario* (precarious) as "temporary" or "for concession" in Italian Law canonized its association with the idea of unstable work contracts. After the second world war, the term gained centrality in the discourse about labor and power dynamics.

Early mentions about *instabilità cronica* (chronic instability), *lavoro flessibile* (flexible job) and *precarietà permanente* (permanent precarity) can be dated back to the Italian political discourse of the early1950s. Through the 1960s–1970s, another important contribution came by Italian political underground publications debating frameworks and definitions for proletarian class and productive labor (Wright 2017 [2002] cf. Thoburn 2003: 73). Among the clandestine pamphlets, collections of essays, and independent publications some arrived at uncontested relevance, like the *Quaderni Rossi* (Red Notebook, e.g., Tronti 1962 cf. Wright 2017 [2002]). These works will prove themselves crucial to unorthodox groups such as the anarcho-communist *Precari Nati* (A-Infos Project 1996; 2004; 2019) and exquisite thinkers of the likes of Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 469–472; 571).

Starting in the mid-1970s with the expression *lavoro precario* (precarious work) Italians introduce several types of semi-regulated and unregulated forms of employment (Betti 2018). Following Tronti canonical work, *Operai e Capitale* (2013 [1971]), Italian *autonomismo* developed the theory of the *emarginati* (socially outcast/marginalized), a mass of individuals unable to stably enter or return to the working class (Thoburn 2003). In the early 1980s, the expression *precariato* became common among Italian trade unionists (Wacquant 2022: 162-168).

While *emerginati* is not the earliest mention of non-employed proletariat group (e.g., lumpenproletariat), *automismo* highly focused on them, and on the Italian autonomist collective, *Autonomia Operaia*. This faction often held position in conflict with the Italian Communist Party (PCI), mostly for the unquestioned support offered to the Russian Politburo (Scroccu 2012). This disagreement was also explained with what the autonomists considered a dismissal by the PCI of the struggles of the *emarginati*. The merging of Catholic elements, such as charity and pauperism along with Trotskian ideas of limited property and

micro-administration, within *autonomismo* (Sapelli 1986 cf. Negrello 2004) might have provided a fertile substrate for autonomists' insistence on *emarginati*.

The expression *proletariato precario* (precarious proletariat) emerged from those criticisms of the institutionalized Marxism and shaped a class idea in Italy that transcended the economic and productive life, spilling later in the international debate. The argument that French sociologists coined the present use of the term precariat (as in Standing 2011) often overlooks the critical influences that leading figures of the Italian *operaismo* exercised in France's political and economic debate since the late Sixties and through the 1980s (La Repubblica, 2007 cf. Deleuze 2003). Nonetheless, the French tradition can be credited for having popularized and clarified the use of the term besides the Marxist rhetoric. Incrementally, Guattari and Delueze (1987), Bourdieu (1998), Castel (2000[1995]; 2001; 2011), among many other scholars, refined and expanded the enquiries and methodology deployed regarding precariat and present economy.

Operaismo influences continued shaping essential debates on contemporary capitalism, logic of production, and precarity. Particularly relevant to this study are the incalculable contributions made by the scholars that focused on cognitive capitalism like Moulier-Boutang, Vercellone, and Fumagalli. Cognitive capitalism is a production regime in which labor subjected to capital exploitation is primarily carried on cognitively. The concept emerged from a series of diverse work during the early 2000s in France during a laboratory coordinated by Paulré (2000 cf. Fumagalli 2019a: 73). In many cases, these scholars composed their positions under the influence of Moulier-Boutang (2002), Vercellone (2005), Lebert and Vercellone (2006), Fumagalli (2010) and in collaboration with the French regulation school and Italian operaists (e.g., Lazzarato and Moulier-Boutang 2002; Fumagalli and Mezzadra 2008; Negri and Vercellone 2008; Fumagalli and Morini 2013).

The evolution of Japanese Left thought is not as linear as its Italian counterpart. Consequently, observation of the precariat class was not as radicalized until the post-bubble era. Unlike Italy, where a substantial part of the non-institutional Left recognized itself in the *operaismo*, Japan's extra-parliamentary Marxism had multiple souls since the postwar era (Price 1997). Nevertheless, similarities with Italy existed: the Trotskyan imprint of the anti-Stalinism; adoption of Luxemburgist elements; and the criticisms toward the national Communist Party (Suga 2003). On top of these issues, New Left flew national flags such as the destitution of the Imperial Family and the reappropriation of Japanese soil that had been occupied by American troops.

The causes behind this multifaceted nature are hardly identifiable. Among other reasons, Andrews (2016: 79-80) traces it back to the internal struggle that characterized the *Zengakuren* (Union of All Students) movement to the 1960s, then exacerbated in the conflicts among *Kakumaru-ha* and *Chukaku-ha*. Hasegawa (2018) agrees on this but articulates his analysis on the emergence of the new Japanese middle-class. As pointed out by the same scholar (Hasegawa 2006), the distance that many "petty bourgeois" activists held to the productive segment of the workforce dissociated them from the internal discourse within the rural and industrial Japanese proletariat (Hasegawa 2018: 9, 13-44). The exasperated debate was directed internally to the movement and based on ideological and theoretical issues rather than practical matters. These matters were often very abstract, codified on symbolism and representation, and far removed from working class' struggles (e.g., Marotti 2013, in part. 37-73); however, this does not imply that Japanese radicals lacked a political stance on precarious work before the bubble era. Mentions of *hiseikikoyō* (unregular employment) and *shūshoku hyōgaki* (lit. ice age of employment) are traceable in New Left discourses since the late 1960s (Suga 2003). Yet, the struggles of daily workers and the underemployed were part of a phraseology rather than a central point.

With a few exceptions (e.g., Kariya 1991), discourse about precarious work did not penetrate the socio-economic debate until the mid-1990s, from which point the publication on the topic exploded (Cook, 2013). Observations about freeters and NEETs became common topoi for Japanese sociology, psychology, and education. Allison's (2013) pervasive work documented the heterogeneity existing within the Japanese precariat. The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) indicates that during the Koizumi administration (2001–2006), the number of precarious workers increased dramatically (JILPT, 2017). In the case of men, it almost doubled (Cook 2013).

The conditions of insecurity were unquestionably not all created by the 2004's Worker Dispatch Act. Osawa and Kim (2010) observed that imbalances between supply and demand on the labor-market, concerted through fiscal benefit, became institutional frameworks for the "deregulation" (*hiseikika*) of the Japanese workforce, in particular through its emphasis on the *jikosekinin* (individual responsibility). Again, Osawa et al. (2012) indicate that articulated in neoliberal terms, "*jikosekinin* actually means that when you are in trouble, you are on your own" (310). It is possible to notice how discourse about socio-economic insecurity emerged vigorously in Japan, the one about adultness (Cook, 2013) and masculinity (e.g., Dasgupta 2003, 2004; Gill 2001, 2012; Cook 2016) tagged along. This correspondence between adulthood and self-sufficiency is still a perpetual argument in conversations with precariat and insecure workers.

About 10,000km from Tokyo, in 2004, Berlusconi's era was inaugurated with the promise of a liberal revolution (il Fatto Quotidiano 2014) that was accompanied by the extreme precarization of the workforce. That year's Biagi Law and the revision of the Art. 30 from the Worker Rights Chart removed most of the guarantees the Italian workforce obtained in the late 1960s. Publications about precariat as a class and precarious work as a phenomenon frequently appear in Europe and Italy (Pulignano 2017). Together with the dissolution of the welfare state established during the Fordist era, neoliberal regimes vastly modified the Italian social fabric (Standing 2011: 9).

In this climate, Andrea Muehlebach (2012) explores the emergence of a new type of ethos established on moral order. In Italy, this replaces the welfare leveraging on both the Catholic and Marxist values and deploying a thick network of volunteers' associations (*volontariato*). In a post-industrial Italy that Muehlebach describes as in a process of industrial desertification (Sapelli 2018), this welfare in the making can appeal to "Catholic cultural materials … [and] key terms in the Socialist repertoire" (Muehlebach 2012: 59). The central and local governments profoundly regulate the matter and, by doing so, take advantage of micro-social dynamics and personal values to further the dismissal of the public social security system. The required exhibit of virtue the citizens *must* engage with enable the neoliberal governance to sign away responsibilities. Muehlebach speculates on the moral nature of what Barbara Cruikshank calls technology of citizenship (1999), "discourses, programs, and other tactics aimed at making individuals politically active and capable of self-government" (1–2). In the Italian case, functioning individuality within a community is recognized only through the "acceptance of personal debt to others" (Muehlebach 2012: 41–2). To fulfill the duties prescribed by this ethical citizenship, precarized residents recur to "dispersed acts of heroism" (43) through altruism and activism within "sacred social" (81). What Muehlebach described is what I call qualificative agency: a qualifying set of actions used to self-determine authenticity as a member of the community, a group, or a class. It is neither "to be is to do" or "to do is to be." In the neoliberal regimes, "to be you *must* do." I will return to this in detail, but I think this concept is partially the code to crack the Japanese precariat as well. It proved essential to frame anecdotal experiences collected in this work. Also, its emphasis on identity through agency mirrors the corpus of studies about adulthood and masculinity in Japan.

It is interesting to note how the precarization of the workforce in Italy happened simultaneously with the deregulation going on in Japan. At the center of these mutations there is probably the diminishing importance of unions in both countries, which was likely worse for Japan (Imai 2011 cf. Watanabe 2013: 66 100). Watanabe's excellent dive into the dynamics that made such disparate nations have so much in common suggests to me that similarities in the relations of unions and enterprises, employers, and employees produced similar outcomes. I call this non-confrontational sociality, and it appears vivid in some interviews of the Japanese and Italian precariat. However, European debate about precariat inherits aspirations and rhetoric from Italian and French radical Marxism, as well as the Frankfurt School. On the other hand, Japanese discourse draws deeply from contemporary American academic and political forum, mostly ignoring the tradition set by intellectuals of the New Left. And instead, it is worth noting that certain public figures, who are difficult to classify strictly as activists, commentators, or intellectuals, have harshly criticized Japanese Left from a quasi-postideological standpoint (Amamiya 2014; Toyama 2018). These differences are essential elements to keep in mind when trying to discern the diverse natures of Japanese and Italian experiences of precarity.

1-4-2: Literature on Media

With the ambition of efficiently deploying theories about media comes the necessity of summarizing essential works that set the standards for this domain. Pertierra (2018) provides a detailed chronology of the prominent academic discourses about media in which anthropological methods have served as a compass. Her manual is also a guiding light on the rather complex relationship that exists between anthropology and other sciences which engage with those media. Pertierra looks at the liminal territory that anthropology has explored within cultural studies and sociology, as well as with media studies, computer engineering, and human-computer interactions (HCI). Her work is notable for the lucidity of analyzing the back and forth of theories, underlining the reciprocity of approaches, and helping to visualize a trajectory for future media scholars.

Studies about digital media and information technologies were late to bloom within humanities, an element that complicated the integrations within this subfield. This negligence is ascribable to the rigid legacy of many scholars within the fields to overlook new means of communication (Slevin 2000, ch.1). Among anthropologists, in spite of the great attention dedicated to artifacts and fetishes, early mass media studies exploring this analogy suffered from a dismissive attitude of many orthodox scholars. The hesitation itself in engaging with technology and media has been discussed before (O'Regan 1990; Morley 1992; Martin-Barbero 1993; Slevin 2000). This unfortunate stance continued until the late-1980s within anthropology despite the traditional interest in translation, canonization, and communications regarding myths in particular (Spitulnik 1999), examples of which are abundant in all modern media.

This does not mean that anthropologists ignored media in their entirety before the 1980s; notable exceptions that focused on the entertainment media (e.g., Powdermaker 1947; 1950; Morin 1956; 1962) existed and are now well documented (Silverman 2007; also, in Pertierra 2018). Rather, it means that within mainstream academia, instead of being the center of anthropological explorations, means of communication sit in the background, occasionally glanced at for holistic purposes.

With the interest that the media started attracting from exponents of sociology and political science, anthropology and cultural studies scholars also devoted themselves to the topic. Micheals (1986) and Kottak's (2009 [1990]) ethnographies on the deployment of visual media are two of the best early examples of how the energies that from anthropology

started converging over the subject of media usage. The latter work especially sets its core not on what media are but what media do, anticipating by more than a decade what would become one of anthropology's trends in media studies and establishing interesting precedents on the use of both qualitative and quantitative data.

It is not a coincidence that while other disciplines start adopting ethnographic methods (I.A. Ang 1991; Moorley 1992; Moores 1993) and making innovative use of them, anthropologists expanded their horizons. The ethnographic turn played a major role in helping anthropology update its toolkit (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2015) and seize the chances provided by the hybridity that comes with ethnographic approaches. Through ethnographies, the gap between anthropology and cultural studies shrunk rapidly during the 1990s. Both sciences mutually benefitted from focusing on the centrality that audiovisual media occupied in daily life cross-culturally (Miller 1992; Ginsburg 1993; Larkin 1997).

It was not long before, pointing to the already abundant publications, Debra Spitulnik (1993) appealed for the creation of an "anthropology of mass media" Entertainment and educational uses, along with indigenous media consumption and production, became the central focus of many media anthropologists and cultural studies scholars (e.g., the now canonical *Media World* by Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin, published in 2002).

When the internet "became a thing," these approaches were the first to be deployed in examining the use of this new media (Postill 2009). Starting from the mid and late 1990s, studies settled exclusively around cyber and digital experiences emerged (Ito 1997; Miller and Carrier 1998; Hakken 1999). Collectively, these types of work pushed all media into discourses about how different cultures make use of such media and how cultures change in contact with these means of communication.

Since the early 2000s, the ubiquity of digital technology has brought media to the center of various investigations. During these early stages, digital anthropology established itself as a branch of media anthropology (Miller 2017). Also, within what Pertierra (2018) defined as "the first generation of internet studies," two essential points of view emerged. The first was optimistic, suggesting that the internet liberated media production and technology. The second vision, which was more "pessimistic" proposed that realities were bonding themselves to pseudo-living experiences (Pertierra 2018: ch. 4:2).

Both these judgments became marginal when, not the media consumption, but rather the users and the role those media hold in everyday life rose to the center of anthropologists' interest. Early traces of this framework are observable in Postil's (2011) ethnography set in Subyang Jaya, Malesia during the local government's development of digital infostructure. Analyzing the intricate web of agents operating, Postill observes what he refers to as "the field of residential affairs." The work dives into the way "variously positioned field agents and agencies in Subang Jaya (residents, politicians, committees, councillors, journalists, and others) compete and cooperate over matters concerning the local residents, often by means of the Internet" (xii). Postill (2011: 101–110) elevates the discussion, particularly when observing the different types of sociality that emerged within the digital project and their manifestation in real life, a dichotomy that "cannot be reduced to a community vs. network binary" (Postill 2011: 102). This attention to the performative aspect of social engagement offers substantial support for the ethnographer that aims to frame social agencies that reside "in-between" the digital and off-line sphere. For example, within the committee in charge of discussing issues in the fieldsite, the passage from off-line sociality, where the face–to–face conversation is held, is harmonized with the digital one, where digital materials and information that improve that conversation are shared. Postill's insights about sociality and the field in-between digital and off-line lives are valuable tools when working with structured networks and their communities.

Other vital perspectives emerged at the start of the second decade of the 2000s as it became apparent that social networks had swallowed people's everyday lives independently from nationality, class, and gender. Daniel Miller's extensive work on consumption (1995; 1998; 2012) gave him indisputable expertise for observing the consumer's shift to the user. Correctly rejected the "passive" idea of consumption (2012 [1995]), Miller seemed to move on looking at the activities in which that individuality can manifest and is persevered, first and foremost digitally (e.g., Miller 2011). This etymological liminality—someone who consumes is someone who uses—is more visible than ever embodied in the consumers-users. Digital-flea markets offer a clear example in this sense. Consumer-users' exchange capacity intertwined with their ethical performance is embedded in their profile through the mutual exchange of secret evaluations becoming visible only post-transaction.

Another important step in formulating methods for digital ethnographers has been set by Nardi (2010). In her work about *World of Warcraft,* she argues that digital realities became "an active aesthetic experience… a new visual-performative medium" through which digitalization of the individual happens (Nardi 2010: 7). The reciprocal engagement among players, essential in creating the virtual community, is a key element to keep in mind. It influences not only that virtual experience but also the peripheries of that experience: social associations, economic exchanges, and real-life interactions. Nardi also expands on a point critical to my work: digital interactions do not limit or depower the off-line interactivity for which humans are coded. The "media stereotypes about games centered on themes such as addiction and lonely kids with no friends" (Nardi 2010: 21) are not only questioned but disproved by the abundance of contrasting data Nardi presents.

When it comes to methodology, Boelstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Tailor (2012) provided insightful perspectives on how to carry on ethnographies in digital settings. The frequent reminders of considering participant observation as "the embodied emplacement of the researching self in a fieldsite as a consequential social actor" (Boelstorff et al.: 66) are beneficial. The weight is on looking out for the self that embodies experiences enveloped in the field, also in the case of virtuality. The body is not simply left home. It is dissolved and recreated in cyberspace. The importance of sharing the physical space localization with the community in the analysis is no disregarded. This element dismisses the criticism directed at digital ethnography about geo-positional irrelevance. Equally, the reproachment against passiveness is also answered. The consideration of the ethnographer as a consequential actor, thus an active and reactive member in the fieldwork, is in line with traditional anthropological methods. Thus, the essential difference for the digital ethnographers is only in the setting, an "extended fieldwork" in which the "virtual embodiment" is not a simple double of the material one but a concrete extension of it (Boelstorff et al.:69–70). The text highlights the differences brilliantly and those elements that persist within digital and traditional fieldwork.

1-4-3: Literature on technologies, digital economy, and the new form of precarity

The propulsive push that IT science and digital media gave to economies is a subject widely explored. Since the early 2000s, publications about the dawn of new economic order are abundant – in political economy and sociology in particular (Carr 1999; Brynyolfson and Kahin 2000; Varian 2000; Sharma & Gupta 2003; Takaya 2007).

Also, in this case, pessimistic and optimistic approaches often clashed according to the arguments up for discussion (Somma 2019). If it is true that the digital economy transnationally and transculturally allowed for incredible stories of success, it is also true that the spillover effects on the lowest strata of the workforce carried harsh consequences (Woodcock and Graham 2019). The mutation of semi-structured and unstructured labor

assumed a new shape when the so-called "sharing economy" rapidly liquified the last residues of social contracts existing between workers and capital (Prassl 2018). This melting meant the casualization of the work, a subject that has gradually taken a central spot in the discussion about contemporary sociality.

Within sharing economy, other "new economies" (e.g., digital economy, on-demand economy, gig-economy) emerged, rarely meaning good news for the workers. Among others, Chamoux' series on the digital era (2017; 2019; 2022) widely explores the multifaced nature of digital economy. The second volume (Chamoux 2019) discusses intermediary economy, platform economy, and data economy. In the text Grumbach (2019: 67) can be envisioned as natural steps "heralding a new world" over the neoliberal path toward the omni-inclusive *i-conomy,* which happen to be synchronic with digital improvement (Kergel and Heidekamp 2017b: 99-114).

Within anthropology, the lack of a coherent study on precariat relations to digital media, or vice versa, is stupefying. This can be explained by the holistic ambitions that anthropologists traditionally cultivate, thus the desire to portray communities in their multifaced totality. It is also fair to point to the fact that recent ethnographies regarding the use of SNS and digital media are somewhat haunted by the presence of precariat and insecure individuals, evident in the *Why We Post?* publications coordinated by Daniel Miller for the Global Social Media Impact Study (e.g., Nicolescu 2016). Nonetheless, exclusive study about precarity in the digital ecosystem of postindustrial economies seems to have been regrettably neglected in the field.

Despite the limited number of resources within anthropology, the precarization of work in the digital economy has been widely articulated across disciplines. The wide deployment of anthropological toolsets, theories, and frameworks that have animated the studies since their surfacing is also a proof of the important contribution that anthropology can add to these discourse. Polanyi's embeddedness and Lévi-Strauss's work on signifiers, narrative, and myth creation are just a few examples of concepts percolated from anthropology on the subject of the digital economy and precarity.

Furthering the dismantling of the traditional work structure through the abdication of employment responsibilities and the erosion of interpersonal relationships is another criticism from different branches of science that persisted against digital capitalism since its early stages (Turkle 1995 cf. Somma 2019). The subjects of deification of digital entrepreneurs (Harju and Moisander 2014; Harju 2016) and digitality have been floating underneath the surface of study on the subject for a long time. Already, in 1994, Aronowitz and DiFazio observed that "technology [had] become the universal problem solver, the postmodern equivalent of *deus ex machina*" (Aronowitz & DiFazio 1994: 17) and that "good jobs were disappearing as fast as unstable and mediocre jobs were being created" (Aronowitz & DiFazio 1994: 14).

The pioneering opus by Di Nicola echoes and expands upon these concerns. Through his observation about the telework, Di Nicola predicted and later observed quite precisely what, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, became simply known as smart working (Di Nicola 2017). In particular, the Italian sociologist, as early as 1997, focused on how the new technologies were erasing the traditional role of enterprises, having the workers committing to their own professional training, time, and workload management (Di Nicola 2014). The formation is only one of the uncountable responsibilities that has been delegated to the worker. Private space and private time is also grouped together with the professional responsibilities (Di Nicola 1997; 2014). Nonetheless, Di Nicola did not reject all the possible deployment of "smart employment" for the working class. "New methods of work are inevitable," he states, pointing at the possibilities for reentering the labor market, diversifying management of personnel, and increasing the productivity time ratio (Di Nicola

2009). "The shift to smart working, become for organization a strategic step to implement new management methods" (Di Nicola 2017). However, it is "indispensable to address the nodes that smart working opens to organizations" (Di Nicola 2017). Di Nicola's theory of the new method of work stands out not only because it is ahead of its times but also for the sharp analysis of the precarious workers' usage of new technology.

In the context of the digital economy and precariat relations, sociology scholars seem to be innovatively deploying various theories and approaches without rigid sectionalism (e.g., Woodcock 2017; Moore 2018). Ethnographic methods were, at different degrees, applied within unusual communities, such as call centers, arcades, game developers' offices, food ordering and delivery platforms, web contractors' forums, and so on. Woodcock's works are the epitome of this trend. Particularly in *Marx at the Arcade* (2019), the author seizes the opportunities that come with unstructured interviews with gamers and developers. The scholar then widely elaborates from his data an analysis that converges into a classical— yet never predictable—sociological exploration. Woodcock's observations are particularly useful when considering how the boundaries between user and producer are dissolving and in what directions the power dynamics are mutating.

Ravenelle (2019) makes use of qualitative interviews collected within an ethnography about gig-driven business workers such as Uber, Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and Kitchensurfing. She focuses on the aspects of "sharing," not only as a mechanism of resilience against fast-paced capitalism but as an identity-setting experience. Through what Ravanelle defined as the "revival of trust" (31), members of the community become active adherents of the "sharing economy." This is, for Ravenelle, "a solution, as a return to small-town or even village life" (32). This feature that I also observed during my research is at the center of many exchanges online and is the underlying reasoning of what I call the re-embedding capacity of the digital economy. Ravenelle's ambitions are very much shared in the present study regarding the desire to redesign our idea of working experience in digital economic regimes. The ambition to have the reader go back to events that he or she might have lived as a user or consumer and reconsider them through the eyes of those workers is a powerful exercise for the analytical mind. The American sociologist does a splendid job in the arduous task of presenting the narratives she explores freed from stereotypes through constant reminding of her positionality.

Other scholars focused on the socio-normative function that digital technologies have incrementally assumed in the last decades. Kergel and Heidkamp (2017a), introducing their *Precarity within Digital Age*, present the reader with a sharp heuristic to better frame the concepts of precarity and digitalization. They start their analysis with the assumption that precarity can be "basically defined as stable instability" (4). Due to the everchanging nature of digital media reproduction, the representation of precarity suffers from a different type of instability, resulting in a *double precarity*: "a precarity within digital media and a precarity through digital media" (5). This approach makes easier to distinguish the realms of representation and reproduction of precarity. For example, the spectacle made of the struggle of precarious workers in Turin by news media and digital activists (Armano and Briaziarelli 2017) belongs to the first sphere. Also, how self-narrations of precarized individuals unravel within SNS (Kergel and Heidkamp 2017b) belongs to this first group. On the other hand, the emancipatory role served by digital media for an Indian activist group in creating a counterpublic (Mishra 2017), as well as the new practice—or malpractice—in handling patients' data in the healthcare industry (Neville 2017) are examples of the precarity generated through digital media.

Another outstanding contribution comes from a work that, in terms of ambitions, may fit perfectly in the first group of sources about precarity, but that, in terms of attention to innovation, must be included in this section. Johannnessen (2019), in fact, does not solely

tackle precarity in the context of digital capitalism, but, to how the working culture of the twentieth century evolved through those technologies that used to be a product of it. The Norwegian scholar focuses on the many forms of precarity and new employment that emerged with the "fourth industrial revolution." For example, how human–machine relations impact human–human relations or how the commodification of knowledge created knowledge entrepreneurs through the precarization of skilled workers, including IT contractors. *The Workplace of the Future* is much more. It is a roadmap to explore the very complex relations existing within contemporary capitalism. It underlines how "insecurity became part of employees' everyday lives" (Ch.1), a threat that is described as existential. The excellent reconstructions do not fall into simplistic explanations descriptive of the pulverization of the welfare state. Instead, Johannessen observes how even countries with the most robust social safety nets are not escaping dramatic consequences, how the world is dividing into two groups, satisfied and frustrated, and how the lack of class conscience plays a disservice to all social parts but the wealthiest (Ch. 1, 3 and 4). The work is inspirational for those who aim to try new approaches, and with its emphasis on insecurity, can be easily included in an anthropological framework.

1-4-4 Integration of literature review

Summarizing the literature review, we observe how the two independent discourses about the evolution of precarity and digital media, with increasingly centrality of technology in the productive sphere, are now merging into one. The initial divergence between these two realms can be attributed to the already extensive discussions of precarity within the humanities. Such discourses had been a central focus for continental European critics of capitalism since the 1950s. Later within academia, similar explorations seemed to verge on identity issues, whether gender or race, and evolved under those flags. This is despite the numerous works observing the precariat transnationally and how contemporary capitalism seems to universalize forms of precarity. In other words, how the precariat workers are now more than ever homogenous among countries and how we assist the resurfacing of lower-class masses worldwide. The present work aims not to overlook this phenomenon and, while embracing all anthropological traditions, not to fall for the balkanization of precarity.

The first discourse is based on a strictly socio-economic perspective that notably stems from the analysis of interclasses and intraclass contraddicitons of industrial capitalism. In this field, the literature about precarity suffered mainly from the failure to advance traditional Marxist analysis and the tendency to fall into particularistic evaluations that spurred the rise of intersectional and identity politics. Both these gaps are not unfulfillable.

Marxian thought can still be deployed in the analysis of present social differences; however, contemporary ways of production and accumulation of capital require an updated toolkit that considers new patterns of exploitation and expropriation. Sexism and racism exist, but the radicalization of political identity based on the struggle against these inequalities solidified public attention just around the tip of the iceberg of a much broader issue. In fact, while sex and race are undoubtedly vital factors that influence life experiences, the way these experiences can vary within one of these categories is much larger than how these experiences can vary within a class.

The overlooking of this factual data can also be explained by the positions strategically taken over social justice issues by contemporary capitalism, especially IT giants. In fact, when problems are presented as economic ones, and a call for a fairer redistribution of wealth appeared, the tendency among the same companies has been to keep the present status quo. Just recently, humanities started to question the culture of employment and profit of the tech industry more in-depth. Human sciences too often and for

too long left unchallenged the myth of the progressiveness of digital capitalism, seen as an "ally" of oppressed.

The second discourse about the emergence of digital media was late in its development within anthropology. With due exceptions, academics from the humanistic sciences have left unnoticed the digital sphere for quite a long time. Once they engaged with the topic, humanities scholars were rapid in shortening their distances with other disciplines in exploring these topics – and anthropologists with them. Nonetheless, this delay is partially still evident within anthropology, where an organic debate about members of the precariat and their practices with digital media remain widely unexplored.

These gaps still need to be filled, and the hope is that the present work may contribute. Notably, the creative use by precarious individuals of digital media as means to escape precarity in Japan—whether successful or not—is a territory of science almost entirely uncharted. The same goes for the forms of voluntary exploitations transcending traditional engagement[3] that, without a qualitative contribution, may very much trouble the understanding of social economists. Inter-group relations, different from intra-group relations, are also relatively unknown in the studies of digitality and precarity. This should not be a surprise considering that among scholars, even in 2021, some doubt the possibility of thickening social interactions and accumulating social capital through digital media. This work aims to cover these points organically to contribute to the present precarity discourse and its resolution.

1-5 Significance of the Study

The contemporary notion of precarity is rooted in neoliberal policies that have unraveled since the 1980s. The genealogy of the concept is traceable in long-lived arguments within the extra-institutional and intellectual Left of Europe as early as in the 1950s. With the increase of inequality in postindustrial economies during the 1980s and 1990s, the argument was elaborated worldwide. In Japan, reasonings close to European thought existed within the students' movement in the 1960s; however, when the most radical fringes in this movement set one against the other, destroying the organization, the discussion about precarity dissolved along with it. With 1990s post-bubble social mutations, precarity as a cultural theme resurfaced. This time it was shaped by the reviewed academic dialectic, engulfed by loanwords that often dissociate the public and the precarious individuals. It is in our hands to reorganize all these discourses to harmonize with the present struggles of the digital precariat, a challenging task which this work aims to facilitate.

Within anthropology, the discourse about media has been feebly pulsating since the post-war era and exploded in the 1990s. With the "discovery of media," observations on the matter moved parallel to the one dealing with precarity, but anthropologists rarely focused on where these pathways crossed. First, subjects were set around the audio and video means of communications, and only recently have horizons expanded to consider the digital technologies. Still, anthropologists' engagement in the relation of precarity and those technologies remain marginal. Traditional anthropology's preference for holistic approaches may be essential for emphasizing inclusive rather than exclusive observations about these media and their use. Nonetheless, methodologies and theories that emerged from media and digital anthropology remain a valuable asset in the toolkit for those observers who wish to fill that gap.

The digital economy and its internal power relations emerged organically as academic subjects in the early 2000s, and their evolution now stretches over three decades. Precarity and digital world interactions are more than ever observed with interest that

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[3] At least as theorized by Marx in the rate-surplus value ratio (Marx 1999 [1867]: Vol. 1 Ch. 9, Sec. 1 to 3).

transcends a single discipline. Since the 1990s, acute observations still worth exploring started to emerge over the state of digital employment, the culture of enterprises, and the way of productions. These were coming from various academic disciplines with interests in sociology, political economy, and social-psychology. The deployment of digital media by precariat, in particular, is nowadays at the center of a vivacious corpus of publications that is comparable with the latest approaches that media anthropologists favour (i.e., the agency in relation to the media rather than the media itself). This contiguous nature makes the absence of anthropologists and cultural studies scholars from discussions surrounding digital precarity puzzling.

It is interesting to note how the ascendant trajectory of the precariat and its study are parallel to the evolution and distribution of digital technologies. If it is true that "the future is already here, just not evenly distributed," one emphatically says that "the present" is handing out both positive and negative aspects of this future. The hope is that the first will prevail, and we may already be observing signs of this process. DFMs can be part of the strategic redistribution of wealth and control over the decisions determining individuals' and businesses' behaviors.

In the US, this movement is already growing. Emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, many workers refused to go back to their precarious condition, resulting in a shortage of labor and forcing employers to raise wages and improve work stipulations (The Washington Post, May 2021 cf. The Wall Street Journal, June 2021). In New York, exhausted Uber and Lyft drivers joined forces and created the app, Co-op Ride, which, through bottom-up decision-making, grants members the exact percentage of the shares revenues according to seniority and work hours (Gizmodo, June 2021).

Similarly, fast-food employees, ex-cons, local farmers, and urban residents are coordinating their efforts and organizing through platforms like ChiFresh Kitchen, CHCA, and Brooklyn Packers (The Real News Network, May 2021) to subvert the traditional form of employment of neoliberal regimes and allow workers to own the company they are creating surplus for. DFMs can play an essential role in this change of direction. There are chances to alter the paradigms of profit-oriented product exchanges and consumeristic trends. This shift would immensely benefit countries like Japan and Italy, both self-inflicted victims of antiquated working cultures and stiff social mobility.

1-5 Analytical Framework of the Study

Drawing upon my references, I crafted my analytical framework in a manner analogous to the construction of a house. The initial step I take is to delineate the landscape within which the building will unfold. In the context of post-industrial Japan and Italy, I posit that both countries can be classified as biocognitive capitalist regimes. Later, the foundation should be laid with the establishment of definitional tools for concepts such as precarity and labor through selected literature and biocognitive capitalist scholars' theories. Subsequently, I try erecting the structure by incorporating pertinent examples that aligned with the comparative approach I intended to employ. Ultimately, I fortified this framework by incorporating literature, from which I derived three overarching theoretical pillars. These key concepts were strategically devised to elucidate certain phenomena I encountered during my fieldwork. They are the re-embedding capacity of the digital economy, the recursive nature of digital locales, and the qualificative agency that motivates many informants.

Vercellone (2006) and others (Moulier-Boutang 2007; Fumagalli 2007), elaborated comprehensive works on the main features of cognitive capitalism. All these sources, subscribed to the idea that cognitive capitalism has materialized because of the central importance of cognitive labor within postindustrial economies. Cognitive labor is a mode of

production organized over the production of goods through primarily cognitived skills (e.g. developing software, crafting marketing campaigns, producing scientific articles etc.). Within the framework of this production paradigm, the skill set of the laborer and the resultant outputs of their work are intrinsically intertwined. This interconnectedness extends across both productive and private periods, thereby precluding any feasible demarcation between them. As Negri and Vercellone (2008) succinctly put it, cognitive labor "does not crystallize into a material product separate from the worker: it remains incorporated in the worker's brain and is therefore inseparable from his person." This indivisibility renders cognitive labor a quintessential bioeconomic facet.

It is noteworthy that throughout the manuscript, I employ the term "labor" to encompass both its abstract concept, signifying human work embedded within structural power dynamics and social repercussions, as well as its more tangible definition denoting compensated human productive activities. The choice of "labor" over alternatives like "work," "occupation," or "job" is deliberate, as the term carries a historical and theoretical richness, particularly resonating with sociological and economic discourses. "Labor" inherently encompasses power dynamics and social structures, suggesting a complex relationship between workers and the broader socio-economic systems in which they operate. Unlike the more neutral terms, "labor" implies a formal or informal exchange of value, integrating the idea of productivity within an economic context.

Discussing DFMs activities solely in terms of "work" risks depriving them of the emotional and psychological dimensions that accompany user-workers in the steps following and preceding the transaction. Focusing on labor also allows me to include those narratives while also to discuss their extended relationships with actors such as the shipping facilities, the working tools and the other users. Furthermore, a broader discussion of labor allows for an in-depth exploration of DFMs, acknowledging their multifaceted and hybrid nature as spaces for economic interaction and as means of production.

Finally, discussing labor open this study to discussions of semi-independent productive activities within DFMs and digital platforms in general. Such labor is increasingly shaping the contours of the contemporary productive structure, redefining the working class, and influencing productive and industrial technologies. This evolution is evident in the burgeoning integration of fintech, the emergence of digital currencies, and the promotion of a reuse culture that contributes to the reduction of consumption. Through the lens of "labor," these elements are not merely economic or industry's features but are transformative forces reshaping the landscape of work and socio-economic interactions. Therefore, while informants predominantly discussed the tangible aspects of their labor, it is through their observations on micro-practices within DFMs that I extrapolate broader insights. These insights uncover how labor market volatility, propelled by semi-independent labor forms, serves as a cornerstone in the evolving productive order, impacting not just the nature of employment but also the broader socio-economic fabric, including class structures and redistribution mechanisms.

Building upon the definition of precarity that emerged in the literature (Kergel and Heidkamp 2017a), I consider precarity to be the condition of "stable instability" or "secure insecurity." Throughout the discussion, I use these two terms interchangeably, encompassing both economic and social dimensions of precarity. This approach is in line with the long European tradition that I exemplified with references to Italian Marxism and French critical studies of cognitive capitalism. It is notable that while the notion of stability is frequently theorized in economic and productive contexts, discussions on security extend beyond these boundaries. The English term "security" often pertains to safety and comfort, making its antonym a more suitable candidate for describing the multifaceted challenges articulated by many of my informants. I believe that defining precarity as "secure insecurity"

encapsulates the biodynamic incapacity to determine one's immediate and distant future, encompassing both biological and psychological well-being. Elaborating on these differences, I tend to lean in favor of the second definition to emphasize the pervasive nature of contemporary precarity. In light of the data collected, I consider this hyper-dynamicity emerges as a primary force influencing the lives of the digital precariat in Japan and Italy.

Fumagalli (2019a) provided a concise set of twenty theses for the deployment of biocognitive capitalism or cognitive bio-capitalism theories, how this regime deploys its biopower, and how to define cognitive labor.[4] Among these, there are many elements traceable within the narratives presented by the informants of this study to discuss their experiences as cognitive labor. I will focus on four characterisics of the twenty that can help explaining and qualify system of production of biocognitive enterprises (i.e. capitalist ventures operating in capitalist regimes). These four elements are the prominance of precarity as a structural element of cognitive capitalism, the disappearing of boundaries between "life-time and work-time", the interdependance of "abstract labor and concrete labor" and the "interpenetration between place of production and productive networks" (Fumagalli 2019a: 66-69).[5]

The comparison to Italy is a heuristic expedient that I propose not merely for my vicinity with this experience. Rather, it is based on the uniformity among the typology of informants, as well as their customs and practices within and beyond the precarity I observed, and that other scholars before me have noted (Watanabe 2013; Beretta et al. 2018; Schulz 2018; Ito and Suginohara 2018). This inescapable insecurity that torments individuals, once they enter the vicious cycle of unemployment or underemployment is the trigger that motivates them to engage with the digital platforms. This insecurity is also ingrained in social dynamics that regulate employment and traditionally limited the bargaining power of the working class in Japan and Italy. The high presence of small-medium enterprises (SME) also conditioned the interclass sociality of working and entrepreneurial groups. The possibility of avoiding, or at least limiting, confrontations with superiors is an appealing benefit granted by informal work. I observed with fascination this non-confrontational sociality in my Japanese and Italian informants.

The focus on insecurity also allows me to draw upon discourses very well explored in anthropology. For instance, Brouwer's (2010) observations on how IT technologies can further interactions within a group in order to respond to insecurity suggest the pertinence of my approach. The digital flea markets (DFM) or *furima* turned into the locus where this insecurity can be overcome or exasperated and where the precariat as an actor can deploy new strategies to subvert its conditions, although not always successfully.

Ravenelle (2019) would consider DFMs to be the social setting of the sharing economy. I look at them as the island in the digital ocean where I happened to shipwreck. In

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[4] The collection of *Twenty Theses* has undergone multiple rounds of revisions and presentations by Fumagalli. It was initially published in Angelaki (2011) and subsequently included in an anthology of essays edited by Chiesa (2015). The version I am referencing here was integrated into one of Fumagalli's most recent works at the time of this study (2019a). Notably, in this latest iteration, the usage of "bio-cognitive capitalism" and "cognitive biocapitalism" became interchangeable. Prior to this, Fumagalli and Morini (2008) had identified a set of essential characteristics of cognitive labor with the intention of formulating a comprehensive definition. While a significant portion of these theses has been integrated into the *Twenty Theses*, their specific application in the context of cognitive labor constitutes a seminal advancement in the intellectual evolution of Fumagalli's observations, worth mentioning. The five primary characteristics they outlined for cognitive labor are reflexivity, relationality, reliance on networks, utilization of training and skill development, and horizontal coordination opposed to vertical one of taylorist labor.

[5] It is important to highlight that all twenty theses could be applied to the analysis of both Japanese and Italian digital precariats. However, such an endeavor would necessitate a comprehensive examination of macroeconomic considerations, which would exceed the scope of this work. Consequently, I deemed it appropriate to restrict their application in order to maintain the coherence of this study.

this setting, from both professional and commercial use, I witnessed the resurfacing of traditional social mechanics alongside new ones. Before my eyes, there appeared the canonical vision of the economy as an integral part of the social and cultural interactions that partially dissolved with the industrial revolution. This re-embedding capacity of the digital economy, which I observed in my fieldwork,
often overshadowed by its opposite equivalent, is what Ravenelle documented from a sociological stance.

In analyzing DFMs, it is crucial to keep in mind that, as any space with its own logic and rules, they function with a degree of independence to the communities they host. If a seller in an Indian market of Kolkata does not show up one day, the network of sellers in his or her close vicinity might ask themselves what happened; nonetheless, the market will keep existing. A different approach could settle around the fact that those sellers might not have any relation whatsoever without the market and even that the market would not exist without the seller showing up every day. This complex recursive network also exists between the media and the users' communities, reciprocally granting their existences, and it cannot be omitted.

In line with Kottak (2010[1990]), and following the tradition of media anthropology portrayed by Pertierra (2018), along with the heuristic of Kergel and Heidkamp (2017a), it is also essential to remind ourselves that DFMs are both spaces *through* which precarious individuals act and spaces *within* which precarity manifests. Postill's (2011) observation about the recursive social locus which he defined as the "field of residential affairs," coincides with the space constructed by users and platform interactions. The mediation occurring between the material and virtual life is first and foremost an expedient to affirm social and cultural identity.

In the case of the Japanese and Italian precariat, however, the residential sphere is recodified in existential and survival terms. It becomes cyberspace that different users share and where practices from below and regulations from above come to terms. In this space, precarious individuals negotiate how to exist within neoliberal digital regimes, complex economic and political systems in which the adherence to the tenets of the neoliberal paradigm is intricately intertwined with digital technologies. In this new order the arrangements existing with the authorities are often replicated by the users relationship with the platform and its admins. This sphere of existential affairs is the actual scene where the precariat can articulate and discover itself.

To answer why the precarious individuals in Japan act the way they act, I find it helpful to link these actions to the moral impetus that Muehlebach (2012) presents in her ethnography settled in Italy (Muehlebach 2012: 39-50; 80-85). Muehlebach explores how moral expectations set by communities's compel individuals to reengage with the public through performative acts, particularly in the context of volunteer activities. According to her analysis, these actions serve as a mechanism for citizens to fulfill their social roles, often bridging the gaps left by the government's limitations or inadequacies. Muelehbach acutely observes that this relation furthers the neoliberal agenda but, at the same time, is an act of resistance to its violence. These activies become "dispersed act of heroism" striving to knit together communities eroding under neoliberal influences. In other words, they serve as a means to garner recognition (i.e. citizenship), from fellow citizens and to rearrange the social order amidst the challenges posed by neoliberal forces.

Building on Muehlebach's exploration of moral aspects within "social pacts," I will inquire if precarious individuals engage with DFMs primarily to renegotiate their social standing, fulfill their perceived societal roles, and actualize their "inherited conceptions" about themselves. In contrast to Muehlebach's emphasis on moral dimensions, my focus will be on the productive activities within DFMs and how they position individuals in relation to

society and their community. Many individuals I encountered emphasized that unmet expectations regarding economic productivity, occupational engagement, and social relations pose significant threats to one's identity.

Ravenelle (2019) notes similarly how moral responsibility is functional to trust-based interactions among the members of the sharing economy (Ravenelle 2019: 31-33). In this case, as well, trust is deeply intertwined with the self and others' social expectations. To be a member of the community, one needs to be trustworthy. It is not enough to subscribe and sign in. Both Ravenelle and Muehlebach bridge their observations to Ferdinand Tönnies's dichotomy of *Gesellschaft* —the anonymous society of the city—and *Gemeinschaft*—the close community of the village (Ravenelle 2019: 31–36 cf. Muehlebach 2012: 73-80 in part. 79). Interestingly, Eriksen (2010: 3) also mentions this dichotomy in relation to the duality of insecurity and security. Lastly, there is also a precise symmetry with classical anthropological theories of disembeddedness and embeddedness deriving from Polanyi.

In the context of the present study 'qualificative agency' refers to the impetus to engage in an activity with the deliberate intention of being characterized and identified through that engagement. In other words, qualificative agency is the set of strategies deployed by individuals within communities to define one's role within social groups. While all types of activities in different measures qualify the actors involved, and thus have a qualifying potential, my focus here centers on the understanding of the actors in their own roles. It is the commitment to determine what type of member of the society an individual is according to himself. This focus also allows me to look at the use that organizations, private and governmental, make of these obligations—often to their own advantage.

During interviews, an underlying motivation—a sort of ontological foundation—drives individuals to undertake given actions. This concept, which I refer to as qualifcative agency, becomes evident when participants express statements such as, 'I am a father; therefore, I must provide,' emphasizing their role within the family as a guiding force for their actions. Similarly, another participant told me, 'I am an adult; thus, I must achieve economic independence,' reflecting the influence of societal expectations tied to adulthood on their aspirations for financial autonomy. Additionally, statements like 'as a member of this group, I am bound to adhere to its rules' underscore how community affiliation shapes behavior and responsibilities.

In a nutshell, qualificative agency represents the conscious adoption of societal roles, responsibilities, and affiliations, positioning individuals within the framework of their communities. This hybrid negotiation between agents and the digital world becomes an important theme, elucidating the intricate dynamics that arise from human interactions with digitality. The concept of qualificative agency aim to shed a light on the complex interplay between professional identity, societal expectations, and the digital landscape.

While scholars such as Goffman (1959[1956]), Giddens (1986 and 1991) and Butler (1990) have previously addressed agency and identity recursion, my focus in this work incorporates the interplay between digital labor and self-idealization within the distinct microcosm of digital flea markets. Drawing on Muehlebach's insights, I posit that these engagements often serve as a strategic renegotiation strategy in response to challenging socio-economic conditions. However, unlike Muehlebach's focus, many of my informants emphasize the achievement of this renegotiation through productive activities.

In contrast to Muehlebach's concept of "moral" agency, my informants prioritize productive prerequisites over moral considerations in their engagements on digital flea markets. Rather than aspiring to an "ethical citizenship," many informants aim to shape their self-idealization through productive activities in these digital spaces characterized by precarious subjectivities. This nuanced exploration unfolds within the digital realm, revealing both positive and negative features.

Within these digital spaces, individuals navigate a complex negotiation of roles and affiliations, driven by a profound desire to shape and define their identity through digital activities. This negotiation process, occurring within the realm of digital labor, gives rise to what I term the user-worker identity. Essentially, the interactions within digital flea markets create a dynamic backdrop where individuals actively construct their sense of self. This intricate process involves not only the navigation of digital labor but also the negotiation of roles, responsibilities, and affiliations, ultimately contributing to the formation and evolution of the user-worker identity.

1-7 Methodology and data gathering

During my multimodal and multisited fieldwork, I collected qualitative data about DFMs' users through in-depth semi-structured interviews for a total of eighty-five respondents, fifty-nine from Japan and twenty-six from Italy.[6] I also followed the internal dynamics developed within the groups I encountered through other digital platforms such as SNS groups, private blogs, and forums. Furthermore, I kept in contact with my informants through message services, emails, phone, and video-call for the duration of the fieldwork, which started in early December 2019 and lasted until May 2022. Some of these relationships developed before the formal beginning of the research and still remain active.

To ensure their anonymity, all informants are referred to by pseudonyms, a condition that was necessary for the cooperation of many of them, especially among the Japanese participants. Additionally, I indicate only their prefecture or urban area of residence, without providing the exact city location. In instances where the nature of the revelations was particularly sensitive, I opted to further minimize location details to protect their privacy.

Unless explicitly stated otherwise, interviews with Japanese participants were conducted in Japanese, while conversations with those in Italy took place in Italian, with a few exceptions when my informants utilized regional dialects. It is noteworthy that I took care to explain the specific nature and context of my inquiry to ensure clear communication with both groups of informants. Consequently, when discussing concepts such as labor culture, family relations, or insecurity, I consistently sought definitions from my informants and provided my own clarifications.

I was able to identify three separate typologies of users to analyze which actively subscribe to a defined idea of community and to what degree they consider themselves "professional users". By this label I intend that they answered me positively or negatively at the idea that DFMs activities constitute labor, an element that during the fieldwork became bedstone of my research. The differences were set accordingly to social, professional, and recreational habits, as well as to the interviewee's feeling of belongingness to a particular group. All these divisions were kept explicit to my informants.

In the early stages of the fieldwork, I also visited conventions, meet-ups, and "classes," organized by some DFMs to educate new members about the platform. Some of these events were specially designed on the basis of users' age, sex, or products they intended to deal with. Unfortunately, due to the 2019 pandemic, most of these were canceled or shifted to a remote format. I engaged with my informants and many workers of the flea markets in these events and held interviews as best as possible in times of mobility restriction.

The first type of user is composed by self-described casual DFM users. These members do not personally subscribe to any particular sub-group in their usage of the platform but feel part of the DFMs' "community" at large. Importantly, they do not regard their activities on the DFMs as labor. It is noteworthy that while these informants refer to

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[6] Table 1 and Table 2

themselves as "casual users," they also acknowledge the DFMs as a crucial source of income, engaging with the platforms three or more times a day. The notion of sidework and side revenue was frequently evoked to explain such engagement, and all while still they firmly rejected the idea of the DFMs becoming their primary profession.

The second typification of users includes individuals who, while self-identifying as casual users, do consider digital trading activities as a form of labor and are open to the idea of becoming "professional users" of the platforms. Given their prevalence in this category and my frequent encounters with them, I focused during my fieldwork on DFMs users over the age of sixty. Among these users over 60, I identified three recurring profiles. The first profile comprises members who create their products, often utilizing scrap materials. The second profile involves professional resellers who primarily deal in used household appliances, clothing, and accessories. The third profile consists of users who use DFMs to sell their personal belongings, including some who engage in *shūkatsu*, or preparatory activities for their death. While similar divisions could have been observed throughout all the typifications, it was the over 60 users who explicitly addressed and engaged with these subcommunities. In other words, over 60 users were the only ones who proactively interacted not only with their community but also took the initiative to create and maintain subcommunities within it.

The third and final group of informants consists of users who consider the activities on DFMs as a form of labor and self-identify as professionals. While this individuals received various frameworks and categorizations to differentiate themselves from the ordinary users within the DFMs in both Italy and Japan, I extensively focused on the owners of "digital shops." These individuals establish and acquire this status in the digital trading sphere through their special membership or professional accounts, a process that varies in nomenclature and conditions across different DFMs. Although most platforms do not charge any additional costs for the establishment of these shops, this labeling process significantly impacts these individuals' engagement in an ontological sense, often more than their practical involvement in the trading activities.

Until recently, all major DFMs' central offices did not contest the use of external forums and websites to coordinate their efforts and helping each other; however, when the spike in user numbers started in mid-2019 and exacerbated with the Covid-19 pandemic, all the major Japanese DFMs started suspending and banning users for coordinating sales and purchases outside the apps. To the extent of my knowledge, this phenomenon is unique to Japan. The strategies for circumnavigating these restrictions and concurring community-building mechanics are also part of this work.

While the nature of this work is undeniably anthropocentric, I also participated in these markets as a direct seller and buyer. Engaging in the repair and resale of hardware, tech, and game consoles, I created profiles and conducted approximately 590 transactions with varying outcomes. This engagement served not only as participant observation to better understand the user's perspectives but also to document the recursive changes and influences that the platforms and communities of users exerted on each other. As a consequence of my direct association with communities involved in legal yet forbidden trades that violate the terms of use of some DFMs, I have experienced suspensions and even permanent bans. Consequently, I directly witnessed and discuss in this work most of the changes that radically altered the engagement paradigm between user-workers and DFMs, such as the emergence of "pro" accounts for sellers in Japan, the banning of products, and the subsequent coping strategies of traders with these bans, as well as the sensitivity of DFMs to complaints from large Japanese companies about secondhand trades.

Table 1

Informants from Japan	≤20 / ≥30	≤30 / ≥40	≤40 / ≥50	≤50 / ≥60	≤60	
Fully employed	1 (M1 / F0)	2 (M1 / F1)	1 (M1 / F0)			
Unemployed / Retired (only ≤60)*		3 (M2 / F1)	3 (M1 / F2)	1 (M0 / F1)	17 (M7 / F10)	
Underemployed (not counting DFMs activities)*	7 (M4 / F3)	10 (M5 / F5)	6 (M3 / F3)	4 (M1 / F3)	4 (M1 / F3)	
Total	8	15	10	5	21	59
have a side job / does multiple jobs	4 (M2 / F2)	10 (M5 / F5)	5 (M2 / F3)	2 (M1 / F1)	4 (M1 / F3)	
do not have a side job	4 (M3 / F1)	3 (M1 / F2)	7 (M2 / F5)	2 (M0 / F3)	15 (M6 / F9)	
Consider DFMs activities as a Job	1 (M1 / F0)	8 (M5 / F3)	8 (M3 / F5)	5 (M1 / F4)	16 (M6 / F10)	38
Do not consider DFMs activities as a Job	7 (M4 / F2)	5 (M2 / F3)	6 (M2 / F4)		3 (M1 / F2)	21
Hokkaido						
Tohoku	2	1		2	3	
Kanto	4	5	4	2	3	
Chubu		2	1		3	
Kinki/Kansai	2	5	2		4	
Chugoku		1			4	
Shikoku					2	
Kyushu		1	2		2	
Okinawa and other Islands			1	1		
Total	8	15	10	5	21	59
Below Poverty level 23,458USD / 2,500,000JPY	7 (M5 / F2)	11 (M5 / F6)	5 (M2 / F3)	1 (M0 / F1)	5 (M0 / F6)	
Above Poverty level 23,458USD / 2,500,000JPY	1 (M1 / F0)	3 (M3 / F0)	5 (M2 / F1)	2 (M1 / F1)	8 (M3 / F5)	
Above 3,00,000JPY		1 (M0 / F1)	2 (M1 / F1)	2 (M1 / F1)	5 (M3 / F2)	
4,000,000JPY circa (Japan average GDP per capita)					1 (M1 / F0)	
*Retired with Pension or a type of welfare					13 (M7 / F6)	
*Retired without Pension or a type of welfare					8 (M0 / F8)	

Table 2

Informants from Italy	≤20 / ≥30	≤30 / ≥40	≤40 / ≥50	≤50 / ≥60	≤60	
Fully employed	0 (M0 / F0)	1 (M0 / F1)	2 (M2 / F0)		1 (M1 / F0)	
Unemployed / Retired (only ≤60)*			1 (M1 / F0)		3 (M1 / F2)	
Underemployed (not counting DFMs activities)	3 (M2 / F1)	7 (M2 / F5)	5 (M2 / F3)		3 (M1 / F2)	
Total	3	8	8		7	26
have a side job / does multiple jobs	2 (M1 / F1)	6 (M1 / F5)	3 (M0 / F3)		3 (M1 / F2)	14
do not have a side job	1 (M1 / F0)	2 (M1 / F1)	5 (M3 / F2)		4 (M0 / F4)	12
Consider DFMs activities as a Job	2 (M1 / F1)	4 (M2 / F2)	3 (M3 / F0)		7 (M3 / F4)	19
Do not consider DFMs activities as a Job	1 (M1 / F0)	4 (M0 / F4)	5 (M2 / F3)			7
Northern Italy	1	4	4		2	11
Central Italy		3	1		2	8
Southern Italy and Islands	2	1	3		3	7
Total	3	8	8		7	26
Below Poverty level 18,000 USD / 13000 Euro (2021)	3 (M2 / F1)	3 (M0 / F3)	2 (M1 / F1)		5 (M0 / F6)	
Above Poverty level 18,000 USD / 13000 Euro (2021)		3 (M1 / F2)	2 (M2 / F2)		8 (M3 / F5)	
Above 20,000 Euro less than 28,000 Euro		1 (M1 / F0)	1 (M0/F1)		5 (M3 / F2)	
28,000 Euro circa (Italian average GDP per capita)		1 (M0 / F1)	3 (M2 / F0)		1 (M1 / F0)	
*Retired with Pension					2 (M1 / F1)	
*Retired without Pension					1 (M0 / F1)	

1-8 Limitations of this study

The most significant limitation of this study is its ambitious aim. In line with its holistic design, there is a risk of diluting individuals and their specific experiences. The desire to build an organic investigation about the Japanese precariat engaging with DFMs and correlate it to the Italian experience is also encumbering. This is particularly the case in managing how much editorial space and research energies to dedicate to the core of the study, the Japanese digital precarity, and balancing it with the paralleled part.

There is also the risk of overlooking specific data that emerged to safeguard the coherency of the research. During the fieldwork, many more informants than those I have been able to include kindly cooperated with me and gave me their time. While their helps ground many speculations of this work, I regrettably was not able to include individual section for each of them. A "community" of scalpers encountered during the fieldwork is an example in this sense. Their attitudes and strategies are so well-orchestrated that they might be fruitfully explored in anthropological and socio-economical terms. They also frequent external platforms, coordinate their efforts, and develop software to maintain their primacy in obtaining rare or brand products worth reselling. Their bonding is not less fascinating from a socio-anthropological perspective for how it is based on economic profit. They run on their own ethos (VGC, November 2020) that often infuriates neighboring communities (Mainichi, May 2021). They also have international counterparts (Forbes, February 2021), and, remarkably, their use of scripts (codified algorithms to carry on automatic actions) and bots to conduct the tempestive purchases is very much in line with war strategy and war machinery development (VGC, January 2021). The scripts themselves are unique artifacts, digital proof of the logic of accumulation. These are none but a few of the possible tasks that remain for future studies.

1-9 Organization of the Chapters

Hereafter, there is a short overview of the work.
The Chapter 1 introduces the essential topic of this study: the emergence of identity renegotiation strategies by precarious individuals through Digital Flea Markets platforms in Japan and their counterpart in Italy. The overall argument of the thesis is presented, along with objectives, research questions and essential literature. The chapter analyzes the genealogy of terms and theories. These are divided into three sections. The first is relative to precarity. The second is about the anthropology of digital media. The last is about studies within social science that focused on precarity and digital science relations. Next, there is a short discussion of methodologies deployed in the course of the data gathering, also concerning the state of international mobility during the fieldwork that happened at the peak of the Covid19 pandemic. In conclusion, there are a few observations about the limitation of the study, such as the impossibility of focusing on all parts involved and limited chance to include international observation.

Chapter 2 will present the historical backgrounds of precarity and digital media in a comparative context of Italy and Japan. It deals with the international situation and the unraveling of neoliberal policies that profoundly influenced the emergence of the precarious class in both countries. The chapter also aims to underline how the "precarization" of employment sped up with the emergence of digital capitalism. Lastly, there will be an exploratory segment on how and why digital capitalism incorporated the majority of neoliberal ideals, paradoxically maintaining a "progressive" stance in appearances.

Chapter 3 is the first chapter containing field data. It will explore those users of DFMs that do not subscribe to any sub-community and feel connected to the sole platform. This chapter will present the strategies deployed by two sets of self-described "casual users" (*raito yūzā*)

to overcome precarity through DFMs. The informants in this chapter all consider themselves not part of a community within platforms, despite some of the informants having developed "real friendships" while engaging with them. The first group in the analysis will be a collective of five individuals united to purchase defective and returned products stocks from abroad to repair them and resell them for profit on the DFMs. The second group comprises young mothers that became assiduous users of DFMs trading products for their children in two cases semi-professionally. The chapter then proceeds to compare these findings with equivalent sets of informants from Italy.

After a brief introduction outlining the phenomenology of their experience of precarity, Chapter 4 will delve into an exploration of the practices undertaken by communities of users aged over 60 within the context of DFMs. All these informants while considering themselves not professionals indicated to see positively such potential outcome. The central aim of this chapter is to investigate how DFMs have been harnessed to reclaim agency and foster a positive sense of identity in their lives.

The section examines how these informants have 'hijacked' peripheral digital spaces, ingeniously crafting personal realms for their groups. Their discourses focus on proactivity, centrality that certain activities have in life and the role that fates have in the emergence of positive interactions on DFMs. Integral to this chapter is an analysis of the interplay between Japanese pre-death activities (*shūkatsu*), the fragmentation of familiar bonds and the exploitative practices that DFMs wield against their user base. This intricate connection raises pertinent questions about power dynamics and motivations within this digital landscape. Concluding, there will be a comparative analysis with Italian informants, who, while not presenting as diverse an array of motivations behind their engagement, view the role of DFMs in providing economic stability as fundamental for the establishment of their professional paradigm, representing a step forward in fully embracing their user-worker identity.

Chapter 5 delves into the recursive relation that envelops the platforms and professional users. The first part dedicated to Japanese informants contains observations collected from users that own digital and off-line "shops," and who on the basis of this consider themselves as professionals. The chapter also explore the "shops" certification that Mecari provided to certain users and how this impacted their identification. The scope is to uncover the motivations behind the development of a professional identity in the context of digital trading, and in particular the extent to which DFMs contribute to this professional identity formation. In the cases of Italian informants their narratives bring to light two divergent trajectories for the user-workers: one showcasing potential avenues for professional growth, while the other underscores how similar usage patterns leavaraging legal grey areas can lead to dysfunctional outcomes, perpetuating the very precarious cycles that the informants had long sought to overcome.

Chapter 6, the final chapter, will present the conclusions gained from each portion of the dissertation. It will concisely summarize elements in which the thesis was refuted or proved (if any). The segment will also present updates about some of the informants. It will provide concluding narratives essential to the speculations that emerged while in the field.

Chapter 2 Background of the Study

Hereafter, I will explore the background for my study. This chapter is composed of four sections. First, I will reflect on factual considerations for digital economy and biocognitive capitalism. In the second and third segments, I will explore in more detail what drove me to engage with my informants and the background of the social phenomena that involved them. In the last and final portion, I will provide general context about the topic of digital precarity, particularly in the context of Japanese DFMs.

But what does digital economy mean? While one definition at large might be that segment of the economy mediated through information technologies, within this vaporous concept there are a great multiplicity of notions and ideas. There are many positive aspects that, according to Maier (2019), underline *"cyber-euphorics."* Following most of the traditional media apparatuses (TMA), digital capitalism is a smart and flexible, ecological, and cheap, fair, and anti-materialistic, genderless and raceless new economic regime. Its potential for an unstructured and equal future is enticing for the workers and employers. It is the unveiling of the real modernity, the one that failed to manifest during the twentieth century. It is the infinite knowledge at hand and the chance to correct a false one.

It is also an economic regime of unsurveilled exploitation, distasteful capital accumulation, energetic waste, and privacy violations. It is a regression to the Taylorist concept of scientific management of the workforce through timing workers, denying union formations, and ignoring fundamental rights (The Hill, April 2021). It is the era of "self-employment" that, upon a closer look, resembles piecework remuneration (Lehdonvirta 2018; Brockling 2019). It is the end of traditional occupations in favor of everchanging daily tasks. It is the time of contradiction for which struggling with house expenses or credit card debts does not prescind carrying in the pocket a thousand-dollar computer. It is the age of meta-hedonism when being famous can be a job in which revenues are set over the desires of others to be like that celebrity.

Inconsistencies are all over human behaviors, but rarely have they been so acclaimed. Those that were able to accustom are now part of this joyful machine we call neoliberal capitalism, and those that were not able to are stuck in its gears.

2-1 The Rise of Digital Capitalism

Since the introduction of structural reforms that broadly reshaped the employment system in Japan and Italy, the number of people living in precarious conditions has exploded. Japanese statistics that consider diverse typologies of full-time employment indicate that the precariat in Japan doubled during the late 1990s (Cook 2013). Other statistics focusing on freeters and NEETs' entrance into the workforce discuss a general increase of half of the total existing before 2000. In Italy, during the early 2000s, reforms dismantled a significant part of the securities and forms of protection that workers benefitted from since the war (Murgia 2014). Furthermore, the Italian National Institute of Statistics indicates that while full-time figures decreased by 7 percent from 1999–2004, the temporary worker tripled (Istat 2004), suggesting a sudden halt of college graduates' entrance into the regular workforce in the years between 2001–2004.

Coyle (2017) examined digital platforms for their potential to benefit both ends of the producer-consumer relationship. However, within the same study, the economist delves into the "controversy" surrounding the gig economy, wherein "while the employment rate is at a record, real earnings growth has been slow" (Coyle 2017: 10). Coyle keenly observes that this paradox poses significant challenges, particularly for economies lacking comprehensive social services (such as inadequate minimum wage, limited alternative job

opportunities, and insufficient provision of public services, notably healthcare) (Coyle 2017: 8). Nonetheless, Coyle also underscores that the crux of the issue primarily lies in the absence of appropriate and advanced contractual employment structures that enable and perpetuate unjust and insecure labor practices. Ultimately, the economist underscores how the "weak state of the labor market, post-crisis," has been a pivotal factor in facilitating the emergence of precarious digital employment (Coyle 2017: 10).

Somma (2019) notes how during the neoliberal era traditional welfare was substituted by workfare but that with the disappearance of stable employment there emerged further precarity. For the scholar, the emergence of "*on demand* economy" meant an uneven distribution of public assistance. The universal social safety-net not only shrunk but was also torn into pieces and offered in limited or partial forms, which sometimes included only some types of protection—oddly improving situations for those with better working conditions. This form of social security in which every citizen reaches diverse benefits, not through collective rights but as individual achievements, is what the scholar called a "welfare *à la carte*."

From the same book, Fumagalli (2019b: Chap. 1) delves into the concept of how bio-cognitive capitalism (i.e. that capitalism primarily rooted in the exploitation of knowledge-based labor) utilizes financialization to exert its biopower and assimilate the workforce. Within this framework, the creation of surplus value is dissociated from traditional material production and instead hinges upon "conventions (speculative bubbles) of creating uniform expectations among speculators" (Fumagalli 2019b: Chap. 1 par. 5). In this work, Fumagalli notes that to manipulate expectations, capital still needs to deploy labor to create products (for the most through knowledge) and move them through space (virtual or material). However, through the platforms exploiters developed new relational dynamics with the workforce. Now, labor operates in "contradiction with the increase of its importance as lever for value creation and its own devaluation in salary and professional terms" (Fumagalli 2019b: Chap. 1 par. 16). In other words, the cognitive working class within biocognitive regimes fails to capitalize on its role within the production chain, instead aligning itself with the capital that exploits it. Fumagalli (2015a) had already pointed at this phenomenon as a novel manifestation of labor subsumption within biocognitive regimes—the transformative process wherein social relations of production become entwined with labor itself.

2-2-1 Breaking through the glass wall of the displays: insecurity in digital spaces

The transformation of the relationship between capital and workers has been discernible to critics of neoliberalism for over two decades (Piketty 2014). The ramifications arising from these shifts were initially predominantly observed among the lowest income strata of the workforce (Betti 2018). However, this scenario underwent a substantial mutation with the emergence of the so-called gig economy. Even traditionally deemed 'secure' and well-remunerated professions have become entangled in the vortex of unregulated outsourcing and compensation per piece of work. This trend is coupled with the surge of traders seeking additional income streams through DFMs and e-commerce platforms.

My initial encounter with this shift took place shortly after I began working in Japan. After completing my master's course, I was able to get a job at a search-engine optimization (SEO) firm in Tokyo. While assigned to content contiguity and evaluation tasks, I start working on datasets for several digital flea markets accessible through mobile applications (*furima apuri*). Their users were growing at a pace where even their impressive marketing department could not handle all the data coming in. One of the things that got my attention in those datasets was that we registered an exponential growth among users over the age of

sixty. This data seemed unusual, especially considering that they are informally known as HTR (hard-to-reach). These senior citizens were highly active on the platform. They even created parallel discussions on peripheric forums and organized meetups. The increase in senior users encouraged the digital flea market to hold seminars for new members, specifically designed for the older user base.

On top of anything related to that flea market itself and other similar ones, the users discussed private matters that exceeded the original scope of these platforms. I understood the confidence granted by anonymity. Nonetheless, I was fascinated by how a user could open up about being alone after casually offering advice on strategies for taking better pictures of a product. In one case, through the use of that DFM's official forum/blog, a user started a discussion thread on how to go about doing *shūkatsu* (pre-death activities and procedures to take before one's own departure) through the flea market. The company established the forum/blog with the intention of "alleviating customer uncertainties" and providing a platform for them to "engage in secure trading" (*anshin ni otorihiki dekiru*). The forum side aimed to facilitate users in seeking assistance from fellow users regarding trading-related matters while the administration was using it as a blog to address changes or problems to the DFMs. In this instance, however, this user post appeared to walk the delicate line that divide the realms of personal and business domains – a fact that might have had something to do with the eventual foreclosure of the forum itself in 2021.

The case was part of a broad phenomenon that attracted the public's interest (Asahi Shinbun, March 2019). In preparation for her death, this user confessed to being scared and to be not ready. The thread received dozens of answers in a few hours, encouraging and offering advice. The fragility and insecurity that qualified so many of those replies were something I did not expect to emerge from that discussion. I witnessed some of the most open and vulnerable conversations since I had arrived in Japan, a country well known to have a clear separation between private and public spheres.

Considering the forum/blog's original nature (i.e., a business and trade community), I expected a certain rigidity in tone and content, but I was partially proved wrong. Explanations related to the "business" in the forum used polite and more formal set of expressions. The recurring threads of intimate nature instead presented to a very colloquial dictionary, almost intimate. The world of *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside) collided before my eyes. The nature of this community, in which members could switch so easily between two profoundly different spheres of sociality, enthralled me.

Despite the literal dis-embeddedness that characterizes the e-world, the social threads were realigning. In conformity with traditional sociocultural processes, that digital flea market's community was reappropriating the ongoing narratives. Flexing ordinary boundaries between actors and media, these users coordinated efforts to hijack the discourse. From cold transactions to warm exchanges. Contrary to my expectations of what takes place in the technosphere, the re-embedding was very real. The community was not simply carrying on material trades through digital platforms, by meeting in person and getting close to each other, these users turned digital sociality into off-line relationships.

In different spaces of the same network, another community was growing. From their very inception, digital flea markets were a paradise for video game, anime and collectable enthusiasts. The ability to buy and sell old consoles, games, and figurines online made the specialized store sales dump. Book-off, a Japanese secondhand shop giant with around 800 salespoints and 12,000 employees, had to widely restructure their sale strategy to avoid disaster, in many cases mimicking or allying with *furima*. The company eventually closed the videogame sections in many little shops (Nikkei Shimbun, December 2020). The hunt for the deal made professional resellers and scalpers (*tenbaiya*) flourish. Bots started to be

deployed to purchase seconds after low-priced products were posted. Most of the time, these products were ironically sold on the same platform.

This situation disadvantages the causal user, who is forced to pay more for a product that the reseller may not even have yet in his hands. Scalpers benefit from their talent of programming a script that makes the purchase and the admins' disinterest. This problem is not exclusive to the videogames, but it is where it manifests more evidently. There are cases when resale is illegal in Japan (e.g., for products which warranty is associated with the nominal payment through credit card or limited-edition goods); however, for general products, it passes mostly ignored by the admins of the platforms. While the scalping proceeds, the digital flea markets do nothing about it with the excuse of not limiting the users. They get commission fare twice for the trade of one product. What they are extensively opposed to is the trade of customized hardware and digital data. "Customized" (*kaizō*), refers to hardware that is able to run unsigned code and "data," refers to saved files and items in online games.

The pushback is not coming from the flea markets' offices alone. Instead, they come directly from the big hardware manufacturers, suggesting the custom firmware is used to run pirated games. Also, game developers sustain those real-life exchanges (*RL torihiki*) and real money trade (RMT) risk to unbalance of the online game's community. Both independent developers and hardware manufacturers threaten legal actions against the DFMs.

In order to dissuade users from this activity, digital flea markets made it a violation of the users' agreement to sell anything related to custom firmware or to sell data in any form. Paradoxically, the unethical and, in some cases, illegal scalping is tolerated while the legal, but against the rules, trade is punished with account suspensions and eventually bans.

Around these "legal but illicit" exchanges, communities emerged. Through external forums, gamers from any platform started organizing themselves, talking in code, and posting custom firmware products and game data under other names. Others circumnavigate the problem selling not the digital data alone, but the games itself without formatting its memory, thus giving the buyer access to all the stored data.

According to an informant, during Tokyo Game Shows 2018, rumors surfaced that Nintendo developers decided to change the save system in their newly released console. The company started encrypting the save files and the software with a "key/lock" code to make them unique to one console and one game. The plan eventually backfired when the customers protested, requesting the ability to move freely from different consoles connected to the same account as the save data. The trade reopened on the flea markets, now filled with the whole users' accounts for sale at discounted prices.

Members of the online game's community kept posting custom firmware items and saves under false posts, so initially it was not easy to establish contacts and understand their practices. Only once I start regularly visiting the same forums and taking part to discussions, was I able to grasp their struggle. I discovered that a group formed long before joining the flea market platform and consolidated in a "guild" on a popular MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role play game) —and actually playing together to several games. The relations within themselves were very much alike to the one of a group of close friends. Besides sharing working shifts to coordinate their gameplays, each member provided the others with his logs, a registry of any activity carried on the game platforms. This total openness was not confined to their playtime, instead they were also very much involved in each other's lives.

The composition of the community was striking; its members were all males, with only two exceptions being celibates. Moreover, the group mainly consisted of insecure workers—merely three out of thirteen managed to work more than 20 hours per week, and of these, one was a freelancer. This group encompassed a wide array of professions,

including part-time office clerks, blue-collar workers, freeters employed in bars or restaurants, and even farmers. Despite their diverse backgrounds, these individuals shed their professional identities within these platforms, identifying primarily as "buddies" (nakama) and coalescing around their shared resistance against what they perceived as an unjust economic system.

It is worth noting that they opposed the DFMs when these platforms prohibited the sale of digital artifacts with the spirit to an act of civic disobbedience. In response to the threat posed to their supplementary income, the guild members devised various ingenious strategies to sustain their trading activities. Although their heterogenous composition might have set them apart, their economic insecurity and uncertainties about personal spheres often spilled into their interactions, fueling their spirit of "resistance."

They had developed a moral code to circumvent the rule of the platforms which was coherent within the group, and, like the elder users, they seemed willing to make the digital platforms a locus for off-line interactions.

2-3 New media usage among insecure individuals: the users-workers

The contraction manifested in all the manufacturers caused an employment crisis worldwide. This event was significant in Japan and Italy, respectively third and seventh world's manufacturers. The 2008 Lehman Shock exacerbated the situation. This crisis exposed the incapacity of neoliberal regimes to correct themselves, orientating towards industry-led growth (Yamada 2018, 187-189). Characterized by deindustrialization, globalization, and financialization, the neoliberal era witnessed the fading of national economics and the strengthening of international elites. The goals of these are often unrepentant toward domestic interests. There is widespread consensus among scholars that neoliberal regimes failed to rearticulate critical narratives and policies in order to favor domestic growth. Vice versa, among diverse segments of population income differences keep rising, nationally and internationally (Piketty 2014). The compliant middle class, represented by high-income, self-employed, bureaucrats, and media workers support the TINA narrative—there is no alternative—that freezes all the different discourses engaged by the public (Harvey 2005; Duménil and Lévy 2011).

The similar conditions of the labor market shared across the postindustrial countries are examples of how the economy ceased to be a national matter and became an international one. The neoliberal wind blew, and the frail ones fell under its strength. From the residue of the working class in manufacturing countries emerged the precariat. The multifaceted and heterogeneous group became incrementally central to the discourse about the new shape of poverty transnationally.

Within precariat lines exists a steadily increasing group of individuals offering services and products as members of the sharing economy. In most cases, in exchange for a fee, intermediary companies put these user-workers in contact with other consumer-users. This peer-to-peer structure grants, unquestionably, a great flexibility but, at the same time, does not provide any security for the providers of services. These individuals are held responsible for their failure while they are invited to share their profit with the platforms that enables the transactions. I believe in the user-worker identity there lies a substantial part of the conundrum that this study addresses.

Italian and Japanese inability to deal with precariat conditions corresponds to the inefficacy of solving long-standing socioeconomic domestic problems (e.g., *questione meridionale*, the North–South economic differences in Italy or *Tokyo ikkyokushūchū*, the uneven polarization of wealth and services in the Greater Tokyo Metropolitan area from the rest of the country in Japan). Another formidable sword of Damocles is the demographic

contraction that both countries are experiencing at higher level than other postindustrial countries (Schulz 2018). Japan and Italy lose the domestic population, which means losing productive forces and taxpayers, export high-level human capital that costs the country high investments and import a cheap workforce for low-added value industries (Fabbri 2018). These factors exacerbated negative trends regarding salaries that, in both counties, barely grew for almost three decades (Trading Economics 2021 cf. OECD 2021) and sometimes even decreased (OECD 2022). The user-workers are often unable to efficiently relocate themselves on the social ladder because of these aspects.

In this substrate, the informalization of employment took a new turn and the narratives shifted. In Japan, irregular positions, like part-time, contract, and temporary workers became ordinary. So-called freelances or self-employed workers, which are in effect freeters, increased more than 20 percent in the last two years (Lancers 2019), and annual revenues are meager, to say the least. The narrative is that workers need to rejoice because, while enjoying more freedom than traditional full-time laborers, the majority group among the freelancers (26 percent) registered income between two and four million JPY (Statista 2019 through Workerly 2020). Interestingly, the same article does not mention that, according to the same study it quoted, the second largest group composed of just above 23 percent is earning less than two million JPY, which is well under the Japanese poverty line (OECD Better Life Index 2021). Furthermore, another almost 20 percent did not reach the 1 million JPY. Likewise, the research also reports the new historical record, that 11 percent of the total workforce in Japan is now working two or more jobs.

Japanese self-employed sellers on online platforms, from digital flea markets to e-commerce giants, recurs to improvised strategies to increase their scanty revenues, like paying for fake reviews of their products in order to increase their posts visibility. This change in the economic order impacted daily workers as well. These are no longer relatively unskilled laborers but, instead, graduates in marketing, engineering, and computer sciences settling for this type of unstable employment. Mainstream media salute the arrival of the "freelance revolution" as an outstanding achievement for Japan (Forbes, March 2019).

In Italy, national rates of unemployment have been wobbling around 10 percent for almost a decade now. This figure peaks in the southern regions up to 20 percent (Istat 2021). Nonetheless, foreign-based IT actors make reckless use of the desperate workforce through the new form of independent contractors, on-call employment, and temporary work (Murgia 2014). Food delivery platforms boomed in 2016, and since then they became ubiquitous. This growth, however, did not produce organized labor unions; on the contrary, it created an unstructured mass of individuals ready to undercut each other (Armano and Briziarelli 2017). TaskRabbit and similar platforms that match freelance workers and customers, benefitting from the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, are also experiencing a noticeable increase in different services, from grocery shopping to dog sitting (Corriere della Sera, March 2021). Digital trade self-employees, which were already the most numerous e-workers in Italy, saw their number doubling during 2020–2021, but only increased their total sales by 34.6 percent (Istat 2021 through Linea Ecommerce Aicel, Febbruary 2021). Also, in this case, they improvise to increase their margins, with expedients such as offering house clearance services and then selling back the goods they were able to salvage from what those customers had thrown away.

Precarity is articulating with digital experiences, resulting in an intricate web of relationships. Self-employment is not freedom of enterprise based on competition. Rather, it is filling the lowest ranks of giant companies that base their profit on users-workers' performance. The idea of "class struggle" itself is hardly fitting for the present conditions. During the twentieth century, workers fought for their rights, unionizing and serving as direct contacts within their workplace. Today, employees do not personally know their

coworkers or even their employers in most cases. Everything is depersonalized and delegated to complex algorithms in charge of maximizing profits.

It is not only the enterprise structure that becomes hard to decipher but also the conditions of precarious workers. It is often difficult to establish whether the precarity starts from social factors or originated from personal issues, or a mix of both. Gianluca, an Italian member of several flea markets, who specializes in trading sports cards and collectible, told me that his work is so exhausting that he "often sees people quitting out of stress." He also says that "some sellers do only this" so they are in "sink or swim type of situations" (*o bere o affogare* lit. drink or drown). He considers himself "lucky because [he] has a *real job*, so [he] can take time off from this devastating thing of the cards and even quit for a while." Gianluca is employed by City Hall as a licensed tour guide in Naples Underground Galleries for 1200 euro a month, a wage that, with his wife out of a job and two daughters at home, is often not enough. Anyhow, he states that the first reason he keeps making his trades is that he likes the community of sellers and the buyers, mentioning that his "*real job* pays the mortgage, but the cards pay for the food." Like Gianluca, in many cases, it is hard to say if the precarity emerges on the fact that his wage is not high enough or that it does not stimulate him as he wishes.

The evolution of flea markets in the Italian technosphere is more straightforward to analyze than the Japanese one. Two factors can explain this condition. The first is that Italian digital markets connected to the European user base fail to be exclusively geo-localized like its Japanese counterpart. The second is that the leading platform operates for almost two decades in Italy and is now firmly rooted in the national market. A small part of sales happen on eBay, particularly the ones directed to international buyers. National sales happen for the most part through Subito, a notice board that promotes C-to-C interactions at no cost for the seller or the buyer. Professional sellers may upgrade their accounts in order to benefit from special fares for shipping and benefit from the customer protection granted by the platform; however, the primary revenue for the company is generated by its very effective ad placement offered to its partners. When in 2007 Subito was founded, the company became rapidly the most important secondhand platform of Italy reaching more than 11 millions active users by 2020 (Forbes, December 2021 cf. Il Giornale di Italia, February 2021). Centered in Milan, but with a dense network of users-workers across the country, the platform became the primary digital flea market of Italy in few months. Thanks to an intense marketing campaign, the platform managed to generate millions individual access monthly. Subito's parent company Adevinta is a Norwegian multinational with a market cap of 13 billion EUR. In 2020, the European conglomerate also acquired eBay classified-ad units for over 9 billion USD (TechCrunch, July 2020), becoming "the largest online classifieds company globally." With the intertwining of the two companies, the Italian DFMs became an ecosystem structured and interconnected, a situation completely different from its Japanese correspondent.

In July 2013, when the marketplace application Mercari was released in Japan's Google Play Store, it mainly went unnoticed by the financial observers. Similar applications existed, and they failed in creating large communities (Wall Street Journal, February 2002). Like the case of Subito, Mercari's, however, is a story of marketing success. Through a winning product placement campaign that appealed to young women (& Asahi Shinbun Digital Magazine, March 2017), the app started to build hype even before its release. Less than a month after its debut, it had already reached thirty thousand stable users, one million accesses, and it had debuted on the iTunes store (Mercari 2014). According to its founder Yamada Shintarō, at the time, the platform registered ten thousand new posts of product for sale daily and, at the base of this success, there was the chance for users to profit, the "real heart/gut of the C-to-C (*CtoC no kimo*) business model" (Cnet, December 2013).

In November 2014, the Japanese e-commerce giant Rakuten launched its own marketplace platform, Rakuma. The app was not successful in acquiring users, and their reviews lamented the poorly designed UI and the lack of a user evaluation system accessible before the transaction. This situation dragged until 2015, when the interface was radically modified to resemble the one of Mercari. Among the workforce at Mercari, the thing did not sit well. Many "felt there was a real plagiarism (*tōyō*)" and "wanted [the company] to do something about," said Tarō, an ex-employee of the company and now a freelance coder. "What [we workers] did not know was that Mercari itself was a plagiarism." According to him, Mercari's original UI was widely inspired by the somewhat unnoticed Japanese flea market application Furiru.

The case of Furiru (Fril in romaji) is an unfortunate experience parallel to the ascendant one of Mercari. Almost exactly one year earlier than Mercari, its launch was unremarkable, and its welcoming was tepid. For the next twelve months, the Furiru community did not see high growth –with the exclusion of hand-crafted product traders– until the buzz created by the Mercari advertising campaign spurred downloads on the Google Play Store, and numbers went up. About six months later, the Google Play Store again put it in the best app selection (Fril 2014), still several positions beneath the new competitor. From this point, for more than one year, the platform became Mercari's primary challenger; however, unable to create an authentic identity, Furiru mimicked the "only girls" (*josei nomi*) services, marketing strategies, and shipping policies from its more popular adversary. The similarities noticeably decreased from 2015, when the deals designed for the girls disappeared, the access and purchase from the web were made available, and the possibility to lock the purchase in order to allow the seller to check the buyer's profile before the sale. At this point, based on the contingency created by the new (and old), competitors Furiru stayed afloat without a great insurgence in its numbers. The situation improved considerably when in February 2018, Rakuten announced the acquisition of the platform and the merging of its users within Rakuma. From this point, Rakuma became the only real competitor for Mercari for almost an entire year.

This stalemate ceased when, in October 2019, the most diffused digital currency platform used in Japan, PayPay, launched its own flea market application, PayPay Furima. PayPay Furima numbers were interesting from the get-go, and its marketing strategies were effective. While still a relatively new app, PayPay Furima benefitted from the fact that its members could use the revenue from the application almost effortlessly in almost any chain of supermarkets, convenience stores, and in a very thick network of private shops. On the already unconceivable advance of being a subsidiary of Yahoo.jp, PayPay digital currency got the support of a significant number of municipalities and city hall organizations aiming to overcome the Japanese custom to recur to cash payment, reaching rapidly over 10 millions users (TechCrunch August 2019). This support, however, allowed a certain opacity to exist about unstated revenue obtained through the digital flea markets, a point that repeatedly came out when speaking with my informants.

Chapter 3: Beginners by Choice

In this chapter, I will introduce the first data collected by informants who stated to not subscribe to any subcommunity in their activities on the DFMs. When asked, they all self-described as casual users or beginners (*shoshinsha*). All these users have another source of revenue they considered "real" (*hontō no*), but none of them believed it stable enough at the time of the first interviews. The users in this chapter can be analyzed based on the commodities they trade, which I limited to repaired electronics and baby products. These two categories represent the most gender-specific types of articles and constitute a significant portion of the total sales volume (MMD, January 2015; Mercari 2017; 2022). My choice to concentrate on these specific trading categories was influenced by several factors. Firstly, they were the initial group of informants I encountered during my fieldwork, predating the onset of the pandemic. Secondly, I aimed to explore the opportunities presented by these categories because of their diffused accessibility for neousers. In addition, the members of these two typifications offered a discernible demographic pattern with respect to the goods traded within these categories.

It is important to distinguish between factual casual users and those who self-identify as such. Interestingly, despite their self-categorization as non-professional users, all the informants discussed here told me to engage with the platforms three or more times a day, as well, all consider the side revenue (*fuku-shūnyū*) produced on the secondhand trade applications "essential" to their life. Although many of these informants had been members of DFMs for years at the time of the interviews, the term *shoshinsha* was frequently used to describe their user status.

In many cases, these informants had professional involvement with the goods that were traded on the digital platforms, as that their primary activities were dependent on the same types of commodities. Nevertheless, they persisted in characterizing their usage of the DFMs as "casual." I believe this determination may have stemmed from their unwillingness to retain the professional identity, which they usually associated with their off-line employment. I speculate they considered those professional settings "ordinary" or "traditional" and consequently less precarious. I would not argue this if they had not defined the DFMs revenue as "essential." I contend that this obstinacy in rejecting the idea that their engagement with digital platforms as "professional" is already a characteristic of the insecurity they perceive riddling their lives. Therefore, I believe their cases serve as examples for the transitional steps and different nuances that digital precarity encompass, as well as a chance to explore the ongoing transformation of the conventional worker identity into the one of user-workers. In this regard, I aim to highlight two different sets of motivations that led to this change.

The first typification of users I will explore is composed of dealers of repaired articles (*shūrihin*), junk products (*jankuhin*), or scrap parts; most of these informants also have other insecure employment. DFMs became popular among these user-workers, and they generally operate independently. Very often, expressions such as "side job" (*fukugyō*) or "side work" (*saido wāku*) were used to describe the DFMs as opposed to their "real" job, but in other instances, *fukugyō* was used toward their off-line employment. Many of these users consider DFMs a tool to work deploying their "skills and time." To the question of whether private and professional time can be separated, almost all agreed that to "work with *furima*, the private time is business time."

I was able to get in touch with a group of such DFMs users through my friendship with one of them. What surprised me of this group is that, beside the elaborate system they develop to procure goods, share income, and regulate their trade they all still identified themselves casual users. The first interview I conducted with my friend predates the interviews with other participants in my fieldwork by nearly two years. I considered it appropriate to include those data because, in part, they represent the genesis of a substantial portion of this work. It is in fact through him, and later to his partners, that I got introduced to DFMs. These early interviews provided valuable insight into the experiences of DFMs users and influenced the direction of my research.

The second typology of self-proclaimed casual users is composed of women who engaged with the platforms during their pregnancy and in preparations for their newborn (*shussan junbi*) or used them after the birth of their babies. These informants were originally dealing in child products that they acquired, used, and later resell on the same DFMs. I contacted two of these users through the platforms, and they graciously agreed to online interviews. One of them, Moriko-san, was a single mother, while the other, Kao-san, was divorced. Lastly, I met Yūko-san through a seminar organized by a DFM in major Japanese cities in late 2019, which allowed me to gain further insight into this group of casual users.

These women were previously employed full-time and, with the circumstances surrounding the birth, found themselves out of work or under-employed. Two of them had held high-status positions, were very well educated, and were proficient in speaking foreign languages. They offered to speak in English as they were willing to improve their language skills, and only occasionally recurred to Japanese. At the time of our interviews, despite all of them referred to DFMs as their main source of income, many of them also opposed it to a "real" job in the form of part-time (*pāto*) or short-time employment (*baito* or *arubaito*).

This long chapter could have been divided in two. The main reason I decided to avoid such compartmentalization is due to repetition, in analysis and conclusion that would have emerged in doing so. Moreover, this section of the study was put together and elaborated as one, therefore splitting it would unavoidably denature it. I aim to focus on three key sub-questions. Firstly, what is the definition of "casual use" according to the informants? Secondly, can the use of DFMs by self-described casual users be considered cognitive labor? And finally, how do the experiences of Japanese casual users compare to those of their Italian counterparts? In conclusion, I will provide a summary of the crucial data that has emerged and explore how the Japanese narratives align with those of Italians. Additionally, I will offer some key observations that have been derived from these interviews.

3-1.1 Employment, semi-employment, and refusal of traditional Japanese productive identity

In early 2017, approximately two years prior to the start of my fieldwork, I began contemplating advancing my studies. Although my research project was still in the early stages of development, I had a firm desire to ethnographically document certain manifestations of Japanese precarity. To this end, I initiated information gathering from a person in my close circle of friends who had previously struggled with social withdrawal, commonly referred to as the infamous condition of *hikikomori*, and was currently having difficulty adjusting to work life. During these initial interviews, I did not possess a voice recorder and only took a few informal notes with his consent.

For his entire life, my friend Fumiō had been a diligent student and hard worker. He came from a middle-class family, was a member of his high school baseball club, and had a passion for mathematics. After graduating from a prestigious university with a degree in

computer engineering, he secured a job in Tokyo and had no intention of permanently returning to his hometown in Hiroshima prefecture.

Thanks to a recommendation from a *senpai*, he landed a job with one of Japan's leading IT security systems and infrastructure developers, which he considered a big accomplishment. He felt confident that his life was pretty much settled. However, when he reminisced about receiving his formal job offer, he lamented that he could not have anticipated the outcomes that followed.

However, things didn't turn out as he had hoped. Fumiō's work was indeed exhausting, and he had no say in what tasks he was assigned. Furthermore, his salary wasn't as high as he had anticipated before graduating. Despite these challenges, he held onto the belief that through hard work and perseverance, his stress levels would eventually improve, along with his pay.

After working for eight months, Fumiō experienced depression and anxiety and ended up isolating himself for almost eleven months. His parents eventually came to Tokyo to "rescue him," and some friends visited or tried to contact him. Fumiō felt guilty (*zaiakukan*) towards the *senpai* who recommended him at his workplace, but he had already moved to a foreign branch, so Fumiō never had the chance to apologize in person. Fumiō considered himself irresponsible and felt ashamed for his absence, and he never went back to that workplace. His coworkers did not make him feel included, and he felt that nobody understood his true self (*hontō no jibun*). With the help of his relatives, an NPO association for *hikikomori*, and his network of friends, Fumiō recovered and started looking for work again. During this period, he met me through an Italian friend who was volunteering in the *hikikomori* association. Fumiō eventually found a job at a company in the center of Tokyo that produced semi-elaborated electric systems for public venues, but also this job did not last long.

A few months later, Fumiō opted to work part-time instead of full-time to avoid responsibilities of the job. He began working as a clerk in a Japanese chain that sold a variety of goods, from groceries to household items and small electronics. According to Fumiō, the pay was not significantly different from his previous job, but he appreciated the ability to take it easy when he needed to.

Fumiō mentioned that he was also making extra income of around 40,000 to 60,000 JPY per month by selling computers on an online marketplace. It was my first time hearing the word *furima*. When I asked him about it, he explained that he would buy used computers, salvage parts and hardware, and then use these to build new computers that he sold online. I commended his proactive approach and expressed my interest in learning more.

We engaged in a comprehensive discussion about his daily routine. Fumiō had reduced his work schedule to four days per week, working six to eight hours per day. Due to financial constraints, he had to move out of his former apartment near the center of Tokyo, as he was unable to afford it. However, he did not relocate closer to his new workplace. Although that place is a more affordable area than Tokyo's city center, he still had to rent a one-room apartment about ten minutes from a remote station in the east side of the city and commute for approximately an hour by train. Fumiō claimed that the train fare was expensive, but not as costly as living near his office. When I pointed out that including the commute, he was still spending more than eight hours a day at his job, he replied that it was still better than before because of the shorter workweek, and he could use the train ride to relax. He later revealed that his monthly salary from the store ranged from 75,000 to 100,000 JPY. After paying 38,000 JPY for rent, 20,000 JPY for house expenses, and 14,000 JPY for his monthly commuter ticket, he was left with barely enough money for food. It was during this period of financial insecurity that he began to turn to DFM practices.

At that time, I was unaware that Fumiō was one of the 8 million Japanese users of DFMs, and one of the 300,000 who considered income from these platforms essential for their support (MMD, April 2021), figures destined to almost triple in the next couple of years. His use of the platform was well-suited for flexible employment and allowed him to utilize his professional knowledge and personal interests. At the time, my knowledge of the matter was anecdotal. Nonetheless, I took note of this side income generated by the platform. It seemed like an exciting response to the insecurity caused by exhausting working practices, which, in my friend's case, was taking a toll on his well-being.

Table 3:

Name	Age	Prefecture / Region	Members of Family Living Together	Off-line profession / income (approx.)	Years of Unemployement / Under-Employment	On-line profession or products/ income (approx.)	Weekly Hrs on DFMs or working for DFMs related products (approx.)
Fumio	35	Hiroshima	2 (parents)	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	Less than 2	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	More than 10 less than 20
Yūji	34	Aichi	3 (parents/grandparent)	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	More than 2 Less than 5	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	More than 20
Yūma	37	Hyogo	1 (parent)	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	Less than 2	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	More than 20
Tomohiro	34	Kumamoto	No (but supportr his parents)	Teleworker 170,000 JPY	More than 5	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	More than 20
Gennichi	39	Kanagawa	No	Licensed Repairer Unknown	More than 5	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	More than 20
Moriko	34	Osaka	1 (child)	Maternity leave 150,000 JPY	Less than 2	Baby Products second hands and new	More than 20 post-employment Less than 5)
Kao	28	Kanagawa	2 (children)	Barista	More than 2 Less than 5	Baby Products second hands	More than 10 less than 20
Yūko	37	Osaka	2 (children)	Unemployed/ Freelancer >50,000 JPY	More than 2 Less than 5	Baby Products and her belongings second hands	More than 20
Marco	41	Ancona area	4 (2 siblings/parents)	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	More than 5	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	Less than 10
Alessio	40	Ancona area	2 (spouse and children)	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	More than 5	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	Less than 10
Cinzia	37	Ancona area	2 (spouse and children)	Clerk (unpaid work)	Less than 2	Clerk (unpaid work)	Less than 10
Paola	26	Ancona area	4 (2 siblings/parents)	Clerk 500-600 Euro	More than 2 Less than 5	Clerk (unpaid work)	More than 20
Carola	31	Ancona area	4 (2 siblings/parents)	Clerk 500-600 Euro	Less than 1	Clerk (unpaid work)	More than 20
Maura	34	Bergamo area	2 (children)	Representative 800 Euro	More than 5	over the counter pharmacy beauty products - New	More than 20

3-1.2 "I am not around, but does not mean I shut-in"

DFMs had almost slipped my mind until almost two years later when I transitioned to a new job. In my new role, I was assigned a task for one of the leading Japanese flea market platforms. My small team and I were responsible for marketing research. One of the categories of users we analyzed was part-time employees who used the platform as a side source of revenue (*fukushunyū*). The data revealed a significant increase in the number of users who fell under this category.

Fumiō's case returned to my mind, and I felt compelled to check on him. Though we had occasionally kept in touch, after he moved out of the center, we both ended up too busy and too distant to meet without prior arrangements. My attempts to call him were unsuccessful. Given his history of depression and shutting in, I decided to inform our circle of friends. One of us went to his apartment in Hino, but no one answered the buzzer. We then contacted the association for *Hikikomori* through social networks, where one of us had previously volunteered. After checking with his father, the association provided us with a phone number, and we were able to reach his family and obtain information about him.

He told me that he didn't feel like himself in Tokyo. His part-time job had started to feel too confining because his boss kept giving him new tasks to manage. He said that he could earn the same amount of money by working from home and focusing on his trades.

While we didn't discuss his finances during our conversation, I was just glad to hear that he was doing well and that we were able to reconnect with him.

Several more months passed, but I was now very careful to keep in touch with him regularly, if not daily, then at least a couple of times a week. Before moving to Hiroshima in the summer of 2019, I used to call him and talk for quite some time over the phone, speaking in both Japanese and a little Italian. We made plans to go out for drinks and eat *okonomiyaki* just a few days after I moved into my new home. However, on the day we were supposed to meet, I received a message from Fumiō saying that he wouldn't be able to come. This happened two more times until one day I took the initiative and invited myself over to his place.

Fumiō had moved back into his old room at his parents' house in Hiroshima prefecture. In many ways, the room reflected his personality. It was cluttered with electronics and computer parts scattered everywhere, along with old toys, clothes, and empty bottles of *uroncha*. The visual oxymoron of seeing complex IT hardware on the soldering iron's stand and an anime poster from the Nineties on the adjacent wall was striking. His juvenile identity seemed to oversee his work. On a tiny shelf placed on top of the bedstand, there were dusty miniatures of *Vespa*, a famous Italian scooter. One of the first things he said with a smile was, "It doesn't mean I'm shutting in again." I'm still not sure if he said this because he noticed my inquisitive looks or if he genuinely wanted to let me know about his state of mind. At the time, I was not sure if I believed him, but I believe him now.

Fumiō showed me all the commissions he had received for working as a freelance for nearby computer shops. He had around 15 disassembled computers, with their cases and shells lying in three piles. They created a symbolic wall that allowed him to seclude himself from what he did not like about Japanese traditional working culture. As long as they were there, he could protect this other way of living. He was getting paid anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000 JPY depending on the type of maintenance needed for each appliance. Additionally, Fumiō was selling many components on DFM and digital auction websites, making between 80,000 to 120,000 JPY per month.

Another thing he was eager to mention was that he had reconnected with his Italian ex-girlfriend. I believe that this was not a coincidence and was a demonstration of his proactivity. Fumiō seemed to be signaling to me that he had not only taken control of his life but had also managed to regain his personal and emotional growth.

On the same visit, I suggested that we go out for lunch, but Fumiō declined and revealed what was taking up so much of his time. That afternoon, he had an online meeting scheduled with four other hardware "traders," each specializing in certain products. They had to discuss whether to purchase returned goods from Amazon and BestBuy directly from the United States and Canada. The products were sold in bulk and sent to Japan on pallets, which would take over two weeks, sometimes even a month, to arrive, making the reselling process more complicated. However, Fumiō believed that it was often worth it.

I drove us to the nearby convenience store, to buy us ice creams and beverages. On the road, Fumiō again told me how relaxing his life in Hiroshima Prefecture was compared to Tokyo due to rarely congested streets and the easy access to services. His main point was the lack of necessity to fake a lifestyle nothing like his true self (*jibunrashikunai*). When I pressed him on what he meant by the true self, he quoted a song we used to sing together and described it as "simply something based on contents rather than appearances" (*kekkyoku mitame yori nakami*) and in line with who he was "before the company."

We relaxed for the next hour, playing video games and chatting. As I left, I reflected on how much Fumiō had improved personally, but how this improvement was linked to a regression to a safer physical and mental space. The former was easily identifiable as his childhood home; the latter involved shedding many of the contingencies of adulthood. The

rejection of responsibility played a crucial role in his newfound "happiness." Rather than incorporating his inner child into his professional life, he brought his precarious work into his childhood. Rather than confronting himself and his superiors, he opted to linger in a state of semi-adulthood and semi-employment.

Fumiō's focus on returning to easier times was both mental, through his search for "another way to live," and physical, through his return to the cluttered space of his childhood room, still adorned with anime posters and toys. While today's emphasis on safety and safe spaces is undoubtedly a step forward towards a better and more welcoming society, I found myself wondering if it was constructive for my friend to dwell on childhood memories instead of taking risks in the outside world. Although Fumiō was signaling to me his personal growth, I am still unsure if he will be able to apply these experiences in the society he criticizes so much, and that may eventually push back against him.

Fumiō's emphasis on "selfness" (*jibun/jibunrashii/jibunrashisa*) is not a new concept in Japanese discourses about precarity. Allison (2013) extensively discussed the concept of *ibasho*, literally a place to be or a person whereabout, but also refers to an existential place for oneself. I believe this theory can be expanded to include the identity discourse that is central to Fumiō's narrative. My friend was unable to find this place in Tokyo. The claustrophobia that crowded spaces, which are virtually ubiquitous in the city, can be a depersonalizing experience. Fumiō felt that his colleagues did not understand him for who he was, and he felt that he had lost control over his persona, as well as lacking personal time. These were all things that he expressed discomfort with and fought against.

Fumiō rejected the traditional *cursus honorum* of Japan, which dictated that one must be good at school, sports, to achieve the goal of a good job being a good employee. The steps of the ladder that society had placed him on would have had him keep the position for at least three years, possibly much longer. The short-circuit between his social and psychological identities never ceased. When his second job manifested the same oppressive demands, he quit again. He also refused to reduce his identity to his work performance, and the mere thought of it caused him to withdraw from society for months. He could not escape the "responsibilities" he theoretically owed to society and his superiors, symbolized by his recurring mentions of the senpai. According to Fumiō, the DFMs gave him an alternative and a chance to reconsider who he was for himself and others.

3-1.3 "We against Japan"

After my visit, Fumiō and I kept in touch regularly. During this time, my research began to take shape and I explained to Fumiō that I was interested in including him and his partners from the DFMs and liquidation auctions in my study. He was thrilled, but not all of the other members shared his enthusiasm. I later discovered that one of them expressed intense perplexity about my eventual research. However, after Fumiō confirmed with all of his partners, ensuring anonymity, I was allowed to be present at their online meetings, conduct individual and group interviews, and participate in their activities. Throughout my interactions with them, I experienced nothing but kindness.

Excluding Fumiō (35), the group included four other sellers: Yūma (37), Yūji (34), Tomohiro (34), and Genichi (39).[7] Yūma was from Hyogo prefecture, Yūji was from Aichi

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[7] For the purpose of safeguarding the anonymity of my informants, all names within this study have been altered. Moreover, I have taken care to minimize references to specific towns, instead opting to indicate their respective prefectures. Furthermore, I have refrained from explicitly mentioning the current or former places of employment. In this regard, I employ pseudonyms comprising first names for informants with whom I engaged using their first names, and last name pseudonyms for those with whom I communicated using their family names.

prefecture, Tomohiro was from Kumamoto prefecture, and Genichi was from Akita prefecture. While Tomohiro always worked from home as a teleworker, all others shared a negative experience working and living in the Tokyo area that caused them to leave the city. Yūma once playfully said that he had "escaped/retreated" from Tokyo (*ushiro wo misechatta*). This was true for all, apart from Genichi, who still lived in Kanagawa prefecture, adjacent to the Tokyo metropolitan area.

Once Fumiō informed them that I had some knowledge of electronics, they even offered me the opportunity to participate in their business, but I hesitated. Fixing one's appliances is one thing, and acting as a professional electronic engineer is another. I promised that I would help if needed to the best of my abilities. My main task consisted of translations, checking retail prices on the Japanese market, and looking for exciting bulk purchases (*nerau*). I later speculated that my access was also granted because none of them were considered fluent in English, so they hoped for my support. Undoubtedly, during this time, Fumiō acted as a gatekeeper for me, allowing me *to borrow the trust* (Bestor et al. 2003) that the other members granted him.

Their operation appeared to be very efficient. The members had divided responsibilities according to each person's expertise. Although they shared the profits equally for the products they traded, they also added margins tailored to one's contribution. For example, while all of them could sell Bluetooth speakers, a common item in the return pallets, Yūji oversaw repairs when necessary. He would fix the speakers, subtract repair costs and work (usually 10 to 15 percent), and be entitled to a larger share of the total monthly revenue from his partners. They saved a part of their income in a *Payoneer* account accessible to all, which they used to purchase other liquidation or returns stocks.

Each member of the group specialized in a specific type of electronics. As mentioned earlier, Yūji was in charge of repairing speakers, earphones, and audio components that used Bluetooth modules, which are notoriously difficult to fix. Yūma – whose mother used to work as a blue-collar worker at legacy manufacturer of arcades and pachinko slots until the nineties – was responsible for video game consoles and their accessories. Tomohiro dealt with hard disks and solid-state drives, using his expertise as a programming engineer to restore them if needed. Genichi had the responsibility for repairing all household and mass-consumption electronics, including home appliances. Lastly, Fumiō specialized in repairing motherboards, GPUs, and internal hardware of laptops and desktop computers.

Most of their products were sold on DFM sites, auction sites, and Jimoty, a DFM where trades are finalized face-to-face. After deducting various expenses, their monthly profits ranged from 300,000 to 500,000 JPY, which meant each member earned between 60,000 to 100,000 JPY on the side. Additionally, all of them had other sources of income, such as repairing commissions, part-time jobs, and freelance gigs. As a result, their total monthly earnings ranged from 160,000 to 200,000 JPY. The only exception was Tomohiro, who had a full-time job as a contractual worker for a telecommunication company that paid him 170,000 JPY before taxes and health insurance.

I asked on several occasions if they considered themselves professionally committed to the platforms, despite all their profiles describing them as "beginners" (*shoshinsha*). Except for Fumiō, who told me that the self-description as beginners is more to avoid trouble with customers than to indicate genuine inexperience, all the other informants answered negatively to my question. Tomohiro maintained that his "real" employment was with the company, while Genichi, speaking for himself and Yūji, said that "DFMs are just the platforms, not the job." To this, Yūma added that the skills on which they capitalized were the real epicenter of their activity, and those skills existed "with or without the *furima*." To elaborate, a number of informants within the group asserted that their work primarily hinged on their own cognitive abilities and competencies, a notion closely aligned with the

biocognitive capitalist theories. On top of this their insistence on how the labor continued outside of the output facilities of the product (i.e. the DFMs), meaning the continuation of work outside the workplace and the worktime, is also another key element of cognitive labor as described by Fumagalli (2019a).

During my fieldwork, it became clearer why some members were initially reluctant about my interest in their activities. Essentially, the group acted as a precarious and unregistered company, operating in the shadow of the government. Their extensive use of digital currencies, which are abundant in Japan, made it impossible to obtain a clear idea of their income from the outside. The same was true for me – I never received a copy of their detailed spreadsheets with their monthly incomes, and they were generally vague about it.

None of the members appeared to appreciate my questions about the morality of taxes or receiving welfare benefits. However, it should be noted that they were actively trying to remain "off the grid," and as a result, were rarely eligible for any government assistance. According to Nagao (2012), the Japanese welfare system operates on the principle of *shinseishugi*, which can be loosely translated as "applicationism." This doctrine states that entitlement to a given right is only granted if one has the necessary knowledge, submits the correct application, and follows the appropriate bureaucratic procedures.

> Benefits of the social security and social welfare systems are on hold until the application for those who apply; only after the presentation of certificates eventual positive evaluation the benefits payment will be possible for the 'applicationism.' It is important to point at the fact that citizens often end up losing their rights [*shikken shiteshimau*] because they did not know about the correct procedures and laws. When public authorities do not provide sufficient information along with an excellent welfare system, this disappears [*gabei ni kisuru*] (Nagao 2012).

Months after I started researching their group, Genichi provided me with a fitting example of applicationism. He used to be employed as a household appliances installer for a leading electronics and cameras department store in Japan. When he broke his shoulder riding his bike, he was unable to work for some time. He pulled his blue t-shirt's neck to show me the scar, and rased his voice said, "See! See!" Through the webcam, I recognized the marks of an operation. His practice for unemployment benefits at that time was rejected because he did not present on time the letter of separation (*rishokuhyō*) his company sent him. Since he applied by mail, nobody informed him. When he received it in Tokyo, Genichi was back in Akita with his family to get help during the rehabilitation. Hospitalized, he did not have the chance to register the new address on time, and the deadline for the benefit expired. Genichi sounded more and more upset while explaining these events to me. He concluded emphatically in broken English: "*we against Japan!*"

3-1.4 Camaraderie as solution to social insecurity

Over time, the opposition between the group and the society became more evident. Implicit criticisms about the functioning of Japanese culture, government, and the mainstream media became progressively more explicit. These criticisms were never concretely articulated in a progressive or conservative discourse and were rarely political. Nevertheless, generational, inter-sexual, and social conflicts were evident in my data.

When questioning Tomohiro about the reason behind his long-standing contract employment and why it did not turn into a more secure full-time position, we entered into a lengthy discussion about Japanese work ethic. According to him, this is outdated and cannot work in modern society. As a result, he has never held a full-time position since he started

as a teleworker for a communication company years before our interview. However, he was employed at a public library in Kumamoto prefecture for two years after graduating from university, where he oversaw digitalization. His recollections are of an environment with "older people, who were kind but not necessarily friends (*nakama*)."

> "I know that being *seishain* (regular full-time employee) may be good, but then you are just that: a *seishain*. My parents are old, and I want to be around if they need me […] in the company, I was the one feeling old, I was feeling miserable. […] In a Japanese company, you cannot take two hours off […] it does not matter if you conclude the work assigned: It is about being in the company! They want you there on Monday at 8 p.m., but the work starts at 9 p.m., you can do the cleaning in 10 minutes, but do you need to be there for one hour? It is like a school! […] they want you on Saturday, and you are supposed to go no matter what […] in Japan you say that work is your reason to live (*ikigai*) but what about the things that one cannot call work?"

Tomohiro contrasts being a son with the worker's identity, as he also dichotomizes being young and being old. For him, full-time employment carries the tasks of the position and the burdening consequences that come through the engagements with colleagues. Yūma told me that since Tomohiro's father had a stroke, he became unable to move one side of his body. As a consequence, his mother's health worsened too: helping him out of the bath she felt injuring badly. Tomohiro's distress of not being able to help them daily can also be explained through this event.

Similar to Fumiō's case, there is a clash of personal and professional identity within the workplace. Fumiō has a positive view of his older colleagues but considers them to be attached to outdated work ethics. He also connects their kindness with their longevity, but this precludes them from being his friends. He brought up the topic of friendship again, saying that "to call them friends, you need to have the same mentality (*kangaekata*)." The older generation shapes the new workers, who in turn are made "young-old" (*wakadoshiyori*).

The opposition between the worker's and personal identity can undermine even the lives of individuals. Tomohiro shared the sad memory of two childhood friends who lost their lives during the Kumamoto's 2016 earthquake. Both persisted in going to their offices despite the already evident state of emergency.

> "[…] The earthquake [of April 2016] first happened on Thursday night… it was strong, but the people still went to the company on Friday… there were shocks all day and on the night of Friday strong one happened, but people still went to the company. If the government sent in Self-Defense Force (SDF), why did the companies not call the day off? How many people died on the way or going back?"

While he struggles with the worker's identity imposed by the Japanese working culture, he is ready to engage with many of its responsibilities. Tomohiro is the only one to have a formal job that is not a part-time and one of the only two members living independently from their families. This is the case even though his parents' health condition would justify his return to family house.

A second recurring argument on which the members felt in disharmony with society was celibacy. No one of them had any ongoing relationship, and only Fumiō and Tomohiro were in contact with someone they felt intimate with. Fumiō, however, who entertained his digital correspondence with his past girlfriend, did not hesitate in answering that he did "not consider her a partner." Now living in Osaka, Tomohiro's high school girlfriend still writes

to him often, but they never meet "being her a *seishain*." None of the members considered themselves experienced except for Genichi, who had been married and divorced young.

Yūji and Yūma were particularly shy about their romantic lives. I never insisted, but the openness of Genichi became, on more than one occasion, the chance for them to talk about it. Yūma, at 37, told me that he never had a girlfriend despite trying. The few times he dated with interest at first, he lost it and felt out of place. He believed that the mass media public opinion influenceon people like him, with passion for electronics and anime, now stained by a bad reputation (*akumyō dakai*). He did not want to lie about himself, and that made girls uninterested. He was sure that "women would not be interested in an *ani-wota* (anime fan) because no woman was looking for the things [he] likes."

Yūma's shy attitude towards starting personal relationships was surprising. Despite being a good-looking, softly spoken, and kind man, he did not consider it possible to begin any type of relationship. Instead of asking himself why he failed to have a relationship, he delegated the responsibility to public opinion. This projection is made more evident by emphasizing the "name" or "title" that, in his words, society puts on people who share his interests. Yūma was atypical of the group in many ways, including his attention to physical health. He kept himself in good shape, dressed well, and worked out frequently, but he could not escape his identity, which he considered geeky. I believe this attention to physical appearance underlines even more the centrality that societal opinions hold for him.

While it is true that national conversations about the so-called "otaku," intended as individuals interested in videogames, anime, and manga's universe, lean to be in between mockery and fear, the degree of acceptance for the phenomenon has radically improved in the last decade. The word is now used for any type of interest somebody cultivates in Japan. Additionally, Japanophilia worldwide has created a more serene environment for discussion and analysis of this domain. Mainstream entertainment also rode this trend nationally. Academic research on the topic is extremely prolific. Movies and series in which the stereotype of the otaku has been de-weaponized and commodified have been widely explored (Freedman 2015). Ito (2012) made an excellent analysis of the contribution the widespread anime *Densha Otoko* – which was initially a web novel published on 2channel -– gave to the rehabilitation of the word. More recently, *otaku ni koi wa muzukashii* (Love is hard for otaku) (2020) used the stereotype of otaku for comedic purposes, but doubled on it with a female co-protagonist along with the traditional male one.

However, Yūma's position is more radical. Rather than "be made a joke (*waraimono*)," he would prefer a discussion of why some people choose video games and anime as their primary interests. For him, the issue of identity is not only a problem of self-determination. Individuals can find "who they really are thanks to the things they can do." Yūma sees identity as a more complex interplay of environment and nature. He said that a person alone cannot decide who he is while "the media points his finger and talks of the next incident […] like a person that burns a building or [worse.]" He refers to cases like Miyazaki Tsutomu or Aoba Shinji, still vivid in Japanese media imaginary.

We had several other discussions that bordered sociology, psychology, and anthropology. The impression was that Yūma had also proactively tried to stay away from the risk of emotional involvement. I asked him several times about it, but as he told me the first time, he always confirmed that he desired a partner; it just never happened. He did not feel any awkward around women. He had dated. He had friends with wives and girlfriends, and he could talk to them. It just never happened that in the company of a woman he liked, he felt at ease (*raku ni dekiru*). He always felt like "anything [to say] was weird" (*hen*).

The most talkative of my informants turned out to be Genichi. We had several in-depth interviews in which he never refused to answer or tried to evade any questions. After spending a few years in Akita, where his mother was from, he moved to Nagoya, in Aichi

prefecture. His father was employed in a large Japanese corporation of building machinery, so the family moved many times before he enrolled in university, spending some time even abroad.

Genichi had a boisterous laugh and convivial personality. When he was younger, he had a fierce temper and a rebellious nature that caused him conflict with peers and teachers. He connects this nature to his birthplace Akita. While he now regrets his attitude, at that time, he believed to be a "big deal" (*kiremono*) that could not be fooled (*damasarenakatta*). He and Tomohiro were also the only two who had their apartments, while others lived with their families. Initially, I thought that his independence, older age, and life experiences made him stand out from the other members, but I was wrong.

In fact, Genichi was the one who struggled the most to determine his identity. While working as an installer, his tasks consisted of delivering and setting up large household appliances, for customers that had bought them in the electronic department store where he worked. Refrigerators, air-conditioning units, washing machines, dishwashers - he apparently could install and fix them all. This, along with the types of electronic devices he was repairing for a secondhand shop, suggested that he had the least valuable skill set among the group. Genichi also had fewer chances to re-enter the job market in non-blue-collar positions than other members with IT and electrical engineering abilities. Lastly, he was earning less through his activities on the DFMs, since they rarely had large household appliances in the stocks they purchased.

While it is true that a significant part of household electronics destined for the Japanese market is still produced locally, it is indisputable that the sector's turnover is not as dynamic as the one of the IT's. The manufacturing work that has not been delocalized is often entrusted to immigrant workers in Japan. This condition limits even more the opportunities for Genichi.

After recovering from his bike incident, he tried many jobs. For some time, he worked as a contractor with several companies operating in the Kanto area. Then he quit this job, wishing to use his talent to "repair everything." He solved his quest for occupation in 2017 when he started making enough as an independent seller on online marketplaces and auction sites. He told me that finding good deals when students and seasonal workers leave their houses in February and March was essential for the first two years. When new students start moving in the city in March and April, he could make three and sometimes up to ten times his investment in less than a month. For a short period, he also received unemployment benefits and while still selling products he obtained clearing out cellars or picking up large objects people wanted to dispose.

At first, he was able to earn more money than before, but as the reselling market became more popular, he realized he needed to change his approach. He had watched videos online of stock buyers and got the idea of doing the same thing, but he did not feel confident in managing so many different products. So, he reached out to two other sellers he had get in touch on DFMs, Yūma and Fumiō.

Genichi is the only one among the group who still hopes to find a more stable position and re-enter the regular workforce. He believes that his monthly revenue, which ranges from 120,000 to 180,000 JPY, is not enough to survive in the Tokyo area. He was quite critical of Japan and its politics, which he characterize as "useless," and express frustration with its immobility. Nevertheless, Genichi exhibits a noticeable nationalistic inclination and demonstrates a keenness to draw a distinction between Japan as a country (referred to as "*kuni*") and Japan as a political entity or governmental institution (referred to as "*kokka*"). In his words, "the country is made up of the population (*minzoku*) within the borders, while [state's] institutions are made by [politician] in charge." This separation of humans and istitutions allowed Genichi to hold an amorous yet conflictual relationship with Japan and,

particularly, with its capital. Despite living in the Tokyo area, he was critical of the polarization of industries in the region. He saw the dense concentration of industries as a risk in the event of natural disasters or war, which was another recurring topic in our conversations.

Although he had never voted as a youngster, he jokingly defined himself as *uyoku* (right-wing). Genichi, like Yūma, was extremely wary of the Japanese media, particularly mainstream outlets. His turbulent past had made him political, yet uninterested in politics – an interesting paradox. While he was the only member to identify himself as being on one side of the political spectrum, the other members mostly agreed with him when he discussed social issues.

Genichi's opposition to institutions echoed his need to renegotiate his identity, or at least his idea of it. He felt comfortable in his own skin and maintained a persona of a strong-willed, rowdy kid. But at 39, he was no kid anymore. His association between his origins and nature reminded me of some of the informants of Uchikoshi (2019). In those cases, place of birth and regional identity is often redundantly attributed as the reason for personal choices, even when those lead to troubling outcomes. This fatalistic view of human nature often emerges in interviews conducted in both Italy and Japan. However, it aligns with the 'economism' that characterizes both countries, whereby economic prosperity is given priority over political and cultural factors (Fabbri 2018).

3-1.5 "Not the *furima* but the friends"

Internally the group members operated through trust that they had built within the online space granted by the DFMs. While it is true that they have never explicitly expressed a leader, Genichi's older age along with his frank nature put him in a privileged position to assume to that role. Many times, during group discussion he felt free to interrupt other members to add or conclude their points. I rarely observed this kind of behavior with other informants in Japan, even in groups that had an identified leader. From an external point of view, Genichi appeared to be recognized in this position at least by Fumiō and Yūma.

Tomohiro held a different opinion on the matter of leadership. "I do not like when someone talks for me" he said. "I do not believe I have to [respect people] because they are older." In many ways, this reasoning was coherent to his "*anti-salariman-ism*." For Tomohiro the group works well because it trades "at ease" (*raku ni*) without "the intention of becoming rich", thing that he deemed impossible "just selling junk" referring to other sellers, but because they managed together to create a "strange way of making money."

Tomohiro's theory begs for further discussions. It is indeed apparent that the individuals of the group trusted one another because the creative approach they had in running their venture. All of them took pride of what they managed to accomplish online, and it is undoubted they had put their personal relations and their business profit in a proportional correspondence. The more they traded together, the more they developed trust in each other, and the more they were able to rely on other members, the more they felt the convenience of their business. This virtuous circle of capital production is an unexpected outcome of their group, as it was born as a mere association for profit among private individuals. Such description is incredibly resembling of the one that Ravenelle (2019) described in studying the gig economy and that I call re-embedding capacity of DFMs.

Yūji rarely voiced his opinions, but in one of our last group discussions he extensively talked about the strategy for survival now that the competition on the DFMs is becoming so hard and that even larger companies are opening "profile/shops" on the platforms. "The model of the liquidation goods is going well because anyone of the members can work with each other on his own expertise." This characteristic enables the members "to

stay focused on what [they] can do […] and sending what [they] cannot work on to other friends." The positive mind set and the positive feeling coming from repairing a good when it is needed is for Yūji a form of moral payment. It is the manifestation of the re-embedding capacity the platforms have for certain informants. "If a company tries to do what we are doing, the single repairers will feel like employees, and even if they get the commission on each piece they sell, [their company] will not do as good as we do in proportion." Yūji rationalizes their success not only through their intuition but with their smart division of labor. He told me, "We are not employed by anybody for doing what we are doing. It is not because we are on the *furima* that we are doing well now, it is because we can trust the other friends."

3-2 Strategic use of DFMs in relation to motherhood and insecure employment

Another example of informants who considered themselves casual users were parents, mostly mothers, who used DFM platforms to sell and purchase products related to their children. These types of goods tend to be an entry point on the platform, and due to their short life cycle and the high demand, the supply is abundant. When working with these data is important to remember the traditional demographic of Mercari, the most popular *furima apuri*. The success of this platform can be attributed to an effective marketing campaign that managed to attract, for the first five years, a user base composed largely of women in their early thirties (Mercari 2019). Many of these women were young mothers who needed to trade their children's outgrown apparel and toys. After two years since its emergence, "babies' goods" became Mercari's third highest revenue category, surpassed only by "entertainment" and "ladies' clothing" (Mercari 2015). However, when analyzing this data, it's important to keep in mind that the second position, "entertainment," includes every type of gaming console, PC, and video electronics which have a consistently higher price point than baby products.

The participants engaged in this segment of my fieldwork comprised nine individuals, all of whom were exclusively female. The majority of them assumed responsibility for household management and were predominantly either married or engaged in long-term romantic partnerships. However, it is noteworthy that four of these individuals were single parents. Among these four, two were divorcees, one had limited contact with her husband, and the remaining participant had sporadic interactions due to the man's personal choice. In cases where the families included small children in preschool age, it was typical for the mothers to refrain from working outside the home, or, when they did, to hold irregular or part-time positions. This data seems to contrast with the ones reported by informants from households that had kids in elementary school.

In most cases, not only were the female parents the main caregivers, but they also contributed to the household income with a job that required a significant investment of time and energy proportionate to their children's age. Among the informants, six mothers held part-time positions characterized by varying levels of "security," whereas the remaining two were in formal full-time roles. It is worth highlighting that one of the participants was completely unemployed. Intriguingly, this particular informant, possibly due to her relatively young age (25), emerged as one of the most actively engaged individuals with the DFMs. In our conversations, she candidly shared that she was receiving welfare benefits as a single mother and concurrently assisting her sister's business, thereby earning additional income.

The well-documented Japanese social pattern, whereas one parent assumes the role of caregiver and household manager while the other serves as the primary provider seemed traceable among my informants's narratives. This trend is reflective of the middle-class

family structure that gradually took shape during the Meiji era, became firmly established in the post-war era, and was further solidified during Japan's high-growth period until the 1970s (Gagne-Okura 2021: Ch. 1-1 and 1-2). The social compartmentalization inherent in this model continues to place undue burdens on individuals, a reality that is reflected in their use of DFMs. These platforms serve as a means of observing the overall precariousness of the Japanese middle class, which is in part being replaced by user-workers.

The majority of informants in this group responded consistently. That is not to say they all fit society's expectations nor that they all cultivated the same aspirations. Gender inequalities and explicit discussions of gender discrimination were common. Several of my informants regretted getting married so young or some not getting married at all. Others were critical of the lack of public support, which made them view motherhood as a burden to their professional aspirations. On the other hand, some informants praised the municipality of their city for helping them out. Misaki (36) told me that in Japan "little girls often desire to become a bride (*oyomesan ni naritai*)" which she believes is a result of "brainwash." In contrast, Aki (32) shared that "desiring to be a housewife" is labeled as "old fashioned by other women that do not want [that for themselves] … this makes [one] feel like a traitor."

Three cases embodied many of the struggles that I had observed throughout the entire cluster of informants. Two of these individuals were single parents, one of whom was a divorcee, and the other was a senior bank official who had quit her job during the late stages of her pregnancy and had not been able to re-enter the workforce after that. In all these cases, DFMs and their user-worker identities functioned as instruments to achieve empowerment and boost the spirit of independence.

3-2.2 DFMs as mean for self-reliance

When contacted Moriko-san (34), it was because my wife had bought some products by her and noticed her profile page on the DFM. Moriko-san described herself as a "beginner on Rakuma, around 30, a mom of Haruka, and a single mother." Despite labeling herself as a "beginner," she already had more than 400 positive reviews, many of which stated that they were "returning customers" (*repīto desu*). Moreover, the pictures of her posts were beautifully taken and edited, adorned with cute writings and emojis. She principally sold new baby products, and only occasionally sold used ones. Her main trade consisted of imported articles, seemingly from North America or Europe. The fact that she had such transaction record on one platform suggested to me that she might have an even larger one if included with other DFMs.

Our first interactions were cordial but reserved. Moriko-san appreciated my interest in her case and, in particular, she seemed pleased with my direct approach and praise for her brave sincerity. However, she made it clear that the reason why she wrote "single mother" on her profile was only because she wanted the "customer to understand that sometimes [she] cannot answer rapidly." Through this brief statement, Moriko-san seemed to imply two things. Firstly, that she was not advocating for the empowerment of single motherhood, a still-stigmatized condition in Japan. Secondly, that she may not have the inclination or time to discuss her experiences on the DFMs with me. After a few exchanges in which Moriko-san shared very little of her personal story, I left her my contact information and stopped writing to her, under the assumption that she was not interested in further communication.

Almost four months had passed, and I was in Italy, stuck due to the 2020 pandemic lockdown. Suddenly a notification on my phone informed me of a message in my inbox. Moriko-san had added me to her friend list and apologized for the delay, expressing her surprise upon discovering that I was a foreigner. She explained that due to the problems with imports to Japan during the early stages of the pandemic emergency, she found herself with

more free time. Subsequently, we engaged in numerous discussions through messages and later on video.

Moriko-san, who is originally from Kansai, moved within the region to Osaka after her graduation to work for a large company that specialized in importing building materials from all over the world. She is fluent in English and has a basic knowledge of German. Moriko-san's childhood was marked by economic stability, but emotional difficulties due to the suicide of her mother at the age of 12. Her father struggled to cope with this event, and the loss remained a wound within the family. Through her job, Moriko-san became romantically involved with the father of her child, a married American man of Japanese origin. The man never recognized the child and stayed with his American wife. According to Moriko-san, this created a fracture between him and his own mother, a Japanese woman who works in the baby care and products industry in the United States and Japan.

During her maternity leave, Moriko-san continued to work on many operations that she had started during her normal employment. She also began selling baby clothing and goods that her baby's grandmother had sent to her on the DFMs. Moriko-san noticed the success of certain products that were normally unavailable on the Japanese market and decided to start trading them more intensively. At the time, Moriko-san was still receiving full maternity pay, so she never reported her side-trade. However, she claimed that "there was not much to report."

Moriko-san told me that her situation took a drastic turn when she began planning her return to the company after maternity leave. She discovered that several projects under her direction had been discontinued, and some of her subordinates had moved on to new endeavors. She realized that taking time off from work would mean sidelining herself for the benefit of her daughter, which was a difficult decision for her. However, the practical realization of this sacrifice hurt her deeply. After some time, she decided to return to her job, but only part-time, and in the meantime, continue trading on the DFMs through the channels she had created with her baby's grandmother. Opting to transition to part-time work significantly and adversely affected her salary, ultimately leading to a situation where she discovered she was earning more income through her trade than from her job. The DFMs gave Moriko-san the courage to reject the conditions imposed by her company, which sought to diminish her role as a worker and emphasize her role as a mother. Through her trading on the DFMs, she was able to generate a highly flexible side income.

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Moriko-san's sales experienced a meteoric rise. As the circulation of goods across the world was disrupted, many individuals began to stockpile long shelf-life items, including high-end baby products that Moriko-san traded. She observed that "the fear of not being able to procure products for one's child is an extremely daunting prospect for a parent, especially those accustomed to expensive goods." Moriko-san's inventory occasionally grew so voluminous that she had to sleep with a portion of it by her bed. Despite the challenges of managing a large stock of goods, Moriko-san was able to sell out most of it before new orders from the US arrived, even with a small price increase. Moreover, her restocking process was relatively flexible, allowing her to rearrange shipping via couriers before her competitors and without suffering significant losses in profit.

By the end of 2020, Moriko-san's success was evident with almost 1,000 new positive reviews across the three major DFMs. However, during this period, she also became aware of the need for greater security for herself and her child's future. The never ending request of customers had turned into a "hard to bare annoyance." In the summer of 2021, Moriko-san took a further leap of faith and quit her job for a new full-time employment. She was also content with the fact that her baby could benefit from the preschool services of her municipality. During our last conversation, Moriko-san happily told me that she had received

a job offer from a key player in the Japanese baby products industry, also leveraging the knowledge and skills acquired during her successful venture in the past year.

Moriko-san's story serves as an illustrative example of how the use of DFMs can support job mobility. Her narratives demonstrate a constructive deployment of a user-worker identity, wherein she was able to carve her own path by leveraging the opportunities provided by the DFMs, in response to the limitations imposed by her previous workplace. Through her determination and courage, she was able to develop a marketing instinct and sophisticated consumer analysis. However, when the DFMs were no longer sufficient to meet her needs, Moriko-san was able to transition to a more stable and secure employment. Overall, Moriko-san's case shows how the use of DFMs can empower individuals to take control of their professional lives and pursue their own paths. The economic insecurity stemming from her initial demotion in both job status and compensation, followed by her subsequent complete exit from that position, serves as a prominent example of the substrate from which user-worker identity can emerge and be deployed as a transitional state toward a safer working condition.

Although Moriko-san described herself as a casual user, the significance that secondhand platforms had in her professional development and the critical role they played in her economic subsistence challenge her statement. Moreover, despite her initial intention of using the platforms solely for buying and selling, she later utilized the experiences accumulated on digital flea markets as a reference for her new career. Her tale is illustrative of the ambiguous usage and suitability of the casual user typology in capturing the complex and varied ways in which she, like many other informants, interacts with the platforms.

This can be considered an empowering deployment of the platform by its members and community, going beyond its original scope. As further chapters of this study will discuss, digital flea markets have attempted to channel and capitalize on this type of use over time. Nevertheless, it is evident that Moriko-san displayed a sharp marketing instinct that allowed her to recognize and take advantage of the untapped potential almost two years in advance.

3-2.3 Social independence through the DFMs

Like Moriko-san, Kao-san (28) also believes that DFMs were helpful when her life suddenly took an unexpected turn. Due to her peaceful upbringing in Kanagawa-prefecture, she mentioned to me that she lacked the skills to handle conflicts and, as a result, struggled during her divorce. Kao-san explained that her parents had never fought in front of their children. On the other hand, Kao-san's ex-husband had been consistently disrespectful towards her in the presence of friends and family for years. He had been her first love, and they had been together since high school, which led Kao-san to believe that "it was normal (*atarimae*) to stay together."

Kao-san's relationship with her partner began to deteriorate following the birth of their first child, when they were just 24 years old. Kao-san reported that the couple struggled due to his long working hours at the office, while she harbored resentment for having given up her career. The situation further deteriorated through extended arguments and continuous threats of abandonment. Despite the unfavorable domestic environment, Kao-san became pregnant again. As a graduate of a specialized school and former manager of a cafeteria, she felt particularly uncertain about her ability to provide adequate support for her children. During her second pregnancy, Kao-san's relationship with her husband became increasingly strained, ultimately leading her to leave him and return to her parents' home.

While living at her parents' home, Kao-san began to use a DFM platform more frequently. For Kao-san, it was not just the act of buying or selling that was important, but

rather the accessibility of the platform that made her feel "comfortable." She compared the experience of a smooth transaction to that of going to a shop where she was well acquainted with the salesclerk. The ease that she felt "asking for opinions, discounts, and suggestions...not only about the articles she was interested in but about all the things that come with it" gave her peace of mind (*anshin*). For instance, "Is it a good baby bed or not?" was not the only question for a single mother like her. Kao-san needed to know if it was easy to assemble, if it could be folded, if it was heavy, how long she could use it, and many other factors. Although she could have gone to a physical shop, "besides being more expensive, the other customers around the clerk made [her] feel like an annoyance" (*meiwaku*).

Kao-san gave me an example of this discomfort. Once, she was looking for baby-proof gates to prevent her first child from crawling towards the stairs in her house. The shop assistant suggested a specific product and reassured her that it was easy to use, and that "the Mr. would have put it up in no time." This implication that a husband would be present to assist her in setting up the gate made Kao-san feel embarrassed and ashamed. As a single mother in her second trimester with another small child, she felt like she had failed in some way.

In this context, Kao-san saw her favorite DFM as the primary means to make money and move on from her previous relationship. She no longer wanted anything to do with her ex-husband, so selling items that had a connection to him felt "liberating" (*kaihō*). The platform allowed her to establish a sense of independence and control over her life that she had been lacking and provided a locale for her to engage with a community and build social connections. Additionally, the anonymity of the platform allowed her to avoid feeling judgment and scrutiny from others, which gave her a sense of privacy and safety. For Kao-san, the *furima* was not only a way to buy and sell goods, but a space to reclaim her sense of self and rebuild her life "*as any other SNS.*"

Kao-san explicitly stated that her use of the DFM platform had become an obsession (*maibūm*), as she had completed 350 transactions before realizing it. She had also formed friendships with two other members, whom she had met in person and who had provided her with assistance during her last months of pregnancy. Following the birth of her child and the finalization of her divorce, these friends, along with her family and an older university friend, became the people she "relied on" (*ate ni natta*). It is noteworthy that Kao-san is the only informant who identified as a casual user and maintained a casual user routine, but was able to develop friendships on the DFM platform that continued to flourish off-line.

In late 2021, Kao-san expressed her belief that she would have found alternative ways to dispose of her old belongings had she not utilized DFM platforms. Nevertheless, she underscored the significance of being able to conduct these transactions without the need for face-to-face interactions, which allowed her to circumvent the feelings of being judged or the need to provide explanations. This aspect of anonymity and ease of use was a critical element in her path towards recovery. As non-confrontational person, Kao-san found the platform to be a chance to work on herself unseen without involving others. Furthermore, the capability to generate income and provide for herself instilled in her a sense of agency and empowerment, which she needed at that moment of her life.

3-2.4 Requalification of professional identity through the DFMs

Yūko-san (37) is the sole informant who described her relationship with her partner in a positive light, indicating that they are "happy when together," but complained that "he rarely is." Her husband is experiencing a condition known as *tanshin funin*, which refers to a job transfer that requires him to live in a different city, separated from his family.

I encountered Yūko-san at one of the "Mercari for Everybody" (*minna no Mercari*) classes that have been organized by the corporation throughout Japan since 2019. At that time, she was acting as an "ex-beginner" (*motobeginnā*), assisting future sellers with various aspects of their digital interactions, such as uploading images, providing descriptions, sharing personal information in their profile, and engaging with other members. Yūko-san applied for this position via the company's website, presenting her profile with over 600 positive transactions, the bulk of which consisted of items she had purchased or sold for her children. She received nearly 30,000 JPY for two days of work to cover transportation and meals. After learning about my research during the seminar, Yūko-san approached me and offered to meet with me to share her experiences. Through her kind and comprehensive interviews, she has been a critical informant for this cohort of users.

Yūko-san (37), who holds a degree from a renowned national university, spent nearly ten years in a successful career at one of Japan's largest financial institutions. However, after giving birth twice in three years, she began to feel estranged from her workplace. She expressed frustration that even if one is "not willing to quit their job, there are limited options available." In her view, once employment is no longer the sole priority, the chances of maintaining one's position, let alone advancing in the company, are slim for a woman. Although she acknowledged that certain employees may contribute more to the company than others, she hoped that performance, rather than time spent in the office, would be the primary consideration. She did not have an issue with the neoliberal concept of self-responsibility, but rather with the way it was expressed in Japan. Her digital flea market profiles' self-introduction sections feature lyrics from a song: "again in the game for my gain," which, in my opinion, exemplifies this sentiment.

Yūko-san felt particularly stressed by how, not only the workplaces but, society compartmentalize women identities with biological events through what she defined in English as "mind tricks." She shared a remark with other informants that projects a clear idea of what she intends.

> When I go get my kids at the preschool, I am not anymore [last name] Yūko-san, I am "*Manato-kun to Ao-chan no okāsan*" (Manato and Ao's mom). People at the gates will greet me using *okāsan*. The teachers, the other kids, the principal, they will all address to me as *okāsan* (mom). Even the [mail] they sent me are not addressed to me, they are addressed to [my children's] *okāsan*. Similarly, when I am at the doctor with the kids, the nurses will call me *okāsan*, and I would like to tell them 'I am not your mom! I have [a] name!' The feeling is that in Japan you stop existing as a person when you are a woman with [children] […] This is very bad because [in] many ways it [scares] young women to have children. *Shoshika* (low natality) should not surprise […]. I am shocked that nobody notices this, but maybe they just have it in their mind, so it is normal for them.

Yūko-san' sharp analysis echoed in my mind every time DFMs' members I contacted wrote in their description or even the very username to be "[name]'s mom."[8] These cases, like Moriko-san's, are extremely frequent and, not only attest the accuracy of Yūko-san's observation, but are in indicative of the biopolitical conditioning that Japan' society exercises on young women with children.

After resigning from her position, Yūko-san found herself in a state akin to depression. She initially felt apathetic, but this gradually turned into anger towards her

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[8] This type of cases is very frequent. While it is hard to speculate on an exact figure, I have personally encountered this phenomenon more than 250 times on the span of 2 and half years. It in general appears as "Name-chan mama," "Name-kun no haha," "Name-mama" etc.

former employer and later towards her distant husband. Yūko-san found it difficult to accept the notion that a woman could transition from being an asset to a liability "simply because she has a baby."

In her previous role, Yūko-san frequently traveled to various countries for business purposes, often at the expense of quality time with her loved ones. Yūko-san acknowledged that she had prioritized her work over her private life, citing the early enrollment of her children in preschool as evidence. Notably, she indicated that she had to pay for the fees out of pocket, as "kindergarten is free after three years old." She used this information to demonstrate how Japan tries to discourage women with children from working.

Additionally, she considered her colleagues at the bank as her friends and noted that her only recreational moments were spent with them. The overlapping of private and professional spheres has been extensively investigated by scholars of cognitive capitalism (Fumagalli, 2019a; Lebert & Vercellone, 2006), and this argument was frequently raised by informants who experienced unemployment or underemployment. It is interesting that she emphasized the relational importance of her work also because relationality in its biocognitive nature is also listed by Fumagalli and Morini (2008) as a key feature to discuss cognitive labor.

Yūko-san places great importance on the triangular relationship between happiness, time management, and profitability. Yūko-san acknowledges that "the time [she] looking at the phone is time [she] could be working" but since "it is hard to find a job that satisfy [her]," at least DFMs provide her with a chance to deploy that time "to make money, *like working*." For Yūko-san, happiness is implicitly connected to the recognition of skills and the ability to turn those skills into profit. According to her "when Mercari [emphasizes] *kakureta shisan* (hidden resources or assets), [9] maybe they don't know it, but they are also talking also of people's abilities."

To phrase it another way, Yūko-san acknowledges the potential to commodify human skills and time as a positive aspect of DFMs. She sees selling one's abilities as not only justifiable but desirable, even at a discounted price. This conscious embrace of a cognitive biocapitalistic perspective highlights the strong connection between cognitive labor and cognitive capital, as also observed by Fumagalli (2019b). While this alignment benefits enterprises that make use of this workforce, it remains unclear what material benefits these user-workers believe to gain from engaging in such practices compared to traditional employment. It is also open for debate to what extant this embracing is influenced by the increasingly insecure job market and the unfair treatment they may have experienced in it, as in Yūko-san's case.

The inextricability of productive identity and self-realization is a central aspect of neoliberal citizenship, as noted by scholars such as Gardner (2010) and Muehlebach (2012). In this context, individuals are expected to be self-sufficient and define themselves primarily through their economic productivity. Yūko-san's emphasis on the economic return of her personal aspirations and skills is reflective of this neoliberal mindset, which values economic success over other forms of fulfillment.

It is also noteworthy that Yūko-san characterizes her activities on the DFMs as "*like working*" but not literally as such. In the same conversation, she reiterated that DFMs lack two essential elements to be considered a "real job": a satisfactory salary – she stated her income from the platform greatly varied and could range from 20,000 to 80,000 JPY – and a hierarchical work environment "with superiors and juniors." This pervasive equality

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[9] "Hidden resources," which Yūko here called "*kakureta shisan*" in Japanese, have constituted foundational keywords for Mercari for a considerable period. In the seminars hall where we met there were huge banners "there are 340,000 JPY laying around your house." Beginning in 2018, the company's mission statement explicitly encompassed the concept of reusing "hidden assets" (*kakure-shisan*).

among user-workers is, for Yūko-san, another factor preventing the DFMs from being regarded as a profession and the major obstacle in considering herself a professional. This perspective seems to reflect an internalized feature of neoliberal corporate culture.

Although Yūko-san experienced rejection from her workplace, which was a central part of her social identity, she did not reject the profit-oriented values on which it operated. Instead, she settled for the user-worker identity offered by Mercari and other *furima*, which allows her to share in the profits without committing to traditional employment. In essence, Yūko-san did not only choose the user-worker identity as a pragmatic response to limited employment opportunities but also to fulfil a desire of self-realization she associate with value production.

Yūko-san also has introduced in very human way her favorite platform. This personification of platforms – treating them as if they possess human qualities or emotions – does not seem just a linguistic or psychological curiosity; it speaks volumes about the social ambitions and aspirations of individuals in modern workplaces. When users ascribe human attributes to platforms, they are often seeking to navigate and rationalize a digital environment that is inherently impersonal and algorithm-driven. By attributing human-like characteristics to these platforms, they imbue them with a sense of agency, reliability, and sometimes even companionship, which reflects their desire for more humanized interactions in their work environment. This tendency can be seen as a coping mechanism to counter the isolation and mechanical nature of digital labor, where human connections are often mediated by screens and interfaces.

Furthermore, the anthropomorphizing of digital platforms might suggest informants' aspirations to establish a sense of control and familiarity in their work. In environments where algorithms and data analytics dominate, imbuing platforms with human qualities provides a sense of predictability and understanding that might otherwise be lacking. It reflects a deeper social ambition to reclaim a sense of agency and personal connection in the workplace, which is increasingly dominated by digital interfaces. This phenomenon underscores the ongoing negotiation between technology and human interaction in modern workspaces, revealing how digital laborers seek to humanize their interactions within digital ecosystems as a way to fulfill their social and emotional needs in the workplace.

Yūko-san emphasized that with DFMs, it is the user-workers who employ the platforms for a share of the profit, rather than the other way around. She expressed her satisfaction with the fact that the platforms never reject her and are good business partners, in defiance of their flaws such as being time-consuming and having limited scalability. Despite these limitations, Yūko-san appreciates the opportunity to be "in the game for her gain" again, especially after her negative experience in the traditional workforce. However, Yūko-san is aware that it is challenging for user-workers to be officially recognized and become employees, regardless of their efforts. She managed to be a paid guest at those seminars, which seems to have made her feel understood. It is hard to say if her ambitions can settle for it.

3-3.1 Italian Informants

In 2006, Marco (41) and Alessio (40) established a business specialized in the repair and sale of electronic devices, computers, and videogames, but also sold tabletop, and trading cards games. Prior to this, Marco had resigned from his position as an authorized repairer for a Finnish phone company, quipping that the "Scandinavian ways were too cold" for him. Meanwhile, Alessio had left his post as a technician responsible for the local municipal office, describing his former role as a "glorified handyman" in a workplace where

"one grows a year older every day." Having been friends since high school, the two opted embark together on their entrepreneurial venture.

Originating from a small town in Central Italy, situated in close proximity to Ancona, Marco and Alessio demonstrated a keen understanding of their customer base's desires, effectively steering their store towards the groups of local adolescents and young adults fascinated with video games and smartphones. Their humble establishment soon transformed into a popular hangout spot for the region's youth, who frequented the store to test new games and engage in trading card games. In 2010, the entrepreneurial duo relocated to a more spacious location nearer to the center of Ancona.

Until 2013, their business was flourishing. However, with the onset of the European recession, their enterprise suffered a significant decline, losing approximately 40-50% of its revenue in just one year. The situation further deteriorated when a large department store, owned by an international corporation, opened on the outskirts of Ancona, leading to further shrinkage in their profits. Despite their resilience, they were compelled to close their shop the following summer, out of fear of bankruptcy, which has hard consequences for Italian entrepreneurs, and commenced selling their inventory through DFMs. By early 2015, almost all their trading was conducted through these online platforms.

Like some Japanese informants, Marco and Alessio soon realized that the most lucrative aspect of the re-use business was not in selling items but in buying broken goods, refurbishing them, and reselling them. This approach utilizes non-perishable and upgradable cognitive labor, as opposed to the traditional trade formula. According to Marco, "for the first few years, it was really easy," but as competition increased and foreign buyers entered the market, they were compelled to adopt a more comprehensive approach and also salvage electronic scrap materials from the components.

In the same year, both Marco and Alessio obtained their certification as professional disposal and repair agents of RAEE (rifiuti da apparecchi elettrici ed elettronici), which refers to wastes coming from all types of electronic appliances. Italy is known for its compliance with EU policies on the disposal of such materials, making it one of the most efficient countries in the world in this regard (ECORIDIANA Foundation, April 2021). Through this certification, the informants found themselves in an official position to refurbish and resell electronic goods, purchasing them in bulk from collection centers across Italy.

Currently, Marco and Alessio spend most of their days collecting valuable parts for materials, such as gold and copper, harvesting components or repairing their stock to upload offers on DFMs and social media marketplaces. In this task, they are supported by their family members Paola (26) and Carola (31), who are Marco's sisters, and Cinzia (37), who is Alessio's wife. Cinzia told me that she repairs and cleans products herself but had no plans to obtain the RAEE certificate because her involvement with DFMs was only as a "loving wife (*moglie da bene*)" and not as a seller. According to Alessio, the work is just as intensive as running the shop but "at least it comes on terms that [they] set for [themselves]." They were "making a little more [money] at the time of the store but working oppressive 9-18 hours." Marco added that "happiness and work are not mutually exclusive in your life."

The professional identities of Alessio and Marco are nuanced, as they reject for themselves the label of professionals in the digital trades. Alessio said that he sees himself as "not a professional of the DFMs but a professional repairer working with the DFMs." On the other hand, Marco stated that although his primary work is done through the DFMs, he is still a "newbie" in the digital trade, explaining that he relies heavily on his younger sisters' help. He credits his younger sisters with expertise in the management of the digital trades, particularly Paola, who oversees customer interactions and posting of new offers, while Carola manages inventory and shipping.

This observation highlights the complex and multi-layered nature of the digital trades and the varied roles that individuals may take on within this sphere. It also reveals the potential for familial ties to shape participation in self-entrepreneurialism and the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal spheres. Finally, the differences in the perceptions of professional identity between Alessio and Marco highlight the diverse ways in which individuals may engage with and participate in the digital trades, despite similar backgrounds and circumstances.

Two further considerations should be made. The first is that Alessio, like Yūko-san, did not renounce his professional identity even when it was disrupted during the economic crisis. Instead, his self-entrepreneurialism led him to establish functional relations with the DFMs through his new user-worker identity. The second consideration is that, despite the participation of Paola and Carola, they minimized their involvement. They receive a small salary of 800 euros "without any contract" (*a nero*) while Cinzia does not receive any payment. This is in contrast to the approximately 2000 euros of net profit that Alessio and Marco individually make. During our conversations, all three women seemed more interested in discussing business operations rather than their commitment. When we talked about the management of digital trades, Paola reduced her role to that of an "assistant" with the motivation that "a decent person (*una persona per bene*) does what they can to help a brother... if it is family, it is always good to do good (*è sempre bene fare bene*)."

The observations about the role of *bene* in the family dynamic, while undoubtedly a social product of unfair gender relations, occurs within the context of familiar kinship. Numerous studies have highlighted how women tend to be the first victims of hyperflexible labor markets (Ong 1999; Menéndez-Espina 2020), and Italy, like Japan (Kondo 1990), has a grim record regarding gender differences in employment (Bernardi 2000; Ferrera and Gualmini 2004; Betti 2016). Salzinger (2003: 9-11) connects such exploitative norms in Mexico to the docile productivity associated with feminine identities. I believe a similar docility is exploited here, but in Paola, Carola, and Cinzia's cases, this is leveraged within a familiar affective setting.

Muehlebach (2011: 62), working with Italian volunteers, described affective (or emotional) labor as a new form of (bio)capitalistic value extrapolation from "noncommercialized social bonds." Whether interfamilial labor can be considerate affective might be up for discussion. Muehlebach's definition presuppose emotional labor to be *unwaged* and based "on good feeling—trust, reciprocity, magnanimity" and oppose it to flexible labor based on negative emotions such as "fear, opportunism, and cynicism." A rigid application of such criteria would qualify only Cinzia for such typology of labor, but I am not convinced of Muelebach would apply a dichotomic separation for my informants' case.

Indeed, interplay between family and business norms in this case blurs the boundaries between affective and flexible labor. Although Muehlebach's definition of emotional labor as based on trust, reciprocity, and magnanimity could apply to the familial bonds in play here, the fact that Paola and Carola's labor is remunerated complicates matters. Additionally, the informants' double role as both family members and workers in the business makes it difficult to strictly separate affective and flexible labor. In this context, it seems that the familial affective identity is the dominant factor, leading Paola and Carola to accept a labor regime that they may not tolerate in a non-familial setting.

The Intertwining of family and enterprise suggests the interlocking of personal and professional life and this pattern was observed in both the Italian and Japanese cases. However, the way in which these relationships migrate between personal and professional spheres seems to differ between the two contexts. In the case of Marco and Alessio, personal relationships stirred outward from their private sphere into their work. In contrast, in the Japanese case, relationships moved inward, from the professional sphere into their private

life. This may be due to the historical context of Japan, where the corporate sector held a central position in society and individual life until the burst of the 1990s bubble.

It is noteworthy that the neoliberal restructuring of companies failed to entirely eradicate the pre-existing corporate social dynamics that blurred with interpersonal relationships. The significance of "family business" (*aziende a conduzione familiare*) is exalted by both small and large enterprises in Italy, with the largest Italian car company, Fiat, still being essentially run by a family. Similarly, in Japan, Okura-Gagné (2021 Ch. 2-4) observed that the neoliberal restructuring of Japanese companies "overwrote existing corporate social dynamics" but failed to create "new subjectivities and values" that matched contemporary working customs. In other words, while the corporate productive mechanisms underwent significant changes during the neoliberal era, the interpersonal social dynamics that emerged from them do not match individuals emotional and interpersonal needs. This is evident in the case of the Japanese informants in the first group, who, despite being physically distant, placed great importance on their friendship, a phenomenon that I have also observed in other similar instances (Angiulli 2022).

3-3.2 Self-entreprenuerialism, death and local identity on the DFMs

One of the most interesting cases among my Italian informants is that of Maura (34), who works as a seller of health, beauty, and sanitary products, commonly known as *parafarmacia* in Italy. During our first interview, Maura shared that she had worked for pharmaceutical companies in Lombardy for almost nine years, including the national leader in medical utensil manufacturing. At the age of 23, Maura had her first child with her partner Andrea, who was a specialized blue-collar worker in a motor parts factory near Bergamo. Unfortunately, Andrea was involved in a workplace accident and lost his life only eight months after the birth of their second child when she was 29. He was one of many workers in Italy who die in workplace accidents due to the outdated and unregulated labor market -–so-called "white deaths" (*morti bianche*).

Maura shared with me the tragic circumstances of Andre''s passing, attributing his demise to the actions of another worker – an individual she specifically noted should not have been tasked with operating the forklift that led to the incident. While the full details of the event remain somewhat shrouded in mystery, Maura managed to piece together a partial recollection of the events after taking legal action against the company. As per her account, the department head directed the inexperienced colleague to relocate cargo within the warehouse. Unfortunately, the lack of familiarity with the task led to a mishandling of the situation, resulting in the pallet slipping over the edge and precipitating the collapse of the entire shelving unit. Tragically, this sequence of events led to injuries sustained by four workers and ultimately proved fatal for Andrea. After his loss, Maura became the main caregiver and sole provider for her family of three. At the time, she was employed as a full-time sales employee in a large pharmaceutical manufacturer. Besides dealing with the obvious emotional turmoil, Maura had to balance her work and family responsibilities.

In this situation, Maura proposed to the head of her branch that she be made responsible for e-commerce for the company and allowed to stay home for more time. The supervisor flinched and ironically invited Maura to form her own small handling operation, "*diventare una partita iva*" (lit. to become a VAT number)[10] and try this venture herself. Maura accepted the challenge to depart from her underpaid and constraining job precisely when she required security the most, opting instead to embark on her own solo endeavor. She "could feel the patronizing way (*aria di smacco*)" in which the head of the department had spoken to her. Maura believes "he would not have said that thing in that way if not to a

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[10] Independent workers often self-employed further explaination in the next paragraph.

woman, and one in [her] situation above all." Molé (2012) recorded a multitude of narratives and provided a detailed record of mobbing in the Italian workplaces. This phenomenon more often affects female, minority, and "risk categories" (*categorie a rischio*), unprotected workers (Molé, 2012: 82-85). Maura's story is a poignant example of the challenges faced by women who become the sole providers and caregivers of their families. In Maura's case, her husband's untimely death forced her to take on both roles, and she was forced to seek alternative employment options that would allow her to balance her work and family responsibilities.

The phenomenon of the "*partite iva*" (plural of *partita iva*) is a noteworthy development in the neoliberal Italian labor market. Originally referring to the VAT number that freelance and self-employed workers ("*lavoratori autonomi*") had to register at the Italian Finance Ministry for fiscal administration, the term has come to indicate socially and physically the independent laborers. The VAT number allows these individuals to count as a company by the Italian Revenue Agency (Agenzia delle Entrate) and access certain benefits (Istat 2011: 17).

Although Italy has had a high number of self-employed workers since the 1970s (Istat 2011: 17), governments of any affiliation that succeeded since the 1990s increasingly favored policies that encouraged such autonomous work while not offering new protection or stimulus for regular employment (Barbieri 1999; Brandolini et al. 2010; Gori 2017). While the working conditions of "partite iva" workers are comparable to those of Japanese freelancers, the Italian neoliberal regime has provided a biopolitical framework for self-entrepreneurialism.

In 2015, Maura quit her full-time employment "to become a *partita iva*," becoming a commission worker also for her previous employer. Her experience exemplifies a common pattern among the Italian self-employed population that is also emerging in Japan, where informants often report quitting their full-time employment to become part-time freelancers or temporary employees within the same company.

Maura's success as an autonomous worker was largely due to her ability to leverage her professional network and make strategic use of digital platforms. As she began working for herself, she reached out to contacts she had made in the logistics and representative departments of her previous employer, as well as similar companies. This networking proved fruitful, as she quickly achieved impressive sales results. Initially, Maura attempted to create her own website, but she found the competition to be overwhelming. Instead, she turned to digital platforms such as DFMs and e-commerce giants like Amazon and i-Herb, as well as domestic websites. By using these platforms to sell her products, Maura was able to achieve a significant increase in sales, earning nearly 50% more than she had in her previous full-time position in just three months.

Maura's experience highlights the challenges faced by small-scale independent sellers in the digital marketplace, especially with the emergence of new sellers benefiting from the free circulation of goods within the European Union. She observed that these new sellers often sourced their products from countries "where everything is inexpensive" with lower production costs, enabling them to sell their products at lower prices, thereby reducing her profits. She also understands that the primary responsibility rests with the companies that manufacture and sell the same products at lower prices in certain countries. Maura's shrewd business acumen is evident as she astutely identifies the issue of internal dumping that the European Union has failed to effectively address, despite several attempts (European Commission n.d.; Official Journal of the European Union 2017). As a result, Maura was forced to shift her focus towards larger e-commerce platforms, where she could potentially benefit from greater exposure to a wider customer base.

Maura re-addressed this problem in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, telling me that "now everybody is trying [to get into e-commerce on DFMs] but they don't know how" and "with the halt [of the circulation from other European countries] the cheaters (*imbroglioni*) selling *foreign trash are ready to cry* (*iga i làgrime in scarsèla*)."[11] For Maura, who does "not believe in states but only in communities," unfair competitors should not be outed by the platform's administrators but by the market. "In [her small town], if a shop cheats [her] or the neighbors, everybody just stop going."

Maura, quite proud of her origins, presented often such explanations based on her cultural heritage for surrounding events. For example, she believes digital trade is "natural for Northern Italians (*padani*) [12] because of [their] shared Communal history (*eta dei comuni*)"[13] which made them prone to "commercial exchanges between different Commons on the base of trust." She thinks that "trust is the basis of digital trade" and that the "reliability" (*affidabilità*) of a seller is embodied by the reviews of the buyers – something that also Ravenelle reported in her fieldwork (2019: 31-36). This openness makes it "on the customers to distinguish decent sellers and crooks (*borlandòt*)." [14] Quite vocal in her criticisms of Italian politicians, Maura described herself as *leghista*, [15] in some ways justifying herself to a Southern Italian like me, that "they are the lesser evil (*i mal minori*)."

Maura's viewpoint on the issue of unfair competition within her e-commerce competitors underscores the ongoing tension between market regulation and community-based approaches to governance. Although she acknowledges the problem of internal dumping in the European Union (EU), she maintains that market participants ought to assume the responsibility of identifying and resolving such issues. Such a stance appears to align with a neoliberal perspective, which typically emphasizes the market's role in regulating economic activity. In reality, however, this viewpoint unveils an oxymoron–- the simultaneous call for the elimination of public interventions while also complaining about their absence as in the case of policies to contain price dumping within the EU.

At the same time, Maura's reference to the local community's response to cheating shops suggests that social norms and community pressure can also play a role in regulating economic activity. This view aligns with a communitarian perspective that emphasizes the importance of social norms and values in governing economic activity. Overall, Maura's perspective reflects the complex and multifaceted nature of governance in the digital age, where traditional regulatory frameworks may be insufficient to address emerging challenges.

Maura's strong attachment to her local identity and disassociation from the broader Italian one is evident from her self-description as, "Lombard, or Padanian at worst (*Lombarda, o Padana al peggio*), surely not Italian." This local identity she emphasizes

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[11] Local dialectal expression to express that with a sudden change the situation worsened drastically.

[12] The word *Padania*, indicative for Italy's northern regions, and the adjective *padano,* to describe its inhabitants, are non-historical rhetorical artifacts of political independentists of those areas (Cimino and Foschi 2014). The second is rarely deployed outside of the northern secessionist discourse, yet Maura often used it talking about herself or the citizens of Northern Italians regions.

[13] The term "communal age" or "communal period" (*età dei comuni* or *periodo comunale*) refers to a historical era within the Middle Ages, marked by the governance of local municipalities. This phenomenon was particularly prominent in Northern and Central Italy, and later other regions of central Europe. During the medieval period, the municipality served as a political framework aimed at safeguarding the welfare of city residents. With time the communes grew their military and especially economic power through a thick network of exchanges and alliances that made them city-states with important experiments of semi-demicratic governance.

[14] Local dialect.

[15] The right-wing, separatist and conservative political party Northern League (Lega Nord) arrived to be the first party of the Northern regions during the late 1990s. While it now holds libertarian and populist views, it was indeed an independentist party for the northern regions that characterized itself for its racism toward Southern Italians (Zaslove 2011).

seem to play a crucial role in her success on DFMs, owing to several distinctive characteristics.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, Maura believes the historical context of the communal age would have equipped Northern Italians with a predisposition for trade, honing their reliability in such endeavors. This was useful not only for being trusted by her customers but also by her suppliers. Secondly, Maura attributes her emphasis on self-reliance to the micro-fragmentation typical of small urban centers in Northern Italian regions. According to her, DFMs are "places" where one can find "only customers or competitors"; partnership is something relegated to the immediate proximity of her "real world." The emphasis on competition is also something Maura discussed as arising from her local identity. Central and Northern Italian small urban centers are in facts characterized by competition among neighboring towns, and paradoxically, the smaller, closer, and more similar these centers are, the more intense this rivalry becomes. This very attribute she believed endowed her with the adeptness to compete effectively with other traders on the platforms.

Maura identifies herself as a casual user of DFMs, despite admitting that a significant share of her profits still come from these platforms. In fact, she does not consider herself an expert in e-commerce but "a professional seller on the [DFMs] by mistake (*per sbaglio*)." With expression like this one, this informant seems to express a longing for traditional form of labor. While Maura believes that her skills would be better utilized in a single company or her own operation, the instability in Italy creates doubts in her mind about what tomorrow may look like and if there is any company worth her time.

Maura has highlighted two examples of the uncertainties created by Italian policies, which reveal the challenges faced by individuals engaged in digital trade. Firstly, there is a lack of clarity regarding the taxation of digital trades through DFMs, which are subject to double taxation–- at the wholesale and retail levels–- despite the supposed benefits of having a VAT number. Secondly, during the early stages of the pandemic, the government failed to control the prices of certain essential medical products such as surgical masks and sterilizers, resulting in rampant scalping with prices surging up to 25 times their original value. This has led Maura to assert that politicians are not allies but rather business partners who seek to extract half of one's earnings while simultaneously hoping for their downfall. Such sentiments underscore the complex relationship between the state and digital entrepreneurs, particularly in the context of ongoing efforts to regulate and manage digital trade. She told me that "politicians are not your allies; they are your business partners… they want half of what you make and hope for you to die."

Maura's strong condemnation of Italian institutions and their role in the premature death of her husband, Andrea, is a recurring theme in her discussions. She attributes Andrea's death to the politicians in Rome and even went as far as claiming that there are "1000 murderers sitting in [the Italian] parliament." Maura firmly believes that her husband's death was not merely an unfortunate occurrence but rather the result of laws and policies that failed to protect workers. She emphasizes this point, citing the trial for involuntary manslaughter in which Andrea's employer was found not guilty. For Maura, this was akin to her husband being "killed a second time."

Maura's perspective on the impact of such tragedies extends beyond the individual experience of loss to the wider social and political context in which they occur. She speaks of "laws that kill you every day (*leggi che ti uccidono ogni giorno*)," highlighting the daily struggles faced by those left behind by such tragedies. Mbembe's theory of necropolitics (2011) is a relevant lens through which to understand Maura's perspective. This theory posits that political sovereignty not only controls life but also determines what brings about death. In Maura's view, this is precisely what is at work in Italy, where the state fails to provide adequate protection to workers, resulting in dangerous working conditions and tragic

outcomes. She told me "to work in [such condition] is the only alternative to starve to death (*morire di fame*) … so or you die for the hunger, or you die for the work (*o muori di fame, o muori di fatica*)."

When asked about the role of the Northern League's political battle for deregulation and its potential connection to Andrea's accident, Maura did not provide a definitive answer. Nonetheless, her strong criticisms of Italian institutions and their failure to protect workers suggest that she sees such policies as contributing to the overall necropolitical landscape in which she operates.

3-4 Conclusions: Worker and user-workers' identities in post-industrial Japan and Italy

The findings in this chapter reveal that the self-proclaimed casual use of digital platforms may not be a precise indicator of the actual users' engagement with these platforms. Rather, the terms casual, non-professional, or beginner often represent the ideal relationship that users aspire to have with the platform. These labels may obscure the reality of the amount of time users spend on these platforms and the quality of that engagement.

It is interesting that although the primary motivation for most users to utilize digital flea market is economic gain, these platforms are also utilized for the construction and affirmation of one's self-image. Specifically, many users highlight their "professional identity" as separate from the platform, but their narrative at times contradicts them and intimately links them to it.

Fumiō presented his online activities as proof of his regained mental well-being, attributing it to a'"*jibunrashi*'" (self-like) productive engagement. Curiously, he also cared to specify that he utilized his engagement with the DFMs as a foundation for his self-entrepreneurial identity and do repairs for local shops. Moriko leveraged her involvement in digital trade to augment her existing professional identity. She strategically employed the platforms to enhance her skillset and strategically navigate away from an unsatisfactory work environment, but eventually extricating herself from the DFMs. Yūko defied categorizations that aimed to relegate female workers to subaltern roles within the workplace, and settled for the "fairer" DFMs, yet she still harbored a yearning for a more fulfilling traditional employment. Similarly, both Maura and Genichi presented intricate rationales to elucidate why the very form of professional commitment they currently exhibit within the realm of DFMs would potentially serve them better within an off-line work environment.

These phenomena can be comprehended as manifestations of a creative form of qualificative agency, coupled with a nuanced subconscious resistance against the inherent insecurity linked to the emerging user-worker identity facilitated by engagement with DFMs. In other words, many of these user'' self-perceived identities (such as a businesswoman, electric engineer, bank manager, pharmaceutical salesperson) can only partially manifest through the DFMs, and these individuals are not inclined to relinquish them in favor of adopting a new – and less secure – user-worker identity.

Many informants discussed in this chapter appear to possess an implicit understanding of the potentially precarious nature of the new working paradigm engendered by digital platforms. Consequently, they adopt them as a temporal alternative or subalternly linked connection with their conventional off-line productive identities. In essence, they view the user-worker identity emerging from their involvement with DFMs as a double-edged sword—a potent yet perilous remedy to be consumed in measured quantities and for limited durations.

It is also worth mentioning that some users considered digital flea markets not as a traditional workplace, but rather a "business partner" that enabled them to utilize their skills

to generate profits. This anthropomorphization of the digital platforms is remarkable primarily because it involves an imaginative cognitive endeavor to humanize an inherently non-human, machine-based space. On top of that, it encompasses a degree of parity between material and abstract, operator and machine, worker and means of production. This might explain why little attention was given by the informants to the portion of income taken by the platforms and the time required to produce it.

Furthermore, engagement in trading on DFMs entails an incessant demand for attention. Customer inquiries and purchases are not confined to specific working hours, unlike their off-line equivalents. The relational nature of digital commerce lacks temporal constraints, in contrast to its off-line analog. Many informants displayed an awareness of this characteristic and conveyed degrees of frustration associated with it. Unlike physical shops that can be opened or closed, digital trading resides within an intangible digital realm functioning as an intermediary space between buyers and sellers. This distinctively biocognitive aspect of digital trade, marked by its insatiable consumption of time and its existential, rather than spatial, pervasiveness, serves as compelling evidence for asserting that activities on DFMs constitute cognitive labor. This substantiates the thesis that the endeavors of users on these platforms can indeed be regarded as instances of cognitive labor. This highlights the thesis that the activities of users on these platforms can be considered cognitive labor.

In addition, many informants establish a digital identity on these platforms that they believe – or they wish – reflects their off-line persona. This identity often emerges in opposition to social norms that user-workers reject or fight against. Through their engagement with DFMs, many also expressed the desire to translate their user-worker identities back into off-line settings, creating a recursive dynamic between the platforms and off-line spaces.

Overall, the findings suggest that digital platforms play a significant role in users' economic and personal lives. They provide a degree of economic independence from precarious contingencies and allow users to shape their self-idealization and establish a digital identity that they believe reflects their off-line persona. Both of these phenomena have potential downsides. In contemporary Japan, DFMs rarely generate sufficient income to sustain oneself, while in Italy, they absorb a similar amount of time as traditional employment, but without providing any of the job security that comes with it. While developing a user-worker identity can be beneficial in a temporary situation, it has the potential to perpetuate precarity as a permanent condition of their lives.

The experiences of the two groups of Japanese informants highlight the diverse ways in which individuals engage with DFMs and how this engagement can shape their identities and perceptions of work.

For the first group of users, traditional Japanese work ethics was the focal point of their narratives. They felt discomfort in their previous employments, not solely due to working dynamics, but also the chain of events and responsibilities attached to them. While they did not express a clear idea of how a good work environment should function, they attempted to renegotiate their condition removing themselves from uncomfortable situations. However, their unwillingness to mediate or understand how they could have grown through those experiences can be seen as alarming, and in certain instances, a form of self-conflicted alienation.

The second group of informants, while sharing with the first one some aspect in their engagement with DFMs was often driven by the issues of gender inequality or the social compartmentalization of familial and business roles. These informants had three primary motivations for subjecting themselves to cognitive labor: professional requalification, overcoming interpersonal problems, and rejecting social stereotypes.

The first motivation was professional requalification, where DFMs provided a means for informants to acquire new skills and broaden their employment opportunities. By engaging in digital work, they were able to break free from the constraints of traditional occupations and acquire the skills needed to transition to new and more desirable forms of work.

The second motivation was the desire to overcome interpersonal problems, such as family or personal issues. For these informants, digital work offered a way of escaping difficult situations and an opportunity for self-improvement and personal growth.
Finally, some informants engaged with DFMs to reject social stereotypes and to challenge the traditional roles assigned to them by society. In contrast to the first group of Japanese informants, for whom working conditions were the primary drive of their engagement with DFMs, the second group's motivations were more varied and complex, driven by both personal and societal factors.

It appears that overall, users do not perceive themselves as workers, but rather as individuals who work through digital platforms. Based on the data I would theorize this rejection as a strategy to deal with the inconscious understanding of the inherent subalternity and insecurity that comes with the user-worker identity. The informants' insistence on their status as casual users holds an almost exorcistic value, as it serves to distance themselves from the sense of precarity that they associate with being excluded from traditional off-line labor. In other words they imagine digital labor as precarious and therefore reject a productive identity based on it even when their statements contradict this idea.

During the industrial era, workers had little choice but to accept exploitation, leading them to develop a class consciousness that made them aware of their proletarian condition. In contrast, the digital subproletariat appears to be willingly taking this subaltern model of value production, often unaware or, worse, accepting the inherent precarity of this type of work. It seems that this condition holds true for both the Italian and Japanese informants. As a result, the label of "casual users" functions as an identity framework that helps distance them from their precarious experiences. Another proof of that is that many informants chose not to disassociate themselves from their off-line productive identity or expressed a desire to return to "traditional" labor. These attitudes suggest a discomfort in situating themselves within the digital economy.

Another recurring element in the informants' narratives of both Japan and Italy is the critical description of political authorities but the embracing of national or regional identity. While it could be argued that this is a resistance mechanism against the globalist outcomes that contribute to their precarity, shifting responsibilities solely based on tribalistic divisions is also controversial. Local identity becomes a useful tool for providing, at times oversimplified, explanations of complex socioeconomic issues and events.

An additional characteristic that appears to be prevalent among self-identified casual users in both Italy and Japan is their limited engagement with the communities active on the platforms. While I encountered several informants who established intricate social relations through DFMs (Angiulli 2022), many light-users in both countries indicated a preference to focus solely on the *furima* and its activities. Even those who create bonds with other users, like Kao-san did, always minimized the role of the platforms in such relations.

This proclivity towards individualistic behavior, while not universal, suggests a lack of interest in the cultivation of social relations and communities within the DFMs. This observation may reflect a broader societal trend towards individualism and a decline in communal bonds, which is often accentuated under neoliberalism.

One noteworthy exception in this chapter to the trend of limited engagement with other users on DFMs could be represented by the first group of users discussed. However, in that case as well, the focus was not on the existing community within the platform, but

rather on the benefits of their secluded group that emerged through mutual respect for each other's work.

This introduces a last intriguing contrast in the formation and dynamics of groups on digital platforms between Italy and Japan. In the case of the first subcommunity of Japanese user-workers, group membership was predicated on the individual's expertise and skills, maintaining a sense of parity among members. On the other hand, Alessio and Marco chose to involve their family members, all of whom were female, in their business on a preexisting business partnership. While this could be seen as involvement by proximity with Paola, Carola, and Cinzia, it also raises the possibility of exploitative use of their affective labor, possibly unconsciously by the two men. I found similar cases in other Italian user-workers informants, where they involved immediate or close family members in their trade, and the retribution was often unproportioned to the efforts and working hours of those family members.

In contrast, the involvement of multiple individuals in the case of Japanese informants seemed to be more often established on professional premises, and only in a few cases of self-described "professional users" did involve family members or spouses. This highlights a difference in how social and professional networks are leveraged and mobilized in these two countries, and how they affect the nature of group interactions on digital platforms.

Chapter 4: Professionality as solution for passivity in users aged over-60

The population of individuals who self-identify as part of the micro-community of DFMs includes numerous users who are over 60 years old. Among these informants from Japan, there are those who describe themselves as "professional" or as "heavy users" (*hēbi yūzā*), while others, despite identifying as beginners, express a desire to become expert users. Two members of the community defined themselves as "professional sellers" but beginners in the context of digital platforms. Lastly, a minority of the informants expressed disinterest in DFMs for professional reasons.

On a general level, there are three recurring user profiles observed among those who engage in DFMs. The first profile comprises members who create their products, often using scrap materials. The second profile involves professional resellers who primarily deal in used house appliances, clothing and accessories. The third profile consists of users who utilize DFMs to sell their own belongings, including some who engage in *shūkatsu*, or preparatory activities for their death.

On a general level, the recurring arguments for engaging with *furima* revolve around the desire for social recognition and the rejection of a passive existence. For several of the over 60s users, the term *burasagaru* incorporates the idea of passivity. While *burasagaru* literally means "to hang" or "to dangle," in the sense used by the informants, it is also intended to mean "to leech." According to one informant, this expression derives from the transportation of the *o-mikoshi*, a portable shrine altar carried around on a litter during neighborhood or city celebrations. During these festivals, it sometimes happened that some participants did not do their share of the work and ended up "hanging" on the structure, increasing the burden for the others. Narratives discussing *burasagaru* express the frustration that most of the users who engage professionally with the DFMs try to overcome and reject what they feel is a marginal social position.

Other recurring elements in the narratives revolve around *ikigai* and *yarigai*. Besides their literal meanings, "reason to live" and "reason to do/worth doing/rewarding," respectively, these two fuzzy expressions are universal rationales to proactively (*sekkyokuteki ni*) engage with an activity. Most of the informants consider social recognition as the prize for such productive engagement. This is opposed to the centrality of economic yields in all the other subgroups that I encountered during my fieldwork. It should be noted that the emphasis on this recognition does not simply mean that revenues take a secondary place for the over-60s informants, but instead, many of them hold a radically different idea of "profit" not solely tied to economic income, as described by the polyvalent term *rieki*.

The non-monetary gains derived from the informants' activities on DFMs highlight the capacity of these digital platforms to re-embed social and commercial exchanges. A prevalent belief emerging from the data is that the intertwining of economic and social interactions is regulated by the principle of *go-en*. Loosely translated as "fate/destiny" or "chance/coincidence," *go-en* plays a role in determining the positive or negative outcomes of interactions. When interactions result in extra-economic relationships or bring users to "share a destiny with a kind person" (*yasashii kata to no go-en ga aru*), they are considered *yoi go-en* or of the positive type.

In this chapter, I will endeavor to analyze the dynamics of over 60 user workers from Japan from an anthropological perspective. My primary objective is to answer a fundamental tripartite question: What are the key motivations that drive individuals to engage with digital trading platforms? Additionally, I aim to explore how these motivations emerge and the

consequences they have on off-line life. Finally, I will compare the perspectives of the Japanese informants with those of the Italians.

Table 4:

Name	Age	Prefecture / Region	Members of Family Living Together	Off-line profession / income (approx.)	Years of Unemployement / Under-Employment incl. retirement	On-line profession or products/ income (approx.)	Weekly Hrs on DFMs or working for DFMs related products (approx.)
Ashida-san	69	Aichi	1 (spouse)	Pension / more than 100,000 less than 150,000	Less than 2	Car Parts / Rather not say	More than 10 less than 20
Yoneda-san	70	Chiba	1 (spouse)	Pension / Rather not say	More than 2 Less than 5	Collectables / 50,000 JPY	More than 10 less than 20
Mamura-san	68	Osaka	1 (estranged spouse)	None / Rather not say	Less than 2	High-end products / 120,000 JPY	More than 30
Hamada-san	71	Kochi	2 (spouse and child)	Pension / Rather not say	More than 5	Fishing articles / 90,000 JPY	Doesn't Know
Kaneda Genta-san	67	Ibaraki	1 (spouse)	than 150,000	More than 5	Antiques / 150,000 JPY	More than 20
Kaneda Mieko-san	63	Ibaraki	1 (spouse)	Rather not say	Less than 2	Antiques / 150,000 JPY	More than 20
Matsuoka-san	66	Tokyo area (unspecified)	1 (spouse)	Rather not say	More than 2 Less than 5	Hand-knitted products / more than 100,000 JPY	More than 30
Watanabe-san	69	Niigata		Pension / Rather not say	More than 2 Less than 5	Hand-made sandals and hair ornaments / 120,000 JPY	More than 20
Kurosaki-san	76	Hiroshima		Rather not say	More than 5	Her belongings - pottery / 50,000 JPY	Less than 10
Tachibana-san	69	Saitama	1 (spouse)	Rather not say	More than 5	Her belongings / 50,000 JPY	More than 10 less than 20
Antonino	66	Veneto/Sicily	1 (spouse)	carpenter / approx. 1000 Euro	More than 5	Electronic Repairer 50,000 JPY>	More than 10 less than 20
Caterina	64	Modena Area	1 (child)	Welfare/ 1200 Euro	Less than 2	Ceramics / 1500 Euro (shared with her daughter)	More than 10 less than 20
Gabriella	28	Modena Area	1 (parent)	Artisan / 650 Euro	More than 2 Less than 5	Ceramics / 1500 Euro (shared with her mother)	More than 20

4-1.1 The Japanese mind and modernity

The number of users over 60 on various DFM platforms in Japan has exhibited a substantial increase since the conclusion of 2019, surpassing 20% of the total user base (MMD, April 2021). Mercari, the largest company in the sector, reported in 2021 that users over the age of 60 had demonstrated the highest percentage increase among new users for three consecutive years, with a growth rate of more than 5% in the fiscal year 2019-2020 alone (Mercari 2021). Notably, as early as 2018, Mercari indicated that users over 60 had reported the highest average monthly profit through the platform –approximatively 30,000 JPY (Mercari 2019). According to recently disclosed documents, this growth trend has persisted since 2019, with users over 50 accounting for up to 23% of the total platform users by 2022, marking a significant rise from the original 8% (Mercari 2023). This data should be examined in conjunction with the notable surge in the overall user base, which has expanded to approximately 15 million accesses since 2015 (Manamina, February 2022). While Rakuma and Furima have also observed significant growth among similar users, their figures seem more in line with the overall expansion of the companies. However, Mercari's case is exceptional because it presents an exclusive increase in a demographic group traditionally considered "hard to reach." This increase can be attributed to Mercari's marketing strategy, which is oriented toward computer illiterate users, emphasizes social engagement and environmental issues, and focuses on "safety" and "security/peace of mind" (*anzen* and *anshin*).

Italy's secondhand digital trade also experienced an increase of over 60s users at the end of 2014, when the largest SNSs started having "*mercatini*" (little markets) and barter pages. It is interesting to note the differences in the motivations for using DFMs between

Italian and Japanese informants. The Italian users mostly discussed economic matters, while the Japanese users presented a broader set of reasons for using DFMs, including social recognition, rejection of passivity, and the idea of profit not solely based on economic income. However, there was a partial overlapping in some narratives, particularly on the matter of intergenerational differences. Despite this overlap, the experiences of Italian and Japanese users were found to be the most irreconcilable during the fieldwork.

One possible explanation for the incomparability between the experiences of Japanese and Italian users on DFMs came from the perspective of Ashida-san (69), a retired worker from the automobile industry in Aichi prefecture, who now trades vintage car parts, miniatures and collectable antiques. According to Ashida-san, the last Japanese post-war generations who have a full understanding of the "Japanese mind/heart" (*wa no kokoro or nihon no kokoro*) are those who were born before the mid-1960s. The ideogram of *wa*, which translates as harmony or peace, and the associated ideas have received significant attention within academia (Hirata and Warschauer 2014) and have been described as the center of domestic state-building and social engineering discourses for centuries. For Ashida-san, the Japanese mind "is not something to have but to understand," and surprisingly, it is not exclusive to Japanese but accessible to those who seek to live "a life based on harmony/peace." However, at times, this last proposition conflicted with other views expressed by Ashida-san about the exceptionalism of Japan.

For Ashida-san, the disappearance of the Japanese mind is an ongoing process that began with the mediatization of information and language through national broadcasting. Nonetheless, he believes that the Japanese mind remained "pure/in its original form" (*junsui*) until approximately the Tokyo Olympics of 1964, which marked the introduction of color television in Japan. Although just a child at that time, Ashida-san divides his life through this event and associates color television with the disappearance of the Japanese heart because of the introduction of colors that "were not part of the Japanese mind/heart."

Ashida-san and I engaged in a sustained dialogue regarding the veracity of his notion that the Japanese mind was responsible for the effective deployment of foreign technology towards the attainment of harmony. In response to my observation that mass media played a significant role in homogenizing cultural features, including language, in Japan as well as in Italy, Ashida-san argued that the Japanese mind facilitated the assimilation of foreign technology in the service of harmony. He posited that the emphasis on mutual agreement, a characteristic of the "pure" Japanese heart, elevated the importance of group success over individual success. This ethic was complemented by a culture of hard work, Ashida-san believed was highly conducive to entrepreneurialism, even on DFMs, where the CEO and freshman employees alike strove to do their best for the company.

Ashida-san perceives his activity on the DFMs as consistent with the principle of mutual agreement and group success, an extension of personal engagement that prioritizes the common interest of the collective. He regards the workers and users as indistinguishable, coordinating their efforts for the sake of mutual benefit (*rieki*). Ashida-san thus positions himself within the productive mechanics of the DFMs, considering himself to be at the same level, if not higher, than the office employees. This notion reflects the culture of hard work and the emphasis on group harmony that he associates with the "pure" Japanese heart, as he views his participation on the DFMs as a way to contribute to the greater good of society.

Ashida-san's perspective on the role of the Japanese mind in deploying foreign technology and achieving harmony is intriguing. However, the idea that the Japanese mind remains "pure" is problematic, as cultural change is an ongoing and complex process that is shaped by numerous factors. Additionally, the notion of a monolithic Japanese mind overlooks the diversity of experiences and perspectives within Japan.

Ashida-san is capable of rationalizing the notion of the "Japanese heart" within the functional context of his user-worker identity, but he does not provide an explanation for why similar phenomena occur in other countries. It appears that the idea of harmony is central to Ashida-san's belief system, and it is this pursuit of harmony that motivates him and other users over 60 on Mercari to engage with the platform in order to achieve social recognition through productive economic self-reliance.

4-1.2 *Burasagaru*, and the response to passive subalternity

Ashida-san is not alone in his belief that participation in DFMs constitutes a form of labor that can lead to social recognition. Yoneda-san (70), a retired high-school teacher from Chiba who trades antiques and collectibles on Mercari, shares a similar perspective. According to Yoneda-san, the work he and other users perform on the platform allows them to cultivate a sense of self-respect and pride (*jisonshin*). This, in turn, enables them to affirm their role (*yakuwari*) within society. Expanding on this idea, Yoneda-san asserts that self-respect is a prerequisite for personal fulfillment (*jiko jitsugen*) and accepting the self-imposed standards of respect and realization is a necessary aspect of this process. For Yoneda-san, engagement with DFMs is a means of achieving both personal and social fulfillment through productive economic activity.

Yoneda-san's understanding of *burasagaru* encapsulates a viewpoint that was expressed by multiple participants during the fieldwork. However, Mamura-san (68), a retired part-time clerk of a luxury department store in Osaka area who now trades high-end products (*burando-hin*), raised a crucial objection to this idea. While the pursuit of respect and realization may be burdensome for men, Mamura-san highlighted that for a Japanese woman of her age who has given up hope (*akirameta*) to witness a radical change in gender dynamics, it is considered normal and unexceptional. Mamura-san shared illustrative anecdotes that shed light on the issues she aimed to address.

In one instance, she recounted her experience at a high-end department store where she had worked for several years. She described a practice where female workers would line up on either side of the entrance in the morning, bowing to welcome clients as they entered. Meanwhile, the male manager would position himself behind a table, facing the entrance. This visual representation of her and her female colleagues being placed on the periphery—both professionally and physically—captured the essence of the challenges she sought to highlight. Mamura-san reflected that throughout her career, many of her female colleagues would often make jokes and express their discontent regarding this practice, but they rarely took any concrete actions to address it, highlighting a passivity she dislikes.

Another example she provided highlights the intersection of gender and age discrimination. Mamura-san revealed that her consistent efficiency often resulted in her being assigned the most tasks, consequently leading her to frequently report to the one of the two managers. However, despite the distinct managerial approaches of both the male and female store managers, who were responsible for overseeing her work, a clear disparity emerged. While the female manager treated her as an equal colleague, the male manager consistently treated her in a subordinate manner. Mamura-san shared with me that despite her aspiration to secure a permanent position in the department store, the persistent presence of such attitudes significantly impacted her self-confidence. What's noteworthy is that, despite being older than her, the male manager frequently commented on her performance in a manner that was disconcerting. He would consistently draw positive attention to "her speed in completing tasks," while concurrently highlighting her status an "old lady." This repeated emphasis on her quickness in contrast to her age underscored the complex nature of the discrimination she faced, characterized by the intertwining of gender and age biases.

This disparity in treatment reached its zenith when the male manager, who she told me always took longer lunch breaks, chastised her for reminding him that she hadn't had time to eat. On this occasion, he insensitively remarked that older people, particularly women, in general eat less.

Mamura-san's observation illuminated the double marginality experienced by female individuals over the age of 60, compounded by the already stigmatized position that women hold in Japanese society. Mamura-san's reflection emphasized a liminal subalternity that is worth noting, as gender and age serve as the sources of discrimination. She suggested that while both conditions are irreversible, gender bias is so inextricably woven into the fabric of a woman's life that many Japanese women have simply given up.

"Giving up," or *akirameru*, emerged as another recurring theme during my interactions with over-60 informants. I came to understand it as a significant milestone in the process of detachment from life and a manifestation of passivity. The idea of giving up suggests resignation and an acceptance of one's fate, indicating a loss of agency and control over one's life. The sentiment is especially pertinent in the context of Japanese society, where the pursuit of respect and realization is deeply ingrained in cultural norms. My discussions with Mamura-san highlighted how gender and age intersect to create a particularly marginalized position for older Japanese women, who may feel they have no choice but to give up on their personal aspirations and accept their social roles. Mamura-san's observations on the unequal distribution of responsibilities within Japanese society underscore the limited decision-making power of individuals in determining their life trajectories.

Mamura-san noted that even desiring a career was frowned upon for women in Japanese society, and some might feel like they are not doing their part (*burasagaru*) if they do not diligently fulfill the role of wife and mother. She eloquently discussed the unequal distribution of responsibilities (*yakuwari/sekinin buntan*) among the members of society and the family, and how little decision-making power is left to single individuals.

4-1.3 Proactive productivity as reason to live

After retiring without a pension for a problem with her knee and still not being entitled to any welfare, Mamura-san quickly sought a way to generate additional income. A friend suggested to sell some of the high-end clothes she had acquired over the years working at the department store, "taking advantage of her employee discount." Her friend suggested selling them through an online auction site. Although Mamura-san liked the concept, she was concerned about the uncertainty of not knowing the final selling price. For few days she scouted the internet.

In 2016, when she first learned about Mercari, Mamura-san quickly became "crazy about it." Within just 20 days of frenetic sales, she realized she had a knack for this type of trading. On a different occasion, Mamura-san mentioned that her part-time work usually resulted in a monthly salary ranging from 100,000 to 150,000 JPY. She explained that Mercari, while offering a slightly lower income, provided the convenience of working from home whenever she wished. By the end of the next month, she had successfully sold off nearly all the items she did not need.

However, instead of retiring, she decided to take a proactive approach. Encouraged by her initial success, she began purchasing clothing stocks from other off-line sellers and leveraging her connections in the Kansai area, where she knew people working in outlet and small boutiques. She used a substantial portion of her Mercari earnings, totaling over 250,000 JPY, to procure new articles from the owner of an outlet shop she was familiar with.

This allowed her to create an initial inventory catalog of just 20 articles, but that served as the foundation for her business throughout the duration of our interviews.

Mamura-san believed that Mercari provided her with an opportunity to regain "a sense of purpose" (*ikigai*) through "proactivity," especially at a time when her reduced mobility posed a significant challenge to her ability of being productive. Continuing along the same line, on a different occasion, she emphasized how the platform enabled her to "fulfill her role" (*yakuwari wo atasu*) and how she felt "satisfied" when she could engage in "mutually pleasant trades" for both herself and her customers. This "role" she stressed is both professional and personal.

In the exchanges, Mamura-san views her customers in a different social light compared to the cold and "hard" interactions often found on digital platforms. On DFMs, her customers acknowledge her "role as a seller, a member [of the community], and a human being […] with messages, comments and the final review" that she believes impossible on different digital shopping services. It is this recognition of her utility, understood as her personal social function contributing to a group, that brings Mamura-san satisfaction through the fulfillment of her social role. This process allows her to cast aside "insecure feelings" (*fuantei na kimochi*) that previously made her feel socially inadequate.

During our interviews, it became evident that Mamura-san drew a significant amount of her insecurity from her private life. She indicated that achieving a degree of success on the digital flea market platform helped dispel doubts raised by her spouse. He had accused her of merely "playing pretend" with her online shop endeavors, consistently minimizing her professional commitments.

Considering Mamura-san's strong emphasis on the links between personal and professional aspects of engaging with DFMs, I embarked on more inquiries concerning her private life. In particular, I asked her about her marriage and her husband's potential contributions to the household economy. However, the responses I received from her were consistently elusive and lacking in detail—something unusual for her. Throughout the course of our numerous conversations, she never spontaneously broached the topic of his involvement. On one occasion, she candidly conveyed, "*that person*, even when he's around, is like he isn't." During another discussion, Mamura-san told me that she was "alone [in carrying out DFMs-related tasks] despite her [health] conditions," and that "she had never had anyone to help her," all while her husband uninterestingly moved back and forth in the background.

During another of our video calls, Mamura-san's husband returned home without a word or acknowledging our ongoing conversation. He proceeded to consume the lunch he had purchased. This incident vividly encapsulated the dynamics that Mamura-san had alluded to. Subsequently, when I inquired about their shared meals or quality time spent together, Mamura-san disclosed that "despite sharing the same house," she felt like "living alone," implying their interactions and connection are remarkably minimal.

Finally, during our conversation about her initial decision to return to work after her wedding, Mamura-san disclosed that her husband exerted compulsive control over her personal expenses. This proved to be especially distressing for her, as she had aspired to pursue a career in design and attend a special school to fulfill that dream. According to my informant, this financial constraint hindered her ability to pursue her passion.

Mamura-san highlighted the significance of assuming roles and finding purpose in work for both herself and other members of the online community. This importance takes on an even greater dimension when the pervasive insecurity experienced by certain individuals is multi-faceted and extends beyond the professional realm. In other words, when social recognition, defined as the sense of being valued as a peer contributor within micro or macro social groups, is absent within the personal sphere, the professional realm often

emerges as a critical avenue for meaningful human interaction. I believe this data holds particular significance as it contrasts the implicit nature of the platforms and subverts the expectations of their administrators, which primarily aim to enable strictly economic exchanges. The evident measures taken by many DFMs administrations, such as shutting down forums, flagging blogs, and generally attempting to limit the potential for conversations, underscore the notion that these platforms were envisioned purely as economic entities. In other words, DFMs were expected to hold very low potential for fostering personal relationships, and conversely, a high potential for impersonal interactions. Cases like Mamura-san's, however, overturn these original design.

Mamura-san also discussed at length the concepts of *yarigai* and *ikigai*, explaining that while work is considered the reason to live for many Japanese people (*shigoto wa ikigai desu*), not all work can bring satisfaction (*manzoku*). However, through her productive efforts on the DFMs, Mamura-san feels a sense of impact, recognition as a worker, and engagement in her work. According to her, these activities have *yarigai* due to their social and proactive nature, because as she put it, "they involve other members, and they require to be dealt with proactively (*sekkyokuteki*)." This emphasis on productive roles is common across all subcommunities, but it is particularly significant for many users over the age of 60, who often translate this into a sense of professionality. For Mamura-san, the pulsating community of several DFMs provides an ideal environment to pursue these goals. She explains that "one has to do their best not worrying about the money, which are often not much […] it is not easy but other members do the same."

The desire for control over one's life through a productive identity is a fascinating aspect of the motivations of many over-60 years old informants. Notably, this informant emphasized the social aspect of work, rather than its economic value. For many in the community, adopting a user-worker identity serves as a means of self-affirmation and recognition from peers. However, some users may be willing to subject themselves to exploitative or disproportionately retributed labor exactly for the same reasons.

Mamura-san is not alone in underscoring the importance of *yarigai* in digital trade. Hamada-san (71), a retiree from Kochi prefecture who now sells fishing-related products and imports, shared that DFMs have enabled him to experience the most professionally fulfilling time of his life. Having worked as an office clerk for nearly 30 years, Hamada-san retired early enough to pursue his passion for fishing. Although he was knowledgeable enough "to [put together] a good rod and select the best articles [for fishing]," he lacked the experience to use them to their fullest potential. As a result, he began selling the fishing "set" he intended to use with good profits on DFMs and auction sites. This also allowed him to expand his knowledge of fishing, his personal network of friends, and his position within a community of fishing enthusiasts. According to Hamada-san, all of this "expansion of his own boundaries" occurred at a time when he felt the surrounding people treated him "just an old man." The "work on DFMs *energized him* (*genki wo moraimashita*)."

Hamada-san emphasized that through interactions with other users on DFMs, he managed to discover a "space" where his interests were shared by others, and he no longer felt like an "outsider." Previously employed in an office where he monitored cargo loading and unloading for construction materials, he felt overwhelmed by the immense responsibilities of his job. Additionally, due to numerous company restructuring efforts, Hamada-san found himself working increasingly long hours and "almost exclusively alone" for the last 15 years of his employment. He stressed that this isolation in the workplace exacerbated the exhaustion of spending extended periods "staring at the monitor" without any real-life interactions. He contrasted this with the peaceful waiting while fishing, where a person is "surrounded by nature" and has multiple opportunities to observe life, including the fish, birds, other fishermen, and people passing by.

When I asked him about the appeal of DFMs, Hamada-san explained that after a long and stressful working life, his activities on the platform provided him with a place where he could be helpful and recognized by other members. People often sought his "opinions or assistance" regarding products or fishing sets they wanted to create using the items he sold. They would then follow up, either to express gratitude or seek further advice. According to him, this is the primary appeal of using the platforms and the element that makes DFMs an activity with a sense of fulfillment (*yarigai*).

Hamada-san contrasted the frustration (*yokkyūfuman*) he always felt while working in an office to the *yarigai* he found in DFMs. He stressed the quiet acceptance and the peer pressure that Mamura-san also emphasized in her interview. For example, when Hamada-san, already over 60 years old, decided to retire and pursue his passion for fishing, he received harsh criticism from his family and spouse for not fulfilling his role as a provider. Hamada-san shared his belief that many Japanese of his generation have a problem letting go (*akirame ga warui*) because they are expected to endure (*gaman suru hazu*) and prioritize obligations over their own happiness and fulfillment.

The emphasis on achieving satisfaction through *yarigai* connects Mamura-san and Hamada-san with Yoneda-san's expression of *jiko-jitsugen*, which succinctly underscores the pivotal role of self-reliance that these informants disclosed. Mamura-san and Hamada-san appear to be dissatisfied, if not resentful, for the lack of support they received from their society and families, thus seeking out different peers who might provide them with the recognition they desire. Nonetheless, cutting out their real life affections and opposing them to the social relations of the DFMs can be argued as a further stage of the alienation byproduct of neoliberal productive subjectivities such as user-worker identities. This alienation can further the creation of fragmented and isolated user-workers in their off-line sphere. As a consequence, the pursuit of *jiko-jitsugen* and *yarigai* through digital trade ultimately might exacerbate social and economic inequalities rather than alleviate them.

4-1.4 The fate and the peers

In response to the pressure imposed by peers and social norms, Hamada-san developed an interesting theory. He suggested that while humans do things to be recognized by their peers, they also possess an original nature or character (*umaretsuki* or *shōbun*) that they must follow in order to achieve happiness. These two conditions make it "necessary to surround oneself with individuals who share the same aspirations, interests, and ambitions, [...] but this is based on good fate (*en*)." Hamada-san introduced a recurring *topos* among informants over 60, namely the role of destiny/fate in social prosperity and happiness. He explained that while he tried to be diligent during his employment, his competitiveness (*charenji seishin*) made it hard for him to passively follow orders. However, the same competitive nature enabled him to ignore the criticisms that his family offered when he decided to pursue early retirement. Hamada-san maintained that this ability to challenge benefited from the support provided by the friends on the platforms that he was "blessed with" (*megumareta*) and which he repaid with the same support.

On the relationship between fate and social interactions, the informants of this sub-community expressed multiple points of view. The Kanedas, husband and wife, respectively Genta (67) and Mieko (63), for example, emphasized the importance of creating off-line human networks through their secondhand market community. Genta-san retired early from his job in Tokyo at a large company and returned to his family house in Ibaraki prefecture to spend time with their grandchildren. He grew unhappy, however, with the little time that the family could spend together, and as a hobby started using auction sites and DFMs. Initially, he and Mieko-san traded antiques and "exceptional" articles that they had collected,

and later they started going to secondhand markets, garage sales, and shops to buy other items to sell. Eventually, when the space in their garage was insufficient for their needs, they rented a storage space from a relative and set up shop there.

Despite the fact the Kanedas still sell most of their products online, but "the shop became the place where everyone who knows can find them." More importantly, the space now serves multiple times a year as the location for meet-ups with other sellers whom they made friends with through DFMs, blogs, and local secondhand markets. This interesting spilling over of the activities that the Kanedas engage in on the platforms has impacted their off-line life and social proximity. Unlike Hamada-san, the Kanedas see their social success as something that exceeds the digital platforms. Mieko-san noted that thanks to the DFMs, her "fate" in common with the other members developed and deepened (*en ga fukamatta*).

Matsuoka-san (66), who had been a full-time housewife for a long time, is now trading hand-made knitted goods. She said that the DFMs were the first activity to which she felt totally committed and successful, with more than 2000 positive reviews. As an enthusiast of handcrafting, particularly crochet, she is grateful for "the good fate to meet with persons [she] could call friends" (*go-en wo itadaki, tomodachi tomo ieru kata ni o-ai dekimashita*). Like the Kanedas, she describes her social success transcending the online platforms. She started teaching her skills to members of the neighborhood association and other friends she made on DFMs, eventually holding "class-like events." Like Hamada-san, Matsuoka-san describes the fulfillment found in furima apuri through the deployment of the personal passion she cultivated for years and the recognition of her abilities by her peers. However, while she describes those skills as something she studied extensively (*sei ippai benkyō shiteimashita),* the consideration she receives from her peers and other sellers is a gift of destiny (*go-en wo itadaki* lit. to receive a [good] destiny).

4-1.4 *Tedsukuri*, repurposing tradionality hand-made with love

Matsuoka-san traded handcrafted items, which is another common activity among the over 60s users of DFMs. In fact, she explained her success through her "desire to make things from original materials," which she thinks may be "inexplicable (*kangae mo oyobanai*) for those who buy anything." She rationalized that "these skills [she] loves were important in the life of a woman […] but are maybe now irrelevant [...] so maybe those who are so kind to buy [her] articles feel *natsukashii* [the longing for past times]." Matsuoka-san provided an example of *natsukashii*. Her mother used to sew "everything [her children] used [...] for no reason other than [the fact that] the house was very poor," and Matsuoka-san still treasures many of those objects. She remembers lying in the futon at night, seeing her mother in the next room sitting at the short table sewing bags, clothing, handkerchiefs, and such, repurposing old dresses and shirts. These memories make her feel *natsukashii*. She feels that the items her mother made were "infused with love" (*ai wo komete*), and she hopes to teach and do the same with her crocheting.

Like Ashida-san, during our discussions, Matsuoka-san juxtaposes modernity and traditionality, leveraging the latter in a way that is fruitful for their user-worker identity. One of the products that made Matsuoka-san well-known on the DFMs is baby hats that feature Japanese fruits like loquats, apples, and *daidai* (decorative oranges used for the New Year's celebration) or folklore animals and creatures such as tanuki dogs, foxes, and *oni* (Japanese ogres). The latter, small caps crocheted to resemble curly hairs with striped horns, became so popular that she was interviewed by local magazines and has since taught hundreds of people how to crochet them. She also proudly told me that some of her students have made video tutorials watched by tens of thousands of people on the internet. According to

Matsuoka-san, this combined use of traditional memes and crocheting skills to obtain a "cute and infused with love" object is the foundation of her trade.

Matsuoka-san is not the sole participant who commodifies Japanese culture to develop her user-worker identity. Another example is Watanabe-san (69), a retiree of a Japanese cooperative located in the Niigata prefecture. After her husband passed away prematurely, she expressed her sorrow on her blog, stating that her life had become "sad [...] and lacking for [economic] leeway." Watanabe-san's blog initially featured a theme of "Japanese-style (*wagara*) handcrafted hairpins and sandals," and a reader suggested that she sell her crafts on DFMs. Inspired by this suggestion, Watanabe-san became fully committed to "gather her strength and take a proactive stance" (*sekkyokuteki ni naru* lit. becoming proactive). She quickly learned how to "post on Mercari, make auction offers online, and respond to customers with her smartphone."

Watanabe-san has gained popularity on her favorite DFM through her handmade Japanese cloth sandals (*nunozōri*). According to her, this product is a redesign of traditional Japanese sandals made of rice straw or hemp cord that have existed in Japan since the Heian Period. Watanabe-san explained that she learned how to make sandals from her father when she was just a kindergartner, almost as a game. She described how her father, who used to be an artisan producing *tatami* (Japanese traditional flooring mat), used the large marking pins (*machibari*) needed to hold together the rice mats to knot the leftover cords and make the sandals. Holding the pins, which were longer than her hands, Watanabe-san said wistfully, "*natsukashii*." When asked if she believed that this nostalgia played a role in the popularity of her product, she said that "old techniques (*furui gijutsu*) [...] have been disappearing for a long time [so for many younger customers, her articles] are maybe not nostalgic but curious/unusual (*mezurashii*)."

Watanabe-san specified that the appeal of her sandals lies in their "unusual (*fushigi de omoshiroi*), yet not [fully] new [design] (*shinki*) [...] maybe the customers have never seen fabric sandals, but they surely have seen [ordinary] sandals [...] or maybe they have an unconscious understanding (*muishiki ni rikai shiteiru*) of what these sandals are." Watanabe-san also explained the production process in detail, providing information on the time and costs of production required to make one sandal, as well as the different types of cords and fabrics she uses. She also noted that "the fabrics used are mostly from ragged kimono or *haori*," which she suggested might help create this "strange sensation about a yet familiar object" (*fushigi na kankaku demo mijika na mono*).

Watanabe-san shared that when she initially began trading handmade crafts, her preferred platform was Rakuma. Despite Mercari's growing popularity, an already sizable community of handcrafted products and DIY enthusiasts existed on Fril before it merged with Rakuma in 2018. Operating mainly through its desktop interface rather than on mobile, Fril's website was known for its usability, and several informants described it as the "easiest to use" among all the DFMs of its time. Handcrafted products were prominently featured on the platform's homepage, and the constant communication between members through blogs and forums laid the groundwork for a real sense of community. Watanabe-san highlighted that "Fril allowed messaging between sellers and buyers [...] which made it easy to become friends," attributing this to the design of the webpage, which had a conveniently placed button for messaging. According to Watanabe-san, these initial interactions were the key to her success, as she learned much of what she still practices regarding customers and platforms through them.

It is worth noting that Matsuoka-san and Watanabe-san, had distinct approaches to their user-worker identities. While Matsuoka-san emphasized the commodification of Japanese folklore and traditional images, Watanabe-san drew on local techniques derived from her family's professional background. This difference may stem from a socio-

economic gap between the two women prior to their involvement in DFMs. Watanabe-san employed her skills primarily for economic returns, and secondarily for personal fulfillment, while Matsuoka-san's narrative indicates the opposite. Furthermore, Matsuoka-san's emphasis on certain "skills in the life of women" suggests a comfort with gender stereotypes. Despite stating that she grew up in a "poor house," Matsuoka-san did not express economic distress as a motivatio for participating in DFMs. It is easy to imagine that her husband's profession allowed for comfortable living. In contrast, Watanabe-san identified herself as a retiree from a cooperative and provided compelling reasons for focusing on economic revenue. While Matsuoka-san emphasized the emotional aspects of her products, including "infused love," Watanabe-san provided pragmatic details regarding the manufacturing process of her sandals, including the time required, materials, production costs, and pricing. Matsuoka-san's pride in her success, as evidenced by the interest of magazines and the views of her students' video tutorial, suggests that she operated on the base of a prestige economy, which Watanabe-san apparently showed no interest in.

4-1.5 The *joy of giving* and avoiding *troubles* through *shūkatsu*.

Watanabe-san introduced me to another theme that characterizes informants over 60 years old: death. While Japanese rituals and practices related to end-of-life are the subject of important anthropological and transdisciplinary explorations (Long 2000; Kawano, 2010; Boret 2013; Suzuki 2014a, 2014b), the significance of reducing material possessions to avoid burdening (*meiwaku*) heirs and family members is a relatively new area of study. Mladenova (2020) notes that in the past decade, *shūkatsu* (pre-death preparations, lit. activities for the end) and other types of activities composed of the same character of katsu have become buzzwords. The author further theorizes that "these 'something-*katsu*' are answers to structural crises" (Mladenova 2020:105). Despite a difference in how this response emerged – the study considers the 'political answer missing,' while I am under the impression that this "missing" is the political answer[16] – I agree with Mladenova that *shūkatsu* reflects self-entrepreneurialism and represents another facet of neoliberal governmentality (Mladenova 2020: 106; cf Brockling 2014), henceforward a different manifestation of their user-worker identity. Some of my informants too articulated it as form of self-reliance but also and especially as a desire to avoid trouble for dear ones after their death. It is under this lens that I believe we should consider the engagement that many over 60 users have with DFMs.

Kurosaki-san (76), is an example of an informant who is currently going through *shūkatsu* and using DFMs because of "the lack of interest [her] children have in many of [her] belongings." None of them lives close enough to help her in her endeavors so she mostly carries on her trades alone from her home, taking advantage of the pick-up services that through DFMs some companies offer. Kurosaki-san responded with laughter when I inquired about her interest in engaging with the DFMs or whether she considered such activities as a form of work. She expressed that she considered herself to be at an age where she was beyond the notion of "actual employment," yet acknowledged the perpetual task of parental responsibilities, especially "tidying up" (*okatatsuke*).

Although she stated that her children's indifference did not bother her, she also extensively criticized the "desire for new things of younger people." It is worth noting that Kurosaki-san used the term "young people" (*wakamono*) quite indiscriminately to describe anyone outside of her immediate physical proximity, including me, her childfren and even other over 60s informants during group discussions. In other words, time and time again, for

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[16] In this consideration I am drawing upon the already mentioned Berardi's idea that deregulate governance is indeed just deeply regulated form of subjectivation designed at advantage of capital" (2009:186).

Kurosaki-san "*wakamono*" seem not to denote an age-related characteristic but rather one associated with a specific geographical location.This connection between spatiality and "age" - not in the common sense of length of life - is intriguing and appears to be one of the foundations of Kurosaki-san's worldview. On a larger scale, this informant identifies the "places that are going to disappear" (*kieru machi*) as the locations of old people, juxtaposed with larger urban centers that will continue to exist.

Kurosaki-san's family provides a nuanced example of generational dynamics and the role of spatiality in shaping identities and social relations among aging Japanese individuals. While her daughter currently resides and works in Tokyo, her oldest son is in his fifties and employed at a large car company active in the Chūgoku region, where Hiroshima prefecture is located. Kurosaki-san expresses disappointment about her son's decision to live in a neighboring prefecture, in a "larger city... with other young people," and links this decision to "youth," which is not necessarily related to one's age. When asked about her son's "youthful" behavior, she responds that "clearly he is not young," but suggests that his distance from his birthplace (*jimoto*) has led him to "live like young people." This connection between spatiality and "youthfulness" appears to be one of the foundations of Kurosaki-san's worldview.

Kurosaki-san also reflects on the role of spatiality and social relations in the survival of communities. She contends that young people "have no connection to where they are born" which makes them more mobile and ready to survive in cities are made for them, as they can live there with almost no human relations. She characterizes places that are destined to survive as those with "shallow human relations" (*asai ningen kankei*), something that is impossible to sustain in a small community. This perspective reveals one of the complex ways in which some over 60 Japanese individuals negotiate their changing social worlds and express their values, aspirations, and concerns in relation to shifting spatial and demographic realities.

Kurosaki-san expressed to me that her current place of residence is a "place where only grannies and grampas live [...] and when they will die [the town] will die/disappear too." The area of North-Hiroshima, where she resides, is indeed the least populated area of the prefecture and is referred to as a "place of depopulation" (*kasoka chiiki*) by Kurosaki-san. She supports this statement by noting that "from [her house,] the closest schools are in [the neighboring prefecture]." She also observed that the "*koinobori*" (carp-shaped wind streamers used to celebrate Children's Day) are no longer displayed, and the last time her neighbor put them up, they were all ragged. In light of this "disappearance," giving away (*oyuzuri suru*) material belongings takes on a different meaning.

While discussing death did not seem to be a problem for Kurosaki-san, she expressed discouragement about her son's capacity to fully clean the house and insecurity about his ability to practice traditional rites. Kurosaki-san lamented the absence of someone who will take care of the *butsudan* (small house altar) and the *ihai* (mortuary tablets) and questioned if someone will ever burn incense for her. This form of uncertainty about funerary practice is an element also explored by Kawano (2014). The study illustrated how the role of ancestor veneration plays a key role in intergenerational reciprocity (65). One could argue that all the trouble that Kurosaki-san is trying to avoid for her children can be considered an attempt to respect the intergenerational relationship that Kawano discussed. What is troubling for Kurosaki-san is the frustration in knowing that, despite her effort to stay true to her part of the cultural contract, she feels there is little chance that her heirs will be able to do the same.

Holding a pessimistic view of both her own and her town's future, Kurosaki-san self-identified as "grateful to the *furima apuri*" which allowed "things that would have ended up becoming garbage [to] make someone happy." She stated that she "will die, but there would not be much trouble for [her] son," and perhaps the buyer would "do [her] the favor to enjoy

her old-lady-like stuff (*obachanrashii mono wo tanoshinde morau*)." Among these items was a significant collection of Japanese pottery that she and her husband had amassed over the years, which she managed to sell for a considerable sum on the DFM. Kurosaki-san expressed initial concern that not many people would be interested in "this type of ceramics," but was pleased that "things that [she and her husband] loved so much went to someone who could do [her] the favor of displaying it."

The concept of "second life to things" (*mono no sekondo raifu*) is a recurring theme in my fieldwork, as demonstrated by the experiences of Tachibana-san (69), which I explored in depth during interviews. Tachibana-san turned to DFM platforms after receiving a grave diagnosis from one of Tokyo's top hospitals after her local doctor in Saitama prefecture recommended her for the visit. Despite being told to prepare for the worst, Tachibana-san's main concern was not for her own life but for the state of her home and the burden it would pose to her husband and children. She thus decided to use DFM platforms to "tidy up" (*okatadsuke no tame*). In the months that followed, the platform she used launched a forum, which Tachibana-san joined and shared her story. To her surprise, she discovered that many others were also dealing with similar issues. Over time, some of the individuals who had responded to her initial post became Tachibana-san's friends and support network, illustrating the power of online communities to provide a "safety net."

Tachibana-san expressed concern primarily for her husband's well-being and ability to manage the household after she passes away. She felt guilty for not having involved him more in household chores and feared his potential poor eating habits and lack of housekeeping skills. Tachibana-san was worried that these factors could cause trouble (*meiwaku*) for other family members and that she would feel obligated to help him even after her death. As a result, she began *shūkatsu* to dispose of her possessions, save some extra money, and give her things to those who might appreciate them.

During this process, Tachibana-san learned the joy of giving "an object a second life" - something that she also referred to, without much difference, as "rebirthed/reused/recycled" (*saisei/sairiyō/saiseiriyō*). She told me that "reuse should be held in high consideration for everyone, but for a person doing *shūkatsu* [...] leaving things behind is like giving a little of oneself (*jibun no ichibu* lit. a part of oneself)." If the buyers "use it with pleasure (*tanoshiku goriyō itadaku*) [...] and we share a pleasant transaction (*tanoshiku otorihiki dekite*) [...] this might be the best example of kindness (*okidsukai* lit. to show concern or care) through sharing."

I argue that the emphasis on sharing, as described by both Kurosaki-san and Tachibana-san, may be a sophisticated manifestation of the user-worker identity. While it is clear that both informants engaged with DFMs to carry out *shūkatsu* with the ultimate goal of personal benefit, whether emotional or material, their engagement can also be seen as a summary of many points expressed by other informants over 60 years old. For instance, Kurosaki-san's contrast between old and young, small and large centers, and her fears that her son will not be able to continue Japanese eschatological practices, echo the points made by Ashida-san regarding new and traditional Japan. Moreover, the desire of both Tachibana-san and Kurosaki-san to avoid problems for their relatives can be seen as another aspect of proactivity and independence emphasized by Yoneda-san. Finally, even the gendered social expectations discussed by Mamura-san and Matsuoka-san seem to be reflected in the narratives of the informants who engage with *shūkatsu*.

4-2.1 Dreaming about retirement: economic insecurity of "aspiring" retiree

In contrast to the Japanese user-workers, Italian participants appeared to discuss with me material experiences of precarity, even when these reflections extended to encompass

immaterial losses and psychological insecurities. While they also expressed their desire to become "professional users" of digital trading platforms, the over 60 Italian informants interviewed presented overall less emotional motivation behind their engagement with the DFMs. A great part of them stated that their primary motivation for using the platforms was to support themselves, sometimes just to survive. For example, Antonino (66), originally from Sicily and now living in the northeast of the country, explained that due to a life of unstable work as a carpenter and contractor, he still missed several years of contributions before becoming entitled to a pension. He also clarified that as independent worker and owner of farming land (*campagna*) for many years, his "score" had been further decreased, and when he does reach the pension age, it will be the minimum amount, barely 580 Euro.

To make up for his lack of pension, Antonino reinvented himself as a restorer and reseller of wooden furnishings. According to him, "Italians of [his age] are used to solid wood, and the feeling of [new prefabricated and mass-produced] articles is not to [their] liking." He has several profiles on DFMs and auction sites that total close to 300 positive reviews. The other noteworthy articles that Antonino produces include wall decorations made from wooden paste, which draw extensive inspiration from classical Roman and Greek sculptures. Selling on these platforms earns him an average of 800-1000 Euro per month after the rather high expenses for shipping, material, and restorable products. Despite his success online, Antonino still works in construction and takes commissions through his off-line network of customers. He told me that the latter activities used to average at least 1000-1200 Euro before taxes, but also that during the 2018 and 2019 years, the amount of work procured in this way shrunk noticeably.

Antonino revealed to me that besides economic instability, he had no other motivation for engaging with the platforms, and that, in fact, he had to do a lot of studying to successfully reach his potential customers on the DFMs. He mentioned that these "generational obstacles" were something he experienced for the first time working with the DFMs. Antonino, who in his off-line working experience had been considered a "*mastu*" (from Sicilian, meaning master builder, head of the contractors working on a site or for a commission) for years, had to humbly ask young workers his juniors and his grandson many times for guidance.

During his work on a construction site, Antonino experienced a humiliating incident. The architect in charge of the site mocked him for his pronunciation of a smartphone brand name and for asking a question to a younger worker. While Antonino had become accustomed to latent racist comments made by northerners about his accent, being ridiculed for what he considered "generational obstacles" was particularly hurtful. Furthermore, the fact that the architect was almost the same age as Antonino added a class-based dimension to the insult, compounding the experience. Lastly, Antonino felt the critic had question his ability to survive on his off-line revenue alone. This incident highlights the intersectionality of ageism, classism, and racism in contemporary Italian society, which are experienced by many over 60 user-workers in the context of digital transformations and labor market shifts.

During our last conversations, Antonino reiterated to me how resentful he had become with his working environment. This led him to consider moving back to Sicily with his wife "to winter like a bird" (*svernare*), as soon as he reaches retirement age, where he believes he can live peacefully with the money from DFMs. He also mentioned that with the farming land (*campagna*) he owns, he may be able to save a significant amount of his pension and potentially build nearby a small (abusive) house. However, Antonino acknowledged that this possibility is currently far off, and he cannot predict whether he will be physically capable of farming his land and work on his house at that time. He emphasized that "without money, the priest will not celebrate Mass" (*senza sordi u parrinu unni canta*

missa), meaning that without economic stability, everything becomes impossible. Therefore, for the time being, he needs to focus on building his retirement fund.

Antonino's story sheds light on the economic challenges faced by many elderly Italians in terms of ensuring their financial stability and securing their retirement. His aspiration to move back to Sicily and sustain himself through income from DFMs and farming is indicative of a growing trend among older Italians, who are seeking alternative means of supporting themselves and preparing for their retirement. This trend of "*svernare*" (lit. to winter like seasonal birds), intended to spend the "winter of life" in a different location from where one typically lives and works originated in the United States, particularly toward Florida, and has become increasingly popular in Europe over the last decade. The warm climate, low cost of living, and picturesque scenery make Sicily an attractive location for such goal.

However, achieving this ambition requires that Antonino and other Italians confront the harsh realities of the pension system, which was reformed by an unelected technocratic government in 2012. Under this ultra-neoliberalist reform, pension contributions are not calculated based on the years of work, but rather on the amount contributed. As a result, higher wage earners reach pension age an average of seven years earlier than irregular workers, *partite iva*, and self-employed workers like Antonino.

4-2.2 Intergenerational and multileveled insecurity: age and disability

An additional informant that exemplifies the use of digital platforms by Italian workers over the age of 60 is Caterina (64). Caterina, along with her daughter Gabriella, uses digital marketplace to sell artisanal hand-painted ceramics. Originally from a small town near Florence, Caterina worked as an art teacher for many years in a charter school (*scuola parificata*) for students with special needs near Modena, one of the wealthiest areas in Italy. However, after an incident on the job left her for some time physically unable to continue her employment, she was placed on redundancy fund (*cassa integrazione*) and her salary was reduced to 851 Euros per month. In addition, she receives 357 Euros of state support for her daughter Gabriella, who is partially disabled but works part-time through a local NGO in one of the art laboratories producing design ceramics for a pay of 650 Euros per month.

Caterina's husband, Aldo, who was also an artisan producing ceramics, passed away suddenly in 2016, leaving her solely responsible for a flexible mortgage that had almost doubled with various reevaluations and inflation over time. Caterina told me that the two had been together their whole life, having attended the same kindergarten and schools. She tearfully added that since she lost him, her life has felt lost as well.

It was with these contingencies that Caterina started selling the hand-painted ceramics that Gabriella creates. Initially, she wanted to get rid of the huge leftover stock of Aldo's ceramics, but people who used to work with him offered an irrelevant sum. Offended by this, Caterina and Gabriella decided to post some of their creations on Europe's largest auction site. To their surprise, in less than an hour, they had sold out all the products they had posted. Over time, this gave them the confidence to start experimenting with their creations, producing more and more artistic products that were well-received in Italy and throughout Europe.

Caterina emphasized that Gabriella does most of the painting, while she focuses on polishing and coloring the backgrounds. Their various webpages and user profiles on the DFMs are all named "Gabriella's Laboratory" (*Il Laboratorio di Gabriella*). Caterina hopes that in case something happens to her, Gabriella will be able to retain this source of income for herself. In a way she aspires to be a professional in order to leave one day this position

to Gabriella. She expressed concern about the potential exploitation her daughter might face if she is not able to be economically independent.

Caterina's comments suggest a critical view of the Italian education system, which she sees as increasingly oriented towards market logic and private interests. By highlighting the "*parificata*" status of the institute, Caterina emphasizes the paradoxical nature of its institutional arrangement, which allows it to benefit from public funding while retaining significant autonomy in managing its workforce and resources. In her words, "*parificata* means that when it comes to paying you a salary or receiving contributions, they are a public school, but when it comes to firing you or their control, they are private."

Gabriella also expressed her distrust of institutions, stating that her disability had prevented her from recognizing how the NGO and the shop that employs her exploit her. However, since using the DFMs, she has come to understand this abuse. She previously felt grateful "for being allowed to work" but now recognizes the need for fair compensation. On another occasion, Gabriella noted that the digital trade platform also takes a significant portion of her profits. However, she believes that this is a mutually beneficial arrangement, as the DFMs recognize and remunerate her work, whereas "the NGO pays her with tax money as if it were welfare." In her view, the platforms represent a "way fairer exploiter (*uno sfruttatore molto più onesto*) because unfair with anybody".

Like many of the other informants, Caterina places great importance on the role of "origin" (*provenienza*). Caterina and Aldo were born and grew-up near Montelupo, a small town near Florence that is famous worldwide for its history in artistic ceramics dating back to the twelfth century. Caterina emphasizes that from a young age, she played in local artisan workshops, such as Aldo's family's. Growing up in that context provided her with an "innate understanding of artisanal business." Caterina often used the expression "*arte editata, mezza imparata*" (art inherited is half learned) to underscore the notion that skills learned through immersion are internalized and become part of one's being. She believes that this is also true for Gabriella, whose father had her in the workshop very often since she was three months old, while Caterina worked. Caterina strongly believes that this was foundational for her Gabriella's artistic development.

It is worth noting, however, that Gabriella offered me a deeper perspective on the matter. While she described her products to me as "in line with the Montelupian technique, as well as its culture of hard work and fair trades," the subjects and shapes of her hand-painted ceramics and tiles bear no resemblance to it. Her tiles patterns, for example, "have nothing to do with traditional ceramics from anywhere in Italy." Gabriella emphasized this distinction, stating that she is not "from Montelupo," even if saying that might result in selling less pieces due to the appeal that the branding would have. She prefers people to appreciate and purchase her ceramics "for what they are," intending "unique pieces with their distinct character." During these comments her mother seems supportive of these statements.

Caterina's user-worker identity can be understood as a response to the multi-faceted precarity that is increasingly common among Italian informants. Her experience was marked by a physical injury that caused a significant reduction in her already unstable income, deepened by a tragic loss that left her without personal and economic support, amplifying the already harsh reality of the poor welfare system in neoliberal Italy. In her case, as well as in those of other informants from both countries, the DFMs provided a means for re-engagement with a hyper-precarious labor market that had already marginalized Caterina and her daughter offering a new avenue for economic survival and a renewed sense of agency, even as they operated within a larger system of exploitation.

Through the same lens also Gabriella's adoption of a user-worker identity can be understood as a response to the exploitative labor conditions that she had been subjected to,

which are unfortunately diffused in the Italian context. Her narrative presents so-called "inclusive policies" (*politiche di incluisione*) in place in Italy as a possible systems of value extraction that exploit even those body who are deemed as "partially unable." Gabriella's awareness of these dynamics of exploitation is remarkable, as is her incisive observation about the DFMs as a "fairer exploitator." Her perspective paints a rather bleak picture of the conditions in which the precarized Italian workforce and population are forced to live.

4-3 Conclusions

The findings of this chapter demonstrate that the identities of over 60 user-workers on DFMs in Italy and Japan are shaped by different forms of precarity, which are influenced by both structural and cultural factors. While Japanese informants tend to focus on emotional and social issues, Italian informants more frequently emphasize economic dependence on the platforms. This difference may be attributed to variations in the degree and form of precarization in the two countries, which can be traced back to differences in their historical and economic contexts.

The key concerns of over 60 user-workers in Japan predominantly centered around social issues that are unfortunately now considered characteristic of their country. Problems such as depopulation and aging communities are occasionally discussed in Italian public discourse as well. However, in the data gathered during my interviews with Italian DFMs users, these phenomena seldom emerged in the context of personal perceived insecurity, as was the case with their Japanese counterparts. Italian informants over the age of 60 more frequently emphasized the economic and institutional dimensions of contemporary insecurity. They often referred to it as the instability in acquiring material wealth, coupled with a pervasive mistrust in the institutions responsible for facilitating and safeguarding the mechanisms of wealth distribution.

The fraying of social ties, the problem of "loneliness," and social isolation, which emerged as recurring underlying causes of insecurity among Japanese DFMs users over the age of 60 during the course of my fieldwork, appear to be less central to the experiences of Italian users. Conversely, Japanese informants discussed with me about their activities on the DFMs as a means to gain recognition from their peers and as a way to overcome the passivity they perceive as resulting from social compartmentalization.

These observations raise two important points for discussion. First, it is appropriate to ask how rigid these traditional roles actually are, especially considering that many of the examples provided by informants represent a circumvention of the expectations of their relatives, friends, and society at large. Second, it is crucial to evaluate how much Japanese individuals over the age of 60 are truly able to establish and maintain meaningful relationships through their engagement with DFMs and the adoption of a user-worker identity. This is not to diminish their self-perceived struggles or satisfaction but rather to consider to what extent individual emotions can be harnessed within biocapitalistic regimes and to what degree user-workers' will can be manipulated by the platforms on which they operate. It is worth examining the degree to which these emotional and biological conditions can be exploited, as this form of value extraction due to the inextricability of emotion from the mind and the human life could be a fundamental characteristic of biocognitive capitalism.

Japanese informants often express satisfaction with their ability to create social connections through their engagement with DFMs. However, it is also critical to recognize that they are participating in a platform that primarily encourages economic exchanges, not purely social interactions. This emphasis on economic proactivity could be seen as a genuine rejection of passivity, but it might also serve as a sophisticated way of eclipsing or masking their solitude behind a veneer of self-entrepreneurialism.

The insistence of Japanese informants on juxtaposing off-line insecurity with their digital satisfaction seems to be a complex outcome of the interplay between their cognitive labor, the network of users, and the platforms themselves. DFMs act as in-between spaces where these intricate dynamics unfold. The emphasis on the social aspect of their digital trades may have roots in pre-existing social practices that were centered around company-based social interactions, a phenomenon well-documented in Japan (Gagne-Okura 2021) and already discussed throughout this work.

It is worth considering that Italian informants may focus more on economic aspects because Italian private sphere discourses encountered often focused around family matters, and actually intertwined with them, as family-led businesses were rather frequents. On top of that, despite it is experiencing a slow economic growth since the early 1990s just like Italy, Japan still benefits from a larger and more dynamic internal economy. In contrast, Italy has had ongoing discussion of precarization since the late 1950s, with the issue becoming increasingly central during the 1990s. This material discrepancy has created a substantial divide between the experiences of over 60 user-workers in the two countries.

In addition to these structural differences, cultural factors also play a significant role. While some Japanese informants choose their user-worker identity as a means of self-affirmation and personal development, even at the expense of their off-line relationships, Italian informants seems to gain emotional satisfaction from their preexisting intimate sphere, particularly their families. Many Italian user-workers share their digital labor with their spouses and children, and some have even used their online work to reunite with family members who had previously migrated for work, as told me by Giuseppe (69), a retired construction worker turned wine producer from Puglia active on many digital commerce platforms.

Furthermore, the platforms themselves have contributed to the distinct formation of user-worker typologies through their different approaches to promoting communities in the two countries. Japanese DFMs, such as Mercari, have prioritized safety and established official discussion pages for users to ask questions and seek advice. This has facilitated the emergence of private blogs and forums where user-workers can come together and support each other, often focusing on typology of products and interests. In contrast, European and Italian digital trade services have been primarily focused on the transaction process and have limited user-to-user interactions. This is evidenced by the absence of third-party sites that discuss digital trades, as well as the lack of commenting and information-sharing features on platforms like Ebay.it. Some Japanese user-workers even consider it rude to buy or sell a product without prior contact and may explicitly state in their posts that it is "okay to buy directly" (*soku-kōnyū OK*).

The narratives of Informants over the age of sixty offer a unique perspective on their involvement with DFM, reflecting their experiences within Japan's historical transition from economic ascendancy to the current neoliberal landscape. Unlike younger informants who may be more acquainted with neoliberal capitalism, these user-workers have occupied professional roles through a period marked by rapid industrialization, economic growth, and a different socio-economic milieu. This historical context can significantly influence their views on economic activities and can explain better concept such as "profession as *ikigai*."

The economic trajectory of post-war and later post-oil-shock Japan, emphasizing industrial expansion, job security, and collective prosperity, has likely shaped the expectations and sense of economic stability of individuals over 60. Their engagement with DFMs may thus be informed by a comparison between the economic conditions of their earlier years and the present neoliberal reality. This contrast could contribute to a nuanced understanding of their motivations, perceptions of labor, and expectations from digital trading. While younger informants may navigate DFMs within the framework of neoliberal

capitalism, focusing on individualistic pursuits and adapting to precarious employment structures, the over-60 cohort may approach these platforms with a lens shaped by a different economic era. Their engagement might be framed by a desire for economic participation reminiscent of a previous period where job security and collective well-being were more pronounced.

Moreover, the over-60 informants could view DFMs as a means to reconnect with a past economic reality characterized by stronger community ties and collective prosperity. The platforms may serve as a bridge between their experiences of Japan's ascendant capitalism and the current neoliberal landscape, providing a space for them to navigate evolving economic structures while retaining elements of a bygone era. In essence, exploring how the engagement of over-60 user-workers with DFMs is influenced by their experience of a different type of capitalism enriches our understanding of the interplay between historical economic contexts and contemporary digital labor practices. This perspective adds depth to the analysis by acknowledging the diverse economic landscapes that have shaped the informants' perceptions and behaviors in the digital trading sphere.

However, it is essential to recognize that this historical comparison also exposes the over-60 informants to new vulnerabilities and forms of exploitation that have emerged in the contemporary digital landscape. The economic conditions during Japan's ascendant period may have instilled a sense of collective well-being and stability among the older informants. However, the shift to neoliberal capitalism, marked by individualism and precarious employment, has reshaped the labor market and introduced new challenges. As these individuals navigate DFMs, they risk encountering exploitative dynamics inherent in the digital economy, which might not have been prevalent during the earlier period of their working lives.

For instance, the gig economy's inherent flexibility, while appealing, can also lead to precarious working conditions, lack of employment benefits, and income volatility. These aspects might be particularly challenging for older individuals who, influenced by a different economic era, might expect a more stable and collectively oriented work environment.

Moreover, the digital nature of these platforms introduces concerns related to data privacy, algorithmic decision-making, and platform control. Older informants, who may not be as familiar with the intricacies of digital technologies, might inadvertently become targets for exploitation or manipulation by the platforms.

The informants' historical context could influence their vulnerability to new forms of exploitation, as they may approach DFMs with a sense of trust and community reminiscent of the past. The platform's algorithms and business models, however, may prioritize profit over user well-being, leading to potential exploitation through pricing mechanisms, visibility algorithms, or data utilization.

In summary, while the over-60 user-workers' engagement with DFMs reflects a historical comparison between different capitalist eras, it's crucial to acknowledge the potential risks and vulnerabilities they face in the contemporary digital landscape. Recognizing the evolving nature of exploitation in the digital economy is essential for understanding how these informants navigate and negotiate their roles within this complex and rapidly changing environment.

Chapter 5: Digital shops and analogic insecurity

Within the community of self-identifying "professional users" on DFMs, another subcommunity of note is that of the "shop owners" who operate on such platforms. Given their now-noticeable market share, and their group logic it is imperative to address these users separately. Inclusion of this cluster of informants is also particularly significant due to the motivations they provide for self-identification as "professional." While for some, it is understandably their high degree of specialization in their products that makes them professionals, for others, the primary reason for assuming such a label is the access to features provided by the platforms themselves, such as the official "shop" recognition granted by Mercari for those who apply. This last service introduction has fundamentally transformed the paradigm of digital consumer-to-consumer trade, which previously served as the cornerstone of DFMs.

Starting from mid-2021, Mercari introduced "Mercari Shops" accounts (Mercari, July 2021). As recently reported by the company (Mercari Column, February 2023), this initiative aimed to differentiate individuals who sell disused belongings from those who operate a "one-man business" (*kojinjigyōnushi*). In reality, the accreditation only modifies the username, increases visibility of these users through the DFMs algorithms, and changes the features available, not only for the seller but also for the buyer. Among the modifications introduced is the ability for buyers to comment or ask questions about posts, which has indirectly complicated the ability to contact users.

The introduction of Mercari Shops accounts generated mixed responses among user-workers. While some welcomed this endorsement, others expressed opposition to the initiative. The reasons behind such resistance included the challenges of adapting to new features, concerns about losing their established customer networks, and the need to obtain new reviews. To address these challenges, Mercari attempted to facilitate the transition by allowing some users to modify their accounts and retain their existing reviews and subscriptions. Furthermore, the platform gave the chance to users to post from the same account on both regular Mercari and Mercari Shops articles, effectively diminishing the exclusive nature of the service.

It is worth noting that professional sellers who operate both physical and digital shops and sell their goods on DFMs and auction sites have been present in the Japanese digital trade landscape since its inception. During my fieldwork and prior to the introduction of the "Mercari Shops," many of these sellers self-identified as "professional users." A significant number of these informants were owners of secondhand shops (*chūkoya*/recycle shop) or thrift clothes stores (*furugiya*). However, with the increasing popularity of DFMs, an increasing number of ordinary sellers from diverse backgrounds are entering this market. The "Mercari Shops" certification has created a framework for the company to control trading flow and to contain and institutionalize these sellers.

While Mercari Shops are not a novel concept within the Japanese DFMs sphere, other competitors such as Yahoo Auctions and Rakuma have been offering similar services for businesses for a more extended period (Yahoo Auction, n.d.; Rakuten Rakuma, n.d.). Mercari counterpart in Italy, Subito, caters to professional users through two distinct frameworks: the "pro account" for self-entrepreneurial user-workers seeking to sustain themselves via digital trade, and the "shop account" tailored for shop owners.

Additionally, Subito offers specialized services like "*abbonamento*" (a form of subscription involving repeated purchase of products, particularly those with short shelf lives). Notably, Mercari stands out due to the varied responses it has received, including the

resistance of many user-workers to embrace these tools. Particularly interesting is Mercari's distinct approach compared to its competitors, as it has actively attempted to encourage professional user-workers to use these services, resulting in a growth trajectory that has been viewed as somewhat forced and yielding only modest results.

These informants responded to completely independent dynamics compared to the other subcommunities and despite their embracing of economic profit, they did not always consider it their fundamental reason for commit to the DFMs. I would like specially to point at the reasons behind their self-identification as professional, since I believe in it might be possible to trace the rationale behind the transformation of workers into user-workers.

The central questions this chapter aim to address are: how do user-workers' identities interact with platform policies and features? Are the platform shaping their communities successfully or are rather the user-workers to have a larger foot print in DFMs' internal evolutions?

Table 5:

Name	Age	Prefecture / Region	Members of Family Living Together	Off-line profession / income (approx.)	Years of Unemployement / Under-Employment incl. retirement	On-line profession or products / income (approx.)	Weekly Hrs on DFMs or working for DFMs related products (approx.)
Saeki-san	43	Osaka		Super market employee / Rather not say	Now employed but spent around 3 years unemployed	Gaming related articles / 60,000 ~ 100,000 JPY	More than 10 less than 20
Ebisu-san	41	Tokyo area (unspecified)	1 (spouse)		More than 5	Fashion products / 160,000 ~ 250,000 JPY	More than 30
Kubo-san	42	Tokyo area (unspecified)	3 (spouse / 2 children)		More than 5	Imported cheap goods / 120,000 ≠ 180,000 JPY	More than 30
Ishino-san	54	Kobe	2 (spouse and child)		More than 5	Second hand producs / 160,000~200,000 JPY	More than 30
Marina	46	Naples area	4 (spouse and 3 children)		More than 5	Farming products / 1500 Euro	More than 30
Gaetano	49	Naples area	4 (spouse and 3 children)		More than 5	Farming products / 1500 Euro	More than 30
Luca	34	Milano area	3 (parents and grandparent)		More than 2 Less than 5	Second hand bikes and scooter (incl. mechanic services) / more than 2500 Euro	More than 30

5-1.1 A career selling "useless junk"

My initial interaction with a self-proclaimed "pro-user" who owned a "shop" occurred when I met Saeki-san (43), a reseller on multiple platforms originally from Osaka area. During our interviews, Saeki-san's shop was named in his profile as "Sadako's Room" (*Sadako no heya*). The name is inspired by the female long-haired protagonist of a popular horror movie series. Saeki-san's focus was on reselling "abandoned treasure for retro gamers and otaku," which he described as "*iranjanku*" (lit. useless junk). This inventory consisted mainly of video games, software, and accessories, as well as action figures. He also occasionally sold collectible and gaming cards.

Saeki-san has an interesting way of presenting himself. According to his profile, he "find most of his *treasure* in the well of Sadako […] where he also lives," so ask his customers not to throw in the "*iranjanku*" in there. In reality, he procures his articles through the network of scrapyards and dispose facility in Osaka area. Through two DFMs and one auctions site, Saeki-san totalized more than 10,000 positive reviews – an astonishing result. It is in this very high number of transactions that he finds a confirmation of being a "professional user."

Saeki-san is an intriguing example of a DFM "pro-user," who does not neatly fit in a narrow typification. For instance, he mentioned that his "real work" revolves around the DFMs, while his side job is as an employee in a supermarket chain, where his responsibilities include packing meat in the back of the store and bring it to the aisle. He expressed

frustration about not being able to fully sustain himself through his online trade, which typically yields him an average of 60,000 to 100,000 JPY per month. During a period of unemployment, Saeki-san tried to rely solely on the income from the DFMs, but he faced challenges and had little success in doing so. At the time of our first interview, he revealed that for about a week he could only afford to consume basic raw egg-rice with cheaper rice varieties, such as *kotsubumai*.

I inquired Saeki-san about the relatively low revenue he generated from his reselling platform, but his response was not definitive. Despite the significant number of transactions and the evident dedication he devoted to the DFMs, it is plausible that the low prices he demanded for the majority of his merchandise contributed to his lack of profitability. Notably, Saeki-san refers to his trade as *iranjunk*, and from a market value perspective, this label is not inaccurate. Professional users in interviewed who achieve stable incomes through reselling, typically focus on high-value and relatively stable merchandise, often restoring such items. Conversely, Saeki-san's inventory comprises niche and relatively inexpensive articles, and he acknowledged that his attempts at repairing items often bring little results.

In addition to his unorthodox approach to trade, Saeki-san's temperament could also pose a disadvantage. It appears that he lacks a clear pricing strategy and does not adhere to a business-oriented approach to sales. As a result, the same type of article could be sold for drastically different prices. Saeki-san's rationale for this was articulated in his words: the important thing is to sell; "sometimes it's 5,000 JPY, other times it's just 5 JPY."

Saeki-san disclosed to me that he has had numerous occupations as a full-time employee, including employment in multinational corporations in Japan, that allegedly fired him after three-years. The veracity of these claims is difficult to ascertain. Saeki-san's communication style and writing are somewhat idiosyncratic, and it is challenging to understand his messages. His speech is characterized by hurried phrasing, which he also employs in writing, leading to comprehension difficulties for native Japanese speakers with whom I conducted group interviews.

Most of my interviews with Saeki-san took place before the launch of the "Mercari Shops." Upon the introduction of the program, I promptly contacted him to gather his thoughts on the matter. To my surprise, Saeki-san vehemently opposed the initiative, citing his reluctance to cede full control of his activities to "such a company". Furthermore, as a dealer of secondhand products, he saw no need for the program. One statement he made was particularly noteworthy. Saeki-san remarked that allowing Mercari to decide who is a pro is like admitting that he is not a professional without the company's endorsement, while he had been operating even before the establishment of Mercari. "Is the sellers that make them professionals" he said.

I argue that Saeki-san's past experiences of professional insecurity contributed to his easy embrace of his user-worker identity. By participating in DFMs, he found fulfilling activities that allowed him to distance himself from the off-line self that he rejects. Saeki-san seeks to work in accordance with his personal interests to the extent that he accepts a blue-collar job, ostensibly to support himself and continue the "real" work that aligns with his user-worker identity. It is also interesting to note that he reinforces his agency through these activities. By participating in DFMs, he can assert his identity, and he is not willing to renounce it, even in the face of opposition from the company that facilitated and strengthen his user-worker self.

5-1.2 Digital shops conundrum: solution to insecurity or key to preserve it?
Ebisu-san (41), is a reseller of high-end fashion products and accessories who has gained considerable popularity on her preferred digital flea marketplace, where she has

garnered almost 2000 positive reviews. Originally hailing from the Shiga prefecture in the Kansai region, she relocated to Tokyo in the mid-2000s to pursue her studies in fashion and design at a prestigious academy. After a series of unsuccessful working experiences, and driven by her passion for vintage clothing, she spent more than two years in Europe, residing in Italy and France, where she met her husband. During her stay in Europe, Ebisu-san frequented numerous secondhand markets, forging relationships with sellers who remain part of her network to this day.

Upon learning of Ebisu-san's proactive approach to business, I surmise that she epitomizes the self-entrepreneurial subjectivity. While residing in France, she assumed the role of a "*marche* tour guide," catering primarily to an influx of tourists, particularly those from her homeland of Japan. Drawing upon her network of sellers, she orchestrated picturesque events in the vibrant districts of Le Marais and Les Halles, sharing evocative images of these gatherings with me. Following her return to Japan, Ebisu-san reconfigured her professional identity, developing an exotic and captivating image for her digital shop with a profusion of French and Italian terminology in her product postings. Notably, she provides historical context for the brands and details about fabrics of her articles, and the aesthetic quality of her product images is unequivocally among the most accomplished that I observed during my fieldwork.

It is worth noticing that Ebisu-san transitioned from an unstable source of income to another before and after traveling to Europe. Although she led a satisfying and captivating life in France, she still struggled to "eat three meals a day." Upon her return to Japan, Ebisu-san attempted to secure stable employment in both fashion and art, but to no avail. To address this predicament, she commenced selling a portion of her extensive clothing collection, contending that this would enable others to appreciate her "sense." Ebisu-san frequently referenced this decision as being based on her "sense," which she expounded as both an "artistic sense" and a "sixth sense," the latter of which she purportedly acquired during her time in Paris. When the sales flow became more consistent, Ebisu-san's husband joined her in her digital trading enterprise and acted as her buyer during his frequent trips to France.

Despite her attempts to shift the paradigm by establishing a physical shop near Yoyogi Park in Tokyo with the funds garnered from her digital trades, Ebisu-san's endeavors proved unsuccessful. On various occasions, she attributed the lack of success to competition, the pandemic, the niche market she catered to, and the exorbitant rental costs. Nonetheless, Ebisu-san affirmed that Mercari was the sole source of reliable income that allowed her to sustain her career. When I queried her on how she divided her time between Mercari and the physical shop, she claimed to devote an equal amount of time to both. However, in another occasion she contradicted herself, saying that she was frequently absent from the store, leaving a part-time worker to manage it.

As a result of her failed attempt to establish a physical shop in 2021, Ebisu-san decided to focus solely on her activities on digital marketplaces, which had become more popular but also more competitive. In order to distinguish herself from her competitors, she was an early adopter of the "Mercari Shops" certification program, which allowed her to retain her previous positive reviews. However, she lamented the loss of direct customer interactions through comments, which had made it easier to establish returning customers. She also noted that Mercari could do more to set apart "shops" from regular sellers.

Despite romanticizing her digital marketplace activities as an artistic outlet that channels her "sense," Ebisu-san appears to reject the idea that she bears responsibility for any shortcomings. While Mercari's "shop" feature provides a stable and recursive location for her to express her idealized professional identity, it also appears to limit her opportunities for further development in an off-line setting.

Another informant who has also found comfort in operating a "Mercari Shop" is Kubo-san (42), originally from Nagasaki-prefecture and now residing in Tokyo. Kubo-san specializes in importing low-priced items from China, which she began doing in 2016. At the time, Kubo-san was struggling to re-enter the workforce after a six-year absence due to the birth of her son. Faced with multiple rejections, Kubo-san's mental state deteriorated to the point where she described herself as being "almost depressed due to job hunting" (*shuukatsu utsū ni chikai jōkyō*). In search of a way to "earn money without being hired," she turned to digital marketplaces.

Although Kubo-san was excited by the idea of starting her own company, she felt uncertain about her lack of a specific area of expertise. However, she continued to search for a solution, and during this time, she came across a book about importing inexpensive goods from China that could be sold through digital platforms such as Rakuten or Amazon. Kubo-san became obsessed with the idea of e-commerce and decided to try importing phone accessories from China on a small scale. The experiment was successful, and in a relatively short time, she had turned her small investment into a profit. She then expanded her stock significantly.

After about a year, however, Kubo-san noticed that her profits were drastically diminishing, partly due to increased competition and partly due to the higher fees charged by the digital platforms. In response, she started to post more and more of her inventory on all available DFM platforms. She got an immediate positive response, particularly from Mercari.

Kubo-san mentioned that the biggest difference between selling on large companies like Amazon or Rakuten and on C-to-C trading platforms is that the former handle logistics and hold the seller's stock in deposit, while the latter requires the seller to be solely responsible for these aspects. Although Kubo-san stated that she does not mind this, she also reported that the additional time and costs associated with handling logistics and storage often bring her profits from the DFM platforms to the same level as those on larger digital companies.

In August 2021, Kubo-san was excited to upgrade her account from a regular seller to a "Mercari Shop" to avoid the "pranks" (*itazura*), intended as the unethical behaviors, some customers would play on her. She also mentioned that this upgrade helped her feel more legitimate as a "real shop owner." Kubo-san acknowledged the instability (*fuantei*) of trading Chinese imported goods through digital platforms, stated also she might be forced to quite one day, but also expressed feeling more unstable/anxious (*fuan*) during her job hunt.

Kubo-san's experience exemplifies how non-confrontational sociality can contribute to the preservation of insecurity, which can in turn facilitate the emergence of user-worker identity. In her case, the DFMs and digital platforms did not serve as a social space or have any re-embedding effect on her social life. She mentioned having "no time for fun" and finding contentment in her situation, with her family being her only source of social support. Her user-worker identity enables her to view the professional label and framework provided by Mercari as a suitable solution to her situation. However, it is difficult to determine how long this relationship can last, which exacerbates her own insecurity. Kubo-san's experience highlights how user-worker labor can offer temporary relief but ultimately can also promote stagnation in conditions that are the very cause of precarity.

5-1.3 Peace of mind through DFMs

Ishino-san (54), based in the Kobe area, is another self-described professional seller I encountered on the DFMs. Ishino-san and her husband have developed an interesting business model for their recycle shop, which goes beyond traditional buying and selling.

Ishino-san is a member of a goodwill group, while her husband provides professional services and works with NPOs to organize, clean, and tidy up empty houses (*akiya*) and large deposit stores across Western Japan. Through this channel, Ishino-san has managed to acquire a constant flow of antiques and secondhand products that she can resell at close to zero cost. After the sale a substantial share of the profits are devolved to the NPOs with which she cooperates.

It should be noticed that the Ishino-san is hardly considerable "insecure" from an economic standpoint. Also, including the revenue of her husband, her proceedings are undoubtedly more stable than many other informants I interviewed during my fieldwork. He was very supportive of her participation to the fieldwork but was present only during few of our conversation. What made her stand out is the motivation she developed to work with DFMs platforms which she initiated first with auction sites in the early 2010s and her personal resilience.

Until the late 2000s, Ishino-san was employed in a large company in Tokyo. However, after the suicide of her 17-year-old daughter, she experienced a psychotic episode that resulted in her being pushed out of the company and eventually led to the intervention of public authorities. Ishino-san was particularly devastated by the responsibility she felt for not understanding what was happening to her daughter beforehand. Although she is now able to discuss these events, she told me that for many years she had to retreat into "another world" (*kakehanareta sekai*) in order to recover from the loss.

Ishino-san revealed to me that she never truly understood the reasons behind her daughter's actions. According to her husband, their younger daughter believed that her sister was going through a phase of "confusion" (*mayotteta*) and "didn't want to disappoint her family." In our last discussion about the incident, he mentioned, "it was like [his daughter] didn't want to leave high school." When I inquired if there was any particular reason, the man uncertainely said, "perhaps a lover..." (*koibito kana*). However, Ishino-san was quick to clarify that all of these were merely suppositions. She explained that it was just a few days before her daughter's birthday, and the day before the tragic event, they had all celebrated together by enjoying sushi, during which her daughter had appeared happy. On the morning of the event, they had prepared Japanese-style omelettes for lunchboxes and talked about the future. Ishino-san believed in her daughter's happiness at the time.

Understandably, the incident took a significant toll on the entire family, but it seems that Ishino-san paid the highest price. A few months later, she began experiencing auditory hallucinations, hearing her daughter's voice as if she were in the living room or at the entrance. Initially, she heard her daughter talking on the phone or returning from cram school. Over time, these hallucinations progressed to the point where she would see her daughter among other students while walking home or riding the train. These experiences led to severe anxiety and deep depression, which left her unable to get out of bed.

Ishino-san workplace's response was quite drastic. After several unsuccessful attempts by her supervisor to persuade her to retire, this informant was eventually terminated due to prolonged absence. She expressed understanding that her absence had become too burdensome for the company and acknowledged that she had caused them a lot of trouble. However, Ishino-san was more forgiving than her husband, who harbored resentment towards the company for timing her termination during such a difficult period. He was also frustrated that the official reason given for her termination was "absence without permission" (*mudan kekkin*), despite him having discussed the situation with her superior and asked an informal permission for her to be absent. Yet, when the termination occurred, just few days later, her supervisor claimed he could not assist Ishino-san.

Ishino-san's reaction to the traumatic incident was indeed severe. During one of her intensive delirium episodes, her family even considered seeking involuntary commitment

for her, but eventually, she agreed to go. Subsequently, over the next seven months, Ishino-san spent the majority of her time in a psychiatric institution close to nature that specialized in cases like hers. The expenses incurred by her treatment were significant.

Mental health discussions in Japan gained prominence with the rise in suicides driven by the economic depression of the early 1990s and anthropologist have produced specific studies (Kitanaka 2011). However, Ishino-san's situation introduces an often-overlooked level of insecurity. She mentioned that if it were not for the fact that her family had some economic "slack" (yoyū), she could not imagine how they would have managed. The main problem was the system of payment. In her particular case they had to advance a part of the expenses privately and then apply for a partial refund with her insurance company through tax returns. Her condition also led to her husband reducing the time he could dedicate to his previous job, and she remained unemployed, which understandably exacerbated the burden of the expenses. According to Ishino-san, this is a common paradox that many families dealing with mental health problems face. To this day, she remains in therapy. "Depression is not something that heals," she said, adding that the cost of medication and hospital exceeds 30,000 JPY per month – of which almost nothing is refunded.

Ishino-san explained to me that in clinic she learned to compartmentalize her life in a way that she always has things to do. She stated that she never wants to be free and keeps herself busy with activities. It is troubling to hear about the lack of support and empathy that she experienced from Japanese public authorities, as well as from her former employer. Despite these difficulties, Ishino-san's husband encouraged her to move back to her birthplace in Kansai and work together with him.

At the light of these data, Ishino-san's motivation to engage with the DFMs and auction sites took on a new dimension. Unlike others, the overlapping of private and professional time in Ishino-san's case is not imposed by economic necessity, but rather by an emotional one. She explained that the constant engagement that the digital platforms provide her with gives her a sense of peace of mind. She noted that "there is always someone online" who kindly looks at what she posts, providing her with a sense of support and companionship.

During the last of conversations, Ishino-san's husband reiterated his belief that if Ishino-san had been employed by a smaller and more empathic company, the emotional distress that caused her further complications might have been avoided. He went on to explain that, despite everyone acting "nice," there was no genuine kindness towards her. He expressed resentment towards the "inhuman procedures" (hiningenteki na hōshin) that companies follow, disregarding the years of hard work and individual circumstances of their employees.

I believe Ishino-san's husband accurately identified a critical aspect of neoliberal management. The lack of empathy is not solely due to the rigid and obtuse nature of a system designed to produce more and faster. I believe, in agreement with other scholars (Fumagalli 2015b; Berardi 2009, 2018; Brockling 2019), that it is intentional rather than accidental that human-to-human interactions are minimized or even prohibited under neoliberal management.

Ishino-san's story is a tragic example of the insecurities that exist in Japan and extend the economic sphere. Despite this, she has found a way to embrace her user-worker identity as a survival mechanism. As her husband mentioned, Ishino-san found a reason to be happy in keeping busy through the DFMs. She also shared with me the joy she felt when someone wrote her a lengthy thank-you message on one of the platforms and how she was able to open up to many other sellers and friends. The re-embedding capacity of the DFMs is particularly important in Ishino-san's engagement with the platforms. It is difficult to determine whether this is an escape from reality, another form of cognitive self-alienation,

a palliative comfort, or genuine human-to-human interaction taking place in a digital environment.

5-2.1 Farms and platforms: on-demand high quality vegetables

Marina (46) and Gaetano (49) are two digital traders from the western periphery of Naples whom I met during the COVID-19 pandemic that struck Italy ahead of the rest of the world in 2020. They operate on their family farm and sell their produce in the local government-sponsored markets known as "*Chilometro Zero*" (which translates to "farm-to-table") as well as on digital platforms. For several years, they worked tirelessly, often putting in six to seven days a week and working up to 12 hours a day, including transportation. Gaetano, who is the only licensed seller, was responsible for dealing with the markets most of the time. However, starting at the end of 2018, they transitioned to an "on-demand" sales approach, enabling them to directly deliver their products to their customers.

The couple owns and operate a family farm where they reside with their three children aged 16, 12, and 9. Their agricultural practices are guided by the principles of organic cultivation and adherence to the Fukuoka Method, which prioritizes non-action as a means of facilitating natural farming. In the first two years following their move to the farm, crop yields were relatively small, likely due to prior "brutalization" of the soil by the previous owners, according to Gaetano. However, as Marina observed, over time, "nature's equilibrium was restored," leading to significantly increased crop yields and greater crop diversity compared to neighboring farms. Marina also noted that the Fukuoka Method involves eschewing the use of machinery, which helps to reduce operational costs.

Marina shared with me that although neighboring farms appeared friendly, they actually viewed her family with suspicion and kept a distance. As first-generation farmers who employed new approaches to farming, she believed they were considered outsiders in the community. However, since they they shifted their focus to digital trades, tensions have partially diminished.

Marina's interest in the digital farm-to-table business grew when the *Caritas Association*, a local church volunteer group, requested that she deliver fresh vegetables to seniors. With the help of her eldest son, Marina first set up a Facebook Marketplace account and later one on Subito. Through these platforms, Marina and Gaetano, who had been struggling to compete with the prices of intensive farmers, discovered a large untapped market for their products.

The pricing strategy that Marina and Gaetano have developed is also noteworthy. They recognize that "fidelizzazione" (an Italian marketing term like "loyalty marketing," referring to the creation of loyal, repeat customers) is crucial in prioritizing a well-organized delivery schedule, optimizing costs, and minimizing their environmental impact. To their loyal customers, they offer a flat rate of 1 euro per kilogram of seasonal products during the spring and summer months and 1.25 euros per kilogram in the autumn and winter seasons. While they cannot always guarantee specific requests, they make every effort to meet their customers' expectations.

A typical "basket" of six or seven kilograms of vegetables and fruits on DFMs costs around 10-12 euros, of which approximately 60% is profit. This represents almost twice the earnings they used to make at physical markets, according to Marina. She sees their success in the digital space as liberating them from the "garrote of the competition," and Gaetano added that the pandemic played a role in increasing their customer base. As an essential worker during lockdowns due to his license as a vegetable reseller, Gaetano was able to expand their network of customers, including those who were hesitant to leave their homes.

The couple sold out of their crops during this time and even had to decline some orders, prioritizing senior citizens.

Despite their strong commitment to sustainable farming practices, Gaetano and Marina prioritize digital trading sites and DFMs, particularly Subito in which they hold a Pro account, as a means of increasing profits. While their competitors, who focus on more profitable crops, may not have discovered the benefits of these platforms, digital trade provides an opportunity for niche markets to be more easily accessed by potential customers.

It's also interesting to note the indirect capacity of DFMs to re-embed Gaetano and Marina's social connections with their community, now that the pressures of capitalist competition have been removed. Marina's initial volunteering with the association, well before she could imagine any economic return for herself, is part of the exploitative form of volunteerism that emerged in neoliberal Italy as discussed by Muehlebach (2012). However, in the case of Marina and Gaetano, a new adaptive spirit has emerged with the development of user-worker identities that allow them to capitalize on their moral drive and seize a chance for profit in the midst of moral commitment.

5-2.2 Insecurity and gray legal areas of digital economy

Luca (34) began his journey as a secondhand scooter and bike trader through Subito in 2017, primarily active in the Milano area but moving around all the northern regions for work. After being on a "waiting list" (*lista di scorrimento*) for four years to be hired by a local public company, which ultimately became privatized in 2015, Luca lost hope in finding work as an employee. With a history of working "*in nero*" (without registration or a contract) as a mechanic since he was young, Luca tried several jobs, including blue-collar positions such as working as a handy-man for an ice-cream factory, an installer for a company producing oxygen tanks, and as a "runner" for food delivery applications. After almost a decade of precarity, he decided to become independent.

Luca and his brother started repairing, buying, and selling scooters together before his brother was hired by a German automobile company in 2016 and emigrated. The two had a plan to save enough money to purchase the license for a store and pay the first three or four months of rent. However, due to economic contingencies, Luca abandoned this idea and decided to become "a professional of on-demand scooter and motorbikes repairing services," as his profile states. He only later decided to sell the good deals he came in contact with due to his job.

Luca essentially operates a small scrapyard from the backyard of his family's "*casolare*," a large rural house in the southern area of Lombardy, which is the industrial center of Italy. He salvages and collects parts, stores the bikes or scooters he can purchase inexpensively, and resells them after maintenance for a profit. The formula he uses, which involves he becoming first the owner and then privately reselling them, operates in a gray legal area since to officially repair them he would require a licence.

Through the platform also performs repairs or customization that are commissioned, mostly involving "*truccare*" customers' bikes. The term "*truccare*," which means literally to apply makeup or to cheat, among motor enthusiasts refers to customizing the engine or other parts to improve performance, often in ways that may not comply with legal regulations. This aspect of Luca's business constitutes a significant portion of his work but also carries a higher risk. While trading private vehicles do not constitute a crime, performing repairs for profit and customization may raise legal issues, as these activities might not align with laws.

Luca explained that Subito gave him the opportunity to have a "shop inside home," providing him with the necessary visibility without the expenses required for a physical store. According to Luca, repairing a vehicle requires a large space, which can cost up to 3,000

Euro per month in his area. However, he was able to utilize the large garage in his family's home, which had the capacity to fit up to six cars and was mostly unused since his brother left and his father stopped driving. By repurposing the space and with the revenue he had originally saved, Luca was able to acquire secondhand specialized equipment for repairing.

It is worth noting that the region where Luca was raised and operates is the epicenter of Italy's entire motor industry. The Po River plain, stretching from northern Emilia-Romagna through the southern part of Lombardy, southwestern Veneto, and into the center of Piedmont, has a long tradition of motor enthusiasts. This tradition is due to the proximity of this region to the motor industry, which, in Luca's words, created the "*indotto*." Luca uses this term to refer to the dense network of small industries that live off and have thrived through minor outsourcing from the major car and bike industries in that area.

Luca's upbringing in that region is something he associates with his ability to "run a good shop." He grew up there, "breathing the industrial smoke and eating *pane e bulloni*" (literally, bread and bolts). In other words, his upbringing in an industrial environment influenced his mechanical skills and interests. He mentioned that under the guidance of his brother, he started customizing his scooter, and later his friends' scooters, even before he was legally allowed to drive one because "that is what everyone did." This suggests that his engagement with repair and customization activities was not solely driven by interest but also by an innate characteristic influenced by his place of origin and his social networks.

Luca expresses a high degree of satisfaction with the platform he uses and highlights the profitability he has experienced compared to traditional automobile and scooter reseller shops. According to him, "the platform takes a set amount," whereas the reseller who owns a car park and allows others to display their products to customizers, repairers, and dealers, not only charges rent for the spot but also takes a cut of the profit and can potentially damage their products. Luca is happy that he does not have to deal with these issues while using the platform.

According to Luca, the only benefit of obtaining a license is the ability to rent a shop for the storage of vehicles and to have insurance coverage in the event of any mishap that may occur while working. Luca emphasized that the scooters and motorbikes he repairs are typically not in his possession for more than a day, and frequently returned within a few hours. When queried regarding the potential for theft or damage to the vehicles, Luca stated that he would be held personally responsible and required to cover any financial loss incurred. Despite this risk, Luca conveyed a sense of confidence in his ability to operate safely, citing the secure nature of the area in which he conducts his business.

Luca finds that the DFM model enables him to concentrate on the "substance" rather than the "form" of his business. Through the use of Subito, he can now assert with pride that he is a professional, and has achieved his long-held aspiration of having a shop space, right where he resides. Importantly, the platform also "spares" him from the various inspections and controls by authorities that a conventional enterprise would be subjected to. This includes both fiscal checks as well as assessments of his compliance with the customization services he provides.

Luca's story exemplifies how the gig economy can offer opportunities to those who face barriers to traditional employment and find a new path to independence. However, it also highlights how the shift away from traditional productive activities can contribute to the continuation of activities that operate in a legally gray or outright illegal space. Some user-workers, like Luca, may be unable or once exasperated unwilling to participate in the conventional job market, leading them to explore alternative, sometimes questionable, avenues for their livelihood.

By utilizing Subito, he was able to bypass, not only his fiscal responsibility, but other expenses typically associated with a traditional brick-and-mortar shop and achieve

profitability. However, Luca's experience also underscores the risks and challenges that come with being an independent contractor. While Luca's lack of a business license may have saved him from rent and insurance costs, it also leaves him personally responsible for any damages or losses incurred while working, highlighting the true neoliberal imprint of digital capitalism.

5-3 Conclusions

Overall, the stories of these informants highlight the complexities of the digital economy and demonstrate how it can provide both opportunities and challenges for user-workers. While it can offer greater flexibility and autonomy, it also presents significant risks, particularly for those who lack job security, benefits, and legal protections.

Japanese informants presented a variety of reasons for self-identifying as professional users, ranging from the appeal of harmonizing their professional and recreational interests to overcoming personal drama. Italian informants, on the other hand, seemed to focus on economic precarity, which also threatened their personal satisfaction and mental wellbeing.

The emergence of an official "shop" label on Mercari provided an additional layer for recursive exchanges between sellers' identities and their platform. Users who seek to qualify as professionals for their digital activities, rather than relying on off-line income, can now fully embrace their user-worker identity with the legitimacy provided by the platform. However, some users reject this label altogether. One of my Japanese informants who refused the label suggested that the creation of the certification was an attempt to establish control over the activities on the platform and avoid problems with Japanese authorities regarding unpaid taxes. While Japanese law regarding taxation of secondhand products is vague, new products run the risk of being traded unregistered, which can lead to legal issues. This user was later banned from Mercari.

This case illustrates how attempts to establish control can exacerbate a platform's problems in surveilling its community. Mercari, which serves a large number of daily users, has been described to me as both a lawless digital frontier and a virtual panopticon. However, neither of these characterizations fully captures the complexity of the company. As Mercari has grown in popularity, it has had to grapple with the realities of law and the demands of its communities.

Italian users of Subito did not report dwelling with such contrasting feelings. In their case, the description of the platforms remained overwhelmingly positive. Even when I encountered critics of digital trade, they articulated their frustration against other sellers rather than against the DFMs. While Japanese informants reported that the platform can be marginal in their assumption of a professional identity, Italians instead recognized the essential position of the platform in such self-idealization. Subito also provided commercial-free premium accounts as well as specialized sections of their services to match the buyers' interest in specific products, but until now, these seem to have been designed with the user-consumer rather than the user-worker in mind.

Japanese informants seem to have a more dynamic and less strictly economic relation with the platforms. The high number of self-described professional users I encountered on the DFMs in Japan provided me with a wide set of answers to engage with the platforms. In Italy, most of the informants I interviewed proposed it to me as a tool to achieve economic security, even in the case of the most ethical and morally driven informants. It should also be noted that Japanese platforms maintain a stronger rooting in the local national setting compared to the ones popular in Italy, which often must interface with the wider and heterogeneous European market.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

During this study, my objective was to examine the underlying mechanisms that lead individuals to perceive their lives as precarious, prompting their engagement with DFMs in Japan and Italy. I aimed to outline some of the recurring user typologies and offer profiles of participants in digital trades in both countries. My focus centered on the implications arising from the intersection of precarious circumstances and digital technologies, with the aim of capturing the specific conditions that had evolved for each informant within this intricate landscape. In this chapter, I dedicated a section for each one of my research questions.

I documented the emergence of a new category of self-employed digital traders in Japan and Italy. These individuals, in both countries, exhibited varying degrees of subordination to conventional employment relationships (Bosch 2004) yet were fully integrated into the digital productive infrastructures facilitated by the platforms they interacted with. This marks a significant departure from both Fordist and, until recently, discussed post-Fordist labor structures. Furthermore, it suggests that, as others have previously argued (Marx 2015; Kergel and Heidkamp 2017a), some of the traditional dichotomous divisions between secure and insecure employment are rapidly dissolving, giving way to a state of *stable instability*.

The pervasiveness of this insecurity, undoubtedly rooted in economic and political crises, has profoundly affected numerous post-industrial countries, and now appears endemic to them. The data collected through my interactions with informants enabled me to explore, from the individual to the societal level, how these shifts are impacting Japanese and Italian cultures and how these evolving dynamics, in turn, are influencing individuals. Consequently, capitalizing on the hyper-flexible and insecure labor market, DFMs, following the trend of other on-demand service platforms, have become an essential component in the intricate machinery of contemporary labor.

My detailed discussions with many informants shed light on the ways in which individuals interface with DFMs. Through these conversations, I was able to identify a set of characteristics that contribute to varying degrees of enthusiasm in individuals' subscription to this new productive regime. Additionally, they provided crucial insights into the recurring conditions that facilitate their integration into the ranks of insecure workers.

These discussions also shed light on the crucial aspect of user-workers' self-perceived social and professional identities. Interviews suggested that, often, if a particular self-identification with a profession preceded engagement with the DFMs, the informants desired to maintain that identity. Conversely, in cases where users perceived their professional commitment to the trading platform as more prestigious or superior to their current or past off-line employments, this also significantly influenced their willingness to fully associate with the user-worker identity.

This data enabled me to develop a concluding observation that emerged during my fieldwork, regarding the role of the informants within the platforms. On many occasions, interlocutors voluntarily disclosed their own perspectives on the DFMs and their personal role in the process. However, they rarely expressed opinions regarding what they believed the company's stance towards them had become. In this context, the emphasis was primarily placed on individual reflection, with limited attention paid to the advantages or disadvantages their participation in the DFMs trades may have constituted for the platforms. In the latter stages of my research, I proactively inquired about their perceptions of the company's vision of the sub-community in which they participated.

6-1 Makeup of Digital resellers community: a case for user-workers

Three major typifications of users emerged: those who do not consider themselves professionals and do not cultivate such ambitions; users who believe they are not professionals but aspire to become one; and users who consider their engagements with the DFMs to be of a professional nature. While the delineation into these typifications may appear somewhat arbitrary, the interview findings demonstrated that users' self-identifications often failed to fully capture the nuanced nature of their actual practices within the digital platforms. The first category of self-described non-professionals, notably, encompassed participants who, despite ascribing to such a designation, heavily relied on the income derived from DFMs and allocated substantial time to these platforms, often due to a lack of more viable professional alternatives. This suggests a notable hesitancy among these individuals to fully embrace the user-worker identity, potentially stemming from their desire to secure a foothold within the conventional labor market.

This hesitation is further evidenced by their tendency to refrain from characterizing DFMs as a profession, opting instead to frame it as a supplementary pursuit. Their recurrent depiction of the platforms as social networking sites, collaborative tools, or digital companions underscores this inclination, emphasizing their user roles rather than their positioning as active workers.

However, it is arguable that their involvements are increasingly taking the shape of labor. In Maura's case, despite expressing a wish to transition back to a conventional off-line employment, she acknowledged that the prevailing political and economic circumstances were not conducive to such a shift, with her reliance on income from DFMs exacerbating the challenges. Her role as a single parent juggling a trade activity, to which she devotes a substantial portion of her professional time, while hesitating to identify herself as a professional in the realm of digital trading platforms, exemplifies the disparity between some user-workers' self-perception and the empirical data.

Similarly, Yūko-san appeared to romanticize her previous professional identity as a manager, to the extent that despite expressing a desire to return to work, she did not consider rejoining her former large corporation in a reduced capacity. Such a role theoretically could have enabled her to balance family responsibilities with her career aspirations. Instead, she conceptualized her engagement with DFMs as that of a "business partner," reflecting her enduring aspiration for a conventional career trajectory, even within the context of digital platforms.

Additionally, I encountered users who, conversely, classified themselves as professionals within the realm of DFMs but lacked the stability typically associated with full-time employment. For instance, Saeki-san faced challenges in achieving significant economic independence through his engagement with DFMs, which eventually led him to return to a low-paying conventional job while still dedicating a significant amount of time to his digital trading efforts. Similarly, Ebisu-san pursued her aspiration of working in the retail industry, specifically with high-end fashion goods. However, she had to settle for dealing with secondhand clothes. While she achieved some success on DFMs, her attempt to open an off-line shop – something she described as "normal" in contrast to the extraordinary nature of digital activities – proved to be overly ambitious and ultimately resulted in failure.

Indeed, the experiences of my informants in both Italy and Japan have highlighted a common thread of insecurity, albeit with nuances that warrant careful consideration. While emotional and psychological challenges pose significant risks for many user-workers, it is noteworthy that their economic insecurities often stem from the very psycho-physical struggles that they

may not immediately recognize as the primary source of their precarity. On the other hand economic instability prevent access to most of the care required to overcome other form of insecurity. In essence, the intertwined nature of emotional and economic vulnerabilities continues to play a central role in perpetuating the economic inequalities that my user-worker informants strive to navigate through their engagements in DFMs-based trading.

6-2 Preexisting socioeconomic outsets: a key factors for user-workers' typification

In general, the user-workers comprising the first group in both Italy and Japan appeared primarily oriented towards reintegrating themselves into the traditional labor market, or at the very least, maintaining a hybrid position. While the DFMs serve as their primary retail platforms, they heavily rely on trading infrastructures beyond the scope of these digital spaces. Their insecurities predominantly manifest in a professional context, rendering them among the most "precarious" in the conventional understanding of the term in relation to their labor conditions.

This particular observation might be instrumental in comprehending their reluctance to fully embrace the user-worker identity. For instance, the individuals within Fumiō's group, with the exception of Genichi, were engaged in various forms of off-line precarious employment and procured their trade goods through an international auction system independent of the digital freelance marketplaces. Similarly, the business of Marco and Alessio relied on a network of nationally licensed electric scrapyards, while Moriko-san leveraged her personal connections to obtain her products. While similar external networks could be theorized for other sellers belonging to different typifications, it is particualry noteworthy that the informants of the first group put the pronounced emphasis on these external relations. These outside connections serve as an anchor, keeping them tethered to the off-line labor market in which they seek a foothold for themselves.

The users comprising the second group, while not explicitly identifying as professionals, perceive themselves as engaged to some extent in digital trading through the DFMs or aspire to attain professional status within this domain. In my research in Japan, I observed a prevalence of individuals over the age of 60 within this group. These participants frequently attributed their alignment with the second group to their pursuit of social recognition and their rejection of a passive approach to life. Many of them characterized their involvement with the platform as a manifestation of proactive engagement. These aspirations often emerged as a response to various forms of social isolation or despair, rooted in broader societal issues such as Japan's aging population and the depopulation of rural areas. These factors have disrupted the familiar societal paradigm, leading to a neglect of the elderly. Interestingly, this data clash with the motivations discussed by some of these users for utilizing DFMs, which include a desire to "tidy up" or "give away" possessions that many of their heirs might perceive as burdensome.

For many users, the dependence on social interactions that resulted from their use of DFMs was closely tied to the principle of *go-en*. This concept repeatedly emerged as a fortunate characteristic governing the relationships among users, thereby facilitating their digital trading activities. Essentially, when discussing the positive outcomes of online trading, these benefits were often dissociated from the platform itself, which primarily served as a digital hub for economic exchanges and articulated in the form of invisible ties that brings together akin spirits. In other word, these immaterial threads that allocate disadvantages and benefits were reinterpreted within the context of good fate and luck.

It is intriguing to observe that while Japanese informants belonging to the second group primarily emphasized social and emotional insecurities, their Italian counterparts more frequently highlighted economic concerns. This distinction was evident even in

situations where these economic challenges were compounded by complex issues such as precarious employment and physical disabilities.

The third group of informants comprised users who identified themselves as professionals or regarded their activity on the DFMs as a form of work. These individuals extensively articulated their involvement with the platforms as a labor-intensive endeavor. In many instances, digital trading had substituted traditional employment and commerce, ushering in a new set of economic insecurities characteristic of contemporary neoliberal systems. While the majority of these user-workers voiced their insecurities primarily in economic terms, certain significant traumatic events emerged as influential factors shaping their relationships with digital trades.

It is noteworthy to highlight that in several cases, these users were already involved in the recycling business, often with a high degree of specialization, such as dealing in electronics or clothing. This line of work was characterized by notable economic uncertainty. It's also fascinating to observe how transitioning to the DFMs was initially seen as a success. However, with the increasing competition, the profit margins gradually dwindled, prompting these users to question the true value of their digital labor. Nevertheless, their ability to adapt to precarity allowed them to swiftly recognize the shift from one form of off-line insecurity to a double-sided insecurity in the digital realm.

These user-workers' narratives are replete with elements of self-reliance and self-entrepreneurialism. Broadly, these individuals leveraged the DFMs to bolster their self-identification as professional digital retailers. In several instances, it became apparent that without the platform serving as their stage, they would have remained relegated to a marginal position within the broader digital commerce sphere.

It is intriguing to observe that while Japanese informants belonging to the second group primarily emphasized social and emotional insecurities, their Italian counterparts more frequently highlighted economic concerns. This distinction was evident even in situations where these economic challenges were compounded by complex issues such as precarious employment and physical disabilities. In examining the fundamental similarities and differences between Italian and Japanese user-workers, several key considerations have emerged. The initial observation concerns the nature of the relationship that Italians maintain with the DFMs. Many of my Japanese informants demonstrated a nuanced understanding of "what the furima apuri is," a concept that extends beyond mere c-to-c business transactions and intertwines with their social and cultural practices. This is evident not only in their portrayal of the platforms as tools for combating passivity or mitigating socio-economic insecurities but also in their anthropomorphization of these platforms as collaborative partners. A comparable analogy surfaced in my interviews with the Italian informant Gabriella, who ironically described the trading services as a "fairer exploiter."

It appears that Gabriella's perspective encapsulates the broader way in which many Italians perceive their labor, whether digital or analog, as existing within a dichotomous struggle between capital and the workforce. Italian participants frequently focused on political and economic insecurities that they believed were independent of the digital platforsm, as was evidenced by their minimal discussions on "the DFMs" per se. Their emphasis was predominantly on their specific activities and, in particular, those that yielded the most profit. When the platforms did arise in conversation, they were often discussed in the context of explaining the mechanics that facilitated their gains, as well as the preexisting conditions that influenced their participation.

It seems that this fundamental difference may stem from varying notions of profit. While it became apparent that profit was a central motivation for engagement among the Japanese participants, excluding the first typification of user-workers, monetary gain rarely surfaced in discussions within this group, indicating a broader conceptualization of profit.

In contrast, Italians frequently and openly discussed their activities in economic terms. Interestingly, a similar emphasis on digital engagement as an essential tool to reinforce their off-line professional identities was observed among the Japanese user-workers who self-identified as professionals. This finding deviates from my expectation that their primary focus would be on their DFMs trading activities for financial support.

This distinct conceptualization of profit can also aid in explaining another notable contrast between Japanese and Italian user-workers: the differing degrees of importance placed on local culture within their digital activities. Italian participants, on various occasions, attempted to elucidate the connection between their place of origin and their engagement with DFMs trading. In contrast, Japanese informants frequently commodified their cultural and localized skill sets through the creation of tangible products. Essentially, the Italian focus revolved around immaterial abilities, particularly those leading to trading practices, while the Japanese orientation leaned more toward the production of material goods.

For instance, Watanabe-san and Caterina, through Gabriella's products, employed regional skills cultivated within a domestic context as the foundation of their commerce, albeit with differing approaches. Caterina did not market "traditional Italian ceramics" in the conventional sense, as this traditionality did not occupy a central position in the description of Gabriella's creations. While their webpage may indicate that Gabriella's pieces adhere to Montelupo techniques, the individual articles bear little resemblance to the products typical of that region—an aspect that Gabriella herself was keen to underscore.

Conversely, Watanabe-san, who also widely modernized the appearance of traditional Japanese sandals, emphasized her origins, how her skill set was acquired from her father, and how the traditions of tatami makers informed her entire learning process. The sentiment she sought to leverage to boost sales was nostalgia or a yearning for the past. In essence, the Italian participants more frequently depicted the influence of their regional upbringing as values or abstract skills, while the Japanese participants did so in terms of marketable products and behaviors. This observation runs counter to the majority of other data gathered during the fieldwork, wherein Italian participants more often discussed their economic and material insecurities, while Japanese participants disclosed emotional and psychological distress.

6-3 After the DFMs: user-workers roles in their digital echo-system

Caterina's narratives have allowed me to derive another significant conclusion regarding a shared form of insecurity among informants from both countries, particularly in relation to the specter of death. As briefly outlined in my data, Japanese participants frequently made references to their mortality and the significance that DFMs assumed for certain users in preparing for their eventual passing. Similarly, Caterina expressed a parallel concern with her insistence on establishing a "viable operation" for her disabled daughter prior to her own demise, which unfortunately occurred a few months after the conclusion of my fieldwork. In light of this poignant event, I have come to better understand certain statements made by Caterina, leading me to believe that she was, in her own way, preparing herself for the inevitable.

It Is noteworthy that the Japanese participants, when engaging in pre-death activities, frequently underscored the imperative of "putting things in order" through the sale and disposal of objects. In contrast, Caterina and Giuseppe, both Italian informants, emphasized their desire to leave more meaningful legacies for their children. In other words, Italian informants focused on the material transfer of properties, expecting reciprocation in life, as suggested by the involvement of their heirs in their digital trades. On the other hand,

Japanese user-workers emphasized immaterial legacies through their notion of putting things in order, "*katazukeru*"" an activity that is unilateral and often selfless. Among the Italian cases, only Cinzia, Carola, and Paola expressed a vaguely similar value through their underpaid or free affective labor.

Although I was unable to delve further into this theme with additional informants, it is pertinent to highlight that these Italian user-workers had endured a form of precarious employment throughout their lives, a situation commonly referred to in Italian as "*lavoro usurante*" (demanding or arduous work). This data, albeit limited, suggests the existence of a profound conception of death among precarious workers, accentuating the transience and instability of life while seeking to forge intergenerational bonds through the transmission of possessions to their loved ones. Such practices illuminate the intricate interplay between labor, impermanence, and the quest for familial continuity within the context of precarious employment.

Certainly, preexisting working conditions play a crucial role in understanding how individuals perceive themselves and their inclination to accept the hypothetical classification of user-workers. The most recurrent profile within the first typification of users, who reject the designation of digital trade professionals and do not perceive their engagement with the platform as a form of labor, can be characterized by three distinct features. These individuals are typically mature adults facing underemployment, often possessing qualifications that surpass the requirements of positions offering only minimum wages. Moreover, many of them have previously held positions that could be considered high-profile employment, or at least roles they personally view as having higher status compared to their activities on digital trading platforms. This latter aspect is pivotal in comprehending the reluctance among many within the first user group to consider their digital trading as an unconventional form of labor, despite frequently rejecting what they perceive as "conventional" working practices.

Indeed, what seems to be in motion here is a manifestation of the sentiments conveyed by the informants in other segments of their narratives, particularly their aspirations to secure a more socially recognized and established employment position, all while being aware of the inherent insecurity that a profession based on digital trading platforms can entail. It is intriguing to observe that while their desire to maintain productivity is a response to the precarious nature of traditional employment, this same agency serves as an anchor, hindering their ability to navigate away from these platforms. In essence, their individual ambitions prove to be less advantageous when attempting to be dynamic and transition away from reliance on DFMs, a feat achieved by only a select few among them.

Similarly, upon examining the group of informants over the age of sixty, it becomes evident that those who express the most pronounced ambition to become professional digital traders are individuals who may have had a distinguished employment history and felt put aside after retiring, or those who have experienced dissatisfaction during their conventional employment. These two categories are theoretically disparate, yet they seem to converge within this context.

Among these two subgroups, members of the first rarely discussed their professional conditions of years preceeding their retirement. Instead, they focused on the present and the changes they were experiencing causing them insecurity. This allows them to utilize the DFMs primarily to facilitate social engagement with other users, something that they perceive as a form of proactive labor. While this resistance to passivity through economic exchange can be seen as a characteristic of neoliberal capitalism, their focus on social recognition through digital trade adds complexity to this interpretation. In fact, while one might discuss this as another expression of the capitalist emphasis on productivity and value creation as a precondition to life, such notions are not prominently featured in their

narratives, which instead delve into the issue of subverting the social compartmentalization of elders as subaltern members of society.

Conversely, the over 60 informants that explicitly expressed their long-standing desire to transition to a different career or their dissatisfaction with their previous employment t took the opportunities presented by the DFMs as a means to establish a new professional identity. This sentiment was echoed by individuals that had lived long term precarious condition in both Italy and Japan. While many informants acknowledged enduring significant hardship due to non-confrontational approaches, which resulted in their relegation to subordinate and insecure working positions, they actively sought to subvert their circumstances when presented with the opportunity to engage with what Gabriella referred to as a "fairer exploiter"– essentially implying fairness for anyone. This type of data effectively exemplifies the re-embedding capacities that arise within hybrid spaces such as the DFMs, and how they can function in tandem with activities that qualify the individuals engaging with them.

Following this trajectory, the final group of user-workers demonstrated a heightened awareness of the conditions perpetuated by contemporary neoliberal regimes in both Italy and Japan. They effectively harnessed the DFMs to reintegrate themselves within contemporary, unregulated postindustrial labor markets and readily embraced the identity of a user-worker as new norm. Upon analyzing their data, it was evident that a significant degree of homogeneity existed among them. The majority conveyed a deeply ingrained sense of insecurity, particularly in the context of their employment and professional life in general. It appears that these factors significantly influenced their capacity to accept an uncertain form of income, as their lives, or at least their professional spheres, had long been characterized by such precarious elements. In their cases, the DFMs emerged as a tool for renegotiating and transforming their identity from one of complete insecurity as unemployed individuals to a somewhat less insecure, self-entrepreneurial user-worker.

Overall, it is clear that the role of digital trading platforms such as the DFMs extends far beyond mere economic transactions. These platforms have emerged as spaces where individuals negotiate their identities, aspirations, and insecurities within the broader context of contemporary labor markets and societal structures. The distinct patterns and behaviors observed among Italian and Japanese user-workers highlight the complex interplay between individual agency, socio-cultural dynamics, and economic forces in shaping their engagement with these digital spaces.

6-4 After the user-workers: DFMs at a crossway

DFMs facilitate a variety of productive routines by offering a multitude of features. Auctions, fixed-price listings, and bidding systems create different dynamics, influencing the strategies employed by sellers and buyers. The visibility of user ratings and reviews constructs a reputation economy, shaping productive identities based on trust and reliability. This raises concerns about the potential creation of new forms of discrimination, as algorithmic decisions influence the visibility and success of user-workers and push them to set priorities among platforms. On top of that, the dynamics of human-computer interactions also give the user-workers very limited say in the way the platforms are going to present, order, and manage shipping. This mostly means that different responses to virtually identical postings bring along diverse degrees of success, pushing users to grow close to a specific DFM for variables totally unrelated to their own trading activities.

While the totality of the informants I included in this study are active on multiple platforms, many of them also clearly expressed a favorite outlet to pursue their user-workers' commitment. In the early stages of my fieldwork, the tendency was that while Mercari was

undoubtedly the most popular, a popularity mostly cast among young Japanese females, meant a rather genderized customer pool. Mercari was also the only one with an external messaging forum, which undoubtedly cemented the feeling in many user-workers that they were part of a community. Rakuma, on the other hand, had succeeded in attracting various types of user-workers since its merging with DFM pioneer Fril.jp and was particularly popular among handcrafted product traders and game enthusiasts but never achieved the public recognition of other competitors. PayPay Furima users were mostly already Yahoo Auctions members, which meant the largest number of "professional" sellers and shop owners had automatic access to it.

This dynamic landscape underwent a significant shift commencing in 2019. Within the complex realm of e-commerce, DFMs found themselves in a competitive struggle for both casual users and user-workers' engagement. This competition catalyzed a convergence among platforms, leading to a diminishing of their distinctive features. Mercari, once distinguished by its sleek design and comprehensive approach to secondhand trading, saw these once-unique characteristics becoming standard across its rivals. The post-2019 pandemic period marked a notable contraction in the growth trajectory of these platforms. Additionally, the initiatives by PayPay Furima (now known as Yahoo Furima) to develop synergistic relationships with shipping entities and Japanese postal services proved insufficient to counterbalance the steep escalation in shipping costs observed in 2023, which, in some instances, nearly doubled compared to 2020.

The identity crisis confronting DFMs extended beyond mere operational challenges. I describe this phenomenon as the "amazonization" of these entities, reflecting a trend towards the fetishization of self-contained, multifunctional digital platforms. Major Japanese DFMs have recently demonstrated a propensity for such an evolution, attempting to introduce independent digital currencies, bespoke marketing services, and even proprietary shipping facilities, exemplified by the establishment of Mercari Stations in Japan's prime locations. These pop-up shops, designed to offer comprehensive support to users—from photographing items to managing postings and shipments—signify a paradoxical shift towards physical services in an era where offline offerings are generally in decline.

The appeal of these augmented services, while potentially beneficial to a subset of the community, especially those seeking a more active and productive engagement on the platforms, has fundamentally transformed the nature of transactions within these digital marketplaces. An informant poignantly observed that the act of delivering parcels to these dedicated facilities, as opposed to traditional drop-off points like convenience stores or post offices, engenders a markedly different experience. She described visits to Mercari shipping centers as akin to a formal work commitment, a stark departure from the casual and spontaneous nature of utilizing random shipping locations.

The expansion strategies of digital platforms have undergone a notable diversification. Rakuma, for example, sought to replicate PayPay's success by capitalizing on the widespread acceptance of its digital currency and the extensive network of its financial services. Under the strategic leadership of marketing expert Fujii Hirofumi, PayPay forged significant alliances with Japanese financial institutions, thereby enhancing its corporate image. Concurrently, Mercari ventured into the realm of cryptocurrencies, initiated its own credit card services, and established a dedicated financial research department.

However, beneath this facade of expansion and diversification lies a trend towards homogenization within what was once a diverse digital ecosystem. The forays of these companies into various services as part of their horizontal expansion strategies have predominantly resulted in either outright failures or marginal successes. PayPay Corporation, notably operated at a loss, with DFMs being implicated as a contributing factor

(Nikkei XTech, September 2021). Rakuma did not experience the same significant growth as its other competitors, and in general the post-Covid-19 landscape only succeeded in reverting digital trade to its 2019 levels, indicating a stagnation, if not an outright decline, in the growth of secondhand trade sectors (Mobile Society Research Institute 2023). As a result, companies were compelled to downscale their operations and disinvest from various ancillary divisions. This challenging scenario particularly impacted Mercari, the largest of Japan's three primary DFMs, in contrast to PayPay Furima, backed by conglomerates such as Softbank and Yahoo.co.jp, and Rakuma, receiving support from Rakuten and NTT DOCOMO.

6-5 Cognitive labor and DFMs: the continuation of neoliberalism by other means

Building on the four theses that I had initially derived from Fumagalli's extensive list (2019a), I contend that all of my informants, in one way or another, provide compelling evidence supporting the notion that their activities on the DFMs can be classified as cognitive labor. The four theses I selected encompass the centrality of precarity as an inherent structural component of cognitive capitalism, the blurring of boundaries between life-time and work-time, the interdependence of abstract labor and concrete labor, and the intertwining of the place of production with productive networks (Fumagalli 2019a: 66-69). It is essential to note that while the latter three points may be somewhat self-evident from the narratives of my informants, the first thesis warrants a more in-depth analysis involving both the political and economic institutions impacting digital precariat.

In order to talk of cognitive labor we need to address the structure of the biocognitive capitalist regimes, therefore, I propose that a discussion of the first point should be prefaced with an examination of a crucial feature described by informants in both Italy and Japan: the establishment of a complex system of laws and procedures that facilitate the precarization of employment, consequently leading to the insecuritization of life. As alluded to in the earlier sections, Berardi (2009:186) characterizes this process of deregulation as another form of regulation that serves solely the capital's interests rather than providing protection for the labor force. It is this legal framework provided to local capital that solidifies precarity as a structural rather than an incidental phenomenon in both Italy and Japan.

Maura's narrative provides a vivid illustration of the profound entanglement between professional insecurity and the contemporary job market, a phenomenon nurtured by a regulatory system that neglects the safeguards for the labor force. This intricate interplay compelled her to seek supplementary income through digital trade. Furthermore, Maura's experience of precarity was compounded by the tragic consequences arising from the passing of her partner, Andrea. She herself underscores that this loss is a direct consequence of inadequately regulated workplace conditions and the lack of adequate support for workers and their families, fostering an environment that 'erodes one's being day by day.' Similarly, Genichi sheds light on how legal procedures can pave the way for the expropriation of hard-earned labor rights, as he elucidates the notion of 'applicationism' prevalent in the Japanese context.

Certainly, the structural hyper-insecurity prevalent in biocognitive capitalism is not merely a phenomenon dictated from the top-down. It is also perpetuated by socio-cultural elements, including gender discrimination and passive relationships between labor, institutions, and capital. The absence of an intermediary function, forsaken by public administration, singularly serves the interests of the latter. Tomohiro's concept of "anti-salariman-ism" can be interpreted as a response to such dysfunctional mechanics. His narratives pertaining to the catastrophic natural events that ravaged Kumamoto prefecture in 2016 illuminate the disastrous interplay between public institutions, which had already

deployed the Self-Defense Forces, capitalists who were reluctant to call for a work stoppage despite the alarming number of earthquakes the previous day, and the workforce that did not voice any objections to their employer's demands to report for duty.

In the context of the first point, there is perhaps no more illustrative case than that of Ebisu-san. On paper, given her talent, certification, and extensive experience as a bilingual expert, she would have been an ideal candidate for regular employment in a transnational fashion company. However, her repeated attempts in this direction proved futile, leading her to embrace self-entrepreneurialism. Despite her continuous efforts, she struggled to achieve any lasting economic security, and her journey eventually led her to rely solely on digital revenue when her attempts to establish an off-line shop faced obstacles. Her prolonged job insecurity became intricately entwined with the persistent economic stagnation experienced not only by Japan and Europe but by all other post-industrial economies.

The second thesis appears to be one of the most recurrent themes in the narratives of the informants. Almost all user-workers who had, to some extent, experienced off-line employment noted how their labor on the DFMs quickly blurred the boundaries between private and professional time. While the spillover of professional life into the private sphere is not an exclusive characteristic of DFMs — as exemplified by Yūko-san's perspective, for instance — the "pocketable" nature of the means of production in the case of digital trade-related activities transforms them into an enduring engagement. In the words of Fumiō, to "work with *furima*, private time is business time."

The third thesis, which underscores the interconnectivity of abstract and concrete activities in biocognitive capitalistic regimes, describes an essential feature that characterizes most transactions on the DFMs. Unlike traditional abstract labor (common in professions such as law, teaching, and marketing), activities on digital trade platforms require a combine effort of mental activities - such as preparing the post, writing the description, interacting with customers, and keeping the posting updated according to the platform's rules - as well as physical labor typical of blue-collar employment, such as packing orders, taking them out for shipping, and handling packaging. Kubo-san's narratives perfectly exemplify this interconnection. She also notices that engaging with a third-party company to handle her sales would essentially alter very little her revenue, prompting consideration for the forms of exploitation that the handler itself may carry out.

The last thesis, which delineates the interpenetration of profession and personal space, is similarly entwined with the very essence of the DFMs trades in both countries. User-workers often described their homes as filled with "potential products." Mercari's recurring talking point about the deployment of "hidden resources" in the form of unused objects lying around the house echoes this sentiment. Moriko-san's description of her house being so filled with merchandise that she had to store products near her bed, or Fumiō's floor completely covered with computer parts, serves as an exemplification of this dynamic. Furthermore, in the case of most informants who craft their own articles, such as knitted hats, sandals, or pottery, we witness the displacement of the workforce and means of production from purely productive environments. Essentially, through the DFMs, labor is no longer concentrated in factories or industries but rather dispersed along the access points to the internet and across the networked web of user-workers.

The implications of these shifts, particularly in terms of the redefinition of labor and its impact on individual identities and societal structures, merit further investigation. Based on this multiplicity of data, my analysis supports the theory that activities on DFMs defy categorization within traditional labor frameworks and are better classified as instances of cognitive labor. The narratives of the informants shed light on a profound recalibration of the conventional boundaries between work and personal life, highlighting the significant influence of DFMs on the contemporary socio-economic landscape. This recognition

emphasizes the need for continued exploration and examination of the implications of these shifts, both at the individual and societal levels, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics of labor in the digital age.

6-6 User-Workers in DFMs: Between Class Solidarity and Individualism

Before embarking on my fieldwork, I aimed to explore user-workers beyond individual and micro-collective identities, questioning their broader understanding as a class within digital marketplaces. Traditional Marxist theory frames a class as a collective sharing economic interests, relationships, and experiences, a definition that seems both applicable and contested in the digital economy.

User-workers on DFMs exhibit class characteristics through shared economic relations with platforms, where their primary engagement—trading goods or services for money—creates a common economic thread. This shared economic interest, coupled with the challenges and opportunities presented by the marketplace, forms a basis for class identification. Furthermore, the reliance on platform policies and algorithms underscores a collective identity influenced by the digital marketplace's overarching structures, suggesting a form of class solidarity shaped by common conditions.

However, the diversity in user-worker engagement complicates this classification. The spectrum of activities, from casual selling to primary income sources, alongside varied motivations and backgrounds, challenges the homogeneity typically associated with class structures. On top of that, while they universally apply, the differential impact of platform policies further complicates the notion of a unified class experience, highlighting the individualized navigation of the digital marketplace.

Individual agency and autonomy, diverging from the constraints traditionally associated with class structures, indicate that the identities of user-workers are more significantly influenced by personal choices than by systemic forces. This divergence also suggests that the systemic framework of the digital economy may discourage user-workers and other participants from developing a collective identity akin to that of a class. Autonomy is set against the backdrop of platforms that present an egalitarian facade, offering uniform tools for production to a demographically varied user base. This provision of equal access contributes to a social leveling effect, which may be indicative of the middle class's dissolution and the broadening of the precariat within the digital landscape.

The heterogeneity of productive dynamics and profitability from platforms challenges traditional class analysis, necessitating new frameworks to understand labor relations in the digital age. The universal access to digital production tools and the resultant flattening of the social pyramid highlight shifts in economic relations and class mobility within the digital economy. Yet, this shift also indicates the precarious nature of digital labor, where risks are individualized, and rewards are unevenly distributed, underscoring the complexities of class identity in digital marketplaces.

The complexities of digital labor reveal that user-workers' interactions with digital platforms escape the confines of traditional Marxist class definitions, given their diverse productive dynamics and uneven profitability. These individuals, despite leveraging the same tools and means of production, come from varied backgrounds and pursue different goals, highlighting how the digital economy muddies traditional class lines. This situation signals a broader shift toward an increasingly precarious labor market, marked by the dilution of the middle class and a leveling of social hierarchies. This phenomenon underscores a deeper socio-economic transformation where traditional frameworks of class, work, and economic disparity are being redefined. Essentially, the challenge in classifying user-workers under a traditional class framework is indicative of a broader erosion of class structures in postindustrial

economies, pointing to a systemic change rather than being specific to the nature of user-workers themselves.

6-7 Citinzeship, agency and the new productive paradigm

I In the course of the study several informants presented insights into the nuances of neoliberal citizenship. These platforms emerge not just as marketplaces but as influential entities, shaping the lives and choices of their users. For instance, Yūko-san in Japan perceives Mercari as a multifaceted platform that epitomizes the commodification of skills and time, a core aspect of neoliberal citizenship. She views her participation in DFMs as a means to utilize her personal capabilities for economic gain, aligning with the neoliberal ethos of maximizing individual economic potential. This commodification is not just a matter of necessity but also a form of self-expression and self-realization within the neoliberal framework.

On the other hand, Luca in Italy experiences Subito more as an enabler, providing him with autonomy and flexibility to engage in entrepreneurial activities. However, this autonomy comes with the inherent insecurity and precarity of gig economy work, reflecting another crucial dimension of neoliberal citizenship. Luca's interaction with Subito illustrates the trade-off between the freedom provided by such platforms and the absence of traditional job security and stability. This precarious nature of work in DFMs highlights the broader neoliberal trend towards flexible but unstable forms of employment.

The diverse experiences of Yūko-san and Luca with their respective platforms, Mercari and Subito, underline the complex relationships user-workers have with these platforms, influenced by cultural, economic, and individual factors. Yūko-san's story, in particular, demonstrates how neoliberal citizenship extends beyond economic participation to deeply influence social identities and personal aspirations, while Luca's experience reflects the ongoing negotiation between the desire for autonomy and the realities of economic precarity in a neoliberal context.

In contrast to the volunteer activities described by Muehlebach, which imbue neoliberal citizenship with a moral dimension, DFMs—despite their marketing efforts to present themselves as essential components in promoting environmental consumption practices—remain primarily econocentric entities. This focus leads to econocentric consequences, underscoring a departure from the ethical citizenship described by Muehlebach's informants. In the context of digital secondhand trades, the ethical dimensions of citizenship seem to find little, if any, space. As reflected in the discussions with some of my informants, their longing for recognition is predominantly tied to productive citizenship, inseparable from the user-workers' productive selves. This observation underscores a critical aspect of neoliberal citizenship as manifested in digital marketplaces: the focus shifts from moral or ethical engagement to an emphasis on economic productivity and self-sufficiency.

The liquefaction of class structures under neoliberalism represents a pivotal shift, blurring the traditional boundaries between different labor sectors and socioeconomic statuses. This phenomenon is evident in the similar struggles encountered by both low-added-value workers, like Luca, and higher-end managerial professionals, such as Yūko-san. Neoliberal policies and practices have facilitated a convergence of experiences across the spectrum of employment, from blue-collar jobs to white-collar professions. Both groups face the challenges of precarity, a fluctuating job market, and the imperative to self-optimize within the neoliberal framework. This convergence reflects a broader neoliberal agenda that prioritizes market mechanisms and individual responsibility over collective welfare and stable employment relations.

In this context, the experiences of Yūko-san and Luca serve as emblematic of the broader transformations affecting workers across the labor spectrum. Despite their disparate professional backgrounds, both are subject to the same neoliberal dictates of flexibility, precarity, and the commodification of self. This shared condition suggests a leveling effect of neoliberalism on the social structure, where the distinctions between different types of labor, just as it happened for the classes, become less pronounced. The struggle for economic survival and self-definition within the neoliberal order becomes a common thread linking individuals across diverse occupational categories.

In the exploration of neoliberal citizenship, the contrast between the market-driven engagements of user-workers in digital flea markets and the volunteerism highlighted by Muehlebach illustrates the multifaceted nature of contemporary citizenship. This dichotomy between economic activities and voluntary actions underpins the diverse manifestations of citizenship within a neoliberal framework, emphasizing the prominence of economic productivity and individual resilience in the face of precarity. Despite the materialistic orientation of platform engagements, informants frequently discuss ethical consumption, environmental stewardship, and the pursuit of self-dignity, indicating an underlying layer of ethical considerations and identity affirmation within these economic transactions.

The presence of ethical and identity-affirming narratives within the economic realm suggests that neoliberal citizenship, while predominantly framed around economic imperatives, incorporates elements of ethical engagement and personal fulfillment. This observation points to a nuanced understanding of citizenship that extends beyond the binary of economic participation versus voluntary altruism, reflecting a complex interplay between neoliberal demands and individual aspirations for meaningful engagement.

The study of user-workers' experiences in digital flea markets reveals the adaptive strategies individuals employ to navigate the neoliberal emphasis on flexibility, entrepreneurialism, and self-optimization, alongside their desire for ethical engagement and self-realization. This adaptation highlights the ongoing negotiation between the neoliberal valorization of market mechanisms and the human pursuit of collective identities and shared values. Thus, the investigation into digital flea markets serves as a valuable case study for examining the evolving dynamics of neoliberal citizenship, where economic and ethical dimensions intersect. It underscores the need for further research into how contemporary societies can reconcile the demands of neoliberal economic policies with the enduring human need for ethical engagement, collective identity, and personal dignity in an era marked by changing class structures and economic volatility.

6-8 Limits of this study and future scenarios of research

During the course of my fieldwork, I encountered a wealth of compelling data, which, while intriguing, necessitated a selective focus in line with the objectives of this research. However, these unexpected and fortuitous encounters served to underscore the limitations of my study and prompted me to consider the inclusion of new literature and sections within my analytical framework. One of my primary concerns pertained to the need for a more in-depth exploration of specific user typifications, particularly the insights provided by informants over the age of sixty, whose experiences were sufficiently rich to warrant a dedicated study or even multiple studies.

Another critical limitation of my study became apparent in relation to the scope of subcommunities that I was able to incorporate. My three identified typifications aimed to encompass the broadest possible range and were guided by the framework of self-identification and bio-cognitive labor relations. However, with the exponential increase in popularity and user engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of

subcommunities active on the DFMs proliferated. It would be highly pertinent to investigate how these communities subdivided further or how user bases overlapped with different subgroups. Additionally, exploring the experiences of foreign users active on the platforms, particularly the surge observed in Italy, and examining how foreign buyers utilized mirror sites established by third-party companies to facilitate the sale of products purchased in Japan to international markets, presents a compelling avenue for future academic exploration.

6-9 Final words

During the extensive and intricate period of my fieldwork, I had the privilege of engaging with remarkable individuals in both Italy and Japan. Many of these individuals graciously shared their narratives, encompassing themes of insecurity, hope, adversity, joy, life, and mortality. Throughout this process, my initial suppositions were profoundly challenged, leading to a complete reshaping of my preconceived notions. I embarked on my research journey with certain assumptions that eventually dissipated, akin to leaves falling from a tree, while new ideas burgeoned thanks to the generous contributions of the informants who dedicated their time to our discussions.

Initially, I held the belief that the DFMs platforms primarily, if not exclusively, prioritized their own interests, and I perceived their relationship with the user base as distant and impersonal. However, events organized by the platforms in Japan and the accounts of support extended to Italian user-workers significantly transformed my perspective on this matter. Digital trading companies, both in Japan and Italy, despite their emphasis on reliability, security, and safety, demonstrated a surprising degree of flexibility, to the extent that keeping up with their innovations and changes became a formidable task. The "furima apuri" in Japan fostered a notably human-to-human approach, leading many user-workers to characterize the emerging relationship with these platforms as "warm."

On the other hand, my central argument, which centered on the ontological insecurity inflicted by postindustrial economies upon the vast labor force, appears to have been substantiated by the data. The dynamics propelling all typifications of users discussed in the course of this study seem to indicate that the user-worker identity, whether still under negotiation or fully embraced by the informants, serves as an anchor for them in the pursuit of a semblance of stability amidst the tumultuous landscapes of contemporary Japan and Italy.

Certainly, the transitory dependence of the users within the first group, the utilization of users' communities to seek social interactions and proactive engagement, especially evident among those over the age of sixty, and the adoption of digital platforms as a potential remedy for the persistent labor insecurity among the users within the third typification all seem to underscore this collective pursuit for a more stable source of income and a solidified professional identity.

I commenced my fieldwork during a period when the popularity of DFMs had already reached its zenith in Italy and Europe at large, whereas in Japan, I observed the burgeoning influence of these platforms while developing the initial concepts for this project. Initially, I held the belief that the DFMs would solidify their position in the market, but the unforeseen outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic instead led to a radical hyperinflation of their growth. Subsequently, my expectation was that the DFMs would capitalize on this surge and maintain their user base's engagement through their services. However, I was proven wrong yet again when the platforms began experiencing a drastic decline in daily postings and user activity, compounded by what seemed to be adventurous managerial decisions, such as Mercari decision of starting the Mercari Shop accounts or PayPay Furima

leveraging its leading position in the Japanese digital currencies sphere. Some of these decisions had severe financial implications, prompting me to contemplate the ability of these platforms to navigate the current deflated traffic without resorting to declaring bankruptcy.

In a way, my research was propelled by what could be described as a "perfect storm" scenario. The DFMs were experiencing a significant upsurge, the user base was expanding, and transactions were flourishing, generating substantial financial activity. Moreover, this fieldwork has been greatly benefited from the relative openness demonstrated by major companies involved in secondhand digital retail, such as Mercari and PayPay Furima/Yahoo Auctions in Japan, and Subito in Italy. However, with the closure of major official forums and the wave of bans affecting numerous blogs discussing DFMs-related activities, a considerable amount of spontaneously shared data became inaccessible, thereby depriving the community of a crucial means to engage with its members. This situation left researchers interested in these platforms bereft of a different and decentralized approach to connect with other users. Consequently, any future study delving into DFMs will likely have to rely solely on post-purchase messaging boards for contacting traders or explore entirely new channels to facilitate such interactions.

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