Introduction

With digital self-entrepreneurship becoming one of the most popular career options among the younger generations, there is increasing interest in understanding the downsides of digital creative work, revolving around the topics of self-commodification, algorithmic control, and work–life imbalance. There is a growing scholarly discussion of gendered and racial inequalities in the (new) creative and cultural industries (CCIs). Critical and feminist studies have discussed the precarious working conditions among lower- and mid-level media professionals in the CCIs while shedding light on how female workers and ethnic minorities are disadvantaged (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016; Neff, 2012; Schradie, 2012), and a burgeoning stream of literature has more recently extended the notion of 'precarious labour' to investigate the deleterious effects of digital creative work along with the problematic construction of gendered subjectivities and heightened emotional labour in the platform creative economy (Duffy, 2016; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017). However, with their focus on the role of disciplinary power structures in unsettling subjects' spaces of action, theories of precariousness and precarious labour tend to 'gloss over some quite marked social *differences* in the […] experiences of cultural work' (Banks, 2019: 542, emphasis in the original). In particular, studies of this topic have generally not been grounded in an analysis of class. Scholars have yet to appraise the ways in which distinct practices and pathways of digital self-entrepreneurship relate to young people's class backgrounds.

Studies of digital inequalities have explored the relationships between socioeconomic differences and information and communication technology (ICT) uses among youth. For instance, Robinson devised the notion of 'informational habitus' (Robinson, 2009: 491) to describe how young people from distinct socio-demographic backgrounds form different patterns

of ICT use. Economic constraints have also been found to expose low-income youths to unique privacy challenges, requiring them to constantly negotiate 'between the norms of social media platforms, and [their] desires for divergence, identity exploration, and privacy' (Vickery, 2017: 282). Furthermore, young people of low socioeconomic status may have to self-censor and self-edit their social media content to avoid being coded as lower class in their self-presentation, thus reinforcing certain racist and sexist notions of appropriate behaviour online (Pitcan, Marwick and boyd, 2018). Nonetheless, critical questions remain as to whether some young people are better positioned to practise digital self-entrepreneurship than others and whether and how the practices of more and less privileged young vloggers differ. In particular, video blogging (vlogging) has quickly become a desirable career path among tech-savvy youth. According to recent surveys, more than one in four members of the so-called 'Generation Z' aspire to become content creators and influencers, and about half of these aspirants consider the path to digital self-entrepreneurship a 'good career choice' (Gianna, 2022). With an ever-increasing number of people seeking careers as video bloggers (vloggers) by monetising the digital content they upload, it is vital to understand how young people of varied class origins come to perceive and pursue vlogging as a career.

This article examines how class background shapes the career paths and aspirations of vloggers in Hong Kong, where social inequality is prevalent (Chan, 2002; Chen and Ting, 2019; Wong and Lui, 2000). Using an extended Bourdieusian framework, the article critically reassesses the digital creative labour, conditions, and decisions of young vloggers by conceptualising them as varied outcomes of position-taking in the emerging field of digital cultural production, tied to socioeconomic differences. Based on in-depth interviews with young YouTubers who identified vlogging and its related influencer marketing activities, including

advertising revenue and sponsorships, as their major sources of income, the study reveals their divergent class-inflected orientations regarding the common tensions between (1) platform productivity and creative autonomy, (2) elite evaluation and mass rating, and (3) career planning and an uncertain vlogging future. Instead of presenting uniform paths for everyone, the findings illuminate the differing strategies of vlogging, choices of genres, and timeframes of aspiration among young vloggers from different class backgrounds. They highlight how vlogging as a career is variously experienced and encountered through the articulation of distinct self-entrepreneurial habitus, whereby differently situated digital aspirants strategise their participation in the platform creative economy in varied ways. Shifting focus to the underexplored nexus between class inequality and the platform creative economy, this article provides a nuanced account of digital creative work amidst platform precarity and uncertainty.

Class-inflected orientations regarding vlogging as a career

Understanding the field of digital cultural production

Bourdieu (1993; 1996) defined 'fields' as distinct social worlds, or 'games', that are hierarchically differentiated and involve 'players' who attempt to acquire field-specific stakes or resources to advance their positions. As an emerging field of digital cultural production, YouTube has its own hierarchy, logics, and conventions that drive competition for distinction among vloggers. In accordance with the primary 'rule' of the YouTube game, vloggers' positions are differentiated mainly by their capacity to create popular or highly visible content that captures the valuable and scarce resource of attention, which is potentially convertible into revenue and financial profit via YouTube's various monetisation features. When playing the game of the online 'attention economy' (Goldhaber, 1997), successful YouTubers are rewarded

with field-specific symbolic capital in the form of viewers' favourable ratings of the vloggers' content and channels. In this context, symbolic capital is 'the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honour' (Bourdieu, 1993: 7) that a vlogger achieves by attracting online attention. On YouTube, attention is recognised, measured, and classified by a range of social media metrics (e.g. the number of views, likes, comments, subscriptions, and community followers) that serve as 'status markers' (Levina and Arriaga, 2014: 469) of vloggers' content and channels and generate distinctions among YouTubers. These status markers are assigned and awarded by the platform to vloggers based on the amount and types of online attention they attract, and they then signify each vlogger's relative position in the 'game' of YouTubing.

This should not be taken to mean that vloggers' differential acquisition and accumulation of field-specific symbolic capital through the attainment of online attention are generated entirely by viewers' autonomous selection and evaluation of content and channels. Rather, these processes are increasingly mediated by platform algorithms that recommend videos to viewers. While creating new work opportunities by enabling the creation and monetisation of digital content, YouTube facilitates and regulates the game by mediating vlogger–viewer interactions through its algorithm. Over the past few years, YouTube has made several changes to its algorithm that have had a significant impact on the visibility and success of vloggers. The algorithm determines which videos are recommended to viewers on the platform by making personalised recommendations based on user preferences inferred from watch histories and liked videos. To be successful in competing for online attention, vloggers must adapt their vlogging strategies and patterns to the ever-changing algorithm.

Driven and conditioned to work and compete by differentiating themselves in the emerging field of digital cultural production, vloggers may utilise and mobilise their pre-existing capital as

tools of distinction to create digital content as cultural artefacts of value to achieve success in the hierarchy within the field of digital cultural production. Drawing on their embodied cultural capital, differently situated vloggers decide which groups of viewers and what kinds of tastes they want to please with their content, and this drives them to engage in specific domains of vlogging activities (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). Through their education and socialisation, vloggers have developed embodied cultural capital, which in this context can be defined as knowledge of certain groups of viewers and the ability to influence them. In turn, these distinguishing traits of vlogging are recognised by audiences, who consume various types of digital content that align with their own schemes of taste (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). Multiple types of distinction thus emerge and operate in various sub-fields within the general field of digital cultural production, in which hierarchical differentiation and market segmentation occur simultaneously according to the structural correspondences between vloggers and viewers (cf. Bourdieu, 1993; 1996).

This observation of the hierarchies of taste and digital cultural production thus highlights the role of cultural capital, which instils in vloggers the capacity to judge and distinguish between practices of content creation and choices of content genres. This capacity enables them to engage in certain classifiable activities and affects their decision-making when vlogging. On YouTube, for instance, more privileged vloggers may draw on their objectified cultural capital, consisting of activities or artefacts that carry high cultural value or meaning, to attract online attention among viewers who share their taste for luxury. In contrast, less privileged vloggers may appeal to the taste for necessity by contributing a large quantity of content to cater to broad audiences who are great in number but low in cultural capital. Over time, differently situated vloggers accumulate relevant cultural knowledge, skills, and experience in learning how to

satisfy the tastes of particular groups of viewers, and this is turned into online cultural capital that can be drawn upon to attract further attention to their content and channels.

Therefore, although vloggers' differential attainment of online attention is not reducible to their external resources or prior positions outside the field of digital cultural production, young people of various class origins may articulate distinct logics of practice while participating in the online attention economy. Specifically, their class backgrounds may create a specific *habitus*, referring to the internalised dispositions or principles of classification that guide individuals' perceptions and actions in various fields. A habitus is common across groups of people who share similar class locations and interests that derive from these locations. While a field-specific habitus is articulated as individuals advance in their positions in the field of social action, it tends to reproduce the actors' objective structures and principles of social class, such that 'the space of social positions is retranslated into a space of position-takings through the mediation of the space of dispositions (or habitus)' (Bourdieu, 1998: 7). Invoking an extended Bourdieusian framework thus allows us to grasp how a field-specific habitus emerges from various class origins and shapes vloggers' experiences and practices in the pursuit of monetary rewards and reputation.

Diverging logics of practices in vlogging

As described above, young vloggers from different class backgrounds may showcase distinct class-inflected stances and logics of practice in playing the game of YouTubing. To play the game, differently situated digital aspirants may draw on divergent class-inflected orientations, using their available resources deriving from long-term social class experiences to develop and deploy differing strategies, which are the varied outcomes of position-taking. This section draws on Bourdieu's theory to further examine the differentiation in vloggers' strategies

of vlogging, choices of genre, and timeframes of aspiration, which necessitate differing practices and pathways of vlogging as a career.

First, although social media metrics create financial incentives for making videos with the aim of capturing viewers' attention, not all youths perceive social media metrics in the same way or pursue online attention to the same degree. Young vloggers tend to exhibit distinct strategies for acquiring and accumulating online attention, with different degrees of autonomy and heteronomy. In Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) theory, cultural producers at the autonomous pole tend to create art for the sake of art, or 'pure' artistic goods, while pursuing their passions. Conversely, those at the heteronomous pole are subject to 'outside rules' in the interests of maximising economic gain. On YouTube, the field-specific symbolic capital based on the capturing of online attention constitutes the overall stakes of the game but is accessed and converted in different ways and to various degrees according to the various positions and position-taking of vloggers, who differ in the values and conversion rates they assign to online attention (Mears, 2023).

To more privileged vloggers, symbolic value can be worth more over time than economic gains. Being relatively free from the urgent need to secure advertising revenue, they may be more willing to invest in making high-quality videos that yield clout and reputation for their channels rather than producing viral content that achieves high view counts. They may attempt to avoid symbolic failure and accept a longer timeframe to capitalise on the symbolic capital accumulated by building a loyal audience and then securing paid collaborations with major advertisers, looking to expand their sources and extent of economic capital in the long run. Their accumulation of symbolic capital at the autonomous pole is no less 'rational' or 'calculative' than the actions of those who pursue economic capital at the heteronomous pole, as more

privileged vloggers engage in calculated self-making in the hope of converting the accumulated symbolic capital into financial resources later on. In contrast, less privileged vloggers may be more eager for views and more likely to choose money over reputation by producing a large quantity of quickly made videos. Particularly given that the potential transfer of symbolic capital into financial resources is risky and the conversion rate is not always certain, less privileged players may chase viral attention and direct revenue. As high-volume contributors, they may perceive viral video-making that is of low symbolic value but directly yields high financial rewards as an end in itself. Selecting the 'proper' way of vlogging thus depends on vloggers' varied perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of particular vlogging activities and the strategic choices they make as a result. Whereas some vloggers may position themselves at the autonomous pole and focus on building their personal brand by producing digital content with a relatively high symbolic value in the hope of converting their accumulated symbolic capital into economic capital in the future, others may orient themselves towards the heteronomous pole and produce content that can be converted into immediate and maximised economic gains.

Second, young vloggers may variously strategise their choices of class-differentiated content and genre along the hierarchy of taste corresponding to the dualist structure of 'restricted production' and 'mass production'. From a Bourdieusian perspective, cultural producers who engage in restricted production tend to provide cultural goods for tiny 'mutual admiration societies' (Bourdieu, 1993: 116), rejecting the taste of the mass market, whereas those involved in mass production are oriented towards making commercial cultural artefacts that adapt to the tastes of mass audiences. In the online attention economy, vloggers with high cultural (and other relevant) capital may position themselves in the sub-field of restricted production by exhibiting a privileged lifestyle and aesthetic discrimination. They may distinguish themselves from others by

targeting elite evaluators in niche communities, who are imagined to also possess high cultural capital and thus to be able to recognise the value of their digital cultural activities and artefacts. Being better positioned to maintain claims to the taste of luxury, these creators focus on crafting personal brands by disclosing their offline identities, more privileged personal lives, and 'expert' knowledge of cultural activities and products. In doing so, they capitalise on their offline cultural capital and/or the social recognition of socio-economic status by turning them into highly valued cultural goods that draw online attention and acclaim. In contrast, vloggers with low cultural (and other relevant) capital lack claims to status and are less likely to reveal information about their offline selves for the purpose of self-promotion. Rather than monetising their branded selves, they tend to position themselves in the sub-field of mass production and cater to masses of viewers whom they perceive to have low cultural capital and low socio-economic status. Unlike their more privileged counterparts, who prize their personhood, less privileged vloggers seek to achieve high sales and cover a wide spectrum of markets by producing digital content that is ranked among the top viewed according to social media analytics.

Third, differently situated digital aspirants may have different timeframes of aspiration for digital self-entrepreneurship. This differentiation in attitudes towards their vlogging future operates not only because vloggers are enabled or constrained by pre-existing endowments of capital but also because they may develop class-inflected stances to assess and act on the opportunities and risks associated with various forms of participation in the platform creative economy. In the face of platform uncertainty, young vloggers who are less able than others to mobilise additional or family resources to (cross-)subsidise periods of transition may develop 'disillusionments – the moments when they fail to keep hoping' (Wong and Chow, 2020: 441). Over time, they may become less committed to digital self-entrepreneurship and be tempted to

pursue alternative careers. In contrast, young vloggers who are more able than others to keep performing low-paid digital creative labour may manage platform uncertainty by (re)interpreting the time and effort they spend as a capital-enhancing activity through which they might accumulate skills for the future. These vloggers may thus cope with challenges by articulating an 'ordinary hope', which provides them with 'a psychosocial temporal resource oriented to the present, an existential attitude that allows one to persist through [platform] precarity' (Alacovska, 2018: 1120).

Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted with YouTubers to gain an understanding of the interactions between class inequality and the platform creative economy. As a method of reconstructing experiences and interpreting meanings, in-depth interviews enable the interviewees to be individually assessed, new leads to be followed up, and the subjective experiences and decision-making processes of the interviewees to be uncovered (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). The recruitment process began with an initial search of the social media pages of YouTubers, which facilitated the creation of a list of informants. Potential participants were contacted, and the snowball sampling method was used to generate an additional list of informants for interviews. Thirty-two YouTubers based in Hong Kong, aged between 18 and 29, who engaged in and identified vlogging as a career, were interviewed to gain an understanding of their work and life experiences, practices, and choices in relation to their socioeconomic circumstances and class origins. This definition of a young vlogger is consistent with recent studies of working youth and youth employment (Pun, 2024) and with the latest demographic

survey of active social media users in Hong Kong who utilise social media platforms for social marketing purposes (Hazel, 2024).

Because the primary goal of this study was to examine the interactions between socioeconomic differences and vlogging as a career within the extended Bourdieusian framework, we defined 'class' mainly using economic and social criteria, following Weber's (1968) conceptualisation, which stresses the importance of an individual's market situation and work situation. In contemporary Hong Kong, the middle and upper classes primarily consist of entrepreneurs and businesspeople, professionals, administrators, and managers. Commanding a higher income than members of the lower classes and having one or more investments, they mostly live in self-contained, private housing and are intergenerationally stable (Chan, 2002). Members of the upper class enjoy superior work and market situations, with the middle class mainly comprising non-manual and service workers (Wong and Lui, 2000). In contrast, the working and lower classes comprise semi-skilled and unskilled workers, respectively. Many of them live in public housing subsidised by the local government, and their incomes tend to be low, generally insecure, and unlikely to rise steadily over time (Forrest and Xian, 2018).

Historically, multiple factors have contributed to the formation of specific classes and class differences. During the post-war era, largely due to the changing political and economic situation in mainland China and the development of Cold War geopolitics in the region, rapid economic development produced a generation of wealthy Hong Kongers who built their fortunes on industry, trade, and commerce, in contrast with the British and other European traders who established their wealth during the first 100 years of Hong Kong's colonial history (Chan, 2002). Since the late 1980s, economic restructuring and increasing links with the international economy have led to growing demand for professional, managerial, and administrative personnel,

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particularly in the sectors of commercial and financial services, and accelerated the formation of the middle and upper classes (Cheung et al., 1988). The continuous expansion of education, notably at the tertiary level, has also raised the overall level of educational and occupational attainment of the middle- and upper-class populations of Hong Kong. However, class differences in the competition for social advancement have persisted, and the gap between rich and poor in Hong Kong has widened in the past few decades (Chan, 2002; Wong and Lui, 2000).

In line with the discussion above, this study identified upper-, middle-, working-, and lower-class vloggers and used interview questions to probe their class backgrounds, education levels, residential neighbourhoods, and occupations, if any, prior to their engagement in vlogging as a career. In addition, given the prominence of intergenerational inequality in Hong Kong, the interviews probed the vloggers' parents' occupations and incomes or socioeconomic status to gain a better understanding of the vloggers' class origins. Most of the interviewed young middle- and upper-class vloggers had grown up in financially stable families, held university degrees, and had parents who both worked as highly skilled workers in professional or administrative positions. Given that most of these jobs require a university education, their parents commonly held university degrees or higher levels of education. A few of the interviewees had parents who were also successful entrepreneurs in other sectors. In contrast, many of the young working- and lower-class vloggers had grown up in public housing and had not pursued post-secondary education, with a few exceptions who had obtained associate or university degrees. They mostly came from families reliant on manufacturing or other low-wage jobs, and most of their parents had not pursued post-secondary education. Moreover, the members of this group commonly had only one parent serving as the primary income earner supporting the family household.

The interviews were conducted in person, guided by a set of open-ended questions. Each interview lasted for approximately two hours. The topics of discussion included the informants' class backgrounds, routines, and practices in digital creative work, their motives for participation, and their future plans. The materials collected were analysed using an interpretive approach to reflect on the interviewees' perspectives on their career pathways and the decisions they had made at each stage of their platform careers. The key themes that emerged from the interviews served as the starting points for analysis. These were further analysed to generate categories and identify common patterns. To protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are used to present the findings in this paper, and some quotations have been altered to prevent the interviewees from being identified.

Unequal pathways to digital self-entrepreneurship

Encountering the tension between productivity and autonomy

Passion, excitement, creative expression, and work autonomy are common motivations for content creators. Despite criticisms over algorithmic control and platform subjugation, scholars have affirmed the potential of (digital) creative work to constitute 'creative autonomy' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 40). However, in the platform creative economy, where a neoliberal logic prevails, a common tension has emerged between platform productivity and creative autonomy that obstructs vloggers' quest for autonomous labour (Banks, 2017; Cunningham and Craig, 2019). Scholars have identified the difficulty of 'selling brands while staying "authentic"' (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021: 66) and the conflict 'between commerciality and authenticity' (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021: 586), but questions remain

regarding how vloggers variously encounter and deal with these tensions in relation to their socioeconomic differences.

Invoking an extended Bourdieusian framework lends nuance to our understanding of 'the opposition between art and money' (Bourdieu, 1996: 162) among differently situated vloggers in terms of their strategies of vlogging. In this study, in contrast with the upper- and middle-class vloggers, the lower- and working-class vloggers tended to express an urgent desire to realise economic gains to support their creative endeavours. However, echoing Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) discussion, the pursuit of immediate market success comes with a loss of 'symbolic profit' (Bourdieu,1996: 142), as the vloggers deprioritised creative autonomy in favour of platform productivity. Although the lower- and working-class vloggers initially found vlogging to be a self-realising job, a series of vlogging activities that incline towards immediate monetisation became ingrained in their daily work activities. They became accustomed over time to the calculated choices associated with platform monetisation but nonetheless experienced a sense of self-betrayal of the practices and norms associated with creative autonomy in chasing immediate monetisation opportunities. For instance, Rebecca, a lower-class YouTuber with six years of vlogging experience, shared how the content and format of her videos were specifically crafted to capture viral attention and expressed unequivocal frustration over the gradual loss of meaning in her work:

> In the past, my videos concentrated on critiquing social issues. I spent a lot of time on writing scripts, crafting compelling narratives, and conducting background research. However, many of the videos I make these days have no deep meaning and are more about sharing raw, unfiltered content about my daily life. I craft compelling titles, strategically incorporate relevant keywords and tags, and add captivating visual effects to

make them more appealing. I actually don't like making these videos, but they are easier

to make, and they are the ones that somehow gain popularity among the audience.

Rebecca's reflection on the changes in her orientation towards vlogging resonates with the experiences of many of the lower- and working-class vloggers interviewed. The less privileged digital aspirants tended to prioritise platform productivity over the quest for creative autonomy, which entails the 'degree to which "art," knowledge, symbolic-making and so on can and/or should operate independently of the influence of other determinants' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 40). Although some were mindful of the risk of losing their autonomous labour and struggled to adjust to the fierce game of gaining viral attention, they encountered more substantial opportunity costs in preserving their creative autonomy than did their privileged counterparts. For instance, Gordon, who came from a lower-class background and had vlogged for over five years, attempted to draw a distinction between his commercial videos, which he referred to as 'homework vlogs', and those he considered to be meaningful and innovative. He explained that he had to spend most of his time *producing* an adequate number of commercial videos to obtain the opportunity to *create* meaningful and innovative videos:

My channel started with short movies, which is what my channel was all about and what

I enjoy a lot. But I have to make these homework vlogs, such as trending challenges and

shopping vlogs, to keep up the view counts. Nowadays, I create 10 homework vlogs to

make a living so that I can create one short film to satisfy myself.

Whereas a substantial portion of the lower- and working-class vloggers' daily vlogging activities felt to them like a 'necessary evil', a task that they had to undertake in exchange for moments of creative autonomy, the tension between platform productivity and creative autonomy appeared to be somewhat mitigated among the upper- and middle-class vloggers.

Positioning themselves at the autonomous pole of the field, many of the upper- and middle-class vloggers interviewed were reluctant to engage in producing content they were not passionate about. They were not indifferent to the number of views or to monetary rewards, but they viewed them as secondary to the long-term benefits of creative autonomy, in terms of its symbolic gains. In particular, they sought to attain a high reputation for their channels in the hope of cultivating a reliable viewership while increasing their opportunities to secure more favourable contracts with advertisers in the future. For instance, despite a decline in view counts, partly due to reduced spending on influencer marketing by major advertisers during the social unrest in Hong Kong in 2019, when the city faced a delicate geopolitical situation and economic downturn (Ting, 2020, 2022), Vincent, a second-year vlogger from an upper-middle-class background, emphasised the importance of the vlogging strategies of 'following your original intention' in digital creative work:

> The original intention of making videos should be to cater to the people who like them. If you are too concerned with instant monetary rewards, you will not be able to enjoy it. It's paradoxical; if you don't enjoy it, you won't make good videos that the audience likes.

Unlike the lower- and working-class vloggers, who prioritised economic gain and came to disregard the symbolic value of their work in producing a large quantity of quickly made videos, Vincent and the other upper- and middle-class vloggers interviewed concentrated on building their personal brands, which they believed would bring greater economic gains in the long run. Rather than seeking to produce content that might immediately go viral, they believed that (only) through 'sincere' self-presentation and dedicated vlogging could they win the respect of viewers and advertisers over time. In effect, they played a long game, in which durable symbolic capital in the form of reputation was expected to accumulate as a return on the investment of time and

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consistency. In this way, they considered the preservation of creative autonomy to be linked to both the intrinsic qualities and the extrinsic rewards of digital creative work, forming an effective pathway to successful digital self-entrepreneurship.

Anchoring digital creative work around the self

Studies have noted a variety of content genres that monetise personhoods in the platform creative economy through affective labour (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) and appeal to personal 'realness' and interpersonal intimacy with followers (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021). However, although various strategies of self-presentation and identity management have emerged, these online performances of selves may not be equally valued or prized. Rather, they may involve divergent orientations and follow particular logics of content creation based on differences in class origin and socioeconomic circumstances.

Bourdieu's theory presents the opposing logics of restricted production and mass production that influence producers' choices of genre and target audience in cultural production, along a hierarchy of taste. In this study, the more privileged vloggers interviewed tended to appeal to smaller circles of niche viewers, as they possessed not only more economic capital than the other vloggers but also more cultural capital, which was reflected in a taste for high-value cultural goods and practices as manifested in their vlogging. For example, Peter, an upper-class vlogger with three years of experience of creating videos, chose the topics for his channel based on his class-inflected desire for life exploration and adventure. One of his upcoming plans for vlogging involved diving or skydiving on remote Japanese islands, allowing him to 'try something different and visit places outside of Hong Kong once in a while'. He justified this choice by suggesting that 'vlogging about outdoor activities that Hong Kong people would enjoy

but find challenging to undertake' could be an ideal strategy that would enable him to maintain his trendsetter status and distinguish himself in the eyes of 'mutual admirers', in the words of Bourdieu.

As such, while Peter's vlogging projects were, in part, developed as a means of personal enrichment, they were aimed at addressing a niche audience with whom Peter shared a familiar cultural taste to which he felt entitled. In addition to travel, Peter planned to acquire a campervan, which is 'relatively uncommon in Hong Kong', and create a series of 'glamping' vlogs. According to Peter, the idea of 'hanging out and drinking beer with friends beside a campervan parked in the woods' represented 'a wild fantasy of manhood' that he believed would 'generate a buzz, especially among the male audience about [his] age [of around 30]'. Therefore, while vloggers compete with each other in the game of the online attention economy, much of this competition centres on distinction that is based in the symbolic worlds of aesthetics and lifestyle, as distinctive tastes and cultural practices grant certain vloggers a degree of superiority in the field of digital cultural production. Although not as outgoing as Peter, other privileged vloggers interviewed also initiated their vlogging projects according to their unfolding, class-inflicted preferences associated with a sense of 'coolness' or 'trendiness', including luxury automobile test drives, wellness retreats, fashion reviews, and exquisite meals. In making these vlogs, many of them drew on their cultural capital as expert evaluators by providing reviews of up-and-coming products and services. Like Peter, they justified their choices by citing the need to create a competitive edge by self-branding as avant-garde explorers and critics.

The upper- and middle-class vloggers thus targeted specific niche audiences that would recognise the value of their tastes, characterised by ease and leisure. Endowed with high cultural capital, they anchored their digital creative work around displays of their private selves that

reflected a 'taste of luxury' and offered critiques on the latest trends in lifestyle, travel, fashion, and luxury to increase the reputation and appeal of their personal brands. In contrast, the less privileged vloggers tended to cater to the tastes of undifferentiated audiences and came to opt for 'the choice of necessity' (Bourdieu, 1984: 373). For instance, Simon, a second-year vlogger from a lower-class background, felt that making videos that were not mass-market tested was 'not his thing to do'. Although he occasionally envied the popularity and high view counts of the travel and fashion-forward vlogs created by his more privileged counterparts, he attributed the success of these vlogs to their creators' high economic and cultural capital, something that he claimed he 'did not possess':

> My channel is about cooking, intimate relationships, and indoor challenges. Some YouTubers make videos on travelling and dining out. However, I am not able to create these types of videos. For example, travel photography requires good equipment, and you need to go to somewhere very special. Besides, you need to have a strong cultural background to provide extensive information to the audience to create popular videos.

This dispositional positioning in the sub-field of mass production not only influenced the content that the lower- and working-class vloggers produced but also shaped the ways in which they organised their daily vlogging activities. As the less privileged vloggers did not feel entitled to enter a 'restricted' sub-field of digital cultural production, they often de-emphasised their offline identities and associated status and instead adopted a mass market-oriented positioning, which required creating videos in response to 'a pre-existing demand, and in pre-established forms' (Bourdieu, 1996: 142), and thus conformed to mass market preferences as prescribed by the platform. For example, May and Cyrus, a couple from lower-class backgrounds who had been vlogging together for over four years, explained that they made decisions about what to

vlog by conducting 'customer research' to identify lucrative genres and topics based on social media analytics:

> May: Every day, we look at what videos are popular among our audience. When we first uploaded our videos to YouTube, we found that our videos about shopping on Taobao [a popular online shopping platform in the region] and trending challenges were popular. So, we made more of these videos.
>
> Cyrus: We constantly keep track of the view counts, even when we don't want to look at them anymore.
>
> May: Because we need to analyse them.
>
> Cyrus: Yes, we have to analyse them to understand what the audience's latest interests are.
>
> May: I just don't want to do this anymore. Cyrus always says these videos are more popular with the audience. I know, but I would also say that I don't want the topics of my channel to be solely decided by the audience.

Whereas the upper- and middle-class vloggers targeted the niche communities of elite evaluators by capitalising on their personal lives and attitudes, the lower- and working-class vloggers undertook the diagnostic work of channel analysis in making videos and moderated their content according to social media analytics, sometimes even at the expense of their own personhoods and tastes. Although they did not necessarily favour this mode of digital cultural production, they constantly compromised on the content of their own channels and tracked views and comments to make sure that they 'rightly' addressed the mass raters.

Facing an uncertain vlogging future

Vlogging as a career entails high occupational risk because it not only lacks the guarantee of a fixed income or an employment contract but also fails to provide a clear career path towards upward mobility. Neff (2012) referred to the risk involved in the traditional CCIs as 'venture labour', in which workers consider their work as having a future payoff; however, this payoff may never come. In the new CCIs, overly optimistic content creators may buy into social media platforms' 'promise of social and economic capital' (Duffy, 2016: 441) in return for unpaid or low-paid labour. Research has considered some of the ways in which individuals' sense of the future and hope shape their (digital) creative work, but much remains to be explored about how socioeconomic differences shape vloggers' aspirations and projects. If future orientations, in terms of identifying opportunities and risks, form an indispensable part of habitus, they are also inevitably and largely class-inflected. Therefore, rather than considering vloggers as a single group, it is more fruitful to consider how these digital aspirants articulate divergent career perspectives and future-oriented practices as tied to their socioeconomic circumstances and class origins.

Achieving success in any field is not immediate; it requires individuals to accumulate the necessary resources. This is particularly evident in the industry of digital entertainment, which is characterised by a 'deferred economy' (Bourdieu, 1993) in which 'newcomers act contrary to their own economic interests, putting up with precarity [and] gaining exposure, prestige and reputation that they hope will be converted at a later stage into pecuniary benefit' (Alacovska, 2018: 1121). During the interviews in the current study, the upper- and middle-class vloggers tended to describe their efforts towards digital self-entrepreneurship as cumulative over time and reported longer timeframes of aspiration for their digital creative work than those reported by the

lower-class vloggers. For example, Franklin, a second-year vlogger from a middle-class background, expressed the belief that vlogging was not necessarily his future career but a stepping stone towards another successful form of entrepreneurship, albeit in another domain:

> Even if my YouTube career ends one day, I will have accumulated experiences and built up skill sets that will be invaluable for my future [career]. I can go run other businesses. It depends on what I want to do next.

The excerpt above illustrates how the upper- and middle-class vloggers confronted platform uncertainty with a hopeful attitude and interpreted the time they spent on vlogging as an investment in their future. Although they often did not have clear ideas about specific careers that they could pursue with their acquired experiences and skills, the more privileged vloggers anticipated that the accumulation of their resources would not go to waste as it would serve as a vehicle for their future career development. Although they understood the risks involved in the pursuit of digital self-entrepreneurship, the more privileged vloggers adopted a somewhat optimistic 'future orientation in practice' (Ting, 2017: 246) to sustain their present pursuits and viewed their vlogging as a period of transition before future entrepreneurship or other professional activities not necessarily within the field of digital cultural production. For Franklin, along with the other upper- and middle-class vloggers interviewed, the future of vlogging, which is inherently uncertain, was considered somewhat 'certain' from the outset. Rather than holding back, many of them continued to invest in their digital self-entrepreneurship with a high level of commitment.

In contrast, when asked about their career plans and projections, the lower- and working-class vloggers articulated their commitment to digital self-entrepreneurship differently from the more privileged interviewees and tended to report shorter timeframes of aspiration for their

digital creative work. They had a general fear that the work experience they had gained from non-standard employment on YouTube would not be recognised or appreciated by future employers in other industries. Moreover, they were less likely to recognise the future possibilities brought about by digital self-entrepreneurship and had concerns about diminishing revenue and advertising payouts in the future in Hong Kong's increasingly saturated influencer market, characterised by both a growing number of YouTubers and the increasing marginality of the Cantonese language. Many found themselves constantly manoeuvring between pursuing vlogging as a career and exploring a second career. For instance, William, a lower-class vlogger with six years of vlogging experience, shared in his interview:

> You never know what the industry will be like or how long your channel will last. Two years ago, I gradually shifted my work to post-production, just in case. I started editing more videos for others. I also tried the education sector. I taught visual production to kids at some local schools.

Due to their sense of insecurity, many of the less privileged vloggers had considered taking or had taken 'outside jobs' (i.e. other than creating videos for their own channels). They constructed their own sense of 'certainty' and 'security' by engaging in pre-operational and informal labour activities to explore alternatives. This class-inflected orientation ultimately distracted some of them from vlogging and led to self-foreshortened career paths. This is precisely what had happened to William, who had gradually become a low-involvement vlogger who made only occasional contributions:

> A year ago, I started working full-time in a company that specialises in managing YouTubers and editing videos for them, and now, I have very little time to make my own videos. […] I know that some YouTubers come from well-off families. Compared with

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them, I am under heavier financial pressure and have more familial responsibilities and

obligations to fulfil. It's a difficult choice. But I now live on a fixed monthly salary, so

that I can have a more stable life.

Conclusions

This study examines how differently situated digital aspirants perceive and pursue vlogging

as a career, based on an extended Bourdieusian framework. Going beyond the topic of the

uneven distribution of the material resources required for digital entrepreneurship, the findings

lend nuance to the understanding of how class inequality shapes the digital creative labour,

conditions, and decisions of vloggers by revealing their distinct practices and pathways of digital

entrepreneurship.

Specifically, the findings suggest that engagement in digital creative work produces

particular types of self-entrepreneurial habitus that inform differing vlogging strategies with

varied degrees of autonomy and heteronomy. Especially given the growing normalisation of

precarity in the platform creative economy, the interviewed vloggers from lower- and working-

class backgrounds tended to position themselves at the heteronomous pole and expressed an

urgent need to engage in content *production* for instant economic gains. In contrast, the upper-

and middle-class vloggers, positioned at the autonomous pole, engaged primarily in digital

creation, orienting themselves towards symbolic gains. By prioritising the building of personal

brands over chasing immediate monetisation opportunities, they perceived that the acquisition of

symbolic capital would eventually bring economic capital.

The more privileged vloggers also revealed that their daily vlogging activities were mainly

rooted in their desire to attain reputation among elite evaluators by experimenting with and

offering expert evaluations of various niches in the sub-field of restricted production. Making videos that reflected the taste of luxury, they targeted niche audience groups of mutual admirers and centred their digital creative work around displaying a privileged private self and/or high cultural knowledge. In contrast, the lower- and working-class vloggers developed quantified perceptions of their online selves and catered to the tastes of undifferentiated mass raters. In making only the types of videos that were guaranteed to attract mass market audiences, the less privileged digital aspirants were more sensitive to social media analytics and frequently worked against their own personhoods.

The youths interviewed diverged not only in their vlogging strategies, choices of genre, and target audiences but also in their timeframes of aspiration for digital entrepreneurship. In facing platform uncertainty, the upper- and middle-class vloggers commonly articulated future-oriented projects. They interpreted vlogging as a means of acquiring experience, influence, and skillsets for future entrepreneurship or professional development and were thus able to maintain a high level of commitment to vlogging. However, unlike the more privileged vloggers, who were able to focus on and invest in their digital self-entrepreneurship, the less privileged vloggers tended to diverge from the pursuit of digital self-entrepreneurship, with many having begun to construct their own safety valves by engaging in activities unrelated to vlogging that would prepare them for alternative careers.

The findings of this study reveal how class-inflected orientations regarding self-entrepreneurship are (re)produced in the emerging field of digital cultural production, but the practices and tendencies associated with digital creative work may be jointly shaped by the logic and hierarchies of other fields. In particular, whereas dominant frameworks focus on European and North American populations and conceive of content creators as solipsist subjects, in East

Asian societies in which a family-oriented culture prevails, young people's work activities and the meanings that they draw from work may be closely related to parental or other kinship expectations and familial obligations. Future studies could explore how in their quest for success young vloggers make trade-offs vis-à-vis the perceived capital that vlogging may or may not bring in a different field or cultural context. Researchers could further identify these local struggles and explore how differences in their embedding in and across social fields (re)define the legitimacy of and/or legitimate ways to engage in vlogging as a career, particularly in non-Western societies.

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