

**WHEN DO BLOGGERS PAY TO BE BLOGGERS?
QUASI-FIELD EXPERIMENT ON ONLINE COMICS CREATORS**

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ABSTRACT

Motivated by the growing prevalence of independent creators using online platforms, we study how creators of two distinct types of work arrangements—traditional employment and independent production—value autonomy differently. Using a survey in a form of field experiment and data from interviews with Korean comics creators, this paper shows that the value of autonomy (i.e., the within-subject difference in financial rewards between high-autonomy and low-autonomy jobs) is lower for creators who are paid by firms in traditional employment arrangements compared to independent bloggers. In addition, we propose that the mechanism underlying this behavior is occupational identity. The difference between hired and independent creators disappears when they identify comics creation as their regular job. The paper contributes to our understanding of autonomy of creative workers, organizational control, and occupational identity under the changing nature of work.

Keywords: autonomy, creative workers, occupational identity, wage differentials, creators' economy

INTRODUCTION

Autonomy is a commonly desired trait in workers across diverse fields and occupations. It represents a sense of control and discretion over one's work and influences job satisfaction, productivity, and overall well-being (Breugh, 1985; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). For professionals, autonomy allows them to perform the job according to their own expertise and beliefs, especially when they conflicts with managerial requests (Thomas and Hewitt 2011). The appreciation of autonomy is also salient among creative workers—such as artists, writers, and designers—where autonomy is not merely a preference, but a fundamental prerequisite for their creative endeavors (Menger, 1999). Previous studies resonate with the insight on the universally desired value of autonomy among the workers, showing that workers often willingly accept lower economic returns in exchange for the opportunity to maintain control over their creative processes and outputs in various settings including the sciences (Stern, 2004), crafts (Anteby, 2008), and entrepreneurship (Benz and Frey, 2004; Roach and Sauermann 2023).

While autonomy's importance in traditional work settings is well-documented, its applications and implications in unconventional, alternative work arrangements—such as gig work, online freelancing, independent contracting, and entrepreneurship—remain largely underexplored. These alternative arrangements constitute an extreme setting characterized by intense autonomy paired with high risk and uncertainty (Kalleberg, 2000; Eberhart, Barley, & Nelson, 2021). Recent studies suggest that workers in the alternative work arrangement also value autonomy, while it does not tell whether the preference is stronger than workers of conventional work arrangements. Our understanding is further limited as they often exist outside conventional organizational hierarchies, making traditional bureaucratic constraints on worker autonomy and creativity less relevant (Whyte, 1956). Yet, despite the rise of the sharing economy and online platforms that have fueled a considerable expansion of these work arrangements (Gallup, 2018; Katz & Krueger, 2019), we know little about how autonomy functions and impacts workers in these contexts.

Thus, our research aims to answer the question why and when some creators place a lower value on professional autonomy compared to others, despite general appreciation for autonomy in the fields. In particular, we focus on the role of occupational identity on online creators' appreciation of autonomy. A growing body of research indicates that gig workers often perceive themselves as entrepreneurs (Eberhart, Barley, & Nelson, 2021), a role traditionally associated with a strong preference for autonomy (Carter, Gartner, & Reynolds, 1996). However, a different stream of studies suggests that workers with a higher degree of occupational identity might demonstrate greater commitment to their roles, thereby becoming less resistant to meeting managerial demands at the expense of their autonomy (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Especially when the profession is not credentialed and has blurred occupational boundaries, adhering to the organizational and managerial rules is seen as more professional and desired to a certain extent (Barley, Becky and Nelson 2016). This suggests that occupational identity might modulate the desire for autonomy, potentially prompting workers to accept certain trade-offs depending on their commitment to their chosen occupational identity.

In this paper, drawing on the literature on occupational identity and following the empirical approach often adopted by the economics literature on compensating wage differential, we investigate whether independent content creators, compared to hired employees performing the same work, are willing to accept lower wages to enjoy a higher level of autonomy. To answer this research question, we face two major empirical challenges. First, it is difficult to find a setting where independent content creators and hired employees perform the same job, as they already have been selected into their current work arrangements according to their preferences and should follow very different norms of the work. Second, it is difficult to precisely measure their value of autonomy in their wages as there are myriads of unobservable differences between jobs with varying degrees of autonomy.

To address these challenges, we conducted a survey that takes the format of field experiment in the Korean comics industry, where creators belong to either of two work arrangements—creators in the open community who share their work for free (“blogger-types”) and creators contracted with platforms that exclusively distribute and pay for their work (“platform-types”). By designing two hypothetical jobs varying only their levels of autonomy and where both types of creators are equally

considered, we can compare the wage differentials—the price of autonomy within the subject. The results show that blogger-type creators place a higher value on autonomy than platform-type creators, supporting the argument that bloggers pay to be bloggers. Platform-type creators do not value autonomy as much as blogger-type creators, and we also show that this difference is driven by their perception of occupational identity.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHOD

The setting of this study comprises online comics creators in Korea who work in what is commonly referred to as “the webtoon industry.” This industry is of significant interest for several reasons. First, the industry is run predominantly by independent freelancers, which offers a good setting for examining the dynamics of autonomy and occupational identity in alternative work arrangements (Eberhart, Barley & Nelson, 2021). Second, the industry has enjoyed tremendous popularity in South Korea, with an estimated fifteen million daily readers (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2019). Despite the precariousness that freelancing creators in this industry experience, the occupation is considered one of the most desired among Korea’s younger generation. In a Korean national survey (2020) that asked elementary school children “What do you want to be in the future?,” webtoon creators were in ninth place, followed by athletes, doctors, teachers, and police officers. The industry has also experienced substantial growth in recent years, surpassing an estimated value of \$700 million in 2019 (Jin & Yoon, 2020). Given the industry’s highly competitive environment and high social and economic significance, the setting provides an invaluable context for studying the interplay among autonomy, occupational identity, and the trade-offs involved in pursuing a creative career.

Empirically, the setting provides a unique opportunity as it includes both blogger-type free creators and platform-type employed creators. There are two major channels in Korea through which audiences can access digitalized comics. One is through creators’ personal accounts on social media or blogs, where unpaid “blogger-type creators” share their work for free. The other channel is professional comics platforms that publish daily comics created by paid “platform-type creators.” The relationship between platform companies and waged comics creators is similar to that of conventional employers and employees. Platform-type creators make an exclusive contract with the platform company, follow its weekly schedules, and regularly receive pay from the company based on their performance. While blogger-type creators often describe their activities as works of love (Scott Morton and Podolny, 2002; Ranganathan, 2018), platform-type creators see themselves as workers hired and managed by the company. On average, platform-type creators have higher viewership than blogger-type creators because being featured on prominent platforms allows them access to a broader audience. However, this does not necessarily mean that blogger-type creators are less skilled than platform-type creators, as many high-quality comics are also created by blogger-type creators. We will return to the quality and selection issues in their choice of work arrangements in the results section.

Experiment Design

Although blogger-type creators and platform-type creators are under completely different work arrangements, they are equally considered for “outside jobs.” An outside job, in their language, refers to a subcontract commission from a company or organization to produce comics that advertise their products or campaigns. Once a creator agrees to undertake an outside job, the company that commissioned the work becomes the creator’s client. Given that companies aim to leverage the creators’ large following, they tend to choose creators based on the size or demographics of their audience group, irrespective of whether the creators are platform-types or blogger-types.

Outside jobs also provide a good empirical setting for testing our hypotheses due to their distinct auction-like price-setting mechanism. Initially, clients typically contact multiple creators and request that the creators provide a price quote without offering any benchmark price. Once the clients have received replies from creators with their suggested price quotes, they typically initiate a brief negotiation process with one or two of the lowest-priced bidders who align with their preferences. The

process gives the right to set the price of work to the creators, but the auction-like process gives creators enormous incentives to submit highly competitive prices to be considered as good candidates for outside jobs.

Using this uniqueness of the setting, we conducted a lab-in-the-field experiment in the form of a survey that required creators to provide their suggested prices for hypothetical outside job offers.¹ The survey was distributed to both blogger-type and platform-type creators. All participants received the same survey, which contained two hypothetical jobs for a comic section in a newly launched web magazine for an organization. The two jobs were identical, only varying in their levels of autonomy, and creators were asked to submit their suggested price for both jobs. Those who chose not to respond to the email were given the option to indicate, "I will reject the offer regardless of the price." Therefore, our setting allows us to directly measure within-subject variance in the value of autonomy each creator held. The process of the experiment is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Experiment Procedure

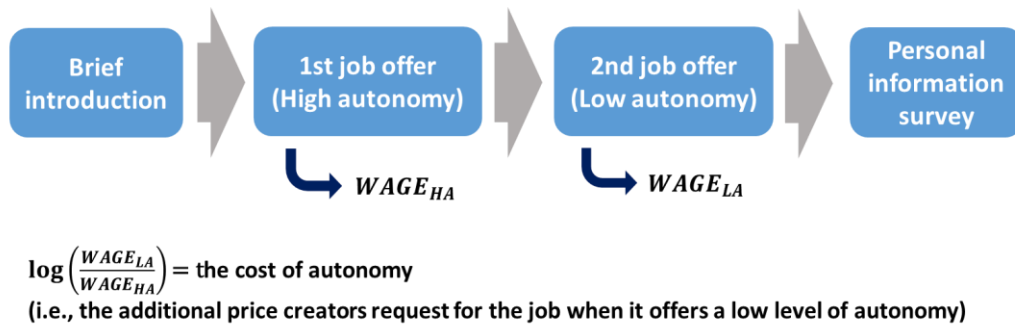


Table 1. Comparison of two hypothetical jobs with varying levels of autonomy

	JOB 1 (High Autonomy)	JOB 2 (Low Autonomy)
Contents	Creators' choice	Creators meet with the client to agree on the general topic, and iterative modification process is expected for every piece of work. The length of the content is also fixed to twelve scenes per issue.
Work schedule	Flexible	Strict monthly deadline with specific deadlines indicated for file submission and iterative modification process
Work period	Creators' choice	Fixed, starting next month and ending at the end of the year
Distribution	No restriction specified	Creators are not allowed to share their work outside the client's website

As summarized in Table 1, the variance in the degree of autonomy was manipulated in multiple aspects based on our preliminary qualitative study, including autonomy over the content (what to

¹ We chose not to conduct an actual field experiment for two reasons. First, implementing a field experiment in the Korean labor market has posed challenges since the Hyundai Motors legal case in 2012. In this case, a researcher was sued by the company for executing a field experiment using fake résumés, with the company citing it as tortious interference with business (Hankyoreh, 2012). The court upheld this claim. Second, by presenting hypothetical job scenarios, we were able to gather responses from those who might reject real job offers. This approach not only distinguishes between non-responses and rejections, but also allows for the collection of personal information data, which would not be feasible in a typical field experiment setting.

create), schedule (when to work), and distribution (with whom to share). For autonomy over the content, the creators were given complete freedom regarding their subject and style for the high-autonomy job. For the low-autonomy job, they were obliged to meet with the client to agree on the topic, and an iterative modification process was expected for every piece of work. As the following comment suggests, accommodating the client's requests for modifications is one of the major autonomy restrictions that creators face when they work with customers.

“Occasionally, when an organization pays me for my work, I got requests like ‘We feel the ending lacks impact, could you add a couple more scenes?’ or ‘This part seems too rough, can you make some revisions?’ While these requests are rare, whenever they arise, I can’t help but feel frustrated, thinking, ‘Even here, they want me to adhere to their rules.’ Of course, I have extensive experience in accommodating such requests and that’s what I do every day at work, so I diligently incorporate their feedback. However, for this particular (webtoon) work, I wish to avoid such instances. I do this because I value the freedom it offers, and I believe that’s what sets it apart.”

For scheduling autonomy, creators were again given complete freedom over the duration of the work and frequency of their product delivery. In contrast, for the low-autonomy job, creators were told exactly when the work would begin (i.e., next month), the hard deadline for delivery of each piece of work, and that the delivery frequency would be monthly without any flexibility. Such procedural and scheduling autonomy has been suggested as an important facet of autonomy measurement (Breugh 1985), along with the independence and discretion of job characteristics. As one of the creators says, they highly value scheduling autonomy: *“I have complete control over my online activities because I work alone, I am the boss, and I manage everything. I really appreciate the freedom to do whatever I want.”* Another creator also says that job satisfaction comes from scheduling autonomy: *“I feel like, life is good when I can relax on Mondays while others have to go to work.”*

In addition to the content and scheduling autonomy, we included distribution autonomy as it is an important aspect of online content creators' work. For example, one creator recalled that *“When I worked with company S, they asked me not to release my work elsewhere, so I didn’t. I wrote an article and only published it in their web magazine. (...) it was a disappointment for me.”* Choosing the right outlet is crucial not only because where creators release their work can determine the size and characteristics of their audience but also because communicating with the right audience will allow them to have a rewarding experience. In our experiment, the distribution autonomy of the low-autonomy job is limited to the client's magazine alone, and the instructions clearly indicate that the work will not be allowed to be distributed through other platforms or channels. For the high-autonomy job, there are no restrictions on distribution.

Main Variables

Our dependent variable is the value of autonomy measured by the within-subject difference in the wages offered for the high-autonomy job and the low-autonomy job. Put differently, the value of autonomy is the additional amount of financial reward a creator requests when the job offers a lower level of autonomy. Note that in our experiment design, creators were presented with the high-autonomy job followed by the low-autonomy job, therefore easily acknowledging that the additional price they would request is associated with the decreased level of autonomy. When the creator charges the same price for the high-autonomy job and the low-autonomy job, the value of autonomy is equal to zero.

Our main independent variable is the type of work arrangements the creators have chosen. The creators who freely share their comics online without being paid directly for their work are called “blogger-type” creators and coded 1 for this variable. The creators contracted with a platform and receiving salaries from the platform company are called “platform-type” creators and coded 0 for this variable. The primary regression model to test whether the value of autonomy is higher for the blogger-type creators (i.e., whether bloggers pay to be bloggers) is as follows:

$$\text{Log} \left(\frac{\text{Wage}_{HA}}{\text{Wage}_{LA}} \right) = \alpha + \beta * \text{Blogger} + \epsilon$$

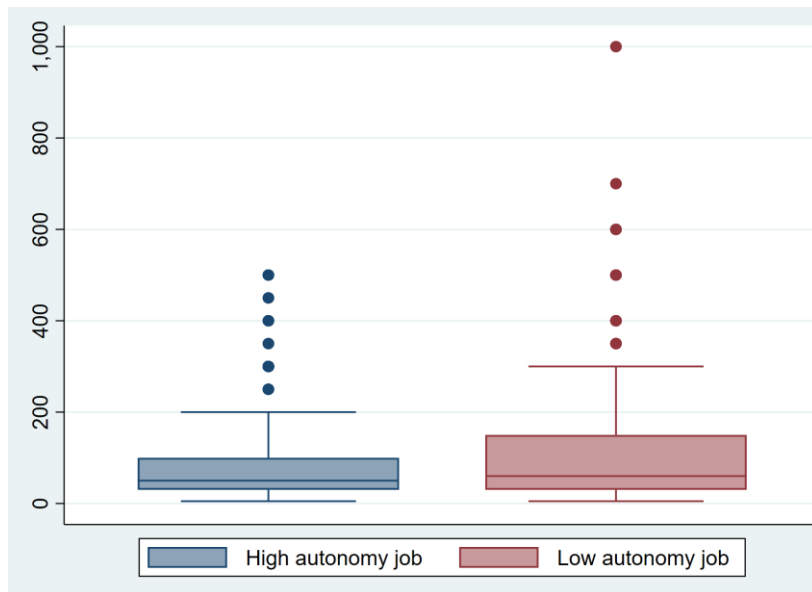
After responding to the two hypothetical job offers, the subjects provided their basic demographic information, including gender, years of experience creating comics, whether they have other jobs in addition to creating comics, their wages from those jobs, whether they have ever worked with professional platforms, their occupational identity as a comics creator ("I consider comics creation my job"), and their recent hits as a measure of viewership. The viewership of creators is considered an indicator of their performance at work and is included as a control variable in every regression.

RESULTS

Five hundred email invitations were sent to online comics creators in Korea, comprising 250 platform-type creators and 250 blogger-type creators. Of these, 247 creators responded to the survey, including 102 platform-type creators and 139 blogger-type creators. Among them, 57% (137 creators) provided their proposed prices for both the high-autonomy and low-autonomy jobs, enabling us to calculate the cost of autonomy.

First, the results suggest that creators ask for a higher wage for the high-autonomy job than the low-autonomy job on average. As shown in Figure 2, the average wage for the high-autonomy job is 903,504 KRW (USD 768), whereas the average wage for the low-autonomy job is 127,281 KRW (USD 1,082). The average cost of autonomy is approximately 369,307 KRW (314 USD), and the difference is statistically significant at $p < 0.000$. Therefore, we found support for the claim that autonomy is valued in this occupational setting.

Figure 2. Observed wage differentials



Second, Table 2 shows blogger-type creators demand a higher price for their autonomy than platform-type creators. The three models in the table have different sets of control variables, and the results are robust to the scope of control variables included in the model. The inclusion of the size of viewership across models is to partly address the empirical concern that blogger-type creators and platform-type creators might not be truly comparable in terms of their skills, popularity, experience, or status.

Table 2. Linear regression on the value of autonomy

DV: $\log\left(\frac{WAGE_{LA}}{WAGE_{HA}}\right)$	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Blogger-type	0.169 (0.079)*	0.189(0.088)*	0.303 (0.087)***
Viewership (logged)	0.032 (0.020)	0.030 (0.021)	0.026 (0.021)
$wage_{HA}$ (logged)		0.020 (0.047)	0.012(0.052)
Female			0.065 (0.067)
Identity ("I consider comics creation my job")			-0.006 (0.065)
Has alternative source of income			0.077 (0.080)
Ever worked as platform-type creator			0.208 (0.124)
Constant	-0.158(0.218)	-0.233 (0.260)	-0.386 (0.305)
N	84	84	84

Note: The value of autonomy is measured by the logged difference between the price requested for high-autonomy jobs and the price for low-autonomy jobs. The sample size reduces from 137 to 84 because of missing values in control variables. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. *p<.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

Figure 3. Viewership imbalance between blogger-type and platform-type creators

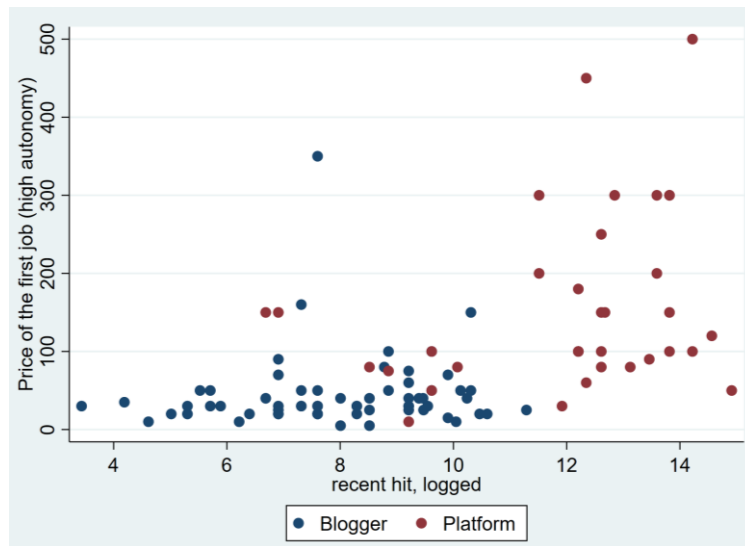


Figure 3, which maps the recent highest viewership of these creators, further aggravates the concern as we observe the popularity imbalance between the two types of creators; platform-type creators generally have greater viewership than blogger-type creators. We believe the difference in the size of viewership is primarily due to the platform effect: being featured on the platform can dramatically increase the size of their audience as millions of users access the platforms. Platforms offer their pages to promising creators based on their selection criteria, but this does not necessarily mean that blogger-type creators are less skilled than platform-type creators. First, one indicator of success in a comics-creating career is that popular networks or production studios are interested in buying the creator’s story rights for TV shows or movies. We found numerous examples of high-quality comics by blogger-type creators that were also produced by major studios and networks. Second, we also found qualitative evidence that some creators willingly choose not to be featured on or hired by the platform because of the characteristics of the mainstream platform audience and their behaviors. For example, one creator mentioned the demographic mismatch between her main audience group and the platform as a reason she chose not to be on the platform. The creator said:

“I personally feel that the readers of Naver [the biggest platform in Korea] Webtoon are too young, and... how should I put it, I often find savage comments there. When I see them, it even makes me feel a little pathetic. So, I’m not a fan of the outlet.”

Even in a case when blogger-type creators are indeed less skilled than platform-type creators and a status hierarchy between the two types of creators exists, we still believe that our results provide a valuable intuition. According to our study, blogger-type creators who probably want an introductory opportunity on the platform to enhance their comics-creating careers, charge a higher price for their autonomy. Note that the price of autonomy is different from the wage for the job, and blogger-type creators ask lower prices for their jobs in general, as shown in Figure 3. Therefore, it could be that blogger-type creators are less experienced and more willing to accept lower wages to seize this outside job opportunity and hopefully make their names. However, even when they ask for lower wages for their work, they ask for higher premiums for the lower autonomy jobs. On the other hand, platform-type creators may charge much higher prices for their work, but the price differences between high-autonomy jobs and low-autonomy jobs are smaller than those of blogger-type creators. The fact that platform-type creators are shown to care less about their autonomy is even surprising as previous literature documents that autonomy is more valued among highly skilled professionals and further freedom in their work is often considered a luxury for highly skilled workers (Mas and Pallais 2017; Wilensky 1964; Thomas and Hewitt 2011).

The observation that blogger-type creators value their autonomy more highly than platform-type creators resonates with our interview data. A platform-type creator we interviewed appeared to be indifferent toward job descriptions and work conditions, saying, *“There’s nothing special about it. I’m just delivering what the client asks for”* in his creative activities. He also said,

“This is what I am being paid for. Before the readers [of my comics], there’s this contract between an employee and an employer.”

On the contrary, a blogger-type creator cared very much about the level of autonomy in her creative activities. She said,

“Sometimes, I find myself thinking, ‘I feel obligated to do this. I feel obligated to draw because I haven’t uploaded anything in a while.’ And then it hits me, ‘Wait, I work as an obligation, and this is supposed to be my hobby, but now I am also obliged to do this?’ I get angry at myself.”

“I do earn money from my corporate work, and this comics work is more like doing a creative act. The sense of accomplishment matters more, so I’m hesitant to make moves that seem overly commercial.”

This qualitative evidence suggests that the two types of creators are not only different in their choice of work arrangements but also in their occupational identities. The platform-type creator in the above example sees himself as closer to regular workers bounded by traditional employee-employer contracts and identifies his creative activities as his regular occupation. On the contrary, the blogger-type creator differentiates her creative activities from the traditional sense of the job and identifies her creative activities as a hobby that is not associated with her occupational mandates and obligations.

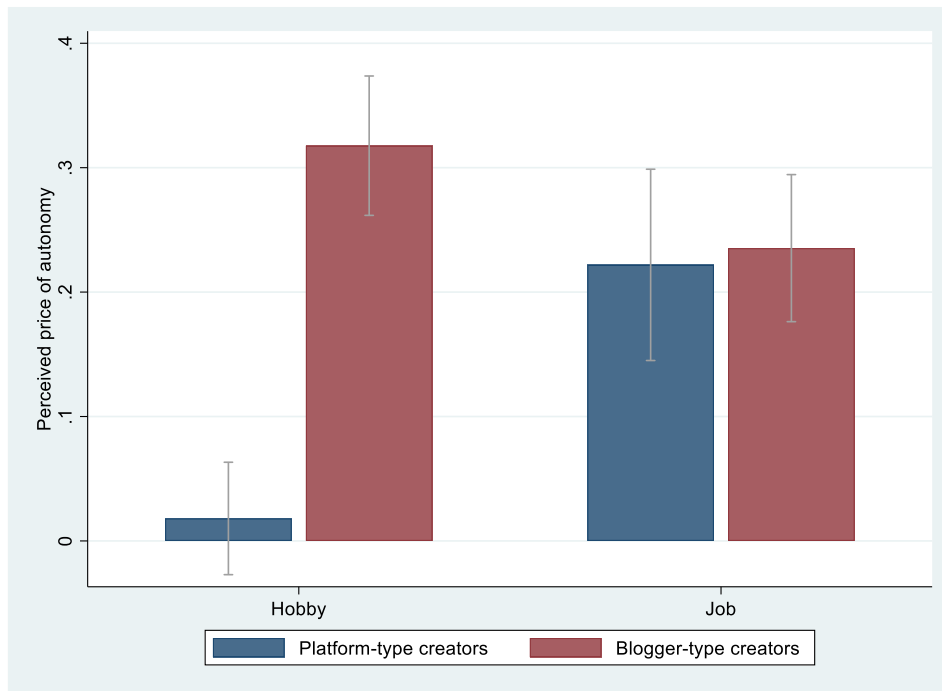
Third, building on this insight, we tested the effect of the creators’ occupational identity and how it interacts with their valuation of autonomy. As shown in Figure 4 and Table 3, we found a strong interaction effect between the creators’ perceived occupational identities and the value of autonomy, and the difference between blogger-type and platform-type creators disappears among those who consider their creative activities as their job. The figure also indicates that the cost of autonomy is particularly higher among blogger-type creators who do not view their creative activities as regular jobs. More interestingly, our analysis did not find the same interaction effect with the non-comic source of income variable. In other words, the fact that creators earn income from non-comic jobs does not appear to significantly impact the cost of autonomy. Instead, our findings suggest that the creator’s self-perceived occupational identity is a more defining factor in determining the cost of autonomy.

Table 3. Interaction Effect of Occupational Identity

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Blogger-type	0.300*** (0.079)	0.313*** (0.081)	0.398*** (0.095)
Considered this my job	0.204** (0.077)	0.198* (0.084)	0.171 (0.086)
Blogger x Consider this my job	-0.286* (0.110)	-0.284* (0.113)	-0.261* (0.107)
Constant	-0.195 (0.215)	-0.255 (0.252)	-0.368 (0.256)
Viewership Control	Y	Y	Y
Wage level Control	N	Y	Y
Other Controls	N	N	Y
N	84	84	84

Note: Linear regression on the value of autonomy (logged difference between the price requested for a high-autonomy job and the price for a low-autonomy job). Robust standard errors are in the parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 4. Interaction Effect between Creators' Identity and Institutions



CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

Motivated by the growing prevalence of independent creators in online platforms, we study how individuals who belong to one of two distinct types of work arrangements—traditional employment and free production—value autonomy differently. Using both a lab-in-the-field experiment and data from interviews with Korean comics creators, this paper shows that the value of autonomy is lower for creators who are paid by firms in traditional employment arrangements compared to independent bloggers who freely share their creative work through their blogs or social media. This supports our argument that bloggers pay to be bloggers. We propose that the mechanism underlying this behavior is occupational identity. The difference between hired and independent creators disappears when they identify their regular job as creating comics.

Scope conditions

While our study offers valuable insights into the experiences of independent online content creators and similar freelance workers, it's important to recognize the specific scope inherent in our research. The world of comic creation presents a unique context characterized by a prevalence of freelance work and an absence of traditional job security. These creators and the open communities they inhabit tend to highly value institutional benefits such as creative freedom and audience feedback, perhaps more so than workers in more conventional or secure occupations. Consequently, care should be taken when generalizing our findings to other forms of employment, especially those offering more job security, regular salaries, or established industrial relations.

Implications for open community and shared economy

Advances in communication technology have given rise to a new institution of production and consumption characterized by the voluntary participation of individuals in online communities (Benkler 2006; Lerner and Tirole 2002; von Hippel 2005). Online creators and bloggers invest substantial amounts of time and resources to share their content on online platforms, often encouraging others to share their posts. In parallel to this, however, it is worth noting that similar work is still being produced and consumed by traditional economic actors, such as firms and paid workers.

The question of why some creators choose to contribute to online communities of free production, while others receive payment for similar work through traditional employee-employer relationships, can be attributed, in part, to intrinsic differences in preferences for institutional values. For example, the nonprofit sector has a different set of institutional values than the for-profit sector (DiMaggio and Anheier 1990; Weisbrod 2009), and studies have shown that employees in the nonprofit sector who accept lower wages find their intrinsic value in helping people (Preston 1989; Rose-Ackerman 1996). Similarly, scientists have been found to accept lower monetary compensation for their work if it aligns with their scientific values (Stern 2004). Programmers involved in open software communities who forgo commercial opportunities and financial rewards provide further evidence of the influence of institutional values on wage differentials (Lerner and Tirole 2002; Mollick 2016).

Our study shows individuals who belong to one of two distinct types of institutions, traditional employment or free production, value their institutional values differently. The results support the argument that bloggers pay to be bloggers; independent creators place a higher value on the autonomy that the institution of free production provides. Furthermore, we show the effect of occupational identity is stronger than the institutions to which they currently belong, as the difference between the creators in the two institutions disappears as long as they have a stronger occupational identity and consider their creative activities as their job.

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