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The Transformation of Online Academic Graphic Designers into *Petite Bourgeoisie* within the Digital Capitalism Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

Academic graphic designers possess strong cultural capital from higher education and deep knowledge of design. This capital includes academic qualifications, high technical skills, and extensive social networks. Internet technology opens global opportunities for them to leverage these skills. Through various digital platforms, they can showcase their work, obtain international projects, and join global communities. These platforms provide them with wide market access, enabling independent work and significant income. However, behind this freedom, they must follow platform rules that reduce their autonomy. Many academic designers then employ junior designers to expand their business, transforming into petite bourgeoisie within the digital economy, controlling junior labour while still subjected to the control of large digital capitalists. This practice creates a tiered exploitation, where senior designers extract more value from less experienced junior designers. This transformation shows that although internet technology and digital platforms open up significant opportunities, they also bring new challenges in the form of injustice and exploitation in the workforce, placing academic graphic designers at the intersection of economic freedom and structural dependency.

Keywords: academic graphic designers; petite bourgeoisie; cultural capital; digital platforms; tiered exploitation

ABSTRAK

Transformasi Desainer Grafis Akademis Online Menjadi Borjuasi Mungil dalam Ekosistem Kapitalisme Digital. Desainer grafis akademis memiliki modal kultural kuat dari pendidikan tinggi dan pengetahuan desain yang mendalam. Modal ini termasuk kualifikasi akademik, kemampuan teknis tinggi, dan jaringan sosial luas. Teknologi internet membuka peluang global bagi mereka untuk memanfaatkan keterampilan ini. Melalui berbagai platform digital, mereka bisa memamerkan karya, mendapatkan proyek internasional, dan bergabung dengan komunitas global. Platform ini memberi mereka akses pasar luas, memungkinkan kerja independen dan penghasilan signifikan. Namun, di balik kebebasan ini, mereka harus mengikuti aturan platform yang mengurangi otonomi mereka. Banyak desainer akademis kemudian mempekerjakan desainer junior untuk memperbesar usaha, berubah menjadi borjuis kecil dalam ekonomi digital, mengendalikan tenaga kerja junior namun tetap tunduk pada kontrol kapitalis digital besar. Praktik ini menciptakan eksploitasi berjenjang karena desainer senior mendapatkan nilai lebih dari desainer yunior yang kurang berpengalaman. Transformasi ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun teknologi internet dan platform digital membuka peluang besar, mereka juga membawa tantangan baru berupa ketidakadilan dan eksploitasi dalam tenaga kerja, menempatkan desainer grafis akademis di antara kebebasan ekonomi dan ketergantungan struktural.

Kata kunci: desainer grafis akademis; borjuis kecil; modal kultural; platform digital; eksploitasi berjenjang

1. Introduction

The economic system, which was previously centered on corporations, has now shifted to an economy driven by the participation of many people, known as the sharing economy (Sundararajan, 2016) or the collaborative economy (Owyang, 2015). The sharing economy refers to activities of sharing, exchanging, or renting goods and services to others through information technology without the transfer of ownership (Taeihagh, 2017:2). The sharing economy or crowd-based capitalism is described as a network consisting of decentralized individuals, where capital and labour resources come directly from the crowd without third-party intervention (van Dijck et al., 2018:1; Sundararajan, 2016:21; de Rivera, 2020:726). According to Ravenelle (2019:5), the sharing economy offers a very interesting future prospect free from employer dominance, allowing workers to manage their income and working hours independently, and serves as a solution to various problems in modern society.

One example of a crowd-based economy is crowdsourcing, which initially aimed to break down heavy workloads into lighter and more enjoyable tasks (Howe, 2009:11; Demir, 2024:86). Crowdsourcing is a method to obtain services, ideas, or content by gathering contributions from various individuals, especially from online communities, for various activities. In practice, companies take work that was previously done by permanent employees, freelancers, or outsourcing companies, and delegate it to a group of usually unknown people through an open call, typically conducted via the internet (Howe, 2006; Fuchs, 2014:246).

Crowdsourcing naturally evolves, with the internet providing a means for anyone to participate in this collaboration. One business model of crowdsourcing is using online platforms in the form of software that connects clients with designers. These online platforms can be accessed from anywhere in the world as long as there is an internet connection.

By participating in this process, these individuals generate information and commodities that hold significant value in the information economy (Howe, 2009:13; Boes et al., 2017:3-4). Hardt and Negri (2004:65) call it immaterial labour, producing immaterial products such as knowledge, information, communication, relations, and emotional responses (Hardt and Negri, 2004:108), as seen in the field of graphic design.

Initially, graphic design was carried out by educated and trained individuals, as seen in the tradition of manuscript making in early Christian Europe (Meggs and Purvis, 2012:46). This skill required special education and training that at the time could only be obtained by certain social classes (Kardinata, 2015:111-115; Samaniego et al., 2024:1). However, graphic design was also open to those who were self-taught or acquired skills through apprenticeships with senior designers (Heller, 2004:136; 2008; 2015).

The internet technology underlying the crowdsourcing system provides opportunities for anyone to become a graphic designer (Howe, 2009:13; Papadimitropoulos, 2018:838), including those who are still at the beginner level, such as young academic graphic designers. The online platform business model known as freelance or gig work is favoured by young people because it offers freedom from formal work rules and bureaucracy, allowing them to work independently.

2. Literature Review

There are three aspects to be reviewed in the literature: digital labour and digital economy; crowdsourcing systems as a form of sharing economy; and cultural capital and the consequences of modernity.

Digital labour encompasses various activities in technology production and media content, ranging from mining workers to software engineers and content producers (Fuchs, 2014:4). This concept emerged in information society theory and Marxist autonomy, indicating a shift in the economy from the production of goods to the production of services and information, transforming professions into more

professional and highly skilled ones (Neilson, 2018:882; Juliawan, 2020:7). Digital workers often operate with digital tools, networks, and software, frequently within the creative sector, which appeals to young people due to the flexibility of time and place of work (Neilson, 2018:883; Nugroho et al., 2019:20). However, despite offering flexibility, digital technology also brings about uncertainty and exploitation, as explained by the concept of immaterial labour that produces non-material products such as knowledge and information (Hardt and Negri, 2004:65).

Digital technology triggers a debate between optimists who see it as a promising world-changer and pessimists who see it as a new tool of control (Chandler & Fuchs, 2019:2; Nugroho et al., 2019:1-2). The online platform-based economy creates new work relations between platform owners, workers, and clients, challenging the concept of conventional decent work. The ILO defines decent work as productive work that delivers a fair income, job security, and freedom for workers to participate in decisions affecting their working lives (Berg et al., 2018:1; Roos et al., 2016:48-49).

Alvin Toffler (1981) in his book "The Third Wave" introduced the concept of the prosumer society, where people not only consume passively but also participate in production. Crowdsourcing is a tangible manifestation of this concept, allowing people to contribute to production through online platforms without having to be permanent workers. Jeff Howe describes crowdsourcing as a combination of "crowd" and "outsourcing," leveraging cheap and on-demand labour through the internet. This system promotes the democratization of capitalism by creating a meritocracy where the quality of work is prioritized over the worker's identity or background.

Crowdsourcing is also related to the sharing economy, which involves sharing, exchanging, or renting goods and services through information technology. Proponents of the sharing economy believe that this system can address economic inequality, empower the poor, and enhance entrepreneurship by offering greater flexibility and control over income and working hours (Brown, 2014:694). However, behind the rhetoric of empowerment, significant challenges exist concerning power, employment issues, and the reinterpretation of individual identities as workers and consumers. The sharing economy offers flexibility but also presents new risks such as job instability and strict digital platform control (Staab & Nachtwey, 2016:260; Törnberg & Uitermark, 2020:2).

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) in "The Forms of Capital" introduced the concept of cultural capital, which consists of three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutional. Embodied cultural capital refers to cultural dispositions ingrained in individuals through socialization, while objectified cultural capital includes physical cultural goods such as books or artworks. Institutional cultural capital encompasses academic qualifications that confer certain social status. This concept is crucial for understanding the reproduction of social inequality, where individuals with greater access to cultural capital tend to gain better social and economic advantages. Bourdieu explains that cultural capital, accumulated through education and socialization, plays a key role in maintaining social disparities, with educational and social institutions serving as primary arenas where cultural capital is recognized and valued. The combination of these three forms of cultural capital enables individuals to access and leverage opportunities within complex social structures, contributing to a deeper understanding of social stratification and power dynamics in modern society (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014:195; Pinxten & Lievens, 2014:1096).

3. Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach with case study methods to explore the experiences and perspectives of academic graphic designers in Yogyakarta. Focusing on this community provides insights into how their cultural capital influences their interactions with digital platforms and their career management within the digital economic ecosystem (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

The academic graphic design community in Yogyakarta consists of individuals with formal education backgrounds in art and graphic design, specifically the students and alumni of the Visual Communication Design Program at the Indonesia Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta. This city, known as a centre for education and culture, provides a rich context for studying how designers with access to formal cultural capital, such as educational qualifications and professional training, use digital platforms like Fiverr, Behance, and others to develop their careers (Bourdieu, 1986). Interviews with designers from this community highlight how they manage projects, interact with global clients, and navigate the dynamics between creative freedom and control imposed by digital platforms (Fuchs, 2014; Howe, 2009).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews allowing designers to share their experiences in depth. These interviews focused on the challenges they face, the strategies they use to overcome obstacles, and their views on the impact of digital platforms on their careers (Flick, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Saukko, 2003). Data analysis was conducted with a thematic approach to identify patterns in how these designers interact with digital platforms and manage their cultural capital. Through this approach, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how academic graphic designers in Yogyakarta navigate challenges in the digital economy and how they leverage their cultural capital to achieve a balance between freedom and control in the context of the sharing economy (Nugroho, Putri, & Laksmi, 2019).

4. Results

In the ever-evolving digital ecosystem, academic graphic designers seem to enjoy considerable freedom in selecting projects and managing their work through platforms such as Fiverr and Behance. These platforms provide them with extensive access to global markets, enabling them to sell their services to clients worldwide (Benkler, 2006:123; Castells, 2001:37–39). However, behind this apparent freedom lie significant constraints imposed by these platforms. On the surface, digital platforms appear to grant substantial autonomy to academic graphic designers. They can set their service prices and choose the projects they want to work on. Yet, this freedom is quickly tested by stringent rules and regulations established by the platforms. The commissions imposed by the platforms, as well as the quality standards and operational guidelines, often dictate how designers must run their businesses (Castells, 2001:57; Fuchs, 2014:136). As a result, the actual control over how their businesses are managed often remains with the platforms, not the designers themselves.

This study involved in-depth interviews with five academic graphic designers who are alumni or students of visual communication design programs, mainly from Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta and the Academy of Visual Arts Yogyakarta. Informants such as Prasetio and Rahman emphasized how digital platforms provide an entry point into global markets, but also create anxiety over ever-changing algorithms. As Prasetio noted, *"Even if we do everything right, one drop in rating or one client complaint can push our profiles down—without clear explanation."* This reflects the broader sense of instability imposed by platform governance.

Furthermore, academic graphic designers must contend with deeper challenges in the form of algorithms that control their visibility on the platforms. These algorithms, which are often opaque and subject to change without notice, play a crucial role in determining whether their work will be seen by potential clients (Castells, 2001:101). This uncertainty forces designers to continuously adapt to unpredictable changes, which in turn can undermine their autonomy in managing how their work is displayed. Nia, a female designer, explained that her success on the platform depends not only on design quality but also on conforming to "trendy" visual styles favored by the marketplace. *"I often feel like I'm designing for the algorithm, not for the client,"* she remarked. This condition creates a paradox where designers seem to have the freedom to run their businesses, but in reality, they operate within a

framework controlled by larger entities (Robinson et al., 2020:12). The platforms set rules that limit the designers' autonomy and require them to comply with policies often designed to serve the platforms' interests (Giddens, 1991:86; Zuboff, 2019:218). Thus, despite the appearance of freedom, the reality is that designers must constantly navigate restrictive rules and regulations imposed by the platforms, affecting their ability to truly control the direction of their businesses (Schor et al., 2020:833).

Under the control of the major capitalists who operate these platforms, academic graphic designers often have to align with the conditions set by the platforms, including facing fierce competition and high commissions. These capitalists have the power to regulate the market in ways that benefit their interests, often to the detriment of designers who must follow rules that may not align with their interests or that limit their ability to innovate and develop their businesses independently (Castells, 2001:101; Fuchs, 2014:136). This added pressure places designers in a position where they must continually enhance their skills and stay abreast of technological developments and platform policies. Santosa, who leads a small team of junior designers, shared that while managing a team gave him more capacity to handle high volumes of projects, he still had to *"play by the platform's rules"*. This included dealing with commission deductions and adhering to preferred project types. This ongoing uncertainty and need for adaptation create a challenging work environment where designers must always be ready to adjust their strategies to remain relevant and competitive (Zuboff, 2019:218).

To address dependence on a single platform, academic graphic designers can develop strategies for diversifying their sources of income. They might work on multiple platforms or build more independent networks of private clients, which can help reduce the risks associated with reliance on a single entity and give them more control over how they generate income and manage their businesses (Fuchs, 2014:257). This diversification allows them to take advantage of various opportunities in the global market and lessen their dependence on a single platform (Zamorano et al., 2021:1).

Moreover, establishing a strong personal brand and attracting direct clients through social media and personal websites can give designers more control and reduce their reliance on digital platforms (Castells, 2001:162–164). Aji, another academic designer, stated that he has been *"shifting efforts toward Instagram and LinkedIn"* to attract direct commissions. This strategy enables designers to promote their work more effectively and build direct relationships with clients, which can enhance income stability and autonomy in running their businesses. It also helps them navigate uncertainty and minimize the negative impacts of changes in platform policies and algorithms. Continuous skill improvement and adaptation to new technologies are also crucial for designers to remain relevant and competitive in the rapidly changing digital ecosystem (Zuboff, 2019:218). Investing in skill development and understanding the latest technologies allows designers to offer more valuable and attractive services to their clients. It also prepares them to handle changes in platform policies and algorithms with greater confidence and effectiveness.

5. Discussions

Overall, the ambiguity between freedom and control in the digital capitalism ecosystem places academic graphic designers in a complex position. While they seem to have the freedom to choose projects and manage their work, in reality, they must operate within a tightly controlled framework by digital platforms. To overcome these challenges, designers need to develop effective adaptation strategies and leverage their cultural capital to remain competitive and independent. By diversifying income sources, building personal brands, and continuously enhancing skills, graphic designers can reduce their reliance on platforms and gain more control over their business direction. The findings from this research suggest that understanding the dynamics of control and freedom within digital platforms is crucial for success in this ever-evolving ecosystem (Pötzsch & Schamberger, 2022:83).

In the digital capitalism ecosystem, academic graphic designers often find themselves in an ambiguous position as a petite bourgeoisie. Although they do not possess the economic capital of large companies that dominate the digital market, they leverage their cultural capital - such as high educational qualifications and deep technical knowledge - to build and run their businesses. This cultural capital enables them to employ junior designers and manage large, complex, and high-value projects (Bourdieu, 1986:241). By utilizing their expertise and knowledge, senior designers can offer more diverse and high-quality services, which in turn attract more clients and lucrative projects. However, in practice, this position creates a characteristic tiered exploitation structure within digital capitalism. Senior designers, armed with their cultural capital, often serve as agents for large digital capitalists who control the market through platforms like Fiverr and Behance. These digital capitalists, while not directly involved in the creative process, hold the reins over the rules and algorithms that govern visibility and market access. In return, they take a share of the income generated by designers through commissions and other fees (Fuchs, 2014:6-7).

Academic graphic designers who have reached this position often find themselves balancing between running their own businesses and meeting the requirements and controls imposed by digital platforms. They use their cultural capital to create additional value, not only for themselves but also for the large digital capitalists. They manage teams composed of junior designers, who often receive lower wages and work under less favourable conditions compared to senior designers. This forms a tiered exploitation structure where the profits and value generated by creative labour are unevenly distributed, with the largest portions going to the digital capitalists and senior designers (Bourdieu, 1986:241-258). In many cases, these academic designers are not only adapting to the system—they are actively aspiring to ascend within it. Several informants in this study expressed a clear desire to become small-scale entrepreneurs by hiring friends or less experienced designers to assist with project execution. Their goal was to gain more economic security, reduce personal workloads, and eventually build formal studios or informal collectives. As one informant noted, *"I don't want to just survive from platform gigs forever—I want to have my own team and take bigger clients."* This ambition, while rooted in the pursuit of autonomy, also mirrors capitalist impulses to control production and labor. It highlights how the petite bourgeoisie status is not merely imposed by structural forces but also voluntarily inhabited as a pathway to upward mobility.

The emergence of academic graphic designers as a petite bourgeoisie highlights the complex dynamics within the digital capitalism structure. They not only function as creative leaders and managers in large projects but also as intermediaries expanding the influence of large capitalists. In this role, they reinforce the control of the large capitalists by integrating lower-level creative labour into the production processes controlled by digital platforms. Junior designers working under them often face tougher and less favourable working conditions, while the value they create is largely channelled to senior designers and digital capitalists (Castells, 2001:101; Giddens, 1991:86). Academic graphic designers in the petite bourgeoisie position face the challenge of maintaining a balance between their creative freedom and the control imposed by digital capitalists. While they have the ability to manage their own projects and teams, this freedom is limited by the need to comply with platform rules and policies that can change at any time. They must continuously navigate the ambiguity between running their own businesses and operating within a system dominated by larger forces (Fuchs, 2014:95-96).

Ultimately, the petite bourgeoisie position places academic graphic designers in a paradoxical role. On the one hand, they are agents who facilitate and reinforce a digital capitalist system that relies on tiered labour exploitation. On the other hand, they are workers who must struggle to maintain their autonomy within a system that is highly regulated and controlled by large capitalists. Their role as intermediaries between large capitalists and junior labour underscores the complexity and ambiguity in the digital economic structure, where value and profits are often extracted from various levels of the creative labour hierarchy.

In this context, understanding how academic graphic designers navigate their role as the petite bourgeoisie is crucial to understanding the dynamics of power and exploitation within the digital capitalism ecosystem. This research shows that although designers have apparent freedom and autonomy, they still have to operate within a framework controlled by larger forces, and they also contribute to reinforcing the tiered exploitation structure that characterizes today's digital economic system.

Digital platforms have opened up vast economic opportunities for academic graphic designers, offering them the chance to reach clients worldwide and participate in various projects that might have been previously inaccessible. This creates a perception of great freedom and potential for growth and innovation in their careers. However, behind the ease of access and opportunities lies a deep dependence on the structures and rules established by these platforms. Many graphic designers find that they must rely heavily on these platforms to obtain clients and projects, which in turn limits their ability to innovate and develop their businesses independently.

This dependence is not trivial. Digital platforms are not just channels for finding work; they also set a series of strict rules and regulations that designers must adhere to. This includes commission settings, quality standards, and other operational regulations that dictate how designers must manage their work. For example, although designers can set their prices for services, they still must comply with the commissions set by the platform and the often strict quality standards and operational rules (Castells, 2001:101, 139; Fuchs, 2014:136; Zuboff, 2019:322-324). Moreover, digital platforms tend to control designers' visibility through algorithms that determine how often and where their work appears in searches or recommendations to potential clients. Changes in these algorithms, which are often opaque, can significantly impact a designer's ability to attract attention and secure projects. Dependence on these unpredictable algorithms forces designers to constantly adjust their strategies just to stay visible and relevant in a highly competitive market. This creates a situation where designers must focus more on navigating and complying with platform rules rather than on creative development and innovation in their work.

This complexity is compounded by the intense competition among designers on these platforms. With millions of designers from around the world competing for the attention of potential clients, the pressure to stay competitive is high. Designers must not only showcase high creativity and quality in their work but also continuously adapt to changes in the economic dynamics set by the platforms. They must always be alert and flexible in facing this competition, often leading them to situations where they feel they have little control over their professional future. This can mean lowering their prices to remain competitive or adjusting their style and approach to better align with the preferences promoted by the platforms. Digital platforms, with their strong control over market access and operational requirements, essentially force academic graphic designers to continually adapt to externally set conditions. Designers often find themselves in situations where they must operate according to the platform's stipulations, not based on their strategies or preferences. This limits their autonomy and places them in a position where they must constantly navigate the rules and expectations set by larger entities.

In the long term, this dependence can hinder designers' ability to innovate and develop their businesses independently. They may find themselves trapped in a cycle where efforts to expand and diversify their business are constantly faced with the limitations imposed by the platform. Therefore, although digital platforms offer many opportunities, they also create challenging environments for academic graphic designers to truly gain full control over their careers and professional direction. Academic graphic designers who succeed in this environment are those who can develop strategies to reduce dependence on a single platform and leverage their cultural capital to remain competitive. This might mean finding ways to build a strong personal brand, diversify sources of income, and develop a more independent network of private clients. By doing so, they can gain more autonomy and control over their business direction and take advantage of opportunities in the digital market without being entirely bound by platform rules and controls.

In navigating the dynamics of digital capitalism, academic graphic designers need to develop effective strategies to manage the ambiguity between apparent freedom and the actual control imposed by digital platforms. They need to leverage their cultural capital to remain competitive and relevant in the constantly evolving market while seeking ways to minimize their dependence on these platforms. Utilizing cultural capital such as high educational qualifications and deep technical knowledge, academic graphic designers can stand out among their competitors and attract more clients. This cultural capital not only helps them offer high-quality services but also enables them to understand and manipulate the digital market dynamics better. However, to truly optimize this potential, they must find ways to reduce their dependence on a single platform.

One crucial strategy is income diversification. By working on multiple platforms, designers can reduce the risks associated with policy changes or algorithm adjustments on a single platform. This not only provides greater stability but also broadens their market reach, allowing them to access clients from various sectors and geographies. For example, a designer who is not solely reliant on Fiverr but is also active on Behance and Upwork has more opportunities to find projects that match their expertise (Fuchs, 2014:257). Moreover, building a more independent network of private clients is another important step. By developing direct relationships with clients, designers can minimize the intermediary role played by digital platforms. This can be achieved through strong self-promotion on social media or through personal websites that serve as online portfolios and direct communication channels with potential clients. These measures enable designers to attract direct clients, which not only increases income but also gives them more control over the projects they choose and how they manage their business (Castells, 2001:162-164).

Establishing a strong personal brand also becomes a critical element in this strategy. Designers who can create a recognizable and respected brand identity can more easily attract the attention of clients outside digital platforms. This not only reduces dependence on a single platform but also increases their visibility in a broader market (Jacobson, 2019:716). A strong personal brand provides designers with a significant competitive advantage, allowing them to position themselves as experts in their field and attract higher-value projects. Besides diversification and personal branding, continuous skill improvement and adaptation to new technologies are also crucial. In the rapidly changing digital world, designers must always be at the forefront of technology and industry trends to stay relevant. This might involve learning the latest design tools, animation techniques, or trends in user experience. By continually enhancing their skills, graphic designers can offer more advanced and attractive services to their clients, increasing their competitiveness in a busy and dynamic market (Zuboff, 2019:218).

This research highlights the importance of adaptive strategies and cultural capital management in facing challenges within the digital capitalism ecosystem. Academic graphic designers need to keep innovating and finding ways to navigate the ambiguity between freedom and control (Giddens, 1991:86). They must achieve a balance that allows them to thrive in a dynamic and unstable digital economy. As part of this ecosystem, academic graphic designers also play a significant role as a petite bourgeoisie. They act as agents within a broader capitalist structure, helping to extract value from various levels of the creative labor hierarchy (Fuchs, 2014:96). In this position, they must effectively manage teams and projects while adapting to the rules and policies imposed by large digital capitalists. Academic graphic designers not only face challenges in maintaining their autonomy but also must serve as intermediaries who reinforce and expand the influence of large capitalists by integrating lower-level creative labour into the production processes controlled by digital platforms (Zuboff, 2019:218).

Therefore, success in the digital capitalism ecosystem depends not only on designers' ability to produce high-quality work but also on their ability to navigate and adapt to the larger, more complex structures that govern how they work. Academic graphic designers who can develop effective adaptation strategies and optimally utilize their cultural capital will have the best opportunities to succeed and thrive in the ever-evolving and changing digital economy (Fuchs et.al., 2024:144).

6. Conclusions

The transformation of academic graphic designers into *petite bourgeoisie* within the digital capitalism ecosystem highlights the complex dynamics between freedom and control in the digital economy. Although their cultural capital gives them an advantage in accessing economic opportunities, they remain bound by the rules and regulations set by major digital platforms. This creates significant ambiguity in their roles as independent business managers and subjects within a broader structure of exploitation.

Academic graphic designers utilize their cultural capital to leverage technology and digital platforms to access global markets and manage large projects. However, they also find themselves in a challenging position where they must continuously navigate the tension between operational freedom and dependence on digital platforms. Tiered exploitation in digital capitalism creates complex layers where added value is extracted at various levels, with academic graphic designers acting as agents of exploitation for large digital capitalists and controllers of junior labour.

To achieve a better balance between freedom and control, academic graphic designers need to develop strategies that allow them to manage their relationships with digital platforms more effectively. This includes finding ways to minimize their dependence on platforms, developing more independent revenue streams, and building a stronger client network. Additionally, policies supporting more equitable profit distribution and better protection for vulnerable digital labour are crucial to creating a fairer and more sustainable ecosystem in the graphic design industry. Ultimately, the transformation of academic graphic designers into *petite bourgeoisie* in digital capitalism reveals unique challenges and opportunities in the digital economy. By understanding and managing these dynamics, graphic designers can create more sustainable and equitable paths for their careers in this ever-evolving industry.

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