# Governed by Freedom: Algorithmic Control, Affective Labor, and the Fetish of Autonomy in Platform-Mediated Knowledge Work

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## Özgürlükle Yönetilmek: Platform Temelli Bilgi Emeğinde Algoritmik Denetim ve Özerklik Yanılsaması

### Extended Abstract

This article offers a theoretical intervention into the study of digital labor by examining the conditions under which freedom operates as a mechanism of control in platform-mediated knowledge work. Particular attention is directed to the ways in which autonomy is constructed, managed, and internalized within freelance arrangements on digital labor platforms such as Upwork. Drawing on Marxist, post-Marxist, and critical management traditions, an analytical framework is developed to interrogate how ideology, affect, and algorithmic governance converge in the constitution of laboring subjectivities under digital capitalism.

The analysis begins with a return to Labor Process Theory (LPT), particularly Braverman's (1974) foundational critique of capitalist deskilling and control, and Burawoy's (1979) extension of this framework to the manufacturing of consent. LPT provides the analytical groundwork for understanding how control over labor is exercised at the point of production and how worker compliance is generated through the structuring of labor processes. In platform labor, this control is no longer exercised through supervisors or hierarchical command, but is embedded in algorithmic infrastructures, rating systems, and data-driven performance metrics. The recomposition of labor is thus enacted not through direct coercion, but through the soft managerialism of interface design, gamification, and automated ranking.

Following the discussion of LPT, theoretical developments from post-operaismo and autonomist Marxism- particularly the concept of immaterial labor- are introduced to account for transformations in labor that extend beyond the analytical scope of traditional workplace-centered theories. Originally formulated by Lazzarato (1996) and further elaborated by Hardt and Negri

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(2004), the concept of immaterial labor designates work that produces knowledge, symbols, communication, and affect rather than material goods. Within platform environments, immaterial labor is subject to intensified forms of measurement and extraction. It is performed not only in technical execution but in communicative style, emotional tone, and visible personality. Reputation metrics and client feedback systems transform affect and sociality into productive forces, enabling platforms to capture value from aspects of labor previously external to formal employment.

In this context, the emergence of the cognitariat (Moulier-Boutang, 2011) is theorized as the reconfiguration of the working class under cognitive capitalism. Members of the cognitariat are not only economically precarious but are continually called upon to self-optimize, remain affectively available, and participate in competitive visibility economies. Labor is no longer confined to the workplace, nor is it restricted to contractual time; it diffuses into all aspects of life through ubiquitous connectivity and social expectations of responsiveness.

Control within platform labor regimes is further analyzed through the concept of neo-normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009), which captures the strategic invocation of authenticity and self-expression within managerial discourse. Rather than being asked to suppress individuality, workers are encouraged to "be themselves," perform passion, and embody entrepreneurial attitudes. Such demands are central to platform-based knowledge work, where emotional display, personal branding, and lifestyle signaling are embedded in client acquisition and retention processes. The managerial ideology of authenticity thus becomes a subtle yet powerful tool of alignment and discipline.

A central concern of this article is the ideological function of freedom within platform labor. It is argued that freedom operates as a fetish in the Marxian sense: it obscures the underlying relations of dependence and control by presenting labor as self-chosen and entrepreneurial. Workers often perceive themselves as autonomous agents within digital marketplaces, while their behavior is structured by platform architectures, algorithmic visibility constraints, and reputational hierarchies. Consent is generated not through overt coercion, but through aspirational narratives of flexibility, self-realization, and meritocratic access.

This process is further elucidated through the concept of hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), defined as underpaid or unpaid labor undertaken in anticipation of future opportunities. On platforms such as Upwork, freelancers are incentivized to engage in hope labor to maintain algorithmic activity, accumulate client feedback, or signal market responsiveness. The deferral of reward functions as an affective dispositif that cultivates endurance, emotional resilience, and optimism- all of which are crucial to sustaining participation under conditions of precarity and saturation.

The theoretical discussion is grounded through the example of freelance workers from Turkey, a semi-peripheral location in the global digital economy. Turkish freelancers, often multilingual and highly educated, turn to platforms as alternatives to domestic labor markets constrained by economic instability and

political authoritarianism. However, their autonomy is highly structured by exchange-rate arbitrage, linguistic hierarchies, and algorithmic obscurity. The concept of structured autonomy is proposed to describe this condition- one in which formal freedoms are preserved, while the actual capacity to exercise them is mediated by unequal access to visibility, trust, and client capital within the global platform ecology.

Three core arguments are advanced. First, that platform labor constitutes not a space of liberation but a regime of governance through freedom, wherein control is exercised through affective norms, metric-driven performance, and aspirational subject formation. Second, that affect, emotion, and temporal deferral are central to the reproduction of platform labor and must be theorized as structural rather than incidental. Third, that a full critique of platform work must engage not only with economic exploitation but with the ideological and psychological attachments that render precarious labor desirable.

The article concludes by exploring possible horizons beyond the current configuration of platform labor. Emphasis is placed on the necessity of rearticulating freedom as a collective, material, and politically grounded capacity, rather than an individualized and market-oriented abstraction. It is argued that only by dismantling the fetish of autonomy and interrogating the infrastructures that sustain it can the platform economy be critically contested and transformed.

**Keywords:** Platform Labor, Algorithmic Governance, Neo-Normative Control, Cognitariat, Immaterial Labor, Hope Labor, Subjectivation.

## Genişletilmiş Özet

Bu makale, dijital emek çalışmaları alanına teorik bir müdahale sunmakta ve özgürlüğün platform aracılı bilgi işçiliğinde bir kontrol mekanizması olarak nasıl işlediğini incelemektedir. Özellikle, dijital emek platformları (örneğin Upwork) üzerindeki serbest çalışma düzenlemelerinde özerkliğin nasıl inşa edildiğine, yönetildiğine ve içselleştirildiğine odaklanılmaktadır. Marksist, post-Marksist ve eleştirel yönetim yaklaşımlarından yararlanarak, ideoloji, duygulanım ve algoritmik yönetişimin dijital kapitalizm altında emek öznesinin oluşumundaki kesişimlerini sorgulayan analitik bir çerçeve geliştirilmektedir.

Analiz, Emek Süreci Teorisi'ne (Labor Process Theory - LPT), özellikle Braverman'ın (1974) kapitalist vasıfsızlaştırma ve kontrol eleştirisine ve Burawoy'un (1979) rıza üretimi konusundaki katkısına geri dönüşle başlamaktadır. LPT, emeğin üretim noktasında nasıl denetlendiğini ve işçi uyumunun nasıl yapılandırıldığını anlamak için teorik bir temel sunar. Platform emeğinde bu kontrol artık denetçiler ya da hiyerarşik komutlar yoluyla değil, algoritmik altyapılar, puanlama sistemleri ve veri odaklı performans ölçütleri aracılığıyla gerçekleştirilir. Emek yeniden yapısallaştırılırken, doğrudan zorlama yerine arayüz tasarımı, oyunlaştırma ve otomatik sıralama gibi yumuşak yönetim teknikleri kullanılmaktadır.

LPT tartışmasının ardından post-operaismo ve otonom Marksizm'den gelen teorik gelişmeler – özellikle de maddi olmayan emek kavramı sunularak

geleneksel işyeri merkezli teorilerin ötesindeki emek dönüşümleri açıklanır. Lazzarato (1996) tarafından geliştirilen ve Hardt ile Negri (2004) tarafından detaylandırılan bu kavram, bilgi, sembol, iletişim ve duygulanım üreten emeği tanımlar. Platform ortamlarında bu tür emek, yoğun ölçüm ve çıkarım süreçlerine tabidir. Emek sadece teknik olarak değil, iletişim tarzı, duygusal ton ve görünür kişilik üzerinden de icra edilir. İtibar ölçütleri ve müşteri geri bildirim sistemleri, duygular ve toplumsallığı üretken güçlere dönüştürmekte ve platformların, daha önce resmi istihdam dışında kalan emek boyutlarından değer elde etmelerini sağlamaktadır.

Bu bağlamda, bilişsel kapitalizm altında yeniden şekillenen işçi sınıfı olarak kognitarya (Moulier-Boutang, 2011) kavramsallaştırılmaktadır. Kognitarya üyeleri yalnızca ekonomik açıdan kırılgan değildir; aynı zamanda kendilerini optimize etmeleri, duygusal olarak erişilebilir kalmaları ve görünürlük ekonomilerine rekabetçi biçimde katılmaları beklenir. Emek, artık sadece işyerine ya da sözleşmeli zamana bağlı kalmaz; sürekli bağlantılılık ve yanıt verme beklentileriyle hayatın tüm alanlarına yayılır.

Platform emeği rejimlerinde kontrol, neo-normatif kontrol (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009) kavramı aracılığıyla da analiz edilir. Bu kavram, yönetsel söylem içinde özgünlük ve kendini ifade etme çağrılarının stratejik olarak kullanılmasını ifade eder. Artık çalışanlardan bireyselliklerini bastırmaları değil, "kendileri olmaları", tutkularını sergilemeleri ve girişimci tutumlar benimsemeleri beklenir. Bu tür talepler, özellikle duygusal ifade, kişisel marka oluşturma ve yaşam tarzı sinyalleri, müşteri kazanımı ve sürdürümünde rol oynadığında, platform temelli bilgi işçiliğinin merkezinde yer alır hale gelmektedir. Yönetsel özgünlük ideolojisi, böylece güçlü bir hizalama ve disiplin aracı haline gelir.

Makalenin temel endişelerinden biri, platform emeğinde özgürlük kavramının ideolojik işlevidir. Özgürlüğün, Marksist anlamda bir fetiş olarak işlediği ileri sürülmektedir; zira özgürlük, bağımlılık ve kontrol ilişkilerini gizleyerek emeği kendi seçimiyle yapılan ve girişimci bir faaliyet gibi sunmaktadır. Çalışanlar çoğu zaman kendilerini dijital pazarlarda özerk aktörler olarak görürken, davranışları platform mimarileri, algoritmik görünürlük kısıtlamaları ve itibara dayalı hiyerarşiler tarafından belirlenir. Rıza, açık baskı ile değil; esneklik, kendini gerçekleştirme ve liyakat yoluyla ilerleme anlatılarıyla üretilir. Bu süreç, gelecekteki fırsatlar umuduyla yapılan düşük ücretli ya da ücretsiz işleri tarif eden umut emeği (hope labor) kavramı üzerinden daha da ayrıntılı açıklanmaktadır (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Upwork gibi platformlarda, serbest çalışanlar algoritmik etkinliği sürdürmek, müşteri geri bildirimi toplamak ya da piyasa duyarlılığını göstermek için bu tür emeğe yönlendirilmektedir. Ödülün ertelenmesi, duygusal dayanıklılık ve iyimserlik gibi özellikleri teşvik eden bir duygulanımsal düzenek (dispositif) olarak işlemekte ve bu da kırılganlık ve yoğun rekabet koşullarında katılımın sürmesini sağlamaktadır.

Teorik tartışma, küresel dijital ekonomide yarı-çevresel bir konumu olan Türkiye'deki serbest çalışanlar örneği ile somutlaştırılmaktadır. Genellikle çok dilli ve yüksek eğitimli olan Türk freelancer'lar, ekonomik istikrarsızlık ve siyasetin etkin şekillendirdiği yerel iş piyasalarına alternatif olarak dijital

platformlara yönelmektedir. Ancak bu "özerklik", döviz kuru arbitrajı, dilsel hiyerarşiler ve algoritmik görünmezlik gibi yapılarla şekillendirilmektedir. Bu durumu tanımlamak için biçimsel özgürlüklerin var olduğu, ancak bu özgürlüklerin kullanım kapasitesinin eşitsiz görünürlük, güven ve müşteri sermayesi erişimiyle sınırlandığı bir durum olan yapılandırılmış özerklik kavramı önerilmektedir.

Makale üç temel argüman ortaya koymaktadır. Öncelikle platform emeği, bir özgürlük alanı değil; duygulanımsal normlar, metrik temelli performans ve arzu edilen özne üretimi üzerinden işleyen bir yönetişim rejimidir. İkincisi, duygulanım, duygu ve zamansal ertelenme, platform emeğinin yeniden üretiminde merkezi unsurlardır ve tesadüfi değil, yapısal boyutlar olarak ele alınmalıdır. Son olarak, platform çalışmasına yönelik tam bir eleştiri, yalnızca ekonomik sömürüyü değil; kırılgan emeği arzu edilir kılan ideolojik ve psikolojik bağları da incelemelidir.

Makale, mevcut platform emeği yapılandırmasının ötesine geçme olasılıklarını tartışarak sonlanmaktadır. Özgürlüğün, bireyselleştirilmiş ve piyasa odaklı soyut bir kavram olmaktan çıkarılarak, kolektif, maddi ve politik olarak temellendirilmiş bir kapasite olarak yeniden tanımlanması gerekliliğine vurgu yapılmaktadır. Özerklik fetişinin çözülmesi ve onu sürdüren altyapıların sorgulanması, platform ekonomisinin eleştirel biçimde dönüştürülebilmesinin ön koşuludur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Platform Emeği, Algoritmik Yönetişim, Neo-Normatif Kontrol, Kognitarya, Maddi Olmayan Emek, Umut Emeği, Özneleştirme.

## The Platformization of Knowledge Work

In recent years, digital platforms have come to occupy a central role in the organization and mediation of labor relations, particularly in the domain of freelance knowledge work. This transformation- referred to as the platformization of knowledge work has been characterized by the emergence of socio-technical infrastructures that facilitate the matching of labor supply and demand across spatial and temporal boundaries. Platforms such as Upwork, Freelancer, and Fiverr have been positioned not merely as neutral marketplaces, but as complex assemblages of algorithmic governance, reputational metrics, and behavioral nudges, through which labor is made visible, ranked, and transacted. These systems have engendered new modalities of work that diverge significantly from traditional employment models, both in their formal architecture and in their normative claims.

While the rhetoric of flexibility, autonomy, and meritocratic access is frequently mobilized to legitimize platform-mediated labor, critical scholarship has increasingly drawn attention to the restructuring of control under digital capitalism. Rather than representing the dissolution of managerial authority, platforms are better understood as its mutation into algorithmic and infrastructural forms. Control is no longer exercised through direct supervision or formal contracts alone; instead, it is distributed through interfaces, feedback loops, visibility mechanisms, and gamified incentives. Labor is governed through design, data, and anticipation- an environment in which workers are compelled

to manage not only their productivity but also their reputation, responsiveness, and affective disposition.

This shift has profound implications for how labor is conceptualized and experienced. Traditional binaries- such as employment vs. self-employment, autonomy vs. control, production vs. reproduction- have become increasingly unstable in the context of platform economies. The freelancer on Upwork, for instance, is simultaneously positioned as an entrepreneur, a subcontractor, a service provider, and a data-producing subject. A nominal freedom to choose projects, working hours, and clients is accompanied by structural pressures to remain visible, available, and emotionally attuned to the demands of both algorithm and customer. In such configurations, freedom is articulated not as a right but as an obligation, constantly measured and recalibrated by computational systems.

These transformations generate considerable interest within the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS), which has sought to interrogate the ideological, affective, and structural dimensions of contemporary labor arrangements. The present article is situated within this tradition and is motivated by the question: How is consent secured, desire cultivated, and subjectivity produced within platform-based knowledge work? In response, a theoretical synthesis is offered that brings into dialogue insights from Labor Process Theory (LPT), post-workerist thought, and critical theories of affect and subjectivation. Rather than treating these frameworks as unified or sequential, they are mobilized selectively to illuminate distinct yet overlapping dimensions of the platform labor experience.

The analysis proceeds from the recognition that platform work is not reducible to its technical infrastructure. Platforms are ideologically dense objects that encode normative assumptions about autonomy, merit, flexibility, and self-realization. These assumptions are not merely discursive; they are materially instantiated in interface designs, algorithmic priorities, and behavioral protocols. As such, a critique of platform labor must attend not only to economic asymmetries and institutional exclusions, but also to the affective investments and symbolic imaginaries through which workers make sense of their participation. The problem of freedom- as simultaneously real, desired, and illusory- becomes central to understanding the functioning of platform capitalism.

The platform is thus approached not merely as a site of economic exchange, but as a regime of subjectivation. Workers are interpellated into roles that require not only technical competence but affective performance, entrepreneurial self-presentation, and continuous optimization. The notion of labor as a bounded activity, limited in time and space, is displaced by a condition of continuous availability, self-monitoring, and algorithmic anticipation. In this environment, value is extracted not solely from productive outputs, but from visibility, affect, and attention- resources that are distributed unevenly and governed opaquely.

Upwork serves as a paradigmatic case of this broader tendency. Its operational logic exemplifies how labor is rendered legible and governable through ranking

systems, profile metrics, job success scores, and client reviews. Freelancers are not simply contracted for their labor but are required to perform a continuous form of self-promotion and reputational maintenance. They must navigate not only the demands of individual clients but also the epistemic opacity of platform algorithms that determine their discoverability and desirability. In this context, success is framed as an individual achievement, while structural dependencies, geopolitical inequalities, and algorithmic biases are rendered invisible.

Furthermore, when viewed from the perspective of semi-peripheral labor markets, such as Turkey, the ideological power of platform freedom becomes especially salient. Workers situated in economically and politically constrained national contexts often experience platforms as both a material opportunity and a symbolic escape. Yet, the autonomy they pursue is deeply structured by currency differentials, linguistic hierarchies, time zone demands, and cultural expectations embedded in the global North. What appears as freedom is thus shaped by a complex set of asymmetries that position semi-peripheral freelancers as simultaneously empowered and subordinated- entrepreneurs in name, yet precarious in practice.

In what follows, the article establishes the theoretical and conceptual scaffolding for a critical examination of platform-based knowledge work. Its central aim is to interrogate how labor, subjectivity, and control are reorganized under conditions of digital capitalism, with a specific focus on the freelance infrastructures exemplified by Upwork. The guiding research question asks: How is consent secured, desire cultivated, and subjectivity produced within the socio-technical regime of platform labor? To address this, the article mobilizes a set of interdisciplinary concepts including Labor Process Theory, immaterial labor, the cognitariat, neo-normative control, hope labor, and the fetishization of freedom. These frameworks are not treated as unified or sequential paradigms, but as complementary analytical lenses that illuminate the multifaceted transformations in how digital labor is structured, experienced, and rationalized. The subsequent sections apply these insights to unpack the specific dynamics of Upwork, examining how it governs visibility, encodes affective demands, and cultivates entrepreneurial subjectivities. In conclusion, the article reflects on the political and theoretical implications of these findings, pointing toward possible avenues for contesting the ideological appropriation of autonomy and freedom in the platform economy.

**Conceptual Foundations**

To critically engage with the ideological, affective, and structural dimensions of platform-based knowledge work, a conceptual scaffolding is required. This section provides a genealogical and analytical overview of six interrelated concepts- Labor Process Theory, immaterial labor, the cognitariat, neo-normative control, hope labor, and freedom as fetish. While these concepts emerge from different theoretical traditions, they are brought into dialogue here to construct a multi-dimensional critique of labor under digital capitalism.

Labor Process Theory (LPT) emerged in the 1970s as a critical response to both mainstream managerialism and classical Marxist economics. It was developed

most notably through the work of Harry Braverman (1974), who extended Marx's analysis of surplus value to contemporary capitalist labor processes. Central to LPT is the argument that capitalist production is structured not only by the extraction of surplus value but also by the imperative to control labor. This control is historically realized through mechanisms of deskilling, task fragmentation, and surveillance.

In Braverman's framework, control is understood as a response to the indeterminacy of labor- the idea that labor power must be continually shaped and directed to produce desired outcomes. The labor process is thus the terrain upon which capital and labor contend over autonomy, skill, and agency. Subsequent contributions, such as Burawoy's (1979) ethnographic work on manufacturing consent, further extended LPT by examining the ways in which workers become complicit in their own subordination through incentive systems, peer regulation, and ideological mechanisms internal to the workplace.

In the context of digital platforms, these foundational insights retain critical relevance. However, the locus of control has shifted from the physical workspace to the interface, the algorithm, and the reputation system. Platform infrastructures instantiate a form of algorithmic control, wherein worker behavior is guided not through direct supervision but through rankings, metrics, and predictive analytics. The visibility of workers, their access to opportunities, and even their perceived professionalism are shaped by opaque algorithmic systems. As such, the labor process is no longer confined to the moment of task execution but extends into a continuous process of self-management, profile optimization, and responsiveness. Contemporary LPT must therefore contend with how control is externalized into digital infrastructures and internalized through platform participation.

The limitations of LPT in accounting for the affective and symbolic dimensions of contemporary labor have been addressed by theorists associated with post-operaismo, particularly Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) and Hardt and Negri (2004). These theorists introduced the concept of immaterial labor to describe forms of work that produce cultural, informational, and affective content rather than material goods. Such labor includes not only cognitive tasks (e.g., programming, design, writing), but also emotional and communicative labor, which are increasingly central to value creation in post-Fordist economies.

Immaterial labor is marked by the blurring of boundaries between production and reproduction, work and non-work, public, and private life. The traditional temporal and spatial coordinates of labor are destabilized: value is extracted from attention, interaction, and sociality. In the platform economy, immaterial labor is subjected to intensified commodification through reputation systems, feedback loops, and customer ratings. Freelancers are evaluated not merely on output quality but on responsiveness, tone, and perceived enthusiasm-characteristics that are neither strictly measurable nor materially tangible.

While LPT remains concerned with the extraction of surplus value through labor discipline, theories of immaterial labor foreground the affective and symbolic circuits through which capital subsumes communicative and emotional

capacities. For knowledge workers on platforms such as Upwork, this means that labor includes not just skill performance but self-performance- articulated through profile curation, brand management, and the constant enactment of a marketable personality. These insights complicate classical Marxist distinctions between labor and life, foregrounding the saturation of everyday experience by the imperatives of production.

The transformation of the labor force under conditions of cognitive capitalism has also been theorized through the concept of the cognitariat, introduced by Yann Moulier-Boutang (2011). The term captures the structural recomposition of labor as increasingly composed of intellectual, communicative, and affective activities, often undertaken under conditions of informality, flexibility, and precariousness.

Unlike the classical proletariat, whose labor was embedded in factories and wage contracts, the cognitariat is dispersed across digital platforms, mobile interfaces, and virtual teams. Control is exerted not through managerial hierarchies but through metrics, competition, and exposure to a surplus population of similarly situated workers. The cognitariat is nominally free but materially constrained. It is expected to be creative, entrepreneurial, and self-valorizing, yet it operates within infrastructures that systematically extract data, attention, and affect.

For platform freelancers, the cognitariat condition is expressed through endless self-optimization, affective modulation, and the imperative to remain permanently "on." Emotional exhaustion, professional instability, and economic precarity are not aberrations but structural features of this labor regime. The cognitariat thus exemplifies a class whose exploitation is masked by a discourse of empowerment, and whose agency is circumscribed by opaque systems of control and competition.

While earlier forms of labor control relied on surveillance and direction, contemporary work environments increasingly rely on normative and affective modes of governance. Neo-normative control, as theorized by Fleming and Sturdy (2009), refers to managerial strategies that encourage workers to express their "authentic selves" at work. Rather than suppressing personality, platforms and organizations incentivize its commodification.

In the context of platform labor, neo-normative control is operationalized through branding, emotional display, and performative authenticity. Freelancers are encouraged to build profiles that reflect their uniqueness, values, and passion for the work. Emotional labor-once considered ancillary- is central to success in client acquisition, retention, and positive review accumulation. Authenticity becomes a managerial expectation rather than a personal attribute.

What distinguishes neo-normative control is its co-opting of resistance. The desire to be oneself is harnessed as a productive force, making dissent difficult to articulate. Emotional engagement is no longer voluntary but required; burnout and anxiety become normalized consequences of failing to "authentically" perform one's labor. Thus, control is refracted through individualization, internalization, and emotional self-regulation, making it deeply effective yet hard

to contest.

The ideology of freedom and self-realization within platform labor is intimately tied to the phenomenon of hope labor, conceptualized by Kuehn and Corrigan (2013). Hope labor is defined as work performed with little or no immediate remuneration in the expectation of future returns-whether monetary, reputational, or symbolic. It is underpinned by the logic of deferred gratification: present sacrifice is justified by future success.

On platforms like Upwork, hope labor manifests in the acceptance of low-paying jobs to build a profile, generate ratings, or stay visible to the algorithm. Workers are encouraged to interpret these sacrifices as investments in a personal brand. However, the temporality of hope labor is structurally indefinite- success is perpetually promised but rarely actualized, especially in saturated markets governed by opaque criteria. Hope labor thus functions as an affective dispositif: a mechanism that governs participation through aspiration, emotional resilience, and the fantasy of upward mobility.

At the center of platform labor ideology is the fetishization of freedom. Drawing from Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, freedom is treated here as a social form that conceals the material relations and power structures upon which it rests. Freelancers are constructed as autonomous agents- choosing when, where, and for whom to work. Yet these choices are delimited by algorithmic gatekeeping, reputational hierarchies, and economic necessity.

This fetish operates by detaching the signifier of freedom from its socio-material referents, allowing it to circulate as a legitimizing discourse. Workers internalize precarity as self-determination, interpreting structural inequality as a reflection of personal failure or insufficient effort. Through this logic, consent is manufactured not by force but by desire, aspiration, and misrecognition. Platform labor, therefore, does not simply extract surplus value- it cultivates subjectivities aligned with its own reproduction.

## Algorithmic Control and Affective Subjectivity

The transition from industrial to post-industrial labor regimes has been accompanied by a profound reconfiguration in the modalities through which work is managed, evaluated, and experienced. Under platform capitalism, control is increasingly exercised through algorithmic infrastructures, which structure access to visibility, clients, and income. These systems do not merely automate managerial functions; they instantiate new forms of governance through metrics, thereby producing novel subjectivities attuned to the rhythms and logics of algorithmic legibility. In this section, attention is directed to how algorithmic control operates in the context of platform-mediated knowledge work, and how it contributes to the formation of an affectively governed, responsibilized laboring subject.

Historically, control over labor was realized through direct supervision and hierarchical structures. In contrast, platform labor is governed by what could be termed computational bureaucracies: systems that embed evaluative, disciplinary, and allocative functions into code. Interfaces such as Upwork's client

dashboards, success scores, and job-matching algorithms do not passively reflect labor activity but actively shape it. These infrastructures establish a regime of continuous visibility, wherein workers are not only surveilled but also compelled to optimize their performance according to algorithmically determined criteria.

What makes this form of control distinctive is its opacity. Unlike traditional managerial directives, algorithmic systems rarely communicate their logic to users. Workers are required to infer how visibility, matching, and scoring mechanisms function. This epistemic asymmetry produces a laboring subject that is constantly oriented toward the platform's perceived preferences, resulting in anticipatory compliance, over-performance, and hyper-responsiveness. As Cheney-Lippold (2011) has argued in the context of algorithmic identity, individuals are interpellated not through overt instruction but through probabilistic classification- assigned to categories and evaluated by predictive models to which they have no direct access.

Crucial to this mode of control is the affective relationship workers cultivate with metrics. Ratings, reviews, and job success scores become objects of desire, anxiety, and aspiration. These data points, while ostensibly rational and impersonal, function as intimate technologies of self-assessment, shaping how workers perceive their worth, potential, and future prospects. The emotional labor involved in maintaining a high rating is substantial and often unacknowledged. A single negative review, a slight dip in visibility, or a miscommunication with a client can induce significant distress, not only due to immediate financial implications but because of the symbolic devaluation it represents.

This regime of metric affectivity aligns closely Gilles Deleuze (1992)'s conception of the "societies of control," wherein individuals are no longer confined by enclosures (factories, schools, offices) but are modulated continuously by information flows. On platforms like Upwork, the self is made governable through its quantitative representation. The laboring body is rendered into a data double-subject to numerical thresholds, behavioral analytics, and predictive risk scores. In this context, workers become entrepreneurs of the self, continually rebranding, recalibrating, and adapting in response to algorithmic signals.

Algorithmic control also imposes a distinctive temporal discipline. Unlike the fixed schedules of industrial labor, platform work requires an ongoing calibration to the rhythms of demand, client availability, and algorithmic visibility cycles. Freelancers must maintain platform activity to remain "discoverable," respond to messages within algorithmically favored time windows, and complete projects under client-imposed deadlines. This condition has been described by scholars such as Wood et al. (2019) as one of "always-on availability," where the boundaries between work and non-work dissolve under the pressure of continuous responsiveness.

This temporal regime reinforces precarity through unpredictability. Workers cannot count on regular assignments or stable income, as job flows are subject to fluctuations in demand and algorithmic visibility. The platform thus structures time as both scarce and fragmented, compelling workers to adopt just-in-time

labor practices, monitor client behavior, and react swiftly to new postings. This condition resonates with Anne Allison's (2013) account of precariousness where economic insecurity converges with heightened demands for emotional availability and social presence.

The cumulative effect of algorithmic metrics, temporal pressures, and reputational systems is the production of a distinct platform subject. This subject is neither a traditional employee nor a sovereign entrepreneur but a hybrid figure: governed by code, economically atomized, yet affectively interpellated into a discourse of autonomy and meritocracy. Success is framed as a function of adaptability, emotional intelligence, and hustle- qualities that must be continuously performed and refined. Failures, by contrast, are individualized and psychologized, attributed to poor time management, insufficient branding, or emotional unavailability.

In this sense, algorithmic control is not merely a technical phenomenon but a disciplinary apparatus that shapes conduct, desire, and self-conception. Drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality, platform governance can be understood as a mode of power that operates through the shaping of subjectivities capable of self-regulation. The platform subject is encouraged to take responsibility for their own exploitation, to manage their precarity as though it were a project of personal development. This responsibilization constitutes a central ideological function of algorithmic control, enabling capital to outsource risk while intensifying control over labor without the need for direct managerial intervention.

Despite its pervasiveness, algorithmic control is neither totalizing nor uncontested. Workers engage in a variety of practices that resist, subvert, or reinterpret the demands of the platform. These include selective unavailability, multi-platform labor, client selection strategies, and community-based knowledge sharing about algorithmic behavior. Such practices represent vernacular forms of resistance, often informal and adaptive rather than overtly oppositional.

Nevertheless, these tactics often remain within the discursive and structural confines of the platform itself. The aspiration is frequently not to exit the system, but to master its codes, increase visibility, and improve outcomes. As such, even resistance can become complicit- recuperated into the logic of competition, self-optimization, and reputational differentiation. The dream of escaping the algorithm is itself commodified, offered as a reward for hard work and strategic branding.

**Freedom as Fetish: Ideology and the Neoliberal Laboring Self**

At the heart of platform capitalism lies a paradox: while workers are continuously subjected to intensifying control, they are also interpellated as free, self-directed agents. This paradox is sustained through the ideological construction of freedom as both the means and the reward of labor. It is this ideological operation- wherein freedom is celebrated, desired, and commodified, even as autonomy is structurally undermined- that is theorized here through the Marxian

concept of fetishism. In what follows, the notion of freedom as fetish is developed to elucidate the affective and epistemological disjunction between workers' experiences of precarity and their belief in self-governance, merit, and individual responsibility.

In Capital, Marx identified commodity fetishism as the process through which the social relations of production are obscured and naturalized. In capitalist exchange, commodities appear to possess value inherently, rather than as products of human labor embedded in particular historical and material conditions. This mystification not only enables exploitation but also secures ideological consent. In a similar manner, the freedom offered within platform economies appears as a personal attribute or entrepreneurial choice, detached from the infrastructures of algorithmic control and global labor hierarchies that make it possible.

To speak of freedom as fetish is therefore to analyze the ideological form through which autonomy is misrecognized- not simply as a falsehood imposed from above, but as a desire produced through social, economic, and technological structures. In this framework, the freelancer's self-conception as an autonomous agent is not necessarily irrational; rather, it is shaped by a system of signs, incentives, and affective cues that render domination legible as opportunity, and dependency as empowerment.

Central to this ideological formation is the production of the entrepreneurial self, a figure widely valorized within neoliberal discourse. As Foucault (2008) argued in his lectures on biopolitics, neoliberalism does not simply deregulate markets- it reconfigures individuals as economic actors responsible for optimizing their own human capital. Under this regime, labor is no longer a contractual obligation but a project of self-realization, governed by metrics of performance, efficiency, and personal branding.

Within the platform economy, this figure is further intensified. The Upwork freelancer is expected not only to complete tasks efficiently but also to embody values such as flexibility, resilience, and self-improvement. These expectations are operationalized through interfaces, feedback systems, and gamified rankings, which continuously prompt workers to evaluate and adjust their conduct. The platform thus functions as a technology of the self, wherein individuals are responsibilized for their success and failure in ways that efface the systemic forces structuring their labor conditions.

The ideological potency of freedom lies in its ability to mobilize aspiration and identification. Workers may recognize the challenges and exploitative tendencies of platform labor yet still invest emotionally in the ideal of autonomy. This dynamic is best understood through the concept of misrecognition (méconnaissance), drawn from Althusser's theory of ideology and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Ideology does not succeed by convincing subjects of its truth, but by offering them a position from which their lived contradictions can be made meaningful.

Freelancers are hailed as "free agents," "digital nomads," or "remote

professionals"- categories that obscure the conditions of algorithmic precarity and global competition under which they labor. The promise of freedom enables the affective investment necessary for ongoing participation: disappointment is not attributed to systemic inequity, but to insufficient effort, poor self-management, or a failure to properly optimize one's profile and routine. Thus, ideology operates not by denying precarity but by personalizing it- transforming structural dependency into an individual failing or challenge to overcome.

Freedom as fetish also facilitates a deeper form of affective capture. The desire for autonomy, flexibility, and recognition is not externally imposed; it is internalized through daily practices, self-monitoring, and engagement with platform metrics. Workers are not coerced but seduced into participation through the promise of future rewards and the narrative of self-directed success. The platform becomes not merely a marketplace, but a site of moral and existential striving, wherein one's worth is tied to hustle, perseverance, and emotional labor.

This form of affective governance- central to neoliberal labor regimes- relies not on domination but on attachment. As Berlant (2011) argued in her theory of "cruel optimism," individuals often remain invested in conditions that undermine their well-being because these conditions are tethered to their sense of what a good life might be. In the case of platform labor, the fantasy of autonomy operates as a cruelly optimistic structure, sustaining engagement despite deteriorating material conditions. Freelancers may endure low pay, client disrespect, or algorithmic invisibility not because they are naïve, but because they are emotionally entangled with the fantasy of freedom that the platform sustains.

It is important to emphasize that ideological interpellation under platform capitalism does not function through total incorporation. Workers are not passive dupes; contradictions are frequently recognized, and cynicism is widespread. However, as Žižek (1989) has argued, ideology persists even when its premises are doubted, because it is embedded in practices, infrastructures, and rituals. The freelancer may know that the algorithm is arbitrary or that the platform is extractive, yet they continue to perform as though merit will be rewarded, and effort will lead to independence.

This disjuncture underscores the importance of analyzing ideology beyond belief, attending to how subjects act as if the ideological promises were true. Freedom as fetish is thus maintained not by cognitive conviction but by habitual participation in systems that materially depend on its circulation. Consent is not secured at the level of discourse alone but through the embodied routines and temporal investments that structure platform work.

**Affective Labor and Emotional Authenticity in Platform Work**

A defining feature of platform-mediated knowledge work is the centrality of affective labor- the mobilization of emotional, communicative, and interpersonal capacities in the production of value. While such labor has long been recognized in service work (Hochschild, 1983), its significance has intensified under platform capitalism, particularly within freelance ecosystems where self-

branding, client interaction, and emotional tone are crucial determinants of visibility and success. In this section, affective labor is examined not only as an economic function but as a mode of subjectivation, in which emotional authenticity is both demanded and commodified.

The concept of affective labor was foregrounded by Hardt and Negri (2004) as a subset of immaterial labor that produces or manipulates affect- defined as the capacity to feel, to engage, to connect. Unlike material production, affective labor works on human relationships, moods, and atmospheres. It is inherently relational and intersubjective, involving care, attention, empathy, and emotional management. In the context of platform labor, affective capacities are not incidental to performance-they are at the heart of client satisfaction metrics, project retention, and future job prospects.

Platforms such as Upwork render affect legible through ratings, reviews, and private feedback mechanisms. These indicators do not simply evaluate technical proficiency; they reflect emotional resonance, communicative clarity, and the perceived authenticity of the worker-client interaction. Consequently, the worker is compelled to perform not only skill, but trustworthiness, enthusiasm, patience, and responsiveness, even in contexts of conflict or exploitation.

The commodification of affect is accompanied by the institutionalization of emotional authenticity as a professional norm. Platform interfaces, onboarding materials, and community guidelines all subtly encourage freelancers to present themselves as "genuine," "personable," and "customer focused." What is ostensibly a recommendation becomes a structural requirement: failure to appear emotionally available or professionally affable can lead to poor ratings and diminished platform visibility.

This condition has been theorized by Fleming and Sturdy (2009) as neo-normative control, where the imperative is no longer suppressing emotion (as in classical bureaucratic environments) but to perform it convincingly. Unlike surface acting, where emotions are faked, platform labor increasingly demands deep acting- the internalization of corporate affective norms as markers of professional identity. Emotional authenticity is no longer a personal trait but a marketable commodity, evaluated in real time by clients and operationalized through algorithms.

The demands for emotional labor and authenticity are not distributed evenly. Affective labor, as a historically feminized domain, often reinforces gendered hierarchies even within ostensibly flexible freelance environments. Studies have shown that women freelancers are more likely to be evaluated based on communicative style, emotional tone, and customer service skills than their male counterparts (van Doorn, 2017). These evaluations reproduce normative expectations around care, warmth, and patience, transforming gendered emotional dispositions into competitive advantages or liabilities.

In this context, intersectional dynamics must be considered. For platform workers from semi-peripheral regions such as Turkey, expectations around emotional tone and linguistic style are further complicated by geopolitical

imaginaries, racialized perceptions, and linguistic hierarchies. Emotional authenticity is judged through a cultural lens that often privileges Anglo-American communicative norms, placing additional affective burdens on workers who must simultaneously code-switch, appease, and over-perform emotional clarity to counteract implicit bias.

The imperative to perform emotional authenticity under precarious conditions also produces significant psychological consequences. Burnout, emotional exhaustion, and anxiety are recurrent themes in qualitative accounts of platform workers. Unlike traditional employment, where emotional strain may be buffered by institutional supports or collective solidarities, platform freelancers are isolated, dispersed, and structurally disincentivized from disclosing emotional fatigue, lest it negatively impact their ratings or client relations.

Moreover, because emotional labor is often unrecognized in project scoping, it remains unpaid and invisible, despite being crucial to service delivery. The requirement to remain pleasant, upbeat, and empathetic- even in the face of unreasonable demands, scope creep, or aggressive behavior-exemplifies a condition of affective overextension. As Sutherland and Jarrahi (2018) observe, platform work often imposes emotional performance standards on workers, while clients remain largely unregulated - creating a one-sided affective expectation.

The final affective layer involves the politics of gratitude and hope. Platform workers are encouraged to feel grateful for the opportunity to access global labor markets, to escape traditional employment hierarchies, or to work from home. This gratitude is politically potent- it mitigates the perception of exploitation and redirects critique toward personal resilience and optimism. Simultaneously, the structure of hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) fosters a temporal orientation in which the present is devalued in favor of a speculative, better future.

Hope is not merely an emotional state- it is a governance strategy. It organizes action, sustains participation, and masks precarity. In this context, emotional authenticity becomes inseparable from aspirational subjectivity. Workers must not only perform joy and gratitude but believe in the narrative of future payoff, even when empirical indicators suggest otherwise. The emotional labor required to sustain hope under conditions of stagnation or decline represents a deep form of affective capture, central to the platform economy's ideological endurance.

## Structured Autonomy and Semi-Peripheral Subjectivity: The Case of Turkey

The dynamics of platform-mediated knowledge work are not universally experienced. They are shaped by the geopolitical positioning of workers within the global division of digital labor. While much of the critical literature on platform work has been produced in core economies-often reflecting conditions in North America and Western Europe- there is a growing need to examine how these dynamics unfold in semi-peripheral contexts, where economic volatility, political authoritarianism, and limited formal employment converge to make digital labor platforms simultaneously exploitative and aspirational. This section

situates the preceding theoretical arguments in relation to the lived experiences and structural positioning of platform freelancers based in Turkey, with particular focus on the production of structured autonomy and ambivalent subjectivity.

The concept of the semi-periphery, developed within world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 1974), refers to regions that are neither fully integrated into the core of capitalist accumulation nor entirely excluded from its productive circuits. These spaces are marked by hybrid economies, fluctuating state-capital relations, and uneven development trajectories. In the context of digital labor, semi-peripheral countries such as Turkey occupy a strategic position: they offer a surplus of skilled, multilingual labor at rates lower than those in the Global North, but with cultural and infrastructural proximity that often renders them preferable to clients.

This structural positioning generates a form of labor arbitrage that is both economically advantageous for platforms and ideologically potent for workers. The promise of dollar- or euro-denominated income in a context of domestic currency devaluation and rising unemployment appears not merely as an economic opportunity but as an existential escape. Platforms such as Upwork thus function as portals to global labor markets, offering Turkish freelancers access to clients, currencies, and symbolic capital otherwise foreclosed by domestic structural constraints.

Despite their appeal, such platforms do not deliver autonomy in any unconditional sense. What is granted is a form of structured autonomy: the ability to make choices within a tightly circumscribed set of options, governed by platform architectures, algorithmic gatekeeping, and market saturation. Workers may select their hours and clients, but these decisions are constrained by algorithmic visibility thresholds, currency fluctuations, linguistic capital, and client biases- often inflected by assumptions about professionalism, trustworthiness, and geopolitical otherness.

The term structured autonomy is thus proposed to capture this tension between the formal freedoms offered by platform labor and the substantive constraints that delimit their realization. Turkish freelancers, for instance, may technically compete on a global stage, but their ability to secure high-paying, high-trust clients is shaped by their profile language, accent, time zone, political environment, and national stereotypes. This autonomy is real but highly conditioned- a freedom that can be exercised only within predefined algorithmic and cultural parameters.

In digital marketplaces, nationality functions as both a visible and invisible marker. While platforms formally emphasize neutrality and merit, the national origin of workers is often legible through profile language, availability patterns, client interactions, and in some cases, explicit location tags. This geopolitical legibility creates a stratified labor hierarchy, where workers from core economies are presumed competent and trustworthy, while those from the semi-periphery must constantly over-perform to establish legitimacy.

Turkish freelancers routinely encounter skepticism, underpayment, or client micromanagement, not because of individual shortcomings but due to broader representational logics that frame semi-peripheral workers as cheap, expendable, or less professional (Urhan, in press). As such, significant affective labor is devoted to managing national identity: adopting Anglo-American communicative styles, concealing location, or emphasizing cosmopolitan affiliations in profiles and portfolios at platforms such as Upwork. This labor is not merely instrumental-it is ontological, shaping how freelancers come to see themselves and their place within the global order.

For many Turkish freelancers, platform labor is lived as both emancipation and constraint. On one hand, it may allow a temporary escape from domestic job markets characterized by clientelism, gendered exclusion, and authoritarian surveillance. On the other hand, it may intensify economic precarity and individualizes failure. This contradiction produces an ambivalent affective orientation where gratitude, hope, and pride coexist with anxiety, fatigue, and disillusionment (Urhan, in press).

The fetishization of freedom, discussed earlier in abstract terms, takes on concrete affective valence in the Turkish context. Freelancers may express pride in their ability to earn foreign currency, to work from home, or to avoid degrading local employment conditions. Yet these achievements are accompanied by relentless hustle, platform dependency, and the creeping sense that true autonomy remains elusive (Urhan, in press). This ambivalence reflects what could be termed peripheral aspiration:the desire for inclusion in global circuits of value, recognition, and dignity, pursued through structures that ultimately reproduce exclusion and subordination.

Finally, the platformization of work in Turkey occurs against a backdrop of regulatory absence. Freelance platform labor remains largely unrecognized by formal labor law, tax codes, or welfare systems. Workers are responsible for their own income declarations, healthcare, and retirement planning, often in the absence of institutional guidance. This legal ambiguity exacerbates precarity and normalizes informality, rendering workers structurally invisible even as they are digitally hyper-visible.

In this sense, platform labor represents a post-Fordist informalization of the labor market, in which the protections of formal employment are replaced by the rhetoric of choice and flexibility. For Turkish knowledge workers, this shift reinforces a double exclusion: from the security of the national welfare state and from the full rewards of participation in the global economy. Autonomy becomes both a resource and a burden, with the costs of labor market participation fully privatized and depoliticized.

It is important to emphasize that these regimes of control are neither totalizing nor uncontested. Platform workers often develop informal, adaptive strategies to negotiate the algorithmic and economic constraints they face. These include multi-platform laboring, strategic self-presentation in profiles to enhance visibility, selective client engagement, and participation in online forums where freelancers share knowledge about platform behaviors. While not overtly

oppositional, these practices function as modes of micro-resistance and situated renegotiation, illustrating that structured autonomy includes not only constraints but also limited spaces for agency and tactical maneuvering.

## Conclusion: Rethinking Freedom, Resistance, and Critique in Platform Capitalism

The preceding analysis has interrogated the complex ideological, affective, and infrastructural logics through which platform-mediated knowledge work is rendered both desirable and governable. At the heart of this inquiry lies a central provocation: the need to critically re-examine the notion of freedom as it is constructed, circulated, and experienced under contemporary conditions of digital capitalism. Far from being an unqualified good or emancipatory ideal, freedom in the platform economy functions as a fetishized form- detached from material constraints and redeployed as a mechanism of control, aspiration, and self-governance.

It has been demonstrated that the architecture of digital labor platforms such as Upwork constitutes not merely a technical system but a regime of subjectivation, wherein workers are interpolated as autonomous agents yet governed through algorithmic metrics, affective expectations, and reputational economies. This paradox is sustained through the operations of ideology, which renders domination legible as opportunity, precarity as flexibility, and emotional labor as authentic self-expression. The platform worker is produced not as a passive subject but as an active participant in their own exploitation- managing visibility, affect, and performance in the pursuit of success within opaque systems of valuation.

By assembling a theoretical framework that incorporates Labor Process Theory, immaterial and affective labor, hope labor, neo-normative control, and Marxian fetishism, this article has sought to move beyond simplistic accounts of platform work as either liberating or exploitative. Instead, platform labor has been situated as a contradictory site in which structural asymmetries, affective investments, and ideological interpellations converge. The freedom that platform workers claim- and are encouraged to claim- is real in its experiential intensity but structurally circumscribed and ideologically mediated.

The case of semi-peripheral freelancers in Turkey further illustrates how global inequalities are refracted through the platform interface. Here, autonomy is simultaneously pursued and undermined, shaped by currency differentials, geopolitical imaginaries, and labor market exclusions. What appears as inclusion in the digital economy is often experienced as structured autonomy: freedom to choose within systems that systematically reproduce invisibility, informality, and affective overextension. In this context, the platform economy becomes a site not only of economic exchange but of subjective and symbolic struggle, wherein workers seek dignity, recognition, and livelihood through infrastructures that continually frustrate those aspirations.

What then are the possibilities for resistance and critique? It is evident that traditional labor organizing frameworks are ill-suited to the dispersed,

individualized, and algorithmically managed conditions of platform work. Yet resistance does not vanish; it is reconfigured into micro-political acts of refusal, subversion, and rearticulation. Freelancers may resist platform control through strategies such as manipulating their profiles to improve visibility or bypass bias, deliberately limiting their availability to avoid constant responsiveness, and participating in solidarity forums where they share information and collectively analyze platform behavior. While these subtle tactics may not dismantle the structural conditions of exploitation, they reveal the fragility of platform ideologies and point toward the potential for alternative forms of worker solidarity.

At the level of critique, scholars and practitioners in Critical Management Studies are called upon to reorient their analyses toward the affective and ideological dimensions of labor, in addition to structural and institutional concerns. This involves treating freedom not as a static concept but as a terrain of political contestation, always shaped by relations of power, desire, and historical specificity. It requires a recognition that consent is not simply imposed but cultivated, that resistance is not always visible but often embodied, and that emancipation must be grounded in the material conditions and subjective experiences of those who labor under digital capitalism.

Ultimately, the challenge is to denaturalize the platform, to expose the contingent and ideological nature of its operations, and to reimagine labor not through the lens of entrepreneurial individualism but through collective care, interdependence, and political demand. As long as freedom is fetishized- circulating as an empty signifier detached from material autonomy and social recognition- its emancipatory potential will remain foreclosed. The task, then, is not to abandon freedom but to reclaim it: to wrest it from its neoliberal form and return it to a horizon of collective possibility. Future research would benefit from extending this analysis through comparative cross-national studies, in-depth qualitative investigations of platform workers' lived experiences, and politically informed political-economy analyses that examine how platform governance, regulation, and capital accumulation operate across different socio-economic contexts.

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