

Studying digitally mediated sites of work through visual methods: the cases of coworking, gig work and creative entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Purpose – As digital technologies increasingly mediate contemporary workplaces, ethnographic studies need to encompass on/offline work practices and workplaces. At the same time, diverse visual practices, for instance, on social media, have become a form of digital work. In this paper, we build on and expand the critical visual methodology developed by Rose (2006) to propose a multimodal framework for ethnographies of digitally mediated workplaces.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on three ethnographic studies on coworking, gig work and creative entrepreneurship, with images collected both online and offline, combined with interviews and fieldnotes, we analyse images, the contexts of their production and their display on digital platforms as entangled sites of work. In doing so, we develop the three sites of the visual in critical visual methodology further to adapt them to digital workplace ethnography.

Findings – We present practical ways to incorporate visuals and embed them in their social and cultural contexts in digital workplace ethnographies, combining tools from traditional and digital ethnography. Reflecting on our own ethnographic studies against the backdrop of critical visual methodology, we formulate ways to implement a critical multimodal methodology in studying digitally mediated workplaces by taking images seriously, embedding them in the contexts of their production and reception and reflecting on one's own ways of seeing.

Originality/value – This study emphasises the necessity and benefits of engaging with visuals in doing digital ethnography at workplaces with multiple on/offline sites and proposes a multimodal research design to integrate visual, textual and verbal data sources.

Keywords Visual methods, Multimodal, Digital ethnography, Workplace studies

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

It is two p.m. in Bengaluru, India: Jiya sits down at her desk in the apartment she shares with her husband and her five-year-old son. She has spent the first half of the day doing household chores and

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taking care of her child, checking her smartphone regularly to see if she has received notifications from the freelance platform Upwork and making sure to quickly respond to requests. Now, she needs the big screen and some uninterrupted focus to capture the details of the brochure she is working on. In two hours, she will have a video call to discuss her work with the US-based client who commissioned it, just in time for the start of their business day. She will move some personal items out of the way to make sure her video background looks professional.

Meanwhile, Laura, the owner of an independent fashion brand, is on her way to her combined studio/store in Berlin, Germany. She sits on the underground and scrolls through some pictures from her weekend getaway that she considers posting on the fashion brand's Instagram account. She opens the Instagram app and inspects the photos of a fashion brand in Barcelona she admires. A pop-up message distracts her: A notification from Shopify indicates that a skirt from the latest collection has just been ordered in her online shop. She must remember to pack the item and send it out later. Arriving at the studio, she takes a photo of the shop front, writes "open studio from 11to 6" as a picture caption, links to the address, and posts the picture on Instagram.

It has been Regina's third month away from Pärnu, Estonia. Although she knows she will move back after a few months, she misses the coworking space already. The focused work atmosphere and the day-to-day chitchats, chess and table tennis. So, she picks up her phone, opens Instagram, and a short video from her coworking space appears at the top of her feed. A new slogan is put on the wall in her beloved kitchen: "If it doesn't bring you peace, purpose or profit, don't give it your time". Somehow, she could often find a balance between corporate culture and inner peace there. Then her phone says her daily Instagram time is up, so she closes the app and opens a different one to book a ticket to Pärnu.

These three vignettes provide exemplary glimpses of the workplaces and work practices present in three (digital) ethnographic studies that we have combined for this paper: Study 1 on graphic designers working remotely in the gig economy through platforms such as Upwork or 99designs, Study 2 on creative entrepreneurs in Berlin in the entangled spaces of the city, the studio and Instagram, and Study 3, a mixed-methods visual-textual analysis connecting the lived experiences in coworking spaces and their image building on Instagram.

The vignettes illustrate how the boundaries of digitally mediated workplaces get increasingly blurry: work is done on the move, in brief in-between moments and in a constellation of on- and offline places. Moreover, the vignettes show that the visual has become an integral part of contemporary work: Jiya juggles different screens for different tasks on Upwork while also curating the images she presents to clients of her workplace, which doubles as her home. As a fashion designer, Laura puts a lot of effort into showcasing her work to an Instagram audience through videos and images. And Regina feels like she can be a part of her coworking space from a distance by following its Instagram account. As [Hua et al. \(2023, p. xiii\)](#) argue, "workplace is no longer a phrase equivalent to office buildings or corporate campuses, but where knowledge work takes place – potentially any place thanks to the high level of connectivity enabled by technology – including both traditional and non-traditional settings" ([Hua et al., 2023, p. xiii](#)).

The focus on changing relationships between people and space during work ([Tagliaro, 2023, p. 7](#)) also has implications for ethnographies of workplaces: instead of observing work exclusively in physical offices, ethnographers face the task of tracing work across times and spaces and including diverse physical and digital work environments. Recent studies have reflected on this transformation by integrating various places of digitalised work into research, shadowing or tracking workers in novel ways or integrating new kinds of materials and documents into workplace studies (e.g. [Richardson, 2018](#); [Luff and Heath, 2019, p. 579](#)).

However, the roles of visuals for the exploration of multiple places of digitalised work are yet to be consolidated. Firstly, despite the increasing abundance of visual material, it is rare that these data sources are integrated as a focal part of workplace ethnographies ([Zilber, 2018](#)). Secondly, visuals are often used to present the materiality of workplaces but are not sufficiently embedded in a broader context of the practices of producing and displaying them, often across digital and physical realms.

Therefore, the question remains: Amid the proliferation of digital work, how can we develop and theorise a research methodology that caters to the rising multiplicity of on- and offline workplaces and the increasing abundance of visual data?

In this study, we propose a multimodal methodological framework that leverages the potential of visual methods in multi-sited workplace ethnographies. We build on [Rose's \(2006\)](#) critical visual methodology. She proposes an approach that takes images and their effects seriously and embeds them in a context of social conditions and cultural practices. Moreover, she stresses the importance of reflexivity in considering how our perspectives are shaped by our own social and cultural contexts ([Rose, 2006](#), pp. 15–16).

To establish this framework, we start by connecting visual practices in digitally mediated workplaces to [Rose's \(2006\)](#) three sites of studying visuals, namely the site of audiencing, the image itself and the production of images. The tools she proposes for visual analysis are adapted, expanded and embedded in a multimodal framework. Then we introduce our three case studies in digitally mediated workplaces and, in the findings, lay out how to study and connect these three sites of visuals in ethnographic observation. After this, we discuss considerations on reflexivity and ethics and how this framework can deepen our understanding of digitally mediated workplace dynamics and labour processes. To conclude, we summarise the conceptual contributions, research recommendations and stakeholder implications.

2. Theorising multimodal sites of workplace ethnographies

A multi-sited approach helps to understand visuals, including images, their contexts, receptions and effects. To this end, [Rose \(2006\)](#) lays out three features of a critical approach to visual images: Firstly, taking images seriously in their own regard; this implies that an image has effects that cannot be entirely reduced to its social context. Secondly, addressing how practices of producing images and meanings are embedded in social conditions and cultural practices. Thirdly, a critical visual methodology requires reflexivity by the researcher, that is, to take one's own ways of seeing into account ([Rose, 2006](#), pp. 15–16). Thus, she proposes to study the meanings of images via three sites: the site of the production of an image, the site of the image itself and the site where the image is seen by various audiences.

The complexity of multi-sited visual analysis requires us to capture those sites from a multimodal vantage point, that is, considering not only (written) language but also artefacts, technologies and images as fully valid dimensions of analysis to grasp modern workplaces ([Sommer and Bembnista, 2024](#)). Deploying novel ways to analyse multimodal data also means focusing on the interactions between multiple realms and acknowledging a co-construction of workplaces through the discursive, material, spatial, visual, emotional, embodied and beyond ([Boxenbaum et al., 2018](#); [Zilber, 2018](#)). In this way, workplaces are perceived as constantly unfolding and co-constructed with multiple modes of seeing and knowing, which connects our methodological approach to the multiplicity of digitally mediated workplaces ([Quattrone et al., 2021](#); [Traue et al., 2019](#)).

Below, we point out four features of digitally mediated workplaces and outline how the three sites of visual analysis by Rose can be leveraged in studying them, as well as where they need to be adapted and expanded.

2.1 Site of audiencing: digital platforms as work environments

Digital platforms have transformed work practices in numerous ways. Scholars have pointed out their impact on work organisation: [Huws \(2016\)](#) argues that workers are increasingly subject to platform logics, which entail the surveillance of work processes, the standardisation of outcomes and the need to be online to obtain work. This leads her to argue that the unity of time and space of traditional workplaces with solely physical presence is dissolved, as “presence” is increasingly defined as being logged on ([Huws, 2016](#), p. 21). Platforms thus emerge as indispensable elements of workplaces. Moreover, scholars have argued that platform mechanisms structure work processes in the form of algorithmic control (e.g. [Prassl,](#)

2018; Wood *et al.*, 2019). For instance, in the work of creative entrepreneurs using social media, platforms shape how work is done by framing ranges of possible action technologically, through their terms of use and through features such as likes as a measure of success (Duffy *et al.*, 2021; Repenning and Oechslen, 2023).

In the conceptual sites of visuals, we translate the site of audiencing (Rose, 2006) to the site of the platform, as this is where the images are communicated and staged. This includes how audiences interpret an image in terms of its compositionality, the technology involved in displaying an image, how images are viewed, perceived and commented. In addition, the platform infrastructure shapes the practices of image production (Repenning, 2024a). In the methodological framework we propose, we utilise Rose's perspective on the social interactions between an image and its audience and examine how digital platforms structure those interactions in visual practices at digitally mediated workplaces.

2.2 Site of the image: curated representations of work and daily life

Collecting images and videos in ever-increasing numbers and ever-shorter temporal instances is an integral part of the business model of platforms such as Instagram. This leads to the datafication of images in everyday life and hence the increasing circulation and availability of visual data (Zulli, 2018; Barns, 2019). Visual media platforms are characterised by presenting “fresh, dynamic or continuously processed content” (Weltevrede *et al.*, 2014, p. 126). Images not only document work but also represent what people choose to show about their work. Individuals engage in self-branding practices, a form of “affective, immaterial labour” (Hearn, 2010, p. 427) to garner attention, reputation and potential profit. This labour manifests in the creation of digital content and online engagement, aimed at increasing visibility and improving one's standing in rankings and ratings (Stark, 2020).

As envisioned by Rose (2006), the site of the image is most closely connected to traditional visual research, focusing especially on the compositionality of visual images. Amid the intensification of workplace visuals, our analysis needs to integrate digitally shared images as representations of work and materialisation of work practices (Jancsary *et al.*, 2017; Mao, 2025; Repenning, 2024a). At the same time, we expand the site of the image itself (Rose, 2006) to the analysis of what is shown, what forms of work and spaces of work are represented and what is hidden. Hence, we treat images as representations of work, where workplaces and practices encompass everyday practices and curated visual representations of work on digital platforms.

2.3 Site of image production: producing visual images in work practices

Image production is part of the practices and routines of daily (work-)life and introduces new forms of digital labour, especially associated with digital platforms (Parry and Hracs, 2020; Repenning and Oechslen, 2023). The production of images encompasses and expands a set of on/offline work practices, such as the use of multiple (digital) technical editing tools and up-to-date visual skills, the strategic study and curation of popular aesthetics and the consideration of socio-economic costs and gains for producing images (Bacevice and Wilhoit Larson, 2024; Tezel *et al.*, 2016; Yen and Yang, 2024).

When Rose (2006) speaks of the site of the production of an image, she refers to the technologies used in its making, whether it was posed or candid (technological aspect), its genre (compositional aspect), the economic circumstances of how images are produced and the individual who produced the image (social aspect). In the methodological framework we propose, we build on this approach and expand it to the site of observing on- and offline workplaces. We also extend this site to the analysis of image production and content creation for digital platforms, as multiple online and offline workplaces become sites of image production.

2.4 Site connections: connecting the sites with multimodal data

As we have established above, digitally mediated workplaces encompass a wide range of physical places and digital work environments and induce multiple practices of producing and

interacting with visual images. By treating visual material and associated practices as elements of a multi-sited field of ethnographic observations, we can better understand digitally mediated workplaces by “following connections, associations, and putative relationships” (Marcus, 1995, p. 97).

Tracing relations between multiple sites also implies relating images to other ways of knowing and understanding (Pink, 2013, p. 141). For those relations, we argue that while visual elements enrich ethnographies of modern workplaces, other modalities, such as textual and verbal data, are an integral part of connecting the dots between the different sites, as they enable people to reflect on images, the processes of producing them and interactions with an audience. Thus, we propose “site-connectors” as a fourth element in the form of textual and verbal data, to study digitally mediated workplaces through the interrelations and continuities of the “sites” of visuals and the connections between them.

In Figure 1, we provide an overview of the sites of the visual presented by Rose (2006), connecting them to characteristics of digitally mediated workplaces and how we have adapted Rose’s sites to reflect them.

3. Three multi-sited and multimodal research designs

The following section illustrates three examples of multi-sited ethnography through multimodal research designs focusing on visual methods, bringing together different kinds of workplaces that are mediated by digital technologies. Table 1 presents an overview of our methods from data gathering to analysis, as well as the visual site(s) and modalities involved.

3.1 Study 1: studying freelancers’ work practices through digital photo diaries

Study 1 explored remote gig workers’ everyday work practices in a platform-mediated work environment. The empirical focus is on freelance designers in India who connect to overseas

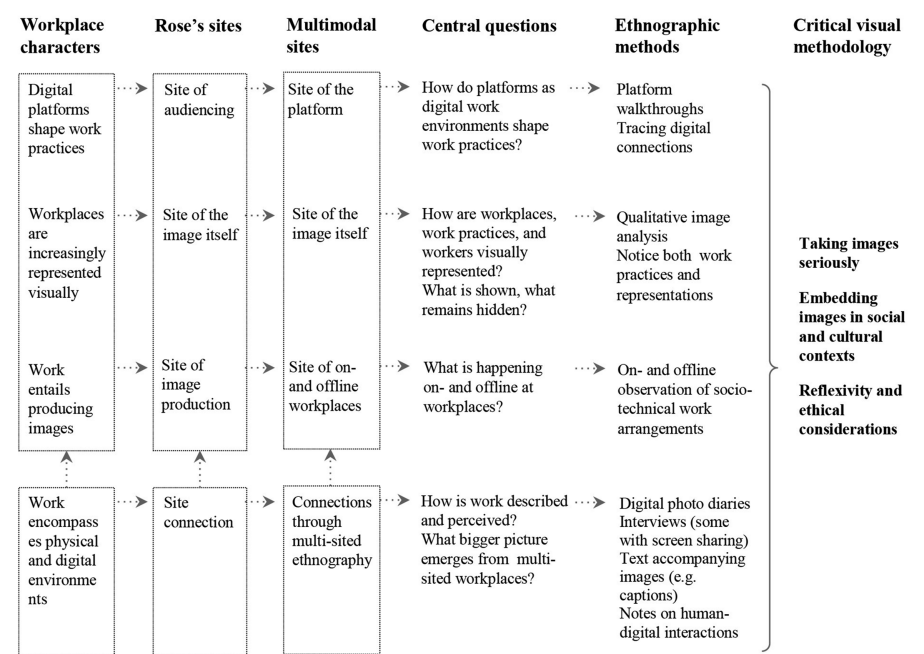


Figure 1. Connecting digitally mediated workplaces to visual sites and practical implications in workplace ethnography. Source: Authors’ own work

Table 1. Methods from data gathering to analysis, the visual site(s) and modalities

Study	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3		
	Gig work mediated by freelance platforms	Creative entrepreneurship mediated by social media platforms	Coworking mediated by social media platforms	Site	Modality
Gathered data	Photo diaries by gig workers (photos)	Visuals on Instagram (screenshots)	Visuals on Instagram (all photos and videos); on-site photos and videos taken by the researcher	Site of the image itself	Visual
	Platform walkthroughs (field notes and screenshots); digital go-alongs (video, transcripts)	Online observations on the platform infrastructure (field notes and screenshots)	Captions, comments, likes and other statistics from Instagram posts	Site of the platform	Textual and visual
	Semi-structured interviews (verbatim transcripts); photo diaries by gig workers (written reflections)	Semi-structured interviews (verbatim transcripts)	Semi-structured interviews (verbatim transcripts)	Site connection	Verbal and textual
		Observation of events and workplaces (field notes)	Working and observing in coworking spaces (field notes, on-site photos and videos)	Site of the on/offline workplace	Material, visual, textual
Data Analysis	Iterative abductive coding in MaxQDA			Coding the data together and relating the sites and the modalities	
Source(s): Authors' own work					

clients via online platforms. In addition to “walkthroughs” (Light *et al.*, 2017) of digital freelance platforms and semi-structured interviews with designers and other creative professionals, designers participating in the study produced digital photo diaries, in which they reflected on their everyday work both visually and textually (Oechslen, 2023).

3.2 Study 2: digital ethnographies of creative entrepreneurship

Study 2 uncovered the on/offline workspaces of independent fashion entrepreneurs whose workplaces were entangled with the studio, the city of Berlin and the platform Instagram. Therefore, visual data from Instagram was combined with offline observations in the city, online observations on the platform, as well as semi-structured interviews. Digital media platforms were defined as spatial mediators of workplaces co-shaping work practices, spaces and temporalities (Repenning, 2022).

3.3 Study 3: visual-textual analysis on digitally mediated spatial production through coworking

Inquiring how digitally mediated work reconfigures experiences, spaces and representations of work, this study opted for coworking spaces as a research context. The aim was to focus on rather understudied medium-sized and small places. A mixed quantitative and qualitative

content analysis on Instagram posts was conducted to understand diverse work practices and image representations of coworking. With semi-structured interviews, field notes and photos taken on-site, a multimodal approach was adopted to investigate the workplace dynamics (Mao, 2025).

We conducted data collection until theoretical saturation was reached. This point was typically reached after 20 to 30 interviews per case study. Visual data collection was also considered saturated when we had the impression that we had already observed various practices of sharing digital content, or when the modes of visual representation appeared familiar to us. The additional offline observations, quantitative visual analyses and qualitative photo diaries were iteratively used as important complementary data sources to gain a deeper understanding of specific aspects. In addition, we triangulated our methods through ongoing discussions, by sharing experiences from our respective case studies, and by comparing and synthesising our approaches.

4. Findings: the visual in multi-sited workplace ethnographies

Based on the three workplace studies, we introduce four building blocks of a critical visual approach to workplace ethnography.

The first part covers the site of audiencing, where we examine different digital platforms as sites where visual images are presented in specific ways. Secondly, we look at the site of the image itself by analysing what is displayed and what is hidden. Thirdly, the site of image production is examined through the on- and offline observation of socio-technical work arrangements at work. Moreover, we show interconnections between the sites with textual and verbal data, which address further reflections as well as potential on/offline frictions and inter-modal relations.

4.1 Site of the platform: analysing and understanding digital platform infrastructures

Digital platforms, such as Instagram, 99designs and Upwork, are central elements of the workplaces we studied to showcase workers' design products, everyday occurrences, events at work and the workplaces themselves. Drawing on what Rose (2006) has called the site of audiencing, we use digital platforms and their impact on work practices as a first lens for a critical multimodal workplace ethnography. The central question on this site is how platforms as digital work environments and sites of audiencing shape work practices.

The first way to explore platforms as infrastructures of work practices is platform walkthroughs (Light *et al.*, 2017). We examined platforms by studying their affordances and constraints, including terms and conditions and technical possibilities, as important context for visual work practices on platforms. For instance, in Study 1, the freelance and creative platforms 99designs, Upwork, Fiverr and Talenthouse tend to regulate profile pictures by limiting the file size of a photograph and making it mandatory to choose a picture with a recognisable face. Also, freelancers can only upload a limited number of images to their profile; they curate and regularly update these images to make sure they reflect their best work. Moreover, due to the limitations of platforms, many gig workers create their own websites to showcase their design work.

Secondly, mirroring more traditional ethnographic methods, we traced digital connections on platforms beyond predefined communities (Hine, 2015). By doing this, we developed a better understanding of the platform interfaces, as well as participants' digital networks and posting practices. For studies 2 and 3, a first exploration period was used to become acquainted with Instagram's features, such as posts, stories, commenting, following, liking and geotagging (see Light *et al.*, 2017). Gradually, we increased the number of accounts we followed, including those suggested by the platform, interviewees and general online research. Interactions between these accounts were followed, such as likes, connected accounts, tags, shares and reposts (see Figure 2a).

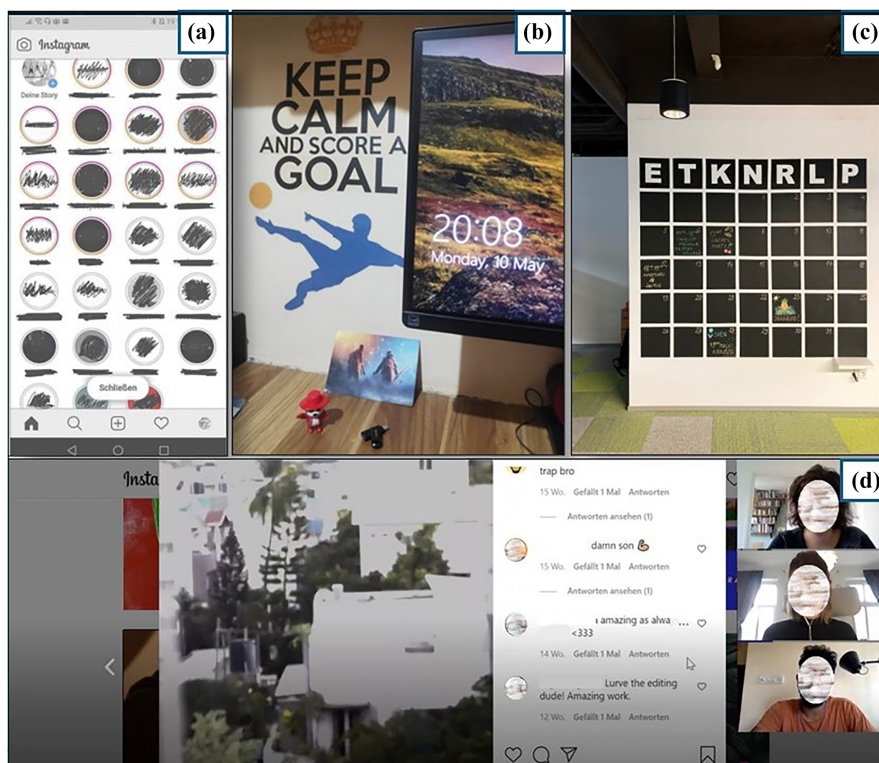


Figure 2. Visual collage: (a) Site of the platform: Screenshot of Instagram stories, (b) Site of the image itself: Image of a designer's workplace from a photo diary, (c) Site of image production: Event calendar of a coworking space photographed during field stay, (d) Site connection: Discussion of a respondent's Instagram posts during a video interview. Source: Authors' own work

Those interactions were documented with field notes to integrate more information on the context of the images, such as the frequency of display and the traction some images gained. Moreover, we reflected on the spatial-temporal experiences of platforms, such as the frequency of posts, our exposure to daily shared visual content, and the feelings of being part of an online community in field notes.

4.2 Site of the image itself: collecting and analysing visual digital content

We expand the site of the image itself by [Rose \(2006\)](#) as both daily materialised practices and curated representations of work. Consequently, our central question revolved around what is displayed and what is hidden.

To address this, for instance, in Study 2, over nine months, daily observations of fashion-related Instagram accounts in Berlin were conducted. Screenshots were taken to capture typical posting practices, frequently represented visual motives, and new ways of posting and interacting. In Study 3, all Instagram posts from four cases were collected, which span between four and six years. The collected screenshots and posts were tagged and analysed in MaxQDA, critically documenting what is frequently shown and what is hidden, what is typically shared or perceived as “out of the ordinary”, and how visuals of work represent work practices as well as how they shift over time.

Secondly, besides platform posts, we collected visuals from multiple sources to compare and reflect on various ways of framing, filtering and editing by different people for different

purposes. In Study 1, photo diaries were used: workers sent visual representations of their workplaces and practices over the course of seven days. A short questionnaire from the researcher also prompted them to reflect on why they chose a certain picture and what it meant to them (see [Figure 2b](#)). For Study 3, the researcher took a large quantity of photos and videos in the field, which focused on happenings that differed from curated Instagram posts, as well as non-human agents such as digital hardware, office equipment, interior and workplace aesthetics.

4.3 Site of the on- and offline workplace: observing daily socio-technical work arrangements with and beyond visuals

We expand [Rose's \(2006\)](#) site(s) of image production by observing work arrangements that are integral to producing visuals at work.

We first familiarised ourselves with those workplaces through observations on digital platforms, such as Instagram, Fiverr, 99designs and Upwork, to develop an understanding of both practices and representations of work. Meanwhile, we conducted observations physically at workplaces and collected more visuals and other data through visits to the studios of graphic and fashion designers, markets for fashion designers, as well as several weeks of working in coworking spaces and living in their localities. In Study 1, research participants shared images of their work setups in photo diaries (see [Figure 2b](#)), pointing out what purposes different elements served: large screens for design work, a quiet atmosphere, as well as personal items to keep them motivated, for instance. In Study 3, the researcher participated in everyday work life, community events, and public events at a coworking space ([Figure 2c](#)). The variety of workplaces we observed reflects the multiple socio-technical arrangements in modern work environments.

We paid attention to coherence and contradictions between platform visuals and observations at the physical workplaces, which sparked critical thinking comparing online image representations and workers' daily experiences.

4.4 Site connections: bridging and reflecting on visual sites with textual and verbal data

While visual materials present a useful lens to study the multiple sites of workplaces, we found that textual and verbal data are necessary to tie them together. [Rose \(2006\)](#) notes that "visual objects are always embedded into a range of other texts, some of which will be visual and some of which will be written and all of which intersect with each other" (p. 10). Therefore, we complemented on- and offline observations of workplaces with field notes, which helped us to uncover frictions between everyday work and its representations. In Study 3, descriptive notes on the human and non-human interactions were extensively written to "spot" technology, as technology is so ubiquitous at work that it is easily taken for granted and becomes invisible in discourses ([Toraldo et al., 2022](#)).

Additionally, we used textual and verbal data produced by research participants. We conducted interviews for more details on the visuals they produce and the processes of their production. In Study 1, interviewees were asked to describe the different elements of their profiles on Upwork, such as their profile pictures, their ratings and their portfolio. Similarly, in Study 2, designers showed their Instagram profiles to the researcher and shared the stories behind their posts. A shared screen was used to anchor respondents' accounts of their posting practices and intentions in specific posts (see [Figure 2d](#)).

Interviews also played an important role in understanding research participants' aims and emotions behind their visual practices, and the impact on their work-life. In Studies 1 and 2, research participants shared how they felt dependent on the platforms' features for promotion and selling, while in Study 3, coworking managers reflected that they rely more on local networks than social media, therefore gradually posted less frequently and more for community memories ([Mao, 2025](#)).

Other sources of participants' text can include captions of platform posts, which provide first insights into what research participants intend to convey with their images. Another example is the photo diaries from Study 1, which included written reflections on the images by research participants.

Accordingly, our empirical codes not only reflect the visible visual elements but also the background information and interactions produced by us, the research participants, or the audience. For instance, short captions accompanying participants' photos and comments from digital platforms were analysed and paraphrased using established methods for textual data analysis (Mayring, 2022; Rose, 2016).

We adhered to an abductive coding process as outlined by Mayring (2022), employing a step-by-step guide to open coding based on grounded theory principles. This process first required a detailed examination of the visual elements (Mayring, 2022; Rose, 2006). We thoroughly reviewed the visual material, identifying and coding minimal units of meaning while paraphrasing the content of photos. For example, a heart emoji was coded as "expressing positive emotions of love" while images displaying how the designers work with the dress form on the latest designs in the studio were coded as "showing the design process behind the scenes." For audio-visual videos, we added detailed content descriptions.

The process of coding, categorising, and re-categorising iteratively brings a deeper understanding to the role of visuals in an ethnographically observed field of work (Rose, 2006). In doing so, we were able to integrate the multiple sites of visual and their connections more rigorously into a common framework for analysis, but this approach also poses a limitation by collapsing visual data into texts, and losing some meanings that are better transmitted in visual forms (Zilber, 2018).

Figure 2 offers a glimpse of what the visuals from each site represent and how they connect.

5. Discussion

In the discussion, we connect the findings to the principles of a critical visual methodology as laid out by Rose (2006): taking images seriously, embedding them in their social and cultural context and reflecting on one's own ways of seeing. We outline how the methodological framework we propose implements these principles and how it enhances our understanding of digitally mediated workplaces.

5.1 Taking images seriously

Firstly, Rose (2006) argues that a critical visual methodology should take images seriously in their own right. To address this, a broad range of photos taken in the field, photo diaries, and social media posts should be gathered to uncover mundane aspects of work (Zulli, 2018; Barns, 2019). Moreover, understanding images from multiple sites and their connectors helps compare images over time and across workplaces, which contributes to a holistic understanding of visual practices and processes at digitally mediated work (Rose, 2016). In particular, viewing images against the backdrop of our own critical observations in workplaces enabled us to carve out what remained hidden in the images produced and presented by research participants, pointing us to the imaginaries of their desired work and workplaces (Bacevice and Wilhoit Larson, 2024).

Those entangled aspects of workplace visuals reflect the complexity of digitally mediated work practices, as well as interrelated challenges for digital workers and researchers. Through visual methods, researchers can resonate with participants by being exposed to digital visual work practices over a longer period, letting such encounters permeate into broader work-life constellations and feeling the hidden precarities and ambivalences in digitally mediated workplace dynamics. Therefore, understanding visual practices across sites is essential to understand the workplaces and the cultures inscribed in contemporary digital work itself (Richardson, 2018; Rose, 2016). For this, further vantage points are needed to situate visual

5.2 Embedding images in their social and cultural contexts

Rose (2006) formulates the contextualisation of images in their social and cultural contexts as the second element of a critical visual methodology. For digitally mediated workplaces, this entails an in-depth examination of the site of audiencing on digital platforms, and the site of image production in on- and offline workplaces.

Digitalised workplaces often encompass digital platforms: photos are commonly taken and uploaded on platforms to document, represent and imagine various fields of work. By studying platforms as sites of work, we were able to embed the analysed images in the social and cultural contexts of work practices shaped by digital platforms (Prassl, 2018; Wood *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, we underscore how platforms intensify spatial-temporal uncertainties of navigating work, and the role of platforms as technical infrastructures and powerful actors that shape work processes (Duffy *et al.*, 2021; Repenning and Oechslen, 2023). In addition, observations of practices and materialities in physical and digital work environments helped us understand the context of visual work practices, especially how they are connected with other work skills and tasks (Bacevice and Wilhoit Larson, 2024; Yen and Yang, 2024; Tezel *et al.*, 2016). Delving into workplaces that fall particularly into complex on/offline practices and representations of work (coworking, creative entrepreneurship, gig working), our studies address the importance of visuals that circulate in an increasing number of local and global communities of work (Jancsary *et al.*, 2017; Mao, 2025; Stark, 2020).

5.3 Reflexivity in researching with visuals

The third element of a critical visual methodology that Rose (2006) proposes is the need for scholars to reflect on their own ways of seeing and how they are socially and culturally shaped. This has the following implications for “ways of seeing” in our research. Firstly, research is not conducted in a neutral arena, but we co-construct the field with the elements and information we encounter along the way, and the field is shaped by our positionality as researchers. Especially when researching precarious work, it is important for researchers to reflect on power relations and our own involvement in them as researchers. Secondly, platforms also shape and mediate our research practices: The data that we provide to platforms while using them shapes what our digital environment looks like and the elements the platform algorithm displays for us. Therefore, platform mechanisms are also part of the field construction. The affordances of platforms also shaped power relations with research participants, for instance, in Study 1, where the researcher had to choose to sign up either as a client or a worker to access information and was thus assigned a role besides that of a researcher in interactions on the platform. Thirdly, the social and cultural processes shaping our ways of seeing are ongoing: our perception of encountering visuals changed in the research process as we encountered and analysed new visuals, relating them to each other and to other material.

To continuously reflect on our positionalities in the research process, we implemented reflexivity measures on two levels: firstly, memos and fieldnotes were added as reflections to include our own observations and ways of seeing and making our emotions visible, as well as contrasts and frictions between different modalities (Sommer and Bembnista, 2024). Secondly, we iteratively assembled our own perspectives, feedback from participants, and theories to construct our results in relation to these elements (Strauss and Corbin, 1991). In this process, we continuously reflected on our assumptions and put them up for discussion.

5.4 Research ethics in digital multimodal ethnography

Since our study incorporates a broad set of multimodal data, privacy and consensus are central to our ethical considerations. A digitally mediated research design should encourage critical

reflection on the methods applied to establish ethical research standards. We aimed to “retain a commitment to some fundamental principles of ethnography as a distinctive mode of knowledge production” (Hine, 2015, p. 2). Ethnography has traditionally relied on observing research sites and participants in public or semi-public spaces. In our study, we translated these ethnographic principles to an online environment. Given the multimodal nature of our data, we adopted a mixed consent strategy, tailoring our approach to different types of material (see also Oechslen, 2023; Repenning, 2024b).

Firstly, obtaining informed consent from interviewees and research participants was essential. Interviewees were informed about the research objectives, methodology and data handling procedures before providing their consent. Secondly, we sought explicit permission to use participants’ photos as visual material in our study. Thirdly, we asked interviewees for their consent to observe their digital profiles for research purposes. For online observations of accounts not involved in interviews, we initiated contact through a follow request, clearly identifying our accounts as research profiles and stating the purpose of our study. All observed accounts were public, meaning their posted content and digital interactions were accessible to anyone. To ensure participant anonymity, we took measures to prevent screenshots from being directly linked to interview quotes. Each screenshot was assigned at least one descriptive code, allowing it to be thematically clustered with other data while serving as anonymised evidence. These ethical considerations highlight the novel complexities that arise in interrelated online and offline research contexts. As a result, researchers must continuously reflect on ethical foundations in the evolving landscape of digitally mediated research.

6. Conclusion

In summary, through connecting critical visual methodology with digitally mediated workplace dynamics and work practices, we propose a multi-sited and multimodal workplace ethnography with an emphasis on visual methods. The framework we propose in this paper makes four contributions to theoretical questions in organisation studies.

Firstly, we point out ways to integrate platform interfaces as sites of work and observation. This enriches debates on how digital platforms shape work practices by integrating elements such as platform affordances and constraints, as well as algorithmic control (Prassl, 2018; Huws, 2016).

Secondly, we provide approaches to analyse images critically, as both documentations of everyday realities and idealised representations of work. Our critical perspective on the representational visual work illustrates the increasingly intensified identity management and branding in the digital era, urging more questions to be raised on the strategic aestheticisation and value normalisation at digital work (Bacevice and Wilhoit Larson, 2024).

Thirdly, we present means to research dispersed on- and offline work settings with a multi-sited visual ethnography. This framework makes explicit how digital labour takes place across a constellation of physical and digital environments, further advocating for critical perspective shifts to the importance of the invisible, the immaterial, and the performance within visual work practices (Quattrone *et al.*, 2021).

Fourthly, by integrating these elements into a shared framework, we contribute to larger debates about the changing character of digitally mediated workplaces (e.g. Hua *et al.*, 2023). By interrelating the increasing amount of image production (e.g. producing social media posts), perception (e.g. observing different digital platforms and their content) and visual meaning-making (embedded in meanings and ideations of work), we reveal the influence of digital platforms in guiding this process with the companies’ models of value capture, and the more deeply rooted global hierarchies around them.

Researchers can build on this framework in three ways: Firstly, we offer an adaptable toolbox for integrating visual elements into the study of digitally mediated workplaces. Depending on the focus of research, diverse fields of work can be studied by centring their visual aspects, but the framework also lends itself to incorporating visual methods to address

questions that arise or remain open after processing text-based data. Secondly, the image of site connectors can be used more generally in studies on spatially dispersed workplaces to trace connections between physical and digital sites of work. Our framework provides a template for an open research approach that gradually co-constructs the field and methods to understand it. Thirdly, we propose not only methodological advancements but, in the outlook, the tinkering of methods as processes towards more nuanced ways of seeing and encountering digitally mediated work. Especially, the more subtle aspects of work that visual methods bring to the fore can support researchers in developing critical perspectives and hold actors in the digital economy accountable.

While the main focus of this methodological paper has been to address researchers' challenges in grasping digitally mediated workplaces, our findings also have implications for practitioners: We hope our methodological advancements can create "a textured, nuanced, and ultimately hopeful account" (Gray and Suri, 2019, p. xxxi) to be aware of the affordances and constraints of digitised work platforms, the amount and extent of labour into representing work with and beyond visuals, and the experiences and feelings such labour brings. Moreover, critical reflection on self-branding obligation can inspire collective actions to trace, measure, and communicate about increasing platform control on digital work, potentially leading to a more ethical national and transnational regulatory landscape of platformised digital labour. On a structural level, accounting for the labour involved in producing images online can support negotiations about fair remuneration of digital work practices.

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Author statement

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