The Journal of Social Media in Society
Summer 2025, Vol. 14, No. 2, Page 1-22
thejsms.org

Implications of Social Media Use Among Self-Employed Workers During the Pandemic: The Case of Photographers and Video Makers in Brazil

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In this article, we examine implications of social media usage among workers who have been drastically affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The research focuses on photographers and video makers whose earnings came mainly from the private and corporate events segment in Brazil. Our analysis compares ethnographic data gathered during the pandemic (2020-2021) to those from an earlier research cycle (2015–2018). This article assesses the impacts suffered by workers in the face of the SARS-CoV-2 crises, analyses changes in professional social media usage and inquires whether the pandemic produced shifts in workers' political subjectivity. Fieldwork revealed that, in response to the acute crisis, workers focused on individual efforts to overcome economic struggles, devoting substantial resources to building their brands through digital media platforms. During this process workers saw professional success or failure as an individual responsibility and expressed political values tied to strands of neoliberal thinking – a phenomenon that seems related to the intensive usage of social media platforms.

Keywords: platform economy, social media platforms, self-employed workers, political subjectivity, Covid-19.

Since the World Health Organization's Director-General, Tedros Adhanom, declared, on March 11th, 2020, SARS-CoV-2 (also known as Covid-19 or Coronavirus) as a pandemic, the world has faced unprecedented challenges from sanitary, social and economic perspectives. The virus and the necessary measures to contain it have plunged the global economy into the worst recession since World War II (World Bank, 2020), profoundly affecting labor markets around the world. The impacts of the pandemic were not spread evenly across industries, nor were the

workers' losses. Individuals in alternative work arrangements and occupations in which only a small share of tasks could be done from home were more likely to have reduced their hours, lost their jobs and suffered falls in earnings (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020). In essence, Covid-19 affected self-employed individuals more than employed individuals and small businesses more than large businesses (Belitski et al., 2022). In Brazil, a country severely hit by the pandemic, where non-traditional forms of employment have been historically dominant, employment fell by over 18-34 per cent year-on-year in vulnerable sectors (Al Masri et al., 2021). As Bridi (2020) argued, the health crisis caused by SARS-CoV-2 hit Brazilian workers in striking and diverse manners, leading to higher unemployment rates, underutilization of the workforce, and significant deterioration of jobs among informal workers.

Understanding the impacts of Covid-19 on work and employment makes up a substantial challenge for scholars concerned with the worlds of labor that have been going through a process of profound transformations within the past few years (Hodder, 2020). In this article, we attempt to contribute to this task by examining the effects of the Covid-19 crisis, both on an objective and subjective level. We do so by examining the situation of workers directly affected by the pandemic, namely photographers and video makers whose earnings came mainly from the private and corporate events segment. The interest to understand this category is twofold, at least: 1. Given that this is an occupational group not covered by social protections tied to work, the ethnographic material that underpins this research allows us to obtain a nuanced picture of increased precarity processes across a diverse range of employment contexts (Alberti et al., 2018); 2. Because of the intensive use of social media platforms by Brazilian photographers and video makers – not only as a marketing tool but as an element that has profoundly reshaped professional practices and imaginaries (Marins et al., 2022) – the research sheds light on the effects of Silicon Valley tech companies over the world of work and employment, including traditional occupations. The latter is a matter that remains unexplored by the literature of work to a great extent. We follow Srnicek's understanding that digital technology is becoming an increasingly pervasive infrastructure for the contemporary economy (2017) and engage with literature on political subjectivity in 20th-century capitalists societies (Dardot and Laval, 2017;

Foucault, 2004; Han, 2017; Rose, 2010). Our point of departure is that of cultural anthropology, which considers work as one of the most important aspects of human existence, as means of producing livelihood but also as a principle for organizing societies (Kesküla, 2018). As such, it should be understood beyond a utilitarian point of view (see, for example, Malinowski, 2002; Sahlins, 2017; Weber, 2009) and as an inherently social activity that involves desires and values constructed in the interaction with others. In this sense, this article draws on the concept of "forms of living" (Millar, 2018) that allows us to explore both the material dimension of work (as means of income, sustenance or livelihood) and its symbolic dimension (as work represent specific modes of inhabiting the world). Going along this path, our goal is to understand how the practice and perceptions of self-employed from a periphery country where precarious forms of work have been historically predominant remodel political subjectivity in the 21st century. Empirical data showed that workers who relied on social media to rebuild their careers saw professional success or failure as an individual responsibility, even in the face of a critical event (Das, 1995) such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The remaining structure of the article proceeds as follows. The first part deals with methodological aspects of the research and presents a brief overview of the specificities in the Brazilian context that shaped the investigation. Then, the "findings and discussion" section of this article begins with an assessment of how the pandemic affected photographers and video makers. Next, we discuss how social media platforms played a massive role in how workers adapted to new conditions to make a living. Subsequently, by engaging with scholarly work discussing neoliberal subjectivity, we examine the nuances of workers' political views from an empirical perspective. The final section will turn to the larger questions of the implications of social media use for work.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES AND CONTEXT

This article draws on longitudinal ethnographic research within photographers and video makers whose earnings came mainly from private events (such as wedding rituals, baptism ceremonies, anniversaries, and other rites marking transitions between stages of life), corporate events and photoshoots (mostly family photography, but also some

commercial work such as fashion, jewelry, architecture, small businesses and professional portraits) and was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The first cycle of the research that originates this article was carried out by one of the authors for four years (2015 – 2018). The second cycle starts in September 2020 through October 2021 and results from the collective effort to follow up on the transformations in the field.

In each of the two cycles of fieldwork, researchers prioritized different observation techniques according to the specific conditions for ethnographic research. Between 2015 and 2018, fieldwork was conducted simultaneously through online and in-person interactions (Marins, 2020). During that period, the researcher engaged in face-to-face interactions with workers as they moved across Brazil, conducting participant observation in several events, including congresses, training programs and award ceremonies. In 2020, when the overwhelming majority of such gatherings did not occur due to sanitary risks, fieldwork relied strongly on digital technologies, including systematic observation of workers' activities on social media platforms, participation in online congresses and in-depth interviews.

In-depth interviews played a critical role in both research cycles, as they allowed us to explore and discuss workers' experiences and assessments that would very unlikely emerge in public. Each researcher conducted their interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire as a guide. We interviewed 35 photographers and video makers – 12 of them face-to-face and 23 through online video calls. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for detailed analysis (a total of 50 hours of audio, approximately). Excerpts from the interviews that appear in this article are translations from the original transcriptions in Portuguese.

The photographers and video makers heard by researchers are men and women spread throughout Brazil, both in small towns and large cities. A few combine the photographic business with other activities, but the vast majority declared that their activities in the photographic/video making business were their primary income source (at least until the Covid crisis erupted). They have different levels of education, ranging from individuals who never completed secondary school to those holding higher education degrees. With regard to bureaucracy, photographers are registered as individual micro-

entrepreneurs (MEI)[1], and others operate in the informal economy. Despite the heterogeneity among the workers, most photographers rely on family members to help in daily activities, such as dealing with clients, finances, photo editing or photo shooting at events. Cooperation often takes place between husbands and wives, but sometimes the activities are shared by siblings, boyfriend and girlfriend, parents and grown-up children. Besides the tasks more directly involved in the photographic and video making business, it is also common for photographers to rely on relatives to lend equipment or money or look after their children while they work.

Table 1.
Sample characteristics N = 35

Demographic category	*N*	Demographic category	*N*
Gender		Age group	
Female	16	26-30 years-old	5
Male	19	31-35	8
		36-40	15
Industry tenure		41-45	6
0-5 years	5	> 45	1
6-10 years	17		
		Additional non-photography/video producer	
		Yes 10	
11-15 years	10	No 13	
16-20 years	1	employment (before covid)	
21-25 years	1	Yes	10
> 26 years	1	No	25

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Impacts

"*Overnight, it was all over*". That was the assessment handed down by Julia[2], a 39-year-old woman who has been in the photographic business for 11 years. Before 2020, most of her income came from family events and photoshoots. Photographing weddings

[1] Individual Micro-Entrepreneur (Microempreendedor Individual – MEI) benefits from a Brazilian scheme of a few social protections such as maternity leave and retirement, as well as simplified method of calculating and paying contribution ant taxes. It applies to individual entrepreneurs with gross revenues that does not exceed BRL 81,000.00 per year among a few other conditions. Source: https://www.gov.br/empresas-e-negocios/pt-br/empreendedor/quero-ser-mei/o-que-e-ser-um-mei (date of access: 27/05/2021).
[2] Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

was the backbone of her business, and in 2019 alone, she shot 38 of them. The work on weddings also attracted new clients who would hire her for other family shootings and celebrations. Recalling the end of March 2020, Julia describes how overwhelmed she felt. For her, the sudden shift from a busy schedule to the indefinite postponement of her work routine led to a sensation of emptiness and despair – to the point of her seriously considering reaching for medical treatment. After a few weeks, however, Julia managed to recover from the initial shock: "*What else was I supposed to do if not adapting and trying to turn this situation into something positive?*". Julia happened to have savings and family members who lived down the street. She says that, after all, it has been nice to be closer to her family in this new routine. While narrating her own experience, Julia was careful enough to warn the interviewer, "*But that ain't usual, you see? Most people in the photographic business are not as financially organized as I am*".

Indeed, if Julia did not face financial hardship, the same could not be said about many of her peers. Although the shape and extent of the pandemic's effects on individuals varied greatly, none of the photographers and video makers we heard passed unaffected. The Covid-19 virus disrupted their routines, which meant a considerable impact on their income. Some indications of the distress provoked by the sanitary crisis were visible on Facebook groups used by photographers and video makers for sharing experiences. In one of the earliest posts indicating a dramatic scenario, from March 21st, a photographer based in Goiânia, a city located in the Brazilian Central-West Region, shared his concerns. Referring to terminated contracts, missing payments and general uncertainties produced by the pandemic, he declared he saw no way out (*não vejo saída*). A fair share of the 124 comments following the original post expressed sympathy and shared anxieties, revealing that many found themselves in a similar situation. Also, posts featuring pictures of equipment for sales became more frequent in such groups. If outbursts on Facebook were not isolated, private conversations about the ongoing struggles were even more common through WhatsApp.

Workers who declared escaping severe difficulty often reasoned that their cases were exceptional. One photographer based in a metropolitan area of Fortaleza, in North-eastern Brazil, said that some of her colleagues with well-established careers "*got to the*

point of starvation". Another one, Carla, a 35-year-old woman from Santa Catarina, Brazil's second southernmost federal unit, who was in the photographic business for six years, claimed that she reached for her parents' financial support. She also described how her energy supply was disconnected due to unpaid energy costs ("*a situation that none of us has ever imagined*"). During fieldwork, we also encountered photographers and video makers who have received the financial benefit put in place by the Brazilian Government to address the immediate impact of income decline during the Covid-19 crisis. Despite stressing that the value of the benefit was considerably lower than their average income before the pandemic, those who received the benefit declared that it played an essential role in protecting them from failing to pay essential bills. Many workers felt forced to take other jobs to make ends meet. For example, a video maker who declared he started to bake cakes for selling locally, a photographer said he rented a motorcycle to work as a delivery guy, and another got herself a job in the commercial department of a company that provides consulting and training services. Photographers and video makers in more favorable situations lived on their savings. However, several among those who owned studios or offices where they used to meet with clients and carry out administrative activities got rid of that physical infrastructure seeking to reduce operational costs. Countless workers decided to quit the photographic and video businesses for good, and some who had side jobs before the pandemic made it their primary source of income. Among such workers, Emanuel, who simultaneously ran a photographic business and worked in his wife's physiotherapy studio, said that what has been his side job sustained him "*among the chaotic scenario*".

What Emanuel called a chaotic scenario could be understood as a setting marked by the disruption of daily life, fear and much uncertainty. From a formal point of view, Brazil's government measurements for stopping the virus were confusing and conflicting. Brazil's federal and progovernment protestors' denialist stance has generated a polarized political conflict with most state and local governments (Dal Poz et al., 2021). As Brazil showed one of the world's worst responses to the pandemic (Ferigato et al., 2020), job opportunities for photographers and video makers disappeared almost entirely for a whole year at least. In addition to economic and social crises making it difficult for workers to

carry on their professional activities, there was fear of contagion. Two workers interviewed for this research said they had been hospitalized in critical condition after contracting the virus. In the case of workers who dealt with pregnant women and babies, there was a particular concern about the clients' safety. Nevertheless, by watching the discussions on social media during 2020, it was clear that the assessment of the Covid situation was heterogeneous and far from consensual. Some workers dismissed the importance of the crisis and assumed that events should go back to normal soon. In a nutshell, there was not only an overpowering uncertainty about the future but also very mismatched assessments of the present.

As segments of photography that depended on the circulation of people and social gatherings to operate were profoundly disturbed, a significant player in that business was dealing with struggles of their own. A company called Grupo Photos, whose revenue derived mainly from promoting events targeting photographers and video makers, was deeply affected by the pandemic. Their main product, Wedding Brasil, a conference and tradeshow taking place annually in the city of São Paulo since 2009, was repeatedly postponed due to health and safety concerns. The biggest of its kind in Latin America, the congress and exhibition attracts thousands of photographers and video makers yearly. According to Grupo Photos, the event brought together 4000 participants in 2019.

To retain the ticket sales they had already made, Grupo Photos ran a series of online conferences. Besides the challenge of launching an online version of the event where face-to-face interaction was crucial, the main objective of the events – "to inspire and motivate" workers, as they often claimed they did – in the midst of such an acute crisis represented a challenge of its own. In one of these online events, which consisted of a series of talks followed by live discussions, Octavio Pompeo, a 28-year-old photographer, set the tone of Grupo Photo's new approach. According to Octavio, succeeding depended on workers' attitudes and perseverance. As long as photographers and video makers could "think outside the box" and "step outside of the comfort zone", they would thrive, no matter what the difficulties were. Adaptation and reinvention were the event's watchwords. Coronavirus was "just one more crisis".

In fact, those photographers and video makers who remained in the business did adapt. Leonardo and Pedro, for example, decided to step out of the wedding video segment to enter the political campaign video realm. Priscila created a digital marketing agency specializing in audiovisual production for online courses, while Gustavo started selling framed pictures of some of his work displaying architectural images or abstract themes. Roberta created a new studio in her father's country house, where she would receive families for open-air photoshoots. Carolina created an online program where she taught ordinary people how to organize their digital photos. Claudio focused on portraits of businesspeople and commercial photography. Many workers said that, as small businesses were being forced to move online during the pandemic, a new market for professional photography was on the verge of emerging.

No matter how varied the stories of "reinvention" seemed, one common thread ran through them: the centrality of social media platforms for a shift in photographers' and video makers' professional activities. The changing approach to digital social media by workers deserves a closer look. In fact, this appears to be a key component for understanding their political attitudes while the Brazilian economy rapidly unfolds as a platform centred system.

Social media usage

While the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak unfolded into a historical record of modern capitalism with 95 per cent of the world's economy suffering simultaneous contractions in per capita GDP (Tooze, 2021), the crisis has turbo-charged profits and share prices of the world's leading technology corporations, including those controlling social media platforms with largest penetration in Brazil (Jolly, 2021; Ovide, 2021). The Facebook Company, which responded to 87% of the social media interactions in Brazil, saw its total revenue rise to $26.17bn in the first quarter of 2021, bolstered by pandemic-driven traffic and ad sales (Paul, 2021). The company's outstanding performance matches the assessments of major shifts in consumer behavior led by the Covid-19 crisis worldwide and the growth peak in social media usage in 2020 (Statista, 2022).

Given a scenario in which the divide between leisure and work time has faded (Scholz, 2012), it is hard to determine how much of the increase in social media is driven

by professional motivations, either in Brazil or other parts of the world. Our research shows clearly, however, that Brazilian photographers and video makers were early adopters of the professional use of social media platforms – matching a trend that other scholars have already noticed among other professional groups (Duffy et al., 2021; Duffy and Hund, 2015; Scolere, 2019). By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, following the transformation of the photographic image by digital technologies (Lister, 2013), the work of photographers and video makers whose production previously confined to the private sphere, gained a public dimension. This shift was particularly evident for workers whose jobs consisted mainly in registering weddings and other family rituals, personal portraits, graduation ceremonies, private events and personal milestones.

Particularly Facebook became an important marketing tool for photographers and video makers, followed by Instagram. As workers gained access to the images produced by their peers on websites and growing social media platforms, new professional networks were formed. In 2018, social media platforms extensive use had produced significant changes in the photography and video making business model, creating new professional hierarchies, increasing market concentration and bringing aspiring photographers and video makers to the core of a new consumer market (Marins, 2018).

As social media platforms became more and more enmeshed in everyone's everyday life transforming work in different settings (Babu et al., 2020; Duffy and Pooley, 2017; Miller et al., 2016; Niedermeier et al., 2016; Song et al., 2019; Steele et al., 2015), savvy use of new digital social media became increasingly decisive to a photographer's or video maker's success. Several workers heard during fieldwork described their professional accomplishments as a direct result of competent use of digital media. That was the case of Bruno, who credited the turning point of his career to a viral video: "We posted a wedding video on Facebook around 7 PM. The next day, when we woke up, the video had 35 thousand views. After that, we were no longer small fry". As a general rule, workers whose professional reputations have been built online observed specific esthetical parameters to reach larger audiences. They were careful about the pictures they selected to display online and monitored comments, likes and shares they got in return. They also thought meticulously about using tags and other social media tools. Although the degree of

dependence on the platforms varied, it is safe to say that social media has played a crucial role in photographers' and video makers' careers in the last decade.

Given the weight of social media in Brazil's photographic and video production businesses when the SARS-CoV-2 crisis erupted, it was not a surprise that social media seemed to be the only escape route within workers' field of vision. “Either you go online, or you are out” this is what Dani said as a speaker on Wedding Brasil, highlighting the importance of social media for the sector. If photographers and video makers were to reinvent themselves, social media, especially Instagram, was viewed as the primary and inevitable tool to overcome the crisis. Increasing visibility and engagement with the audience, organizing the feed – that was seen by workers as a digital portfolio – to make it more attractive, marketing new products adapted to sanitary restrictions and producing content were activities carried out more diligently than ever. Learning about algorithms, finding optimal posting times, targeting potential clients and figuring out whether or not to pay for ads within the platforms became valuable skills – so much so that the vast majority of the workers we interviewed mentioned at some point that they enrolled and participated in training programs focusing on the subject.

Though, in many cases, social media platforms were tools for keeping workers active, finding alternative sources of income and, eventually, inaugurating new professional perspectives, the amount of work required for "reinvention", combined with the opacity of the algorithms (Cotter, 2021; Swart, 2021) produced significant distress. Exhaustion, anxiety, depression, and other factors linked to social media fatigue (Bossio and Holton, 2018; Bright et al., 2015; Dhir et al., 2018, 2019; Islam et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) permeated photographer's and video makers' accounts on work. Even though the phenomenon did not start during the pandemic, it seems to have risen considerably in 2020 as the number of hours spent online increased substantially. When asked about the subject during the interviews, workers pointed out that their daily usage reached as many as 14 hours a day, and some referred to self-control mechanisms to reduce screen time.

Despite the substantial time, effort (and money in some cases) devoted to social media activities, our research data revealed a widespread sense of failure among workers

concerning social media management. When asked about such platforms, workers invariably synthesized their experiences in expressions such as "That's something I need to improve", "I should make a better use of those tools", "I'm not quite there yet, but it's critical for business". On the one hand, the frustration seemed related to the assumption that, despite workers' constant attempts to understand social media platforms' functioning, they were permanently behind when it came to putting the acquired skills into practice. One of the key components for frustration and self-critique was the dilemma of posting content featuring personal life, which included not always appreciated exposure of family members as a strategy to engage with the audience online or the ability to express their political views. Even more important, probably, is the matter of time.

Roberta, 34-year-old, describing how social media now dictate work pace, explains that since potential clients have easy access to several of her competitors, she feels pressured to answer enquires in less than an hour. Other workers emphasized that producing and posting every day is, at once, a requirement to remain on business and an objective difficult (if not impossible) to achieve. In other words, despite the assessments that intensive use of social media leads workers to exhaustion and produces negative impacts on their mental health, photographers and video makers often declared that social media was mandatory to keep business going. On the one hand, that ambivalence of recognizing the harm of increasingly investing on social media platforms and, on the other, not being able to resist the platform's demands results in some workers referring to themselves as "hostages" or "slaves". As 39-year-old Julia puts it:

> *It feels like slavery (…). If Instagram develops a new tool and you don't use it, your performance on the platform worsens because of the algorithms and all. Now it's Reels. You've got to do Reels. And then Live. So I went from really enjoying posting my work on social media to feeling like I'm a slave. Social media triggered a lot of anxiety, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. But I understood that I had to do it to keep working.*

Beyond the intensive use of platforms, according to every worker we heard, dedicating a great deal of attention to digital social media is compulsory. As much as photographers and video makers recognize struggles resulting from platforms and, in

many cases, the risks of building a reputation on media that could vanish unexpectedly[3], they treat them as an unchangeable element of the business environment, something they have to adapt to rather than resist.

Political subjectivity

If the growth and dominance of digital social media are naturalized, so is the harsh competition among workers. In fact, in private conversations with the ethnographers and public speeches in online conferences, many workers referred to the Covid-19 crisis as a sieve (*peneira*). This idea appeared, for example, in the speech of Lavinia, a photographer who specialized in the new-born photography segment, who spoke at the online edition of the conference Wedding Brasil in November 2020:

> *This time of crisis came to work as a filter, a sieve… Those who are prepared will go through this and become stronger. Those who are not prepared will break. Maybe those broke already. Or maybe those will. Let's say those will get hurt so bad that they will have to evaluate whether this career path is something they really want to pursue.*

Converging to this idea, Andreza, who has worked as a photographer for fifteen years, pondered in a conversation with the ethnographers in September 2021:

> *This pandemic moment is also a moment that, for me (...), there are some people that are not working, but are showing that they are doing something, like, they did not disappear, and there are other people that disappeared and are only complaining. Only that, when this pandemic is over, (...) the parties will come back strongly, everything will come back, and when it does, it will be something, like,*

[3] More than an abstract feeling, workers deal with the precarious control over their platform accounts in very concrete terms. One of our interviewees compared social media platforms to rented houses ("The analogy that I draw is that of a rented house (…). I see a lot of people building their careers on Instagram, but if Zuckerberg has a tummy ache and he feels like shutting down Instagram, half the photographic market is gone, just like that, because they don't have a website of their own. So look at Leila's case for example, she has a fine portfolio of women's portraits. One day Instagram banned her because she basically posts images of naked fat women and Instagram decides naked bodies are not allowed. She had her account banned with more than 70 thousand followers, the poor thing"). Another one described how her professional activities have been damaged in the past because her account was temporarily suspended, according to her, because of the way she engaged in a political discussion using the same profile.

really hard! So, I think that everyone has to be very prepared because there is going to be a boom! (...) And who is really working at this moment, the cards will be dealt, these are the people who are going to get really nice places (...). Only that, once again, only those who are structured will survive.

The idea of "sieve" or "filter", to which photographers and video makers repeatedly referred throughout the first year of the pandemic, indicated a two-part classificatory scheme. At one end, we find workers "willing to do the hard work", who would be able to survive difficulties in the market and reinvent themselves (those who supposedly would pass through the sieve). Such imaginaries usually corresponded to photographers' and video makers' perceptions of themselves or reflected their views of colleagues they admired (and whose routines they followed through social media). On the flip side of this native classificatory scheme were placed workers who were considered "less capable", "unwilling to do the hard work", and "people who are about the quick buck". This bipartition based on individual capabilities and attitudes would separate those who would thrive during and after the coronavirus crisis and those who would not be able to make it through the pandemic, according to workers themselves.

According to the workers, the key to success is constant innovation, resilience in the face of adversity and the ability to identify problems and solve them. Autonomy, creativity and originality were attributes that would distinguish successful individuals from those stuck in their comfort zone (Palermo and Ventrici, 2020). Photographers' and video makers' perceptions of their careers seemed to match the "entrepreneurial self" described by Rose (2010). According to Rose's analysis, individuals constantly invest in their own human capital living their lives as a kind of enterprise. As such, photographers' and video makers' lives would be ideally organized around professional goals and a strong duty of self-improvement.

In recent years, much has been written about neoliberalism and the extension of market principles into all areas of life (Brown, 2019; Dardot and Laval, 2017; Mudge, 2008; Ong, 2006; Scharff, 2018; Springer et al., 2020; Ashton, 2021). Through ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews, our goal was to grasp if and how

elements of neoliberal subjectivity discussed in the literature were manifested during the Covid-19 crisis. Given that a previous research cycle revealed the naturalization of an entrepreneurial ethos – meaning that workers demonstrated a strong belief that society should not be asked to guarantee individuals against risks – we attempted to understand the nuances of workers' subjectivities while their business segment was practically extinguished. Has the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic produced any changes in ideological patterns within that segment of self-employed workers? Our research showed that workers' reasoning followed three distinct but complementary directions. The first one consists of feelings of self-blame and individual failure. The second direction taken by workers points to clients as an impediment to their accomplishments. The third one transfers responsibilities to other workers.

As suggested in the previous section of this article, the feeling of individual failure towards one aspect of their professional activities is common among workers. Thus, the duality between freedom and responsibility for the conduct of one's own work was also best characterized as "highly ambivalent" among other self-employed workers, such as those in the cultural sector in England (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). Unsatisfactory management of social media, difficulties in organizing their finances or insufficient marketing skills have frequently been mentioned as limitations to workers' achievements. A few workers also related to a more general aspect of self-blame. This was the case, for example, of 32-year-old photographer Milena, who told the interviewer that her professional struggles are due to mental health matters: "it's just that it ain't the right moment for me to thrive as I'm facing some health problems, and I decided that it was best if I slowed down right now. So, I do therapy and I receive medical treatment".

Workers manifest a great deal of frustration towards consumers who do not appreciate the effort and costs involved in the photographic and video making business. In this regard, clients or potential clients are often accused of some sort of "visual illiteracy" or "low cultural competence". Haggling and bargain-hunting are widely condemned practices considered to devalue professionals and the market as a whole. As for the workers who are open to price negotiation, we find two different approaches among photographers and video makers. The first approach protects colleagues from judgement

even if flexibility towards the rates charged by professionals is considered harmful for the category. A second approach, blatant in Facebook pages that assemble workers, opposes individuals who charge lower fees for their services. That is one aspect of the third ramification of workers' reasoning towards the Covid-19 crisis, namely, photographers and video makers are widely held accountable for hardship by their peers.

Criticism from photographers and video makers towards their peers was frequent and presented in varied forms. One of the most common complaints directed to other workers stressed a supposed lack of resilience and unwillingness to persevere difficulties through hard work. In one of the many speeches along these lines, 27-year-old photographer Beatriz opposed assessments of unfavorable economic circumstances and personal inclinations of working to fight such difficulties. In her words: "they complain because they can't sell…. it's indeed tough, our current situation. But complaining and lying in bed watching Netflix won't solve anyone's problems". Another element already established in the field before the SARS-CoV-2 crisis but reinforced in the second cycle of our fieldwork is connected with the topic of financial structuring. A few photographers who managed to make it through the pandemic despite the severe financial losses during the period stressed that being financially organized (*ter organização financeira*) and having savings for emergencies was critical for self-employed workers. Referring to their acquaintances who were not equally prepared (most photographers and video makers, according to them), our interviewees often suggested that those workers who faced financial difficulties did so not because of Covid-19 crisis exceptionalism but due to poor control over cash flow.

By and large, when reflecting on the dramatic effects of Covid on the segments of photography and video making, workers stressed the crucial rule of individual responsibility in the face of this or any possible forthcoming crisis. The role of the Government or other domains of collective organization, on the other hand, not only was largely absent but was a theme that aroused some kind of wariness whenever it came out in the interaction between researchers and workers. The replies to questions about their

opinion on the Brazilian emergency cash transfer program[4] (*Auxílio Emergencial*), for example, offered us some clues on that matter. Even eligible workers who received the benefit showed a general attitude of suspicion towards it, although admitting it alleviated the damage. One of those workers, Carla, retorted when asked about the benefit: "we know that sometime soon we will end up paying the price [for the *Auxílio Emergencial*]. I mean, maybe we are paying already, through the taxes and the general rise in price". Bruno, in his turn, went as far as declaring that "the help from the government made people starve". According to Bruno's line of reasoning, cash transfer created the false idea that the pandemic would soon go away, therefore postponing the creative thinking that would allow workers to reinvent their business:

> *Only now do people realize they are starving, that their savings were completely spent. If they had realized last year, maybe they would've done just fine (...). But people remained complacent. They didn't make an effort because of the pandemic, now they do because they starve... Darwin, natural selection, you know.*

Remarks that exponents of neoliberal thought base their political views on the idea of natural law have been widely present in academic discussions. As our research shows that this same idea is evoked by self-employed workers from a country where most people do not have access to labor protections (IBGE, 2021) and was severely affected by a global calamity, we start to grasp the extent and reach of such ideology. Furthermore, our research data suggests that as the digital economy becomes a hegemonic model, neoliberal subjectivity analyzed in the 21st century re-emerges in a new guise.

[4] The Brazilian emergency cash transfer program, named *Auxílio Emergencial* (in Portuguese), was created in 18th of March, 2020 as an emergency response to the pandemic, to be paid in multiple instalments that would decrease over time (Cardoso, 2020). The program was designed to address the rapid impact of job losses and income drop as a consequence of the Covid-19 crisis and the correspondent restrictions. Targets of the program can be divided into two groups. The first is composed of individuals registered in the Unified Registry for the government social programs (*Cadastro Único*) by March 20, 2020. The second group is composed of unemployed, individual microentrepreneurs, self-employed and informal workers with a per capita income equal or below 50 per cent of the national minimum wage (BRL 522.50), or a household income up to 3 times the national minimum wage (BRL 3,135). The social assistance benefit, in the form of direct unconditional and non-contributory cash transfers, was valued of BRL 600 (USD115, approximately) (Menezes-Filho et al., 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

This article reflects on empirical material on self-employed workers (photographers and video makers) profoundly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic's effects varied substantially among individuals, our research showed that Covid-19 disrupted workers' routines and significantly impacted their income, making many of them search for alternative jobs. Workers who remained in business found the primary tool to adapt to the new order on social media platforms. Even though social media platforms were often tools that allowed workers to remain active and find alternative sources of income, the amount of work required for "reinvention" and uncertainties concerning its operating mode produced significant distress. Nevertheless, platforms were viewed as the "only way out", an inevitable tool to overcome the crisis.

The growth and dominance of digital social media were naturalized within our research field to the same extent that harsh competition among workers was. In fact, many workers, both in private conversations with the ethnographers and in public speeches in online conferences, referred to the Covid-19 as a crisis that would filter the "good", "strong", "more prepared" workers from "mediocre", "lazy", "untalented" workers. Markedly, workers stressed the critical rule of individual responsibility in the face of the crisis in a very marked manner. Meanwhile, the role of the Government or other domains of the collective organization was largely absent.

By focusing our analysis on the intersection of work, social media platforms, and political subjectivities, we do not intend to indicate a cause-effect relationship between patterns of neoliberal subjectivity and the growth of social media usage. However, some elements brought up in the research suggest that a state of "privatized hope" (Eskelinen et al., 2020), where aspirations and responsibilities are torn from collective life and placed in the individuals, seems to be connected to the opaque and hyper-individualistic logic of social media platforms. That may well be the case for a growing mass of workers who no longer access labor protections expanded in the 20th century. A vast research field remains open for further investigation, therefore.

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Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors thank FAPERJ, INCT-InEAC, and PROPPI/UFF for the financial and academic support. They declare no conflicts of interest.

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