

Flexibility or precarity: exploring transformative resilience amongst media and cultural freelance workers in Singapore

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines how freelance workers in Singapore's media and cultural (M&C) sector cultivate resilience in relation to the precarity they face in their flexible work schemes. It examines how their acts of resilience and those of other organisational and government actors may contribute to or hinder transformation towards more sustainable working conditions.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative study was conducted involving 23 semi-structured interviews with home-based freelance workers in the media and cultural sector. This was complemented with an interview with a key stakeholder from the workers' union organisation supporting freelancers and self-employed persons.

Findings – Precarious working conditions are the norm for workers in the sector. We identify various forms of individualised short-term resilience on the micro-level, where freelancers accept status-quo employment conditions and other actors enforce them to maintain or entrench precarity. However, some freelancers were able to work with other actors to enact longer-term practices of transformative resilience, entailing changes to their social-digital and/or spatial work spheres that helped mitigate precarious work conditions and achieve greater sustainability. Analysis of and further action by organisational and government actors on the meso-level is needed to move towards a sustainable transformation of the sector.

Originality/value – While existing literature has focused on the resilience of workers in the media and cultural sector, this study also highlights how government, client and other actors can contribute to the overall resilience of freelancers towards more sustainable sector transformation. In Singapore, studies on gig work have largely focused on platform delivery and ride-hail workers rather than M&C work.

Keywords Resilience, Media, Cultural sector, Freelance work, Home-based work, Digital work platforms, Labour precarity, Flexible work

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Introduction

Globally, freelance work in the media and cultural (M&C) sector derives income from flexible project-based or gig work for organisations across different sectors. Work in this sector is often described as precarious, with workers lacking a steady stream of work and employee benefits (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Pasquinelli and Sjöholm, 2015). Faced with such uncertainty, flexible workers are often lauded as “resilient”, a buzzword that describes their ability to make-do amidst precarity, but which underplays the fact that under this logic, the onus of resilience falls largely to individuals themselves (Bracke, 2016). Such neo-liberal redistribution of responsibility is so thorough that workers themselves adopt such narratives of resilience in their outlooks towards their work, idealising the perceived flexibility and autonomy of freelance work and, more specifically for M&C workers, “utopianizing” their creative work (Banks, 2009). But flexibility is also double-edged: workers are typically also required to be readily available at any time, to accept employment and payment terms that are less than ideal, and to be constantly adaptable to client needs (Pratt, 2015).

Like many other countries, Singapore has seen the emergence of flexible work. The number of self-employed workers in Singapore (termed by the government as “own-account workers”, defined as “persons who operate their own business without employing any paid employees”, including gig workers) rose from 8.3% of the workforce in 2016 to a peak of 9.7% in 2020 during COVID-19, before witnessing a trend of decline back down to 8.1% in 2024 (MRSD, MOM, 2024, pp. 22–78). Beyond the M&C sector, these workers span the sectors of ride-hail and delivery, info-comms, professional services, and financial and insurance services, facing similar precarities in working conditions and unstable income. However, local media and government initiatives to protect these workers have focused largely on ride-hail and delivery platform workers, who constitute about 30% of self-employed workers (Boo, 2024; MRSD, MOM, 2024, pp. 22–23). A Platform Workers Act was implemented in 2024 to protect these workers’ rights (Government of Singapore, 2025), but no regulations have been placed on online job platforms that tend to hire M&C sector workers.

Scholarship on freelancers working in the M&C sector has often critiqued simplistic notions of resilience within the sector, arguing that discussions of individual practices of resilience could be deepened to contribute to a more systemic and transformative form of resilience in the sector. A more transformative form of resilience would involve transitioning towards a better work system with better working conditions (Pratt, 2015; Yue, 2020).

This article critically examines the resilience tactics of home-based M&C freelance workers in Singapore. It establishes the entrenched precarity currently experienced by workers and argues that collective action by workers, government actors, and organisations (client companies, private providers and unions) is required for a truly transformative resilience which will distribute responsibility for guarding against precarity from the worker alone to the sector at large. Our analysis takes a structured approach informed by research in the organisational communication field (Buzzanell, 2018), considering, at the micro level, freelancers’ diverse motivations for entering the sector, along with the adaptations they make across the social-digital and spatial spheres through which they conduct their work. Additionally, we analyse, at the meso-level, the role of organisational actors and platforms in shaping the overall resilience of the sector.

Extending resilience

Resilience is a keyword in contemporary discourse interpreted differently across disciplines and analysed at various scales, from macro-level systems to individual tactics, and often employed where the goal is to bounce back to an original state (Bracke, 2016, p. 54; Holling, 1973; Walker and Salt, 2012). Additionally, a longer-term view of resilience has been proposed, through which systems can be transformed to become more sustainable (Pasquinelli and Sjöholm, 2015, p. 76; Yue, 2020).

This article uses the definition of resilience as the ability to “withstand shock without either immediate chaos or permanent harm” to the actors in a system (Godschalk, 2003, p. 136). The

system we refer to in this study is the M&C freelance sector, where individual freelance workers adapt in response to their often-precarious working conditions, while organisational and government actors strengthen (or weaken) the conditions for producing good-quality work. Adaptations are made in various work spheres: the social-digital sphere entails online and offline interactions between actors in the sector when finding, supporting or executing work, and the spatial sphere entails where the work is done.

Resilience is particularly relevant to M&C freelancers, as they must often tolerate and respond to precarious challenges (“crises”) at work on an everyday basis (Newsinger and Serafini, 2021, p. 590). Resilience often operates on a short-term and individual level, as neoliberal narratives of resilience place the onus on individual workers to adapt, mitigate and absorb the risks and uncertainties of precarious work (Pratt, 2015, p. 61). Beyond the sector, recent neoliberal resilience discourses have also often regarded adapting and self-exploiting one’s own perseverance as a positive “personal trait” (Bracke, 2016, p. 60).

Individual resilience remains the current focus in the M&C sector, as narratives about the “flexibility” and “autonomy” of working in the gig economy dominate the discourse even amongst workers themselves. These narratives influence how individuals understand their own working conditions in post-Fordist economies, encouraging workers to make-do with less, often to their own detriment (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p. 14; Wolifson *et al.*, 2023). Aligning with Bauman’s “liquid life” thesis of modern life, where people and society change faster than it takes their actions to become routine, workers then find themselves constantly shaping their lives to serve the goals of the market (Bauman, 2005; Campbell, 2013). As such, freelancers adopt narratives that embrace what Banks calls the “utopianization” of creative work, overlooking or dismissing their precarious conditions as the price to pay for pursuing their passion for work (2009, p. 668). In Singapore, state-encouraged narratives of meritocracy, self-determination and innovative entrepreneurship further place the impetus on individuals to bear all risks and returns. This has the consequence of framing vulnerabilities stemming from precarity as failures of the individual (Chua, 2019), as observed in the way M&C workers are expected to remain liquid and to constantly develop their skills to fit gaps in the volatile industry (Kong, 2011), to be resourceful in using social connections (Pasquinelli and Sjöholm, 2015), to mobilise and optimise digital platforms and what they “afford” workers (Treem and Leonardi, 2012), and to carry the burden of determining where to work, of which the cost-saving answer is often in homes (Reuschke and Mason, 2022).

Acts of resilience have the potential to contribute to transformative resilience, especially when they have longer-term implications that can result in changing a system into a more sustainable one. Adaptations that are transformative in nature are said to bring a system to cross a “threshold”, after which the system has the potential to no longer return to its original state, instead undergoing a regime shift (Walker and Salt, 2012, p. 20). In the M&C sector, this transformative regime shift would ideally look like a move towards more sustainable work conditions. Pratt (2015) argued for transformative resilience in the cultural sector, positing that instead of making-do with the existing few resources, it should adopt “social and open resilience” which encourages a change-embracing ethos.

Creating such transformation sustainably often needs novel acts of resilience, such as innovations and alternative practices. Buzzanell (2018) theorised five key processes as critical for transformative resilience: “crafting a new normalcy; affirming or anchoring important identities during difficult times; using and/or maintaining salient communication networks; looking beyond conventional ways of thinking about and doing life by putting alternative logics to work; and foregrounding productive action while backgrounding unproductive behaviours or negative feelings” (p. 14). These processes require meaningful dialogical interactions between individuals (micro) and organisations (meso) in the M&C sector, where worker precarity and imbalanced client-worker power relations are currently a prevalent sector norm. Existing literature has also not always addressed the role of government and organisational actors in maintaining and transforming the sector’s transformative resilience, especially in terms of setting new norms, exploring alternative logics and the ways in which they work with workers to foreground productive action.

We therefore address the following questions:

- Q1. How do media and cultural (M&C) freelancers navigate precarity and flexibility in their professional practices?
- Q2. What forms of resilience do they exhibit?
- Q3. What are the ways that the M&C sector is resilient in a manner that is transformative, and what are the barriers/inhibitors of such transformation?

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews of 40–90 min were conducted with 23 home-based freelancers aged 21–65 in Singapore's M&C sector (15 female, 8 male), with more than 60% of interviewees under age 40 (see [Table A1](#) in [Appendix](#) for details). Semi-structured interviews allowed workers to share in-depth and in their own words (with their own narratives) about their personal experiences and perceptions of freelancing. The sample size revealed recurring themes, which indicated that the data was approaching saturation. Interviewees worked in various careers, including writing, photography, design, public relations or marketing and film or radio production.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling via online invitations on social media accounts or groups comprising Singaporean M&C freelance workers. Although recruitment via social media platforms could bias the sample towards a younger demographic, the nature of the M&C sector means that workers would largely be users of these platforms already. Posting on multiple platforms helped to widen diversity, where Instagram is often used by a younger demographic and the Facebook groups targeted towards freelancers and/or creative workers are often used by a slightly older demographic of workers. A potential bias is that workers may report more usage of social media communities for their work, given that this is where they found the research call.

All participants engaged in home-based work for at least part of their paid work, and all relied on digital infrastructure for their work. Most interviewees were full-time freelancers who depended on freelance work as their main source of income. Seven were part-time freelancers who had another full-time job or were financially supported by family.

The interview encompassed 30 largely open-ended questions with follow-up questions, focused on the six thematic areas: demographic information, motivations for entering a freelance mode of work, their use of and views about digital platforms, the location of their work, their perception of the benefits and burdens of freelance work and their professional and training practices. Transcripts were coded and analysed thematically, across an *a priori* coding of demographics, job platform challenges and the navigation of social, digital, and spatial spheres, while allowing emergent codes to appear, following the approach suggested by Stuckey (2015). With freelancers' descriptive narratives on the advantages and disadvantages of freelance work, their acts of resilience were identified as either entrenching, continuing or potentially transforming the sector's status quo precarious working conditions.

Intersections between freelancers and organisations were explored through data gathered via one interview with two representatives of the National Trades Union Congress' (NTUC) Freelancers and Self-Employed Unit (U FSE), lasting around an hour and focused on organisations and the development of the sector. NTUC is a collection of trade unions, trade associations and social enterprises that created a dedicated association for M&C freelancers in 2021 after the economic impacts of COVID-19 revealed that these workers had been "[falling] through the cracks," as acknowledged by the representatives interviewed (NTUC1) [1]. With NTUC's role as a gatekeeper for freelance workers' access to sector community and resources, the interviews offered insight into the M&C freelance sector from a policy and advocacy level.

Findings and discussion

M&C freelancers: precarity and flexibility of professional practices

Like many other studies, freelance workers in our study alluded to the precarity of their work, including imbalanced client-worker power dynamics. To deal with such precarity, participants used positive narrativization, a strategy that seemed to help them reconcile with unfavourable work conditions. For example, 10 of the 23 freelancers described themselves as being “lucky” with clients for not making extra requests or being late with payment, or when they had sufficient home space for work. Such narratives allude to the *precarity* that freelance workers often experience. While on the surface this narrativization might be read as a “backgrounding . . . [of] negative feelings” to move adaptive-transformative processes forward, it often does not come with a “foregrounding [of] productive action” (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 14), and can result in entrenching existing working precarity.

Our interviews with workers revealed that for many freelance workers, their entry into freelance work can vary and often require acts of resilience. This includes the ability or lack thereof to use one’s own *personal resources* in their work, depending on the various starting points of the workers. Some undertake their freelance work as their sole income, others as a supplementary income or as a money-earning “hobby”. Thus, what is at stake with their work conditions varies: for some, it is a matter of survival, for others a question of realising a passion. These diverse starting points could have implications for resilience as they determine how much agency workers perceive themselves to have.

Socioeconomic circumstances can drive such perceptions of agency. For instance, those who freelance part-time, either alongside a full-time job or with the subsidy of family wealth, often do so in pursuit of creative passions. As such, they are able to assert more agency, in the form of choices they can make about the projects they take on. As one participant who did freelance writing on the side of her full-time job explains:

Certain opportunities seem interesting and [I] hope to do them for creative challenge or fulfilment . . . If I were to enter the market as a full-time freelancer, [money] would be one of my biggest apprehensions, because the amount that I would have to drum up for my bills would be much higher than right now. (FW4)

Housing and essentially, ownership of domestic space, also impact the experience of precarity for M&C freelancers. In Singapore, multi-generational households are common, and unmarried young adults are very likely to be living under their parents’ roofs (National Youth Council Singapore, 2014). Some participants were able to entertain creative freelance work simply because they lived with their parents or a well-earning spouse and did not carry the full burden of supporting a household. Meanwhile, young adults living with parents to save money could also have trouble negotiating a space that can accommodate their work. One copywriter-photographer in their thirties shared: “I need to really fight and argue with my parents about keeping quiet . . . It’s not my home. It’s not a space that prioritises my needs or my comfort levels or my productivity” (FW12). In contrast, other freelancers are in the position to undertake extensive renovations in their homes to develop their ideal workspace.

Those who relied on freelancing for their economic survival also had comparatively less freedom around the imperfect conditions of their work. Of the 23 participants in the study, 16 shared this challenge. This lack of freedom is most keenly felt in the early stages of freelancing, as one participant explained: “for people who are starting out, they fear, because, if [they] burned this bridge [with a client], [they] won’t have the opportunity again.” (FW7).

In fact, the acceptance of the precarious working conditions by those with more resources has an impact on other workers in the sector as they perpetuate low market rates, given that they are relatively more willing and able to work for less. Some freelancers feel that the adoption of this narrative makes it more difficult for those who need to earn their living from freelancing to do so. As one participant expressed:

When more privileged people in this community are working for free, it actually harms a lot of people who can't get into the circle because they simply cannot afford to work for less, but instead it's phrased as "I work for free because I really care about the local community, I want to see it grow, you can't put a price on it" . . . the more we work for free, the more we undercut, the more we don't call out companies for paying less, the smaller this community is going to be and at some point it's full of rich men's sons (FW13).

This demonstrates how micro-level individual actions by those with more agency can be perceived as having an impact. Often accompanied by a positive narrativization of meaningful work, individuals with greater resources and agency can have critical impacts on the types of adaptations other freelance workers perceive that they would have to make.

The utopianisation of work and conforming to the market was observed across the board, regardless of the extent of workers' personal resources, where passion is used as an excuse to accept the precarity that the work comes with, creating a passion-precarity paradox in freelancers' narratives of their work. For example, some chose freelancing over full-time employment, embracing the trade-off between a lack of employee protection in exchange for perceived benefits of flexibility. This flexibility is not just about when one works. It is also about a sense of self-determination in the quality of work, including cases where some interviewees had turned hobbies into freelance income. One participant described it as:

Being a freelancer enables me to have a more enriching life because I get to try out so many types of roles, push myself and learn new things, which is something that I can never do if I was stuck in a full-time role. (FW9)

This passion invested into one's work creates more leeway to "liquidity" bend one's narratives to serve the needs of the market (Campbell, 2013), sometimes through self-exploitation. This implies accepting less reasonable working conditions to gain a market advantage and/or maintain client relationships in which workers often hold little bargaining power. Participants often gained a market advantage when they made themselves available at any time to clients, offered discounts or agreed to tight turnaround times. However, such strategies add significantly to experiences of precarity and threaten the longer-term resilience of workers and their enterprises. One manifestation of this is the erosion of the boundary between work and rest. As one worker put it: "you're like, 'oh, I have the flexibility,' but you're working 24/7" (FW14), demonstrating how flexibility can be experienced both as a benefit and as a source of exploitation. In one extreme example, a study participant reflected: "in some cases [of contractual disputes] . . . I'm perfectly fine with just refunding [the client] the full amount and keeping the relationship, you know, better. Just keep it clean" (FW14).

Accepting these imperfect circumstances and making-do around them are adaptations that rely on the worker's need or desire to keep their enterprise going as they self-exploit their own perseverance as a positive "personal trait" of resilience (Bracke, 2016, p. 60). Such experiences perpetuate unsustainable and unfair work practices, which intensify precarity.

These practices of resilience enacted by individual workers may allow them to continue working despite precarity, but potentially entrench disadvantageous working conditions in the sector and inhibit transformation.

Forms of resilience

Freelancers may work alone, but they are very reliant on their social networks. Through their social networks, they network, find support amongst each other, make themselves known to clients, and find work (Pasquinelli and Sjöholm, 2015). These social networks are often mediated and managed using digital communication platforms such as social media or online job platforms.

These needs have seen the emergence of online job platforms such as Upwork (founded in 2013) and Fiverr (founded in 2010). These platforms provide a way for freelance workers to boost their profiles, including the skills that they have, connect with potential clients, and work

on their self-branding. The strategies used by freelance workers we interviewed are similar to those by Blyth *et al.* (2022), who also highlighted the risks and tensions faced by freelancers when they use such online labour platforms.

While freelancers may recognise the benefits, studies have shown that they also recognise that such platforms keep rates low, perpetuate the status-quo and offer little protection for freelancers (Berg *et al.*, 2018). In this study, two designers (FW3, FW8) found a small number of jobs on Upwork from Singaporean and international clients, but acknowledged that projects from Upwork only constituted about five percent of their incomes, due to low payment rates. Four other interviewees mentioned they had tried finding work on job-matching platforms but could not, due to competition or lack of demand. FW23, who does not use these platforms, believes that they “spoil the market”: “it feels intimidating when you first start out because you have no reviews, nothing. You have to charge cheaper for people to even consider you.” Their experiences demonstrate how these platforms can be a double-edged sword: while they can offer new opportunities and help to diversify income streams, they can also contribute to a race to the bottom, with global competition from other freelance workers keeping rates low.

Interestingly, the context of Singapore’s high labour costs drove participants in our study to use the platform to hire subcontracted workers. People who hired others using platforms elected to use Fiverr, as it was known for having lower rates. This practice demonstrates how freelance workers can utilise platforms strategically in order to reduce their fees and increase their profits from projects. In so doing, they may further perpetuate the precarity of others by keeping rates low. However, those who used Fiverr to hire also noted the uncertainty of work quality as a challenge, often adapting by not disputing quality issues, given the cheap labour and the difficulty of using platform dispute mechanisms in practice. For example, FW2 noted that “some [disputes] are very easy to resolve, like if a person does not deliver within a certain time. But the problem is when the quality of work is not of expectation, because that is very subjective.”

Freelancers also use social media to find work. They cite and make do with challenges in doing so, yet there is also transformative potential in social media innovations and how workers innovatively adapt their usage to shift conventional power dynamics. As a case in point, Instagram is used frequently by photographers to showcase their portfolios, but they are also susceptible to the risk of plagiarism by others. Such examples reflect the limits of social media innovations in introducing changes that would significantly shape the overall resilience of freelance workers.

Nonetheless, our participants highlighted how newer social media platforms have positively afforded them with increased visibility and persistence in their self-promotion, indicating that digital platform providers can indeed contribute to the sector’s transformative resilience. Visibility and persistence are examples of the “affordances” of social media, which are the perceived or actual use-cases enabled or constrained by these platforms (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). For example, a home-based business owner shared that Instagram required them to regularly post new content to stay easily visible to customers, whereas a new local lifestyle app Lemon8 used a different algorithm, which afforded them persistence in their visibility to users regardless of post frequency (FW21). Freelancers with more specialised expertise like FW2 also cited their persistently public LinkedIn profile as a source of work, as clients would see and actively reach out to them. Consequently, social media platforms have the potential to adjust and innovate their services in ways that better serve workers, giving workers a platform that perceptibly affords them more agency to potentially negotiate a regime shift away from precarity.

Freelancers have also innovatively adapted to use social media to garner support amongst themselves in transformative ways. Communities on Facebook, Discord and Telegram help not only to connect workers to opportunities, but also serve as networks for workers to seek advice on their professional practices, despite ever-present individualistic attitudes of competition:

You don't have colleagues to bounce ideas . . . so these groups are useful because you can post a question and get their opinions. Of course, there might be some conflict of interest because after all, everybody's a freelancer. Some say, 'don't charge so low, charge higher'. But if I charge higher, I lose the job. You must take their advice with a pinch of salt. (FW9)

Despite accepting the limits to the extent of solidarity amongst workers, freelancers provided each other with advice on how to manage difficult clients and disputes, cultivating a collective intelligence made possible by social media. These communities allowed workers to call out unfair behaviours by certain companies, creating an informal "blacklist" amongst worker communities: "we'll know which person has a good reputation, and if they're not a good paymaster, we'll not work for them . . . there's Facebook groups that say, 'don't go work for this company, they haven't paid us for how many months'" (FW10). Social media thus affords freelancers with a wider, more persistent reach for their grievances, creating what FW7 calls a potential "fear" amongst employers. This empowers workers with a new agency to place pressure on clients who perpetuate unfair conditions to encourage fairer practices. This usage of social media hints towards creating *unconventional, alternative logics* through alternative practices that afford perceivably more agency to the worker than a typical client-worker interaction would allow, an attribute seen in Buzzanell's (2018) five subprocesses of transformative resilience.

The findings demonstrate various ways by which freelance workers can use online platforms to build their resilience against the uncertainty they often face, but also how such platforms can perpetuate their precarity as they involve fees to use and are not subject to local labour regulations. Even though platforms seemingly introduce new opportunities and alternatives for freelance workers, high platform fees and the ways they are used may entrench and profit from existing precarity, inhibiting positive transformation.

Given the flexible nature of their work, freelancers are required to be adaptable in the ways they manage client relationships. This can mean making trade-offs that may disadvantage them. However, the resourcefulness of certain workers is also notable, especially in their potential for transformative resilience for the sector. For instance, some participants described how, in positioning themselves as experts, they explored ways to negotiate contract terms for fair work. A freelance ghostwriter/content consultant explained: "I set my niche to be in content because all my colleagues do advertising. I talk to [the client] as a content expert." He emphasised the importance of managing the social labour of his work, including meeting clients in-person, as a way of building credibility and working efficiently. He elaborated:

I need to do a [paid] consultancy part before we even produce any article. We chitchat for two hours. The way I've been doing it, it has been controlled so much [that we don't need many revisions] . . . because I already know what you want. (FW5)

Client organisations have also adapted their modes of sub-contracting in ways that also benefit the freelancer. For example, two of our participants (FW2, FW8), had secured long-term monthly "retainer" work with one or two companies. In FW2's case, that retainer work was also topped up by "extra work" that was "paid for outside of the retainer." In these relationships, freelancers have more power to negotiate and transform their conditions of work, while maintaining their gig-to-gig flexibility. Such sustained relationships are an example of a transformative resilience that yields benefits (Yue, 2020) for both worker and client. This practice holds potential to initiate a regime shift in the social system of freelancing as a whole, including beyond the M&C sector. By relying on a known and trusted freelancer, employers save the time that would have been spent looking for or building rapport with unknown providers, while the freelancer is released from aspects of self-exploitation to win the attention of a client.

Barriers to transformation

However, such innovative acts of resilience remain limited. They depend on the will and ability of the client to adapt their policies. One participant who had over five years of freelance

experience (FW2) reflected that her power to negotiate appropriate terms was diminished in projects with large companies or government bodies as clients, particularly if these companies sub-contracted the acquisition of freelancers and so had less direct oversight.

Intermediary and regulatory actors could play a role in providing greater support for freelance workers. As a start, Kong notes that actors in Singapore are making efforts to manage the precarious economy through improving measurement of the sector, investing in training, and experimenting with new forms of labour organisation (2011, p. 56). The Freelancer Unit of NTUC, a collection of trade unions, acts as an in-between gatekeeper for the freelancer community to access resources and connect with each other, while being a body that pushes for policy advocacy on laws and protections as an entity that is officially separate from the government. Resources provided by NTUC include networking sessions and workshops on best practices like “contracts, Intellectual Property rights, and payment methods.” (NTUC1). NTUC publicises these sessions through existing and alumni networks of arts and media schools in Singapore. However, only one freelancer interviewed mentioned signing up for the paid union membership, which means that these resources could be better extended towards more M&C workers beyond NTUC’s current membership base, which presently consists largely of photographers, videographers, and production crew. A further engagement with the role of trade unions and advocacy groups could be explored in future research on the M&C sector.

For freelance workers, working from home is a common aspect of undertaking freelance work due to its convenience. The decision to conduct one’s freelance work from or in one’s home might even be seen as a first, critical act of resilience that again draws on freelancers’ *personal resources*. It cuts rental overheads and saves time, both precious freelancer commodities. As one NTUC representative puts it, it has become “natural” for freelancers to work from home, another point of evidence for precarity being the norm for workers: “we have been socialised into thinking that most freelancers don’t operate in offices. It’s very natural for us to have Zoom meetings and our meeting participants are joining from home” (NTUC1).

Although using the home as a workspace reduces space rental costs, it is not cost-neutral. Home-based freelancers simply bear the cost of their workspace overheads differently and more invisibly. The invisibility of this cost is in itself a status-quo-accepting adaptation, given that the home is not an equitable resource for all, depending on the worker’s own power dynamics within their household. Many participants, such as FW12, had to individually make do with less-than-ideal work conditions in the home by negotiating space usage with household members or by seeking out other locations for work. Only a handful of participants enjoyed the agency changing their home spaces for work significantly, while the rest were able to make small adjustments, e.g. adding furniture.

While such adjustments to the home are innovative, they are borne by individual freelance workers and not on a larger scale – contributing to inequalities between freelance workers, undermining the transformative potential of such adaptations. Beyond the home, participants in our study also discussed their use of client spaces. FW7 reported his inventive ways of making use of client spaces: “[sometimes] the clients have maybe green rooms, or rest areas, [so] I’ll just work from there.” Another freelancer (FW2) had access to a retainer client’s rented co-working space for free, using it once or twice a week. Interestingly, most of the freelancers in this study found specialist co-working spaces to be too “corporate” (FW5) or too expensive to pay for individually, thus avoiding them. Given the emerging market of pay-on-demand co-working spaces (Goh, 2023), some client organisations might voluntarily consider or be regulated into offering spaces for freelance workers to use – transforming not just the resources that freelance workers have, but also their relationships with client organisations.

The adaptations by freelancers as well as clients are innovative, but largely remain as individualised, localised, place-bound solutions which are not transferable to other workers or scales, constraining their wider transformative potential. These spatial adjustments may only drive paradigm shifts toward better working conditions if they can be included as part of the ecosystem for the sector, and if government and private stakeholders consider and include them when designing homes, workspaces, and jobs. For example, a 2021 British public

housing project, A House for Artists, addressed the spatial needs of home-based cultural workers by designing clustered housing that offered communal workspaces ([Create London, 2024](#)). In land-scarce Singapore, where 80% of Singaporeans live in public flats and 97% of unmarried youth aged 15–35 live with parents ([Department of Statistics Singapore, 2023](#); [National Youth Council Singapore, 2014](#), p. 27), such design solutions are a challenge.

The challenges associated with domestic spaces for freelancers' work are especially crucial for younger freelance workers. Younger, unmarried participants in our study usually live with their parents and are also the ones who experience less freedom when it comes to adapting their domestic spaces for work. While our study did not investigate the links between working from home and the sense of social isolation and loneliness like [Chmiel \(2025\)](#)'s did, discussions of the challenges associated with working from home by our participants alluded to impacts on overall social resilience – especially essential for areas such as public relations, which is about working with people.

Conclusion

Using the case of M&C workers in Singapore, this article has shown that building transformative sector resilience towards alleviating precarity requires the understanding of and action by micro-level individual actors and various meso-level organisational (clients, platform providers, and unions) and government actors, borrowing from [Buzzanell's \(2018\)](#) framework. However, coherent with other existing studies on the industry, the burden of risks in the Singaporean M&C sector currently falls largely on individual freelance workers, who work in precarious conditions and take on narratives of “flexibility”. The acceptance of precarious working conditions by workers with more personal resources can also further entrench precarity for those who do freelance work for economic survival.

Our findings deepen understanding of diverse adaptations made across social-digital and spatial work contexts. While many freelancers cope with precarity as a status-quo condition when working in the sector, others are able to negotiate and interact with other actors in the sector in ways that are transformative, such as introducing new norms and expertise-based identities. Social media platforms function as communication networks to bring freelance workers together in solidarity and build resistance against exploitative clients, and in doing so, contribute to transformative resilience amongst freelance workers. Clients also make transformative acts by providing co-working spaces for their freelancers, alleviating some worker precarity while tapping into an emerging market of pay-on-demand co-working spaces by funding it on a corporate rather than an individual level.

Only certain freelancers whose main income is not tied to their freelance work, or those who have more experience, tend to have the agency to work with other actors to enact adaptations that embrace transformative resilience towards more sustainable work in the system. Regardless, all freelancers enact short-term individualised resilience by accepting their imperfect work conditions either due to their lack of agency or through adopting narratives of their own flexibility in the face of precarious market realities. This individual resilience reflects a liquid life adaptation that Bauman finds characteristic in ever-shifting modern life ([2005](#)): it is behaviour that can contribute towards, but is often not enough on its own to enact, the longer-term benefits of transformative resilience.

This study observed some instances of other actors working with individual workers towards sector resilience, usually with evidence of successful and potentially transformative results. This is evidence that more can be done by these actors to share the burden of adaptation that has largely fallen on individual workers, and thus transform the sector towards alleviating worker precarity. As individual workers form the backbone of the sector, these actions benefit the sector as a whole by strengthening the conditions for good-quality work to be produced.

[Table 1](#) summarises a framework for understanding the key issues for freelance workers managing precarity while working in the media and culture sector, spanning underlying epistemological facets of privilege, income, passion, market dynamics and flexibility.

Table 1. Key themes and issues for M&C freelance workers

Precarity	Social-digital sphere Platforms	Client relationships	Spatial sphere Work from home	Other spaces
Privilege	<i>Online job platforms</i>	Experts/niches	Family members	Co-working spaces
Income	Low rates	Trust	Cheaper	Client offices
Passion	High competition	Trade-offs	Comfort/heat	Third spaces
Market dynamics	Solidarity/ community	Networking	Noise	
Flexible	Visibility	Unrealistic timelines	Renovations	
Uncertainty	Plagiarism	Late/non-payment No negotiating power		

In the social-digital sphere, clients, online job platform providers, or regulators could play a role in transforming the sector's norm of strong client-worker power imbalances. Client companies could make more effort in exploring mutually beneficial, sustained relationships with freelancers, allowing freelancers more negotiating power while sparing clients the inconvenience of training new hires. The entrenched client-worker power imbalance on online job platforms would benefit from institutional regulation, as in their current form, they tend to favour clients and offer minimal protection for freelance workers. Policymakers could also level power imbalances by introducing alternative practices and thus logics through regulatory frameworks, given the lack of standardised rates or benchmarking of labour rates in the M&C sector.

For sustainable transformation, organisational and government actors on the meso-level are key to empowering freelance workers. They can do so through providing training and legal resources, or by enabling and/or regulating digital platforms to better meet freelancer needs. As a start, union actors like NTUC have cultivated industry-specific networks to disseminate resources to freelancers. However, this reach could be expanded. It is currently limited to paid union members and largely consists of on-site freelance workers. Digital platform providers would also benefit from the system if their platforms were more attuned to freelance workers' needs for community, visibility and persistence of content.

In the spatial sphere, innovative adaptations of homes for work have been observed on the individual level, but these can only have longer-term transformative potential if applied to design thinking on a larger scale. Housing providers and planners could integrate and consider these work-home innovations and needs in their typologies of housing provision (Holliss, 2015), while governments could implement regulatory requirements for companies to provide workspaces for freelance hires. The development of third spaces designed or adapted for work, sector-specific work-at-home housing or industry clusters could also be explored.

There are some limitations to our study. Our interviews with NTUC have limited representation, given that it is also closely linked to the government, but it is the only union in Singapore. For further research, we hope to also deepen our insights with interviews and case studies with media and cultural organisations. Our sampling and recruitment of participants in the study have also been limited to the use of online platforms and snowballing participants, which introduces convenience biases. Future work could involve diversifying our recruitment strategies, such as working with organisations to invite freelance workers they already work with. Our study also did not differentiate between freelance workers working in different areas of media, culture and communication (e.g. journalism versus design versus public relations). Given the expansion of freelancing in media and communication, examination of the nuances is essential for future work, as Moise *et al.* (2025)'s study revealed, where differences as well as similarities were noted between journalists and communications freelancers.

Table A1. Profile of interviewees

Code	Age	Gender	Full or part-time	Occupation
FW1	31–40	M	Part-Time	Article writer and English tutor
FW2	41–50	F	Full-Time	Podcast curator; Scriptwriter
FW3	21–30	M	Full-Time	Brand designer
FW4	31–40	F	Both	Freelance writer/editor; Full-time editor
FW5	41–50	M	Full-Time	Content consultant and ghostwriter
FW6	31–40	F	Full-Time	Emcee and copywriter
FW7	31–40	M	Full-Time	Photographer; Part-time admin worker
FW8	31–40	F	Full-Time	Motion graphic designer
FW9	31–40	F	Part-Time	Digital marketer
FW10	41–50	F	Full-Time	TV producer
FW11	21–30	M	Both	Freelance photographer; Full-time video editor at a bank
FW12	31–40	F	Full-Time	Freelance copywriter; Freelance photographer
FW13	31–40	F	Full-Time	Media communications and PR
FW14	21–30	F	Full-Time	Marketing, design, and social media
FW15	41–50	F	Both	Sign language teacher and performer; Full-time work in wellness events company
FW16	21–30	M	Full-Time	Article writer
FW17	31–40	M	Full-Time	YouTuber
FW18	41–50	F	Full-Time	Art director
FW19	50 and over	F	Part-Time	Illustrator (design platforms)
FW20	50 and over	F	Full-Time	Vocal coach (public speaking)
FW21	21–30	F	Both	Crafts business owner and plants business owner
FW22	31–40	F	Full-Time	Freelance SEO writer and astrologer
FW23	21–30	M	Full-Time	Nature photographer and illustrator
NTUC1	–	–	–	2 representatives of the NTUC Freelancer Unit; both in advocacy roles

Note

1. Freelance interviewees are de-identified and referred to by pseudonyms like FW1 (Freelance Worker) and FW2 accordingly. The interview with NTUC representatives is referred to as NTUC1.

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