PLAYFUL WORK AS A PATHWAY TO MEANINGFULNESS

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Abstract

This research examines how the co-existence of work and play can lead to meaningfulness and what this might signify sociologically. Drawing upon forty qualitative interviews with autonomous neo-craft workers in Italy, we contribute the concept of playful work as a voluntary and subjective framing of autonomous work entailing the simultaneous interplay between the extrinsic material goals, utilitarian planning and outcomes that characterise work, and the intrinsic experimental purpose and focus on place and process that typify play. The experience of playful work is challenging and tensional due to the interaction between individual agency and broad structural forces. Autonomous neo-craft workers manage these tensions by ascribing worth and significance to neo-craft's aesthetic ideals and to care and (com)passion values. This contribution is significant in that it expands sociological imaginaries and the potential for future research by framing playful work as a tensional pathway to meaningfulness.

Keywords

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Introduction

This research examines how the co-existence of work and play can lead to meaningfulness and what this might signify sociologically. By meaningfulness we mean the subjective attribution of worth and significance to an individual's whole life world, acknowledging that 'meaningfulness of work may not necessarily derive from work-related factors, but more so from elements of life enrichment' (Alacovska et al., 2021: 758). For instance, meaningfulness can emerge through the experience of being helpful, valued and trusted by others, by doing something relevant and making a difference through one's own actions (Lysova et al., 2023). Meaningfulness can enrich both work and life more generally with value and purpose. For example, individuals engage in volunteering work to do something that really matters, such as saving or helping other people's lives, in order to imbue work with a values-driven purpose (Weller et al., 2023).

Recent research advances understandings of meaningful work by focusing on work performed in organisations (e.g., Lysova et al., 2023). Yet, individuals working autonomously have significantly different conditions and experiences compared to organisational workers (Caza et al., 2022). By autonomous workers we mean self-employed workers or micro-entrepreneurs. Unlike organisational workers, they may work alone or with business partner(s) or employee(s), but they do not belong to a structured, complex organisation.

Typically, autonomous workers enjoy higher degrees of freedom, with less atomised and more diverse working routines than organisational workers. They may also experience the intertwining of work and leisure time as, often, autonomous work involves the integration of personal passions and work (McRobbie, 2016). This means that individuals working autonomously might experience meaningfulness in ways that are not currently theorised in sociological research. Indeed, scant research exists on meaningfulness in relation to autonomous work. This research scarcity is remarkable, given the rise of autonomous work in recent years

(Caza et al., 2022), and its potential to enable meaningfulness in people's lives.

As meaningfulness involves ascribing worth and significance not just to an individual's work but also to the individual's whole life world within a particular socio-cultural context, this demands an expansion of sociological theorisations beyond meaningful work. Meaningful work is necessarily limiting, as it can only ever partially illuminate the possibilities and constraints of meaningfulness through the boundaries of work. This is problematic when work is not demarcated by organisational boundaries, as is the case with autonomous work. This, thus, demands a theorisation that can illuminate meaningfulness within whole life worlds, how it can be achieved and what this might mean sociologically.

These points also call into question the relationship between work and play because they are both inherent parts of whole life worlds. Traditionally, play has been defined as voluntary, enchanting, leisure activities belonging outside the constraints of work (Huizinga, 1938/2016). However, sociological research has focused extensively on top-down processes that subdue play and convert it into work, including the transformation of gaming into new forms of work (Kücklich, 2005), or gamification processes inside the organisational workplace (Costea et al., 2007). In this context, play has become more like work and work more like play (Seregina and Weijo, 2017). Yet, there is a lack of research on how workers who have agency and autonomy may interweave work and play. Thus, we advance these research conversations by posing the following question: *how can the co-existence of work and play in autonomous work lead to meaningfulness and what might this mean sociologically?*

We address this research question through qualitative research with autonomous neo-craft workers in Milan, Italy. We follow Gandini and Gerosa's (2023) definition of neo-craft as a form of post-industrial craft work, which is typically middle-class and part of the broader creative industries (Kroezen et al., 2021). Neo-craft combines craft's skilled and meaningful material practices with symbolic forms of marginal distinction within an authenticity-led economy

(Thurnell-Read, 2019). Neo-craft work is an apt context for analysing the possibility of achieving meaningfulness through the interconnection between autonomous work and play because its subjective configuration enables a 'playful and hybrid relationship between the corporeality of the artisan, the materiality of the raw materials and of the final goods, and the discursive practices informing that relationship as a whole' (Gandini and Gerosa, 2023: 21).

Our findings establish that work and play co-exist, albeit with tensions, through what we conceptualise as playful work: a voluntary framing of autonomous work involving the interplay between the extrinsic material goals, utilitarian planning and outcomes that characterise work, and the intrinsic experimental purpose and focus on creativity, place and process that typify play. Playful work enables experimentation with both socially established and desired meanings, which can have positive outcomes for neo-crafters, their local communities and their socio-economic ecologies. Playful work creates favourable conditions for work and play to co-exist porously within people's lives. It is significant because it offers safe spaces (imagined or otherwise) for people to be creative, to problem-solve and take risks, therefore amplifying the possibilities for more holistic and transformative work-play outcomes to emerge in society, including meaningfulness.

Our findings expand recent debates on neo-craft work addressing it either as a new ideal(ised) epitome of good work (Gandini and Gerosa, 2023) or as straining, 'cool work' (Delgaty and Wilson, 2024) in late neoliberal society. Our findings show that experiences of playful work are also challenging, given the interplay between individual agency and broad structural forces. Autonomous neo-craft workers manage these tensions by ascribing worth and significance to neo-craft's creative, aesthetic ideals and to care and a kind of passion that seeks to benefit others rather than just the self, which we address as (com)passion, building on Alacovska's (2020) work. Through care and (com)passion, these autonomous workers interconnect play and work to create their own, holistic versions of meaningfulness which

4

transcend work boundaries, including the traditional divisions between work and leisure and between the workplace and that which stands outside it, drawing from all of them simultaneously. Playful work, thus, entails a shift in the source of meaningfulness from the organisational workplace to the wider socio-economic, relational ecology in which the worker is embedded.

Thus, we contribute the original concept of playful work to sociological research by establishing it as a pathway to meaningfulness. Playful work enables meaningfulness to emerge through a meaning-making process where workers precariously reconcile play and autonomous work through their dispositions and practices. It also entails acknowledging the tensions that emerge, given the constraining conditions of neo-crafters' lives and the societal structures that circumscribe their experiences of meaningfulness. This contribution is significant in that it expands sociological imaginaries and the potential for future research by framing playful work as a pathway to meaningfulness.

The article begins by conceptualising playful work in relation to meaningfulness. Next, the qualitative methods are discussed to situate the research and analysis in the neo-craft context. The article then presents the data analysis, focusing particularly on the subjective co-existence of work and play in neo-craft practices, how care and (com)passion reconcile play and work, and the tensions that emerge in striving to achieve meaningfulness through playful work.

Conceptualising playful work and how it can enable meaningfulness

A growing body of research on work meaningfulness – mainly within organisation studies – tends to use meaningful work, work meaningfulness and meaningfulness interchangeably (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017). We acknowledge but shift their main focus from psychological predispositions and organisational working conditions to worth attribution, liberating work meaningfulness from the boundaries of organisations.

Sociologically-informed perspectives on meaningfulness acknowledge its dynamism,

inherent tensions and complexities (Iatridis et al., 2022; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017; Lepisto and Pratt, 2017). Here, meaningfulness-making becomes an ever-changing practice subject to continuous tensions and negotiations between the self and other actors (Ekman, 2013), values (Weller et al., 2023), and social context (Lysova et al., 2023). Thus, meaningfulness-making entails subjectively enriching work – and life more generally – with worth and purpose (Weller et al., 2023).

Given the work-life porosity characterising autonomous work (Bologna, 2018), we argue that in this context meaningfulness must be theorised as the subjective attribution of worth to the individual's whole existence rather than just their working selves. Doing so demands recognition of what Alacovska et al. (2021) refer to as an individual's whole life world, including all aspects of life and the more holistic, existential nature of meaningfulness, which cannot be achieved just through work.

Indeed, Iatridis et al. (2022) highlight the need to include diverse sources of meaningfulness beyond work, because meaningfulness can derive from all essential human capabilities that people value and strive to perform as meaningful within enabling and constraining circumstances (Alacovska et al., 2021).

Attributions of worth to work can emerge through ideals and values, the need for relationships, family, community, wellbeing, quality of life and, importantly, play and pleasure. Therefore, we broaden existing understandings of meaningful work through a needed return to meaningfulness, which concerns whole lifeworlds that necessarily include 'play'.

An assessment of the relationship between work and play in the labour process is central to progressing understandings of how autonomous work can lead to meaningfulness. For Huizinga (1938/2016: 3), play consists first and foremost in having fun. Play is a spontaneous, voluntary, enchanting, and uncommitted activity that exists outside everyday life constraints (Huizinga, 1938/2016). It includes approaching tasks through experimentation, improvisation and

innovation in the face of uncertainty (Malaby, 2009). Play also involves an orientation towards achieving intrinsic rewards perceived as inherently meaningful (Masters, 2008).

When theorising play, Huizinga (1938/2016) addressed the importance of place through the metaphor of the playground, a ritualised time and space where individuals experience a pause from normalised practices. Thus, play is distinct from the contractual, compulsory nature of labour and its extrinsic material goals and ends. Huizinga (1938/2016) also viewed play as wasteful, the opposite of the rationality, efficiency and functionality attributed to the modernist, *Homo Faber* view of the working man.

Here, Huizinga (1938/2016) echoes a significant historical contrast between play and work, often seen as conceptual opposites. A general notion of work need not strictly imply this perspective and can entail both extrinsic and intrinsic goals and dimensions (Thompson, 1989). However, in a capitalist economic system, work is 'not just something which a society organises to meet social needs. […] It is a framework within which those who own and control the economic resources seek to ensure the appropriation of the surplus' (Thompson, 1989: 5). The way this surplus appropriation is sought shapes the arrangements and features of work in a society. The compulsion, rationality and efficiency characterising work and the extrinsic nature of its goals derive from labour's subordination to capitalist accumulation; it is scientific management, automation and control (as features of capitalism) that have valorised and foregrounded work's extrinsic dimensions (Thompson, 1989). This is the perspective on work which Huizinga (1938/2016) and a significant literature contrast with play.

The tension between play and work is implicitly reflected in attempts to introduce play elements into labour processes. For example, the injection of play elements into the labour process can originate from workers, to resist against management within factory work (Roy, 1959) or to upskill assembly line routines making work more meaningful (Rostain and Clarke, 2024).

More recently, in post-industrial societies work and play are blurring and ethical values are incorporated into organisational work (Land and Taylor, 2010). However, most attempts at job enrichment (Thompson, 1982) come from management. For example, gamification uses play to improve workers' productivity, creativity and satisfaction (Fuchs et al., 2014). Such practices have been seen as a new form of subtle corporate control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), imbuing work processes and practices with "work hard, play hard" ideas (Costea et al., 2007). These attempts fall short because they come pre-packaged (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). They are designed by management to improve productivity and imposed on workers with pre-determined goals, undermining play's essence.

This strategic blurring of work and play also reflects the growing invasion of gaming by labour values, which in games studies has been conceptualised as playbour (Kücklich, 2005). Thus, gamification and playbour generally fail to lead to the kind of meaningfulness discussed previously and contradict the defining features of play. Still – precisely because of the inherent contradictions of phenomena like playbour – it is important to consider how play and work co-exist in contexts without organisational management, such as autonomous work, and whether this co-existence can act as a pathway to achieving meaningfulness.

Inspired by these ideas, we argue that autonomous work outside corporate organisations can enable what we term playful work: a subjective and voluntary experience of work. We conceptualise playful work as characterised by the interplay between the extrinsic, material goals and utilitarian planning typical of contemporary work and the intrinsic, experimental, imaginative and creative features and focus on means of play, including relational aspects of place and community.

Through playful work, we reimagine Huizinga's (1938/2016) playground as a metaphorical place where individuals can create and/or reconfigure their desired life worlds imaginatively and relationally. In the "playful work playground", an individual's ideals and

values can transform what is unpleasant (work) into meaningful, creative and autonomous activities (play), where work is 'no longer rooted in exploitation' (Benjamin, 1999: 361).

In this way, playful work activities enrich, and are enriched by, the utilitarian, goal-oriented, subjective experience of labouring, allowing individuals to purposefully maintain a sense of openness and experimentation (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010). Playful work can, thus, offer safe spaces (imagined or otherwise) where people can be creative, problem-solve and take risks, therefore amplifying possibilities for a more holistic, values-driven, transformative and relational meaningfulness to emerge.

Further, playful work allows autonomous workers to experiment with the threshold between desirable work and the uncertain, tensional realities (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017) of work in society. This experimentation is necessarily tensional because of the interplay between workers' agency and enabling and constraining structural forces, which in turn create the potential for playful work to be experienced simultaneously as both meaningful and alienating (Delgaty and Wilson, 2024).

Together, these ideas enable a renewed understanding of meaningfulness, one that can be (not unproblematically) achieved through playful work and its relational place within whole life worlds. As the search for meaningfulness and values-driven work intensifies (see Graeber, 2018), playful work becomes a seductive, aspirational concept. An example can be found in autonomous neo-craft work. Pushed to the margins of capitalism, neo-craft is inherently playful, immersive, and improvisational (Sennett, 2008).

Currently, a new wave of autonomous workers search for meaningfulness within urban economies through neo-craft work (Gandini and Gerosa, 2023), which is our research context.

Research context and methods

This study is part of a larger research project examining the neo-craft urban economy.

Qualitative fieldwork took place in Milan, Italy. The Italian context possesses distinctive features: high unemployment, low wages, and governmental rhetoric, exacerbating individualisation processes and entrepreneurialisation of the self (Colombo et al., 2022). Further, Milan is particularly relevant for the study of neo-craft work because of the development of its independent, local food and beverages businesses (Gerosa, 2024), which are central to the neo-craft economy (Land, 2018).

In Italian urban spaces, craft ideals and values manifest through neo-craft hipster bars, craft beer and liquor breweries, street food vendors, artisanal bakers, small craft sellers, innovative jewellers and the like. Neo-crafters see themselves as autonomous workers, changemakers (Arvidsson, 2019), and taste dealers (Smith Maguire, 2018). Therefore, this research focuses on neo-craft food trucks participating in Milan's street food festivals and independent neo-craft bars[1] and restaurants in NoLo and Dergano, two Milanese neighbourhoods with growing relevance in the urban hipster economy. The participants are autonomous workers, i.e., self-employed workers who have opened small and independent businesses that they run either alone (most cases), with one or two partners, or together with few employees (1-9). In the latter case, they can still be considered autonomous because they own their businesses and continue to perform neo-craft work, not just managerial roles, within their ventures. This perspective aligns with ample literature which treats self-employed, autonomous workers and micro-entrepreneurs as interchangeable concepts (e.g., Montes Rojas and Siga, 2011; Davies et al., 2023; Cohen, 2025).

Data collection took place between October 2017 and February 2019. It involved an initial period of informal observations at street food festivals, bars and restaurants during social events. This allowed the lead researcher to familiarise himself with the settings, the atmospheres and the social interactions in these places. Consistent but informal observations also enabled rapport-building with food truckers and bar and restaurant owners, creating opportunities to

recruit these participants for in-depth interviews.

The interview sampling strategy was purposive and based on Ocejo's (2017) criteria for defining the neo-craft urban economy. Criteria included: upscaled, refined aesthetic and price ranges compared with traditional food trucks and corner shops; a drive to provide an authentic experience to customers; and consistent presence of middle-class, culturally omnivorous patrons. Snowball sampling was used as a complementary sampling method for food truck vendors (Handcock and Gile, 2011).

Interviews were used for data collection because of their suitability for analysing neo-crafters' subjective experiences, meanings and identities (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2009). Forty in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out, 20 with neo-craft food truckers and 20 with bar and restaurant owners. The interviews took place mostly face-to-face. Because street food festivals are hectic spaces, seven participants were interviewed either via telephone or video call after the festivals. Nevertheless, all participants were met in person at street food festivals and the lead researcher saw their food trucks and tried their foods and drinks. Table 1 shows participants' profiles.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and questions focused on participants' backgrounds, work identities, the key neo-craft values driving their working lives, their symbolic and material practices, socio-economic experiences and conditions, and their relationship with the surrounding environment. Interviews were audio-recorded and held in Italian. In line with institutional research ethics requirements, all participants were guaranteed anonymity and made aware of the nature and aims of the research.

Data analysis took place during and after data collection. It followed an abductive approach (Sepúlveda, 2023), as we moved back and forth between data and theory iteratively and with openness (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2008). We also used our experience as researchers as a

reflexive and interpretive tool, deploying our knowledge to improve and reconstruct the interconnections among theories on play, work and meaningfulness while engaging in an interpretive process of discovery (Pratt et al., 2022).

Through this analytical process, participants' experiences of, and aspirations to, simultaneously play and work emerged as the common thread in how they pursue a more holistic kind of meaningfulness. We also teased out the neo-craft ideals and values that were emerging through the data and how they might be implicated in the interconnections between work and play. At different analytical stages, we reflected extensively on the plausibility and potential conceptual contributions of our interpretations (Pratt et al., 2022), which resulted in the findings discussed next.

Playful neo-craft work as a pathway to meaningfulness

Our findings reveal a reconciliation of play and work in participants' experiences, given the consistent presence of what existing literature considers constitutive features of play: having fun, spontaneity, experimentation with working practices and creativity. The outcome, which we term playful work, is facilitated by neo-craft aesthetic ideals and practices (e.g., the creative experimentation involved in crafting ingredients into high-quality products and the innovations of neo-craft work). Playful work goes beyond individuated notions of passionate work, gravitating toward care and (com)passion through a commitment to the community and neighbourhood. While participants construct playful work as leading to holistic meaningfulness, they acknowledge its inherent challenges and tensions. Findings are organised around the following themes: *having fun through work, the experimental and creative features of playful neo-craft work* and *playful work in space, place and community*. Together, these findings support our conceptualisation of playful work and show what this signifies for meaningfulness.

One of the most recurrent accounts from participants is the experience of having fun while working. The common idea is that *'you must have fun, we must have fun, it must not be just working but also having fun, you work having fun'* (Telemaco)! Similarly, Bernardo states that *'for me, [this job] means having fun, and I hope to keep having fun like this for all my life'*. Having fun through work is also an other-oriented goal, as *'I always attempt to try something new and to have more and more fun every day, but also to make others have more and more fun every day'* (Gherardo).

Indeed, in the context of neo-craft work, features of play and work entwine, as explained by Lazzaro, who owns a microbrewery:

'*We like to describe ourselves as a group of stupid but professional people; we join silliness with fun and professionalism. […] You see me, how much I laugh, I have fun and I want to explain to you our beers, that's the difference and it's something we never want to renounce'* *(Lazzaro).*

For another participant, having fun was explicitly linked to the revival of child-like play:

'We are the place for all those [people] who have not forgotten what it is like to be a child. Indeed, we propose to play when people come here, [this is play] for adults' *(Mara).*

Participants expressed the interplay between work and play in all components of their work. For example, this interplay was articulated in relation to neo-craft working practices:

'What I particularly like is that, when I work, it is as if I were going out with my friends to have fun, that's really cool […] I managed to do what you don't believe you can do, that is, a job that you truly love, not one which is imposed upon you' *(Pino)!*

However, play is introduced and experienced not only through neo-craft working practices but also as a feature of their customer services:

'At the kiosk we play chess. Now a bit less, because we have more work, but we very often play chess with customers, there is always a chessboard available' (Claudio).

In other cases, play is experienced through work-related social activities that the business organises in the neighbourhood with customers:

'Our most participated activity is this one of social bike rides, we pass in front of every place, everyone goes out, say hello, it's a way to reclaim the [neighbourhood] space while having fun' (Mara).

In yet other cases, having fun and playing is a part of who they are. For example, Lamberto argues that *'our way of playing is this, to always joke, we're jesters'* and Telemaco highlights how *'in this area, there are many other bars which are like us […] at [anonymised bar], [anonymised participant] plays the role of the juggler, like we do, or the court jester also like [anonymised participant] at [anonymised bar]'*. Having fun and playing is, thus, an essential aspect of playful neo-craft work.

The experimental and creative features of playful neo-craft work

Autonomous neo-craft work is associated with freedom, creativity and experimentation among participants. For example, Brando describes the decision to open a food truck as being a part of his ongoing experimentation:

'My food truck was born after years of experience with food and drinks in clubs. After so many years, I said to myself, let's try to do it on wheels... I realised, by doing market research, what could work, and I chose this product, the Puccia [a typical sandwich from the Puglia region]' (Brando).

A recurrent pattern was participants' experimentation with playful neo-craft practices in informal settings, as consumer hobbies, before deciding to turn their hobbies into an occupation. Rino's story about moving from enthusiastic hobbyist to craft beer maker exemplifies this point:

'I started making beers at home, as a hobby. (…) I had my ex-high school classmate, and another guy taste my beer. The next day they called me because they also wanted to start making beer. […] We realised we were spending a lot of time making beer and it took a lot of passion to craft it, to the point that it would have been a waste not to deepen this at a work level' (Rino).

Most participants become passionate about a specific food, drink, way of cooking, or value, typically in their leisure time, experimenting with it playfully. Then, they decide to abandon their old employment due to some kind of dissatisfaction and dedicate themselves fully to their neo-craft work, like Gigliola:

'*So I started experimenting with the hemp plant, understanding immediately that it's not an easy plant to deal with, you have to work on it a lot. So, I started playing with it and this food truck came out in the end' (Gigliola).*

Once what was a hobby becomes work, participants balance playful elements with those typical of work, including economic sustainability, as *'everything started as a game. Then, as a game, it kept developing and little by little we saw what the market demanded and what we needed to stay on the market'* (Ottaviano).

The process of ongoing experimentation endures after participants establish themselves as neo-craft workers, where experimentation becomes connected to their autonomous path. For example, Norberto opened a bar about six months before the interview and emphasised the importance of autonomous work:

Interviewer: 'Do you think this is where you will settle?' Participant: 'Never! I hope to evolve, keeping this [bar] while doing something else.' Bar partner: 'But you don't think about returning to someone else's kitchen to be a chef, do you?' 'Participant: 'Oh no! If I start something new, I'll do it for me, always' (Norberto).

Norberto has remained faithful to his intentions: about two years after the interview, he opened a restaurant next to the bar, where he can also devote himself to food. Creativity also

plays an enduring role in neo-crafters' experimentation even when neo-craft workers hire assistants, as in this work announcement that a bar owner circulated on social media:

'We are looking for an experienced person to be included in our staff as a bartender, in a friendly, informal, and family atmosphere. We are looking for, and like, people who are creative, charismatic, sociable' (Sandra).

Creativity and experimentation are especially central to their everyday neo-craft practices. Lorenzo, for example, expresses how play, creativity and experimentation come together through his main working activity (i.e., making cocktails):

'The peculiarity of alcohol molecules is that they change according to temperature. The cold holds while warmth releases the aromas. So you play with these factors […] I have a range of glasses of different materials, shapes and thicknesses. Depending on how I play with them, if I cool them down or not, that allows me to create different drinks with the same recipe and ingredients' (Lorenzo).

This experimentation also integrates the workers' ideals and values. For instance, Kevin considers the drink cellar one of the most anti-racist places in the world and explains how this informs experimentation and play:

'The drink cellar is one of the most anti-racist places in the world because you can find the entire world inside it, from Italian to South-American liquors and ingredients […] Up until last week, we had two cocktails, one characterised by Argentinian, Italian and Canadian elements and the other by Tequila and Berbere. The former comes from Mexico, the latter from Eritrea, mixed up with an Italian liquor. Coming up with these ideas and mixing these things is lots of fun' (Kevin).

Conversely, when focusing on the challenges of interconnecting play and work, the most frequently mentioned aspect is the tediousness of bureaucracy, as *'the hardest thing is (…) you have to think about a whole series of [bureaucratic] things that you didn't need to think about*

before' (Torquato). Another challenge can be physical exhaustion, especially for food truck workers, as *'you can do this work on the food truck for a maximum of a couple of years, not more, as it is very tiresome'* (Michele). Further, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with issues related to work-life balance, and the absence of free time:

'Managing everything by yourself is very difficult… I have very little free time. I would like to do the things I did before, like going to walk in the mountains, but when Sunday comes, I realise I am too tired' (Cristina).

Dori also highlighted that autonomous neo-craft work is exhausting, but that so is corporate employment, which has none of the meaningfulness-related benefits of neo-craft work:

'Working for a multinational is very draining. […] The work you have to do is frustrating because you complete a task that then does not even have any meaning. So, […] if I am to make all this effort, then I should struggle for myself' (Dori).

These findings reflect the experimental and creative but also individuated challenges of autonomous neo-craft work, including how play and work are interwoven, the tensions that emerge and the meaningfulness that participants derive from their work. But participants also highlight the importance of the relational aspects of neo-craft work, as discussed next.

Playful work in space, place and community

Neo-crafters' playful work is expressed through multiple relational dimensions, including those that manifest through their working spaces, communities and neighbourhoods. Frequently, neo-craft participants' working spaces are characterised by playfulness and experimentation that have important symbolic and relational roles:

'Here we have this rear space in which I have fun. We organise stand-up comedy events, poetry slams, etc. The counter is adorned with skateboards... In short, this place is me. People like to enter a place that has ideas, not a place without a soul' (Gherardo).

Gherardo expresses himself through his neo-craft space and considers his bar an extension of himself and of how he relates to others. This is common not only among bar and restaurant owners but also among food truckers.

Neo-craft workers also organise their spaces in ways that enable them to host social and cultural events, which fosters creative experimentation and caring social interactions among local people. Cristina, for example, thinks of her space *'almost as a community centre, not just a place where you have a lunch break or dinner'*. She explained that some events were simply initiated by regulars mentioning they had written a book, and a book presentation arose from it. Some bar owners even put their spaces at the disposal of local associations, allowing them to have a venue to meet and offer services to local residents.

Another important relational aspect is creating community through playful neo-craft work. Participants stress the value of building local, caring social connections, but in ways that go beyond "customer relations":

'The first time [someone] comes here they are our client, then they become a friend. These are not empty words, they truly become part of the family' (Carlo).

The idea of building relationships and having fun with customers beyond commercial transactions is a recurring theme also for food truck owners, who have, by design, fewer opportunities to do so than restaurant or bar owners:

'We always try to build a relationship with people, it's not just a sandwich, you try to make them laugh, it must be fun, a beautiful thing [...] as a worker, you perceive a cultural communion with other people' (Biagio).

These relationships are built through social events and everyday playful working practices and routines. Further, playful work connects to neighbourhoods and strives to have a positive impact on their local neighbourhoods while balancing economic goals. For example, together with a partner, Mara opened a bar that addresses the collective needs of the

neighbourhood's mums by offering several services that reflect care:

'We run weekly meetings for mums who gave birth to their children, from 0 to 12 months, because that is a very delicate phase for women in which you find yourself alone, exhausted and you are not "attractive" […] because all the things you talk about revolve around your child. So, it is fundamental to create a moment, a space for mothers to meet and talk' (Mara).

Mara argued that the bar has become not only hers but also the neighbourhood's and that its ultimate benefit is *'to put people in relationships'.* The relationships among neo-craft, local residents, the community and the neighbourhood intersect and generate meaningfulness through a mix of work and play. However, not all relational engagements are structured like those that Mara describes. There are also modest, micro-relational practices, like the one illustrated by Cinzia, a bartender who creates meaningfulness through playful work by developing small exhibition opportunities for local people and artists:

'I create exhibitions of the objects that I find in small markets and collect, which is a passion of mine. The other works on display are from neighbourhood customers and artists […]. So, my small shop window is how I play' (Cinzia).

Typically, food truckers (who do not stay in a fixed neighbourhood) express a similar relational orientation by engaging with a certain food culture, recipe or ingredient as a means to promote a specific Italian region. For example, Gigliola argues that by living in Italy, she has *'an incredible opportunity to play and experiment with food'.* She further explains that:

'I never liked soy because it is too abused... Over the years, I learned about hemp and discovered that in Piedmont, where I come from, there is the National Hemp Culture Centre because here we had most of the fields planted with hemp… We have a plant variety of ours that is called Carmagnola... I also discovered that the elderly Piedmontese ladies who were experts in using hemp commonly said, "Hemp is like a pig, you don't throw away any of it"' (Gigliola).

These place-based relationships exemplify a caring and (com)passionate disposition (cf.

Alacovska, 2020), one where individual passions are socialised and employed as a basis for relational engagements. However, challenges can emerge in these relationships, too. A common feature of playful neo-craft work that generates fatigue among participants is the ongoing communication required to provide detailed information about the foods and/or drinks they create and serve. Local community engagement can also become all-consuming. Some participants acknowledge this pervasiveness but reframe it positively:

'My free time? I spend in the neighbourhood. Like yesterday. I spent my morning drinking coffee with people from the neighbourhood. Then I went to the sommelier course to improve my skills and to the flea market in the neighbourhood where I met other people and talked to them. It seems sad, told like this, but for me, it is not' (Sabrina).

In sum, having positive relationships and social impacts on people, local communities and neighbourhoods are the primary goals of playful neo-craft work. Playful neo-craft work involves a complex bundle of other-oriented creativity, social activities and relationships with people and places, which together evidence the deeply relational nature of playful work.

Discussion and conclusion

This research establishes how the co-existence of work and play through autonomous work leads to a holistic type of meaningfulness in the neo-craft economy. Drawing upon forty qualitative interviews, we illuminate a voluntary framing of autonomous work involving the interweaving of work and play, which we conceptualise as playful work. This contribution is significant, as it extends theorisations on how work and play can be integrated meaningfully in the context of autonomous work rather than for managerial purposes. This conceptualisation is also significant in that it expands sociological imagination and the potential for future research by establishing playful work as an alternative, but tensional, pathway to meaningfulness.

Our findings show the fun, experimental and creative characteristics of playful neo-craft work, as well as its relational aspects regarding space, place and community. Playful work is different from both the commodification processes of play (Kücklich, 2005) and the gamification processes in the workplace (Fuchs et al., 2014), offering an alternative to the positioning of workers as 'docile subjects that can be manipulated into experiencing work as meaningful' (Laaser and Karlsson, 2021: 810). Playful work intertwines the extrinsic goals, logics and outcomes that characterise work, and the inherently fun, creative, tentative, relational and means-oriented practices that typify play.

Our findings determine that playful work also features tensions. Some derive from the constraining conditions of societal structures considered the antithesis of play, for example, bureaucracy, which "resists" attempts to make it creative and experimental, as Torquato highlights. Others are the consequences of autonomous work features, including the pervasiveness of work and lack of leisure time unrelated to work, as many participants suggest. Yet others relate to aspects of neo-craft work which make it playful for participants, such as physical exhaustion (a consequence of the crafting process).

In acknowledging the tensional interaction between play and work in playful neo-craft work, we recognise the complex nature of meaningfulness which emerges through our participants' experiences. Conceiving of playful work as a tensional pathway to meaningfulness requires us to overcome binary understandings of meaningfulness as characterised by unsolvable paradoxes (see, e.g., Bailey et al., 2019). In the case of playful neo-craft work, the tension lies in the juxtaposition of the entrepreneurial and cooperative self (Colombo et al., 2022), and the blurring of play and work attributes.

Playful work is not an abstract ideal, but as is the case with any kind of work, it must be contextualised within current societal and capitalist conditions (Thompson, 1989), which are structurally limiting and influence the possibilities available to individuals. The

meaningfulness derived from playful work is, therefore, affected by these conditions. Neo-crafters accept (willingly or reluctantly) that autonomous work is their best pathway to a whole-life-world type of meaningfulness. However, to sustain this aspiration, they partially challenge individuating, neoliberal conceptions of autonomous work (Colombo et al., 2022). They do so through a caring and – we argue – (com)passionate disposition, leveraging aspects of autonomous work that historically have been positioned as alternatives to alienated wage labour (Bologna, 2018). The outcome of this is a complex set of deep, pervasive and fatiguing tensions between diverse value systems, the rejection of bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018), the self-enchanting attributes of passionate work (Murgia and Pulignano, 2021; McRobbie, 2016), and the alternative, relational aspects of autonomous work.

The meaningfulness that can be reached through playful work concerns whole life worlds, as it draws on, and blends, all aspects of an individual's life, including those traditionally associated with work and those usually related to personal passions and fun. This kind of meaningfulness is also bound to be precarious, as it is realised within a capitalist system that is configured to either hinder or domesticate it.

Therefore, acknowledging the tensional nature of meaningfulness does justice (Banks, 2017) to the complexity of autonomous, playful work in multiple ways. First, it valorises the efforts that workers expend in developing meaningfulness and their transformative potential. Second, it denounces the structural challenges neo-crafters experience and how they are recognised and subjectively reframed. Third, it acknowledges the significant agency, autonomy and material and symbolic resources required to manage these tensions and to enjoy playful work over time.

Playful work is not reducible to having a cool job (Delgaty and Wilson, 2024)[2], where job coolness perceptions fulfil a self-enchanting role. While symbolic aspects remain an essential characteristic of playful neo-craft work, it can be at once empowering (or cool) and a source of

strain (Delgaty and Wilson, 2024). The tensional perspective on meaningfulness adopted in our work, thus, enlightens how playful work's empowering and alienating aspects are porously intertwined and how neo-craft workers manage these two aspects continuously.

Playful work is – at least in the context of autonomous neo-craft work – an expression of agency, which strives to attain whole-life-world meaningfulness. However, the blurring of work and play, lack of leisure time and economic precariousness are outcomes of neoliberalism's structuring power, which, as Dori's account illustrates, has become inescapable and a characteristic of most forms of waged and autonomous middle-class work under contemporary capitalism.

This research also highlights that playful work is deeply linked to the degree of autonomy involved in autonomous work. However, we cannot rule out that playful work may manifest in different contexts – for example, inside organisations – in ways that escape forms of gamification imposed from the top down or forms of play considered micro-resistance against management, as analysed in existing literature. Therefore, we hope future research will examine whether, how and with which specific features and tensions playful work can be experienced by waged and semi-waged workers in organisational settings, paying particular attention to alternative or non-traditional organisational models (e.g., co-operatives, NGOs, coworking and/or maker spaces), which may offer high degrees of autonomy.

Overall, ideals and values underpin the interconnection of work and play in neo-crafters' efforts to tackle the worth and significance of their whole life worlds. In this regard, playful work reveals itself as a post-industrial phenomenon characterised by an anti-industrial stance, which is achieved through productive activities underpinned by craft's creative, aesthetic ideals and non-materialistic values.

Playful work resonates with a passionate and caring disposition, which typifies manual craft work (Bozkurt and Cohen, 2019). It also resonates with Alacovska's (2020) definition of

compassion as an existential orientation and praxis founded on togetherness and on acting otherwise, caring for and taking care of others.

Still, our findings support going beyond a dichotomous passion-compassion duality, recognising their tension but also their interdependence. The result can be creatively and more accurately formalised as (com)passion, closer to the Greek etymon σῠμπᾰ́θειᾰ, which means to experience feelings [and passions] with another. Care and (com)passion are, thus, values underpinning playful work and its tensional pathway to a whole-life-world kind of meaningfulness. They find expression in the relational interdependence among neo-crafters, their customers, suppliers, local communities, neighbourhoods, ingredients and the environment, and illuminate attempts at transformative praxis.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] In the Italian context, small and independently-owned bars typically cover the role of coffee shop chains and franchises in other countries. It is common for bars to be run by the owner alone, by a small group of partners, or with one or two employees. Bars can specialise in serving espressos and pastries from breakfast to the afternoon, in lunch breaks and aperitifs, or cocktails, beers and wine from late afternoon onwards. Often, they will be known for a particular specialist coffee, dish or cocktail, and the same bar will have different offerings at different times of the day.

[2] It is important to acknowledge that Delgaty and Wilson's (2024) notion of 'cool work' bases itself on waged rather than autonomous work in the neo-craft economy.

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Tables, figures and/or images

Table 1: Participants' profiles

Participant	Business	Age	Gender	Previous job	Prior experience in the food and beverage sector
Bernardo	Food truck	50-59	M	Restaurant owner	Yes
Biagio	Food truck	30-39	M	Employee	No
Bonifacio	Food truck	30-39	F	Student	No
Brando	Food truck	40-49	M	Autonomous worker	No
Brunilde	Food truck	20-29	F	Employee	Yes
Carlo	Bar	60-69	M	Street vendor	No
Carmelo	Food truck	30-39	M	Student	No
Cinzia	Bar	50-59	F	Bar owner	Yes
Claudio	Bar	40-49	M	Bartender	Yes
Cornelia	Food truck	20-29	F	Student	No
Cristina	Bar/Restaurant	30-39	F	Employee	No
Dori	Bar	30-39	F	Employee	No
Gherardo	Bar	20-29	M	Employee	No
Gigliola	Food truck	30-39	F	Autonomous worker	No
Kevin	Bar	30-39	M	Multiple jobs	Yes
Lamberto	Food truck	30-39	M	Multiple jobs	Yes
Lara	Food truck	30-39	F	Employee	Yes
Lazzaro	Food truck	30-39	M	Student	No
Liberato	Bar	40-49	M	Multiple jobs	No
Lorenzo	Bar	40-49	M	Bartender	Yes
Lùz	Food truck	30-39	F	Autonomous worker	No
Mara	Bar	40-49	F	Autonomous worker	No
Mario	Food truck	20-29	M	Employee	Yes
Medoro	Bar/Restaurant	40-49	M	Autonomous worker	No
Michele	Food truck	30-39	M	Student	No
Muziano	Food truck	30-39	M	Autonomous worker	No
Norberto	Bar	30-39	M	Employee	Yes
Ottaviano	Food truck	30-39	M	Restaurant owner	Yes
Pierangelo	Food truck	20-29	M	Student	No
Pierluigi	Food truck	50-59	M	Employee	No
Rino	Bar	30-39	M	Autonomous worker	No
Roberto	Bar	30-39	M	Multiple jobs	Yes
Sabrina	Bar	30-39	F	Autonomous worker	No
Silvano	Bar	50-59	M	Autonomous worker	No
Speranza	Bar	40-49	F	Autonomous worker	No
Tamara	Food truck	40-49	F	Employee	No
Telemaco	Bar	40-49	M	Student	No
Tina	Bar	50-59	F	Employee	No
Tiziano	Food truck	30-39	M	Entrepreneur	Yes
Torquato	Bar	30-39	M	Employee	No