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Abstract

This article investigates how the gamification of labor and the logic of ludic capitalism are reshaping the experience of time, performance, and well-being among young people. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from a comparative study, it focuses on the increasing use of free time for work-related activities such as training, second jobs, and productivity planning. The findings reveal that over half of respondents report blurred boundaries between work and leisure, with emotional consequences including guilt when resting, anxiety about "wasting time," and pride in overworking. These dynamics are interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Han, Bazzani, Chicchi, and Zuboff, highlighting the internalization of performance, the gamification of everyday life, and the role of digital platforms in normalizing continuous labor. The article concludes by calling for renewed attention to the right to rest, and for further research into alternative models of time, value, and productivity that prioritize well-being over optimization.

Keywords

Gamification; ludic capitalism; youth labor; free time; performance culture; digital platforms; neoliberalism; work-life boundaries; self-optimization; surveillance capitalism.

Introduction

In contemporary labor cultures, the boundary between work and leisure is increasingly blurred. What was once a clear division between productive time and personal time is now a fluid continuum, where rest, play, and self-development are often reabsorbed into the logic of performance. This transformation is particularly evident among younger workers, who frequently engage in work-related activities—such as professional training, side hustles, or productivity planning—during what is nominally their free time.

Rather than resisting this encroachment, many internalize it as a form of self-investment. Leisure becomes a space for optimization, and the self becomes a project to be managed. This shift is not merely economic but cultural and psychological: it reflects a deeper transformation in how time, value, and identity are experienced under

what has been described as ludic capitalism—a system in which work adopts the aesthetics and dynamics of play, and play becomes a vehicle for productivity.
This article investigates how young people navigate this fusion of work and leisure. Drawing on empirical data, it focuses on those who report using their free time for activities that, while not formally required, are nonetheless oriented toward labor performance. The central research question is: How does the gamification of work and the logic of ludic capitalism affect the experience of time, performance, and well-being among youth?
By examining this question, the article aims to shed light on the emotional and ethical consequences of a labor culture in which the game never ends—and where the player is always working.

Theoretical Framework

The contemporary fusion of work and play, and the erosion of boundaries between labor and leisure, cannot be understood without addressing the transformations in subjectivity and control mechanisms under late capitalism. The shift from external discipline to internalized performance, the gamification of labor, and the colonization of private time by productivity logics are all central to the current configuration of what some have called ludic capitalism. This section outlines the theoretical coordinates of this transformation, drawing on the work of Byung-Chul Han, Fabio Bazzani, Federico Chicchi, and Shoshana Zuboff.

In the transition from the disciplinary society to the performance society, as described by Byung-Chul Han, the locus of control has shifted inward. No longer coerced by external authority, the subject becomes self-regulating, self-optimizing, and self-exploiting. The imperative is no longer to obey, but to perform. This transformation is not liberating—it is exhausting. The subject of performance is always active, always available, always "on." The result is a form of fatigue that is not imposed from outside, but generated from within.
This logic is particularly evident in the way young people engage with their time. The expectation to be productive extends beyond the workplace and into leisure, where rest is no longer rest, but a strategic pause in a longer game of self-enhancement. The individual becomes both player and product, caught in a cycle of continuous self-measurement. The disappearance of external coercion does not lead to freedom, but to a deeper form of subjection—one that is voluntary, internalized, and moralized.

Fabio Bazzani deepens this analysis by focusing on the gamification of labor in the digital economy. In his view, the boundaries between work and play have collapsed

into a single, continuous field of performance. The same posture, the same screen, the same gestures are used to complete a spreadsheet and to scroll through a social feed. The same logic of reward, feedback, and optimization governs both. The result is a condition in which every action—whether framed as leisure or labor—repeats the same productive gesture.

Gamification, in this sense, is not about fun. It is a form of soft control that disguises labor as play and transforms play into labor. The subject is encouraged to "enjoy" their work, to "gamify" their goals, to "level up" their skills. But this enjoyment is instrumental, and the game is never neutral. It is designed to extract value, to extend engagement, to blur the line between choice and obligation. In this system, even rest becomes a task, and even play becomes a performance.

Federico Chicchi and Andrea Fumagalli describe this condition as the diffusion of work into all areas of life. Under neoliberalism, the subject is no longer defined by their role in a factory or office, but by their capacity to produce value everywhere: in relationships, in creativity, in self-presentation. The self becomes a micro-enterprise, and life becomes a continuous project of self-investment.

This transformation is not only economic but existential. The boundaries between working time and free time dissolve, and with them, the possibility of disconnection. The subject is always potentially working—thinking about work, preparing for work, improving their employability. This condition is particularly visible among young people, who often use their free time for training, side jobs, or productivity planning. These activities are not formally required, but they are morally charged. To not engage in them is to fall behind, to waste time, to fail.

The consequence is a form of continuous performance, where the self is always on display, always in motion, always under evaluation. This performance is not only external—it is internalized, normalized, and often celebrated. But it comes at a cost: anxiety, burnout, and a loss of meaning. The subject becomes fragmented, stretched across multiple roles, unable to rest without guilt.

Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism adds a final layer to this analysis. In the digital economy, every action—whether work or play—generates data. These data are captured, analyzed, and monetized, often without the subject's awareness. The result is a system in which behavior itself becomes a source of value, and where the distinction between labor and leisure is irrelevant to capital.

In this context, the gamification of work is not only a cultural phenomenon—it is a business model. Platforms are designed to maximize engagement, to extract behavioral surplus, to predict and shape future actions. The subject is not only a worker or a player, but a data point in a system of continuous surveillance. Even leisure becomes productive—not for the subject, but for the platform.

This logic reinforces the internalization of performance. The subject is not only watched, but watches themselves. They curate their image, optimize their routines, and measure their progress—not because they are forced to, but because they believe they must. The result is a form of self-discipline that is total, seamless, and largely invisible.

Methodology

This study draws on both qualitative and quantitative data collected through a comparative fieldwork project involving 206 interviews with young people in Italy and Japan. The sample includes students, freelancers, part-time workers, and individuals in precarious employment, with attention to gender, age, and geographic diversity. The questionnaire was administered in person and online, and translated into English and Japanese to ensure cultural and linguistic equivalence.

The analysis focuses on responses that reveal how free time is increasingly colonized by work-related activities. These include professional training, second jobs, and cognitive labor such as planning, strategizing, or reflecting on productivity. A significant number of respondents reported using their leisure time for activities that, while not formally required, are oriented toward labor performance. In some cases, individuals began working precisely because they had free time available—particularly among Japanese university students, whose academic schedules are often less demanding than their Italian counterparts.

The questionnaire also captured emotional responses associated with this fusion of work and leisure. Indicators such as stress, guilt, and satisfaction were analyzed to assess the psychological impact of continuous performance. Notably, some respondents expressed guilt when not using their free time "productively," while others reported satisfaction in overworking, interpreting it as a sign of commitment or success.

The data reveal that certain demographic groups are more affected by this erosion of boundaries. Students working part-time, especially in Japan, often exceed the legal weekly limit of 28 hours, with some reporting workloads comparable to full-time employment. Freelancers and precarious workers also show high levels of overlap between work and leisure, often lacking clear boundaries or fixed schedules. Among Italian respondents, women were disproportionately dissatisfied with contract conditions, career opportunities, and workplace relationships, suggesting a gendered dimension to the experience of time and labor.

The responses were analyzed using SPSS for closed questions and content analysis for open-ended ones. The findings provide insight into how gamified labor logics and the culture of performance reshape not only how young people work, but how they live—and how they feel about the time they call their own.

Results

The data collected reveal a significant erosion of the boundary between work and leisure among young people, particularly in the Italian sample. When asked whether they occupy their free time thinking about or engaging in work-related activities, respondents were divided into three distinct groups:

- 40 respondents reported that they successfully protect their free time and do not engage in any work-related tasks during it.
- 19 respondents stated that they try to protect their free time but occasionally deal with work matters, especially in urgent situations.
- 29 respondents admitted that they regularly use their free time to think about work or perform tasks related to it.

These figures indicate that approximately 31.5% of the Italian respondents (29 out of 92) experience a direct overlap between leisure and labor, while another 20.7% (19 out of 92) report a partial or occasional fusion. In total, over half of the Italian sample (52.2%) does not experience a clear separation between work and free time.
This phenomenon, often referred to as "blurring," reflects a broader cultural shift in which the distinction between productive and non-productive time becomes increasingly ambiguous. The interviews confirm this trend. One respondent, a 22-year-old male factory worker, stated: "*If I'm working, then it's not free time anymore."*
Others described feeling unable to disconnect mentally from work, even when not physically engaged in it.
The emotional consequences of this blurred boundary are also evident in the data. According to the stress index, 77.2% of Italian respondents reported that their work is "very" or "extremely" stressful. Among those who reported using their free time for work-related activities, stress levels were particularly high. The most affected groups include:

- Young adults aged 18–23, who reported above-average stress levels (+10.3%).
- Women, who were more likely to report high stress (+10.8%) and dissatisfaction with contract conditions.
- Teachers, who showed a +9.5% increase in perceived stress compared to other professions.

These findings suggest that the fusion of work and leisure is not evenly distributed across the population. It disproportionately affects those in precarious or emotionally demanding roles, as well as those with less institutional protection or bargaining power.
In sum, the data provide clear evidence of the gamification of time: free time is no longer free, but increasingly colonized by the logic of productivity. This shift is not only structural but psychological, as individuals internalize the expectation to remain

active, responsive, and improving—even when off the clock.

The data show that the fusion of work and leisure is not experienced uniformly across the youth population. Certain groups—particularly precarious workers, freelancers, and students engaged in part-time or informal labor—are more exposed to the erosion of boundaries between productive and personal time.

Among the Italian respondents, students and precarious workers reported the highest levels of overlap between work and leisure. Many described using their free time for training, second jobs, or unpaid labor such as preparing for tasks outside of working hours. This was especially common among those involved in the gig economy or in informal employment, where the absence of contractual protections often leads to extended, unrecognized labor.

The emotional consequences of this condition are significant. Respondents frequently reported feelings of guilt when resting, anxiety about "wasting time," and even pride in overworking. These emotional responses are not isolated—they are embedded in a broader moral economy that equates productivity with personal worth.

One Italian respondent stated: "*If I'm not doing something useful, I feel like I'm falling behind."* Another described feeling "lazy" for taking a weekend off, despite having worked overtime during the week. These narratives reflect an internalized logic of performance, where even leisure must be justified in terms of future productivity.

The psychological toll is evident in the stress data. Among Italian respondents:

- 77.2% reported that their work is "very" or "extremely" stressful.
- Women reported higher levels of stress (+10.8%) and dissatisfaction with contract conditions.
- Young adults aged 18–23 showed a +10.3% increase in perceived stress.
- Teachers reported a +9.5% increase in stress compared to other professions.

These figures suggest that the most affected groups are those with unstable contracts, high emotional labor, or limited institutional support.

The following table summarizes the main reasons for stress reported by respondents:

Table – Main Reasons for Stress at Work

Reason for Stress	**Reported by (%)**
Work rhythms	High

Heavy shifts and irregular hours	High
Responsibility overload	High
Presence of supervisors	Moderate
Intense physical activity	Moderate
Intense intellectual activity	High
Anxiety about not doing the job well	Very high
Contact with the public	Moderate
Other (e.g., lack of recognition, isolation)	Not quantified

These stressors are compounded by social expectations. Respondents reported being judged by friends or family for working too much or too little. In some cases, overworking was criticized by peers or partners for reducing time spent in relationships, while underworking was criticized by colleagues or superiors for lacking commitment.

In sum, the data confirm that the gamification of labor and the logic of continuous performance disproportionately affect those in precarious or flexible roles. The emotional consequences—guilt, anxiety, and pride in overwork—are not side effects but structural features of a labor culture that no longer recognizes the legitimacy of rest.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm a significant transformation in the experience of time and labor among youth, particularly in the Italian context. The data show that over

half of the respondents do not experience a clear separation between work and leisure, with many using their free time for training, second jobs, or productivity-related activities. This condition is not simply a matter of scheduling—it reflects a deeper cultural and psychological shift in the logic of labor.

Through the lens of gamification and ludic capitalism, this fusion of time can be understood as a new form of soft control. The same tools, gestures, and interfaces are used to work, rest, and socialize. The result is a labor culture in which every moment becomes potentially productive, and every activity is evaluated in terms of its contribution to self-optimization.

This logic is internalized by the subject, who no longer needs external coercion to remain active. As Han argues, the disciplinary society has given way to the performance society, where the individual becomes both manager and product of their own labor. The self is no longer something one is, but something one must constantly become. This transformation is visible in the emotional responses reported by respondents: guilt when resting, anxiety about wasting time, and pride in overworking. These are not anomalies—they are structural effects of a system that moralizes productivity and pathologizes rest.

The data also show that this condition is unevenly distributed. Students, freelancers, and precarious workers are the most affected, particularly women and young adults under 24. These groups often lack institutional protections and are more exposed to the demand for flexibility, availability, and self-management. Their time is fragmented, their roles are unstable, and their labor is often invisible. Yet they are expected to perform continuously, to remain competitive, and to invest in themselves without pause.

This continuous performance is not limited to formal work. As Chicchi and Fumagalli argue, under neoliberalism, labor diffuses into all areas of life. The subject is expected to produce value not only through employment, but through relationships, creativity, and self-presentation. The self becomes a project, and life becomes a platform for performance. This is reinforced by the logic of surveillance capitalism, as described by Zuboff, where even leisure activities generate data, engagement, and behavioral surplus. In this system, the distinction between working and not working becomes irrelevant to capital—what matters is that the subject remains active, visible, and measurable.

In this context, the gamification of labor is not a metaphor—it is a mechanism. It transforms the experience of time, the meaning of effort, and the structure of desire. It invites the subject to play, but only within the rules of productivity. It promises freedom, but delivers obligation. And it does so not through force, but through pleasure, aspiration, and moral pressure.

The implications of these findings are profound. They suggest that the current configuration of youth labor is not only economically precarious, but existentially unstable. The erosion of boundaries between work and life undermines the possibility

of rest, reflection, and resistance. It produces subjects who are always working, even when they believe they are free.

One of the most striking aspects emerging from the data is the illusion of freedom that surrounds the decision to work during leisure time. Many respondents describe their choice to engage in training, second jobs, or productivity planning as voluntary. However, this "choice" is shaped by a cultural and economic environment in which not working is framed as irresponsibility, and rest is morally suspect. The internalization of performance norms leads individuals to perceive self-exploitation as autonomy. The subject believes they are choosing to work, when in fact they are responding to a deeply embedded imperative to remain productive, competitive, and visible.
This illusion is reinforced by the architecture of digital platforms. These platforms are not neutral tools—they are designed to maximize engagement, extract data, and normalize continuous activity. Social media, productivity apps, and online learning environments all operate within a logic that rewards presence, responsiveness, and self-promotion. Notifications, gamified interfaces, and algorithmic feedback loops encourage users to remain active, even when they believe they are resting or playing. The thesis data show that many respondents use their free time to engage with these platforms in ways that are indistinguishable from work. Whether updating a LinkedIn profile, completing a course on a training app, or managing a side hustle through a gig platform, the line between labor and leisure is erased. The platform becomes the space where all time is potentially productive, and where the subject is always performing—even when they believe they are free.
This normalization of blurred time is not experienced as coercion, but as opportunity. The subject is invited to "invest in themselves," to "build their brand," to "stay ahead." But this invitation is not optional. It is embedded in the infrastructure of digital life, and it shapes the very conditions under which youth imagine their futures. The result is a labor culture in which freedom is simulated, but obligation is real.

Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal a labor culture in which the boundaries between work and rest are no longer stable, particularly among youth navigating precarious, flexible, or digital forms of employment. The gamification of labor and the logic of ludic capitalism have normalized the use of free time for work-related activities, transforming leisure into a space of self-optimization and performance. This shift is not experienced as coercion, but as a moral and emotional imperative—one that produces guilt, anxiety, and pride in overworking.
The implications for education and training are significant. Institutions must recognize

that the culture of continuous performance does not end at the classroom or the workplace. Young people are increasingly expected to be "always on," to invest in themselves even during rest, and to treat every moment as an opportunity for growth. Educational systems should resist this logic by affirming the value of unstructured time, reflection, and non-instrumental learning. Training programs must be designed not only to enhance skills, but to protect well-being.

There is also an urgent need to re-establish boundaries between work and rest. This does not mean returning to rigid schedules, but rather cultivating a cultural and institutional recognition of the right to disconnect. Rest must be reclaimed as a legitimate, necessary, and protected dimension of life—not as a failure to perform, but as a condition for sustainable subjectivity.

Finally, this study calls for further research into alternative models of time, value, and productivity. Frameworks such as care ethics, degrowth, and post-work imaginaries offer promising directions for rethinking labor beyond the metrics of efficiency and output. If the self is no longer a project to be optimized, but a life to be lived, then the future of work must begin with the freedom to stop.

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