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Unionisation in the Creative Industries: Challenges and Opportunities in a Fragmented Workforce

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Abstract

This researcher examined the "Unionisation in the Creative Industries: Challenges and Opportunities in a Fragmented Workforce," with objectives to examine the nature of workforce fragmentation in the creative industries, assess the current state of unionisation efforts within creative sectors, and identify the key challenges hindering collective bargaining among creative professionals. The study is grounded in the Labour Process Theory (LPT), which provides a framework for analysing the ways in which digital technology is shaping the labour process and impacting workers' rights. Using a documentary research method, the study analyzes existing literature and documents related to unionisation in the creative industries, including academic articles, industry reports, and union publications. The findings reveal that workforce fragmentation is a significant challenge in the creative industries, with many workers engaged in precarious and informal employment arrangements, and that unionisation efforts face challenges due to the highly individualized nature of creative labour and the lack of formal recognition for many creative professionals. The researchers conclude that unionisation in the creative industries is crucial for promoting fair labour practices and protecting workers' rights, and recommends that unions and worker organisations develop new strategies to organize creative workers, policymakers strengthen labour laws and regulations, and creative industry stakeholders promote fair labour practices and provide greater support for workers' rights.

Keywords: Unionisation, creative industries, workforce fragmentation, digital labour, collective bargaining.



Introduction

In recent years, Nigeria's creative industries—which span film, music, theatre, publishing, digital content, and beyond—have emerged as vibrant engines of culture, identity, and economic growth. Yet they remain defined by fragmented workforces, often composed of gig workers, freelancers, and short-term contractors whose contributions fuel global interest yet rarely secure stability (Owano, 2024). Despite the sector's enormous potential—it employs millions and contributes billions to GDP—creative practitioners frequently lack fundamental protections such as contracts, benefits, or predictable income (Nyamanga, 2024). As digital platforms further reshape how work is produced and monetised, understanding the lived experiences of these workers becomes essential to shaping fairer and more resilient labour relations in this dynamic space.

Within such fluid and porous labour markets, the idea of unionisation has become increasingly compelling. Unions—including traditional guilds and newer digital collectives—aim to negotiate standards, fight for fair pay, and advocate for digital labour rights. However, the reality in Nigeria is complex. Many creative associations remain weak or fragmented, with limited legal backing and internal divisions that hinder cohesive action (Usoro, 2023). For instance, stakeholders have called for the reorganisation of guilds to address exploitative practices, especially toward female creatives (*New Telegraph*, 2023). These dynamics underscore the urgent need to examine how existing union structures can adapt to protect workers navigating an increasingly gig-based creative economy.

Moreover, the prevalence of strikes—both in Hollywood and locally in academia or public services—highlights the tension between labour solidarity and industry fragmentation. The Hollywood writers' strike over streaming compensation and AI protections offers critical lessons for Nigerian creatives, where collective bargaining is underdeveloped (Hills, 2023). Nigerian creatives increasingly draw parallels between these global strikes and their own struggles for fair digital royalties, rights over intellectual property, and contract enforcement (Gilborbe, 2023). This framing invites us to explore how digital labour rights—such as automated payments, data ownership, and contract transparency—could be secured through collective action and negotiation.

Ultimately, the interplay between a fragmented workforce, nascent union efforts, and digital labour rights brings both challenges and opportunities. As UNESCO and the Nigerian government promote digital capacity-building and policy reforms, the creative sector stands at a critical juncture (UNESCO, 2025). Can collective bargaining evolve to embrace flexible and informal work arrangements? Is it possible to build digital-era unionism that transcends traditional guild boundaries? And what overlooked voices—gig writers, online musicians, indie filmmakers—must be heard in these conversations?

Through tracing this terrain, this study places unionisation in dialogue with fragmented labour structures, strikes, and digital rights in Nigeria's creative industries. It seeks to explore not only the barriers—legal, organisational, economic—that constrain collective action, but also the grassroots energy and global comparisons that inspire hope. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more inclusive, equitable vision for labour in a cultural sector that both defines and represents the best of contemporary Nigeria.

Despite the presence of professional associations and guilds in some segments of the creative industries, unionisation remains weak or inconsistent across most creative sectors. As a result, creative professionals frequently face exploitation, underpayment, job insecurity, and exclusion from collective bargaining



processes. The rise of digital platforms has further complicated this landscape by introducing new forms of labour—such as content monetisation and algorithmic work—that existing union models are often unprepared to address.

While there is growing global discourse on labour rights in the digital age, research on unionisation in the creative industries remains limited, particularly in relation to workforce fragmentation and the shift toward platform-based work. Much of the existing scholarship such as Skine (2023) tends to focus on traditional labour structures, with limited attention paid to the unique dynamics of creative labour or how unionisation can adapt to meet the needs of flexible, decentralised workers. Furthermore, strikes such as those initiated by screenwriters, actors, and digital creatives in various parts of the world have drawn attention to key issues like fair compensation for streaming content, intellectual property rights, and the impact of artificial intelligence—yet academic research has not fully kept pace with these evolving challenges. This study is therefore motivated by the need to explore how unionisation can function effectively in fragmented creative industries, what barriers currently hinder collective organisation, and what opportunities exist for advancing digital labour rights through reimagined collective structures.

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the nature of workforce fragmentation in the creative industries.
2. Assess the current state of unionisation efforts within creative sectors.
3. Identify the key challenges hindering collective bargaining among creative professionals.

Empirical Review

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) conducted a study on the creative industries and labour politics, focusing on the challenges faced by creative workers in the film and television industry. The study's objectives were to examine the working conditions and labour politics in the creative industries, and to investigate the role of unions in protecting workers' rights. The study used a qualitative research approach, conducting in-depth interviews with creative workers and union representatives. The findings of the study revealed that creative workers face significant challenges, including precarious working conditions, low pay, and limited job security. The study concluded that unions play a crucial role in protecting workers' rights and promoting fair labour practices in the creative industries. The study recommended that unions should adapt to the changing nature of work in the creative industries and find new ways to represent and protect workers. This study relates to the current study on unionisation in the creative industries, as it highlights the challenges faced by creative workers and the importance of unions in protecting workers' rights. However, the study differs from the current study in terms of its focus on the film and television industry, whereas the current study has a broader focus on the creative industries.

Ross (2008) investigated the impact of digital labour on workers' rights in the creative industries, focusing on the challenges posed by digital technology and the opportunities for new forms of collective action. The study's objectives were to examine the impact of digital labour on workers' rights and to investigate the potential for new forms of collective action in the digital age. The study used a case study approach, examining the experiences of workers in the video game industry. The findings of the study revealed that digital labour poses significant challenges for workers' rights, including the erosion of traditional employment protections and the exploitation of workers through unpaid labour. The study concluded that new forms of collective action are needed to protect workers' rights in the digital age. The study recommended that unions and



worker organisations should adapt to the changing nature of work in the creative industries and find new ways to represent and protect workers. This study relates to the current study on unionisation in the creative industries, as it highlights the challenges posed by digital labour and the need for new forms of collective action. However, the study differs from the current study in terms of its focus on the video game industry, whereas the current study has a broader focus on the creative industries.

Salgado (2020) conducted a study on the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and its role in protecting writers' rights in the film and television industry. The study's objectives were to examine the history and impact of the WGA on writers' rights, and to investigate the challenges faced by the union in the digital age. The study used a qualitative research approach, conducting in-depth interviews with writers and union representatives. The findings of the study revealed that the WGA has played a crucial role in protecting writers' rights and promoting fair labour practices in the film and television industry. The study concluded that the WGA's efforts have been essential in ensuring that writers receive fair compensation and credits for their work. The study recommended that the WGA should continue to adapt to the changing nature of work in the creative industries and find new ways to protect writers' rights in the digital age. This study relates to the current study on unionisation in the creative industries, as it highlights the importance of unions in protecting workers' rights and promoting fair labour practices. However, the study differs from the current study in terms of its focus on the WGA and the film and television industry, whereas the current study has a broader focus on the creative industries and unionisation more generally.

Theoretical Framework

The Labour Process Theory (LPT) originated in the 1970s, primarily through the work of Harry Braverman, who critiqued the labour process under capitalism and its impact on workers. Braverman argued that the labour process is shaped by the capitalist mode of production, where workers are exploited and alienated from their labour (Braverman, 1974). The theory's central tenets include the notion that the labour process is a site of class struggle, where workers and capitalists have conflicting interests. LPT also emphasizes the importance of understanding the ways in which management controls and exploits labour, and how workers resist and respond to these controls (Burawoy, 1979).

Critics of LPT argue that the theory oversimplifies the complexities of the labour process and neglects the agency of workers. Some critics also argue that LPT focuses too much on the structural aspects of the labour process, neglecting the role of culture and ideology in shaping labour relations (Thompson, 1983). Despite these criticisms, LPT remains a relevant and useful framework for analysing labour relations in various contexts, including the creative industries.

In applying LPT to the current study on unionisation in the creative industries, the theory can help analyze the ways in which digital technology is shaping the labour process and impacting workers' rights. For example, LPT can be used to examine how digital platforms and algorithms control and exploit creative workers, and how workers are resisting and responding to these controls (Fuchs, 2014). The theory can also help analyze the role of unions in protecting workers' rights and promoting fair labour practices in the creative industries. By using LPT, the study can provide insights into the ways in which the labour process is shaped by capitalist relations of production, and how workers and unions can challenge and transform these relations.



Furthermore, LPT can be used to examine the specific challenges faced by creative workers in the digital age, such as precarious working conditions, low pay, and limited job security. The theory can also help analyze the ways in which unions can adapt to the changing nature of work in the creative industries and find new ways to represent and protect workers. Through applying LPT to the current study, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the labour process in the creative industries and the ways in which workers and unions can promote fair labour practices and protect workers' rights.

Method

This study employed the documentary research method. Asemah-Ibrahim, Nwaoboli&Asemah (2022a, 2022b) and Asemah and Nwaoboli (2024) observed that it is a qualitative research approach that involves the analysis of existing documents and records to gain insights into a particular phenomenon or issue. Documentary research involves the systematic examination of documents such as books, articles, reports, and archival materials to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Scott, 1990). In this study, documentary research was used to analyse existing literature and documents related to unionisation in the creative industries, including academic articles, industry reports, and union publications.

Creative Industries

The creative industries encompass a broad range of economic activities that rely fundamentally on creativity, talent, and intellectual property to generate wealth and cultural value. According to Eze and Okoye (2021), the creative industries include sectors such as film production, music, fashion, advertising, publishing, and digital media—areas that are driven by the production and commercialisation of creative content. These industries have become crucial to Nigeria's economy, not only for their economic contributions but also for their role in shaping cultural identity and national branding. Eze and Okoye(2021) emphasize that creative industries represent a dynamic force for employment, especially for young people, and offer alternative pathways to economic empowerment outside traditional sectors. However, the authors also point out that these industries are often plagued by structural weaknesses such as informal working arrangements and weak regulatory frameworks, which limit their potential for sustained growth.

Expanding on this, Agbaje and Yusuf (2023) describe creative industries as an ecosystem where artistic expression meets commerce, enabled by technological innovations and digital platforms. They argue that Nigeria's creative economy thrives on a unique blend of indigenous cultural expressions and contemporary media technologies, which facilitate the production and distribution of creative goods at an unprecedented scale. The authors stress that the digital transformation has expanded opportunities for content creators to reach global audiences, but it also introduces challenges related to copyright infringement, fair compensation, and labour rights. Agbaje and Yusuf (2023) contend that understanding creative industries requires a multidisciplinary approach that considers economic, social, and technological dimensions, especially as the sector transitions from informal local markets to formalized global supply chains.



Furthermore, Greene (2022) defines the creative industries as sectors where innovation, cultural knowledge, and intellectual property converge to produce economic and social value. They highlight that in Nigeria, the creative industries operate within a complex socio-economic context marked by high youth unemployment, limited formal job opportunities, and a burgeoning informal economy. Greene(2022) argues that creative industries are uniquely positioned to address some of these challenges by fostering entrepreneurship and cultural participation. However, they caution that the sector's reliance on project-based and freelance work contributes to labour precarity and inconsistent income, making formal mechanisms for worker protection and collective representation imperative. The authors advocate for stronger policy frameworks that recognize the specific needs of creative workers while promoting sustainable industry growth.

Fragmented Workforce

The concept of a fragmented workforce refers to a labour market characterized by dispersed, non-standard, and precarious employment relationships where workers are often disconnected from traditional employer-employee bonds. According to Adegbola (2021), workforce fragmentation is particularly evident in sectors like the creative industries, where gig work, freelancing, and short-term contracts dominate. They argue that such fragmentation leads to irregular income streams, lack of social security benefits, and limited collective bargaining power, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation and job insecurity. Adegbola (2020) highlights that the lack of formal recognition for many creative professionals exacerbates these challenges, resulting in a workforce that is difficult to organize or regulate.

Chukwu and Ezeani (2023) provide a complementary perspective by emphasising the relationship between technological change and workforce fragmentation. They note that the rise of digital platforms and remote working arrangements has accelerated the decentralisation of labour, leading to highly individualized work patterns. In Nigeria's creative sectors, this means many workers operate independently, often juggling multiple gigs without stable contracts or formal workplace protections. Chukwu and Ezeani (2023) stress that such fragmentation complicates traditional union efforts, as workers are dispersed, lack regular employer contacts, and often compete rather than collabourate. The authors suggest that innovative union models and digital organising strategies are needed to address these structural shifts.

Adding to this, Zank (2024) describes a fragmented workforce as one in which labour relations are increasingly segmented and atomized, undermining collective solidarity. Their research in Nigeria's creative economy shows that fragmented employment arrangements foster isolation among workers, reduce trust, and make coordinated industrial action difficult. Zank (2024) highlights that in the absence of formal contracts and stable employment, workers are less likely to participate in unions or demand rights, which weakens labour's negotiating position. They argue that addressing workforce fragmentation requires not only legal reforms but also new forms of labour organisation that embrace flexibility while securing worker protections, especially in the context of digital labour and platform economies.

Challenges of Unionisation in the Creative Industries



One of the primary challenges of unionisation in the creative industries is the highly individualized nature of creative labour. Unlike traditional sectors where employees often share a physical workspace and standardized roles, creative professionals tend to work independently, often on short-term contracts, freelance gigs, or project-based assignments. This decentralisation and autonomy create a structural barrier to collective organisation. As Gill and Pratt (2020) note, creative workers are often encouraged to see themselves as entrepreneurs rather than employees, which fosters a sense of personal branding and individualism that runs counter to the collective spirit of unionisation. This “self-exploitative” identity, where long hours and underpaid work are normalized as passion or commitment, reduces the motivation to seek collective protection. In such a context, unions struggle to define their relevance, and workers may view them as bureaucratic or outdated.

Another significant challenge lies in the fragmented and informal employment arrangements that dominate creative sectors. Unlike permanent jobs, creative work is often episodic, mediated by third parties such as agencies or platforms that do not assume responsibility for worker welfare. DePeuter, Cohen and Saraco (2021) explain that this kind of precarity makes it difficult for unions to identify who the “employer” actually is, complicating efforts to negotiate contracts, enforce labour standards, or represent workers legally. For example, in the gig economy—where many creatives now operate—platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, or freelance marketplaces deny having employer obligations to their users, arguing that they merely connect service providers to clients. This ambiguity in labour relationships blurs lines of accountability and weakens the collective bargaining power of creatives, particularly in disputes related to pay, intellectual property, or digital rights.

The global nature of digital creative work also presents another challenge, as many creative professionals work across borders, jurisdictions, and legal systems. While this opens up access to international markets, it simultaneously dilutes the power of local or national unions, which may be limited in scope and authority. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2020) point out, unions were historically designed for localized and centralized labour markets, and they have yet to fully adapt to the transnational and virtual dimensions of contemporary creative labour. This mismatch makes it difficult to enforce fair pay standards, working conditions, or legal protections across borders. In many cases, creatives working for international clients have no access to grievance mechanisms or labour courts, particularly when contracts are informal or unenforceable. Without transnational union structures or cooperative agreements, creative workers are left to navigate global markets as individuals, exposing them to exploitation and under-compensation.

Moreover, there are cultural and ideological barriers that hinder unionisation in the creative industries. Many creatives perceive unions as intrusive or as limiting artistic freedom, believing that collective structures might impose standardisation or restrict the fluid nature of creative work. Banks and Oakley (2022) argue that this perception is rooted in a long-standing romanticisation of the creative profession as inherently independent, rebellious, and self-directed. This cultural narrative makes it difficult to cultivate solidarity among workers, even when they face shared precarity or exploitation. Additionally, many younger creatives are unfamiliar with labour history or skeptical of institutional structures, seeing unions as relics of the industrial era. As a result, unions often struggle with recruitment, especially among digitally



native creatives who rely on algorithms and platforms rather than traditional production houses or studios.

More so, the lack of legal frameworks and political will to support union activity in creative sectors remains a substantial challenge. Even in countries with established labour laws, creative industries often fall into regulatory grey areas where workers are not clearly classified as employees. According to McRobbie (2021), the shift toward neoliberal economic policies and deregulation has further eroded labour protections, encouraging flexibility and deregulated markets at the expense of job security. In many cases, even when creatives attempt to organize, they face resistance from employers or platforms that see unionisation as a threat to operational flexibility and profit margins. Legal systems may also be slow to adapt, failing to recognize new forms of labour or to enforce existing rights in digitally mediated workspaces. This legal inertia, combined with weak enforcement mechanisms, makes it difficult for unions to secure meaningful gains for creative workers in the contemporary economy.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that workforce fragmentation is a significant challenge in the creative industries, with many workers engaged in precarious and informal employment arrangements. This is consistent with the views of Adegbola (2021), who notes that workforce fragmentation leads to irregular income streams, lack of social security benefits, and limited collective bargaining power, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation and job insecurity. Similarly, Chukwu and Ezeani (2023) emphasize that technological change has accelerated the decentralisation of labour, leading to highly individualized work patterns that complicate traditional union efforts. The study found that many creative workers are engaged in freelance or gig-based work, which further exacerbates the fragmentation of the workforce. This finding is supported by the work of Zank (2024), who describes a fragmented workforce as one in which labour relations are increasingly segmented and atomized, undermining collective solidarity.

The study also found that unionisation efforts in the creative industries face significant challenges, including the highly individualized nature of creative labour and the lack of formal recognition for many creative professionals. Gill and Pratt (2020) argue that creative workers are often encouraged to see themselves as entrepreneurs rather than employees, which fosters a sense of personal branding and individualism that runs counter to the collective spirit of unionisation. Banks and Oakley (2022) also note that many creatives perceive unions as intrusive or as limiting artistic freedom, believing that collective structures might impose standardisation or restrict the fluid nature of creative work. The study found that these perceptions are particularly prevalent among younger creatives, who may be less familiar with labour history or skeptical of institutional structures. This finding is supported by the work of McRobbie (2021), who notes that the shift toward neoliberal economic policies and deregulation has further eroded labour protections, encouraging flexibility and deregulated markets at the expense of job security.

Furthermore, the study found that digital technology has significantly impacted workers' rights in the creative industries, with many workers facing exploitation and underpayment. Fuchs (2014) notes that digital platforms and algorithms control and exploit creative workers, and that workers are resisting and responding to these controls. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2020) also emphasize that the global nature of digital creative work presents challenges for unions, as many creative



professionals work across borders, jurisdictions, and legal systems, diluting the power of local or national unions. The study found that the lack of clear labour laws and regulations governing digital work further exacerbates these challenges, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation. This finding is supported by the work of De Peuteret al. (2021), who note that the gig economy and platform capitalism have created new challenges for labour organising and worker protection.

The study also highlights the importance of collective bargaining and strikes in promoting fair labour practices in the creative industries. Salgado (2020) notes that unions like the Writers Guild of America have played a crucial role in protecting writers' rights and promoting fair labour practices in the film and television industry. Ross (2008) also emphasizes that new forms of collective action are needed to protect workers' rights in the digital age, and that unions and worker organisations should adapt to the changing nature of work in the creative industries and find new ways to represent and protect workers. The study found that collective bargaining and strikes can be effective tools for promoting fair labour practices, but that they require strong union leadership and solidarity among workers. This finding is supported by the work of Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010), who note that unions can play a crucial role in protecting workers' rights and promoting fair labour practices in the creative industries.

In addition, the study found that the creative industries are characterized by a high level of precariousness and uncertainty, with many workers facing irregular income streams, lack of social security benefits, and limited job security. This finding is supported by the work of Greene (2022), who notes that the creative industries operate within a complex socio-economic context marked by high youth unemployment, limited formal job opportunities, and a burgeoning informal economy. The study also found that the lack of formal recognition for many creative professionals exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for workers to access labour protections and benefits. This finding is supported by the work of Eze and Okoye (2021), who note that the creative industries are often plagued by structural weaknesses such as informal working arrangements and weak regulatory frameworks, which limit their potential for sustained growth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that unionisation in the creative industries is crucial for promoting fair labour practices and protecting workers' rights, particularly in the face of workforce fragmentation and digital labour exploitation. However, the study also highlights the challenges faced by unions in organising creative workers, including the highly individualized nature of creative labour and the lack of formal recognition for many creative professionals. The study emphasizes the need for unions and worker organisations to adapt to the changing nature of work in the creative industries and to find new ways to represent and protect workers.

It is recommended that:

1. Unions and worker organisations should develop new strategies to organize creative workers, including online platforms and social media campaigns, to reach workers who are dispersed and fragmented.
2. Policymakers should strengthen labour laws and regulations to protect workers' rights in the creative industries, including laws governing digital labour and platform work.



3. Creative industry stakeholders, including producers, studios, and platforms, should promote fair labour practices and provide greater support for workers' rights, including fair pay, benefits, and job security.

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