

Special Issue
Engineering the Future Sociologically:
a Call to Delve into Environmental
Education Enhanced by
Technological Innovations

FUORI LUOGO

**Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology**

Guest Editors

Norberto Albano
Sandro Brignone
Carmine Urciuoli



Editor in Chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Managing Editor: Carmine Urciuoli

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ChatGPT and the Social Appropriation of AI on Discord²

Introduction

Since the release of ChatGPT the discussions on the uses and potential impacts of AI have revitalized. These cross-disciplinary discourses encompass a wide range of perspectives, often characterised by dichotomies. For example, whether AI will have apocalyptic effects on the labour market or maintain the status quo by rendering some jobs obsolete and easily replacing them with new professions without significantly altering the market structure (Benanav, 2020; Dyer-Witford *et al.*, 2019); whether it will secure a better future for humanity and the planet by addressing contemporary environmental crises or contribute to depleting energy resources for its training (Crawford, 2021; Pasquinelli, 2023); whether it will reproduce gender inequalities through the feminization of automation in domestic, reproductive, emotional, and sexual labour, or contribute to reconceptualizing gender biases embedded in digital technologies (Fortunati, 2018; Adam, 2006; Lynch *et al.*, 2022). However, these dualities obscure the more nuanced and complex realities of integrating AI into everyday life, especially when talking about generative AI, which is defined as «a subset of AI that uses a particular type of machine learning capable of making associations from millions of pieces of data to generate images or predict the next word in a sequence without preset instructions» (Nguyen, & Mateescu, 2024, p. 5).

In this paper, we seek to move beyond a purely dichotomous approach and examine the social shaping of generative AI-based applications (MacKenzie, & Wajcman, 1999) conceived as an appropriation process in the interaction between human actors and technological entities in which users not only adopt technology but also reinterpret and modify it based on their social contexts and needs. We focus specifically on the integration of generative AI into labour practices. In fact, since the release of ChatGPT by OpenAI in November 2022 and the subsequent dissemination of numerous generative AI tools, a variety of users have begun to integrate these tools into their daily labour practices. The study focuses on a specific and understudied social practice: prompt-making within online communities in the context of digital labour. While prompting is often conceived as an individual and technical interaction with AI systems, we investigate how it unfolds through collaborative exchanges, shared experimentation, and mutual feedback among online users. We conceptualise this phenomenon as a form of social shaping of technology (*ibid.*) framed as a set of socially negotiated dynamics and processes through which practices, norms, and expectations around AI use emerge in interaction. This explorative study aims to answer the following research question: how are AI-based prompt-making practices socially shaped and co-constructed on digital platforms in the context of digital labour? We seek to investigate three levels: the type of users who participate in the prompt-making processes, how and why users aim to integrate generative AI-based technologies into daily labour practices, and whether and how prompt-making activities foster the development of a grassroots market for AI application prompts.

To this end, we examine prompt-making as it unfolds on Discord, a communication platform that allows users to interact in real time through servers dedicated to specific topics and communities. In the context of generative AI, it provides a crucial space for collaborative prompt-making practices and peer-to-peer learning. These servers offer direct access to models like Midjourney and ChatGPT and enable real-time interaction among users and foster a collaborative environment for prompt-sharing, feedback exchange, and iterative improvement. As such, Discord functions not just as a technical medium but as a social infrastructure for the appropriation and diffusion

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of generative AI practices. Within this context, the widespread diffusion of generative AI tools has also led to the emergence of so-called prompt markets, an informal, user-driven economic circuits where prompts are created, exchanged, and sold as digital goods, often involving peer-to-peer negotiation, personalization, and the development of service-based expertise by transforming creative experimentation into monetised services.

Our observations indicate that users engage in prompt-making on Discord for diverse work-related purposes, ranging from boosting productivity to creating new digital services. While often framed as efficiency-driven, these practices are deeply rooted in social, emotional, and economic contexts. Some seek to monetize their skills or launch small businesses, others aim to gain credibility within technical communities, and others use AI for personal expression or emotional support. Together, these practices reveal how prompt-making serves as a flexible resource that adapts to users' shifting roles, aspirations, and constraints within the digital labour economy.

To unpack and critically discuss these diverse prompt-making practices and their implications for the social shaping of generative AI technologies, this paper is structured as follows. The theoretical background situates this study within the literature on the social shaping and appropriation of digital technology, examining how generative AI stabilizes within specific social groups, addresses their challenges, and reveals various bottom-up manifestations; the methods section discusses the digital ethnography approach and the qualitative analysis techniques employed; the findings section presents the different types of users, their related activities, and the functioning of the prompt market; the conclusion reflects on how generative AI is reinterpreted and integrated into users' everyday lives, addressing both economic strategies and affective engagements.

1. Theoretical Background

1.1 AI And Labor: A Multifaceted Relation

According to the International Labor Organization (Gmyrek, Berg, & Bescond, 2023), the impact of generative AI is expected to predominantly affect office jobs in high-income countries, primarily through augmentation rather than automation or replacement (Benanav, 2020). While much of the current debate on generative AI focuses on its potential effects on labour markets, this study shifts attention to how users collectively appropriate AI technologies within their everyday labour practices. In fact, the Data & Society report (Nguyen, & Mateescu, 2024, *op. cit.*) advocates for a critical interrogation on some of the prevailing assumptions on the way workers use, or are forced to use, generative AI. According to them, the introduction of generative AI in the workplace may lead to the devaluation of humans, inequalities, the implementation of control and a further prevarication of the labour-force. Conversely, some techno-enthusiast stances (McAfee, & Brynjolfsson, 2017) foster the optimistic idea that instead of completely replacing human workers, generative AI technologies are likely to enhance their productivity and efficiency by taking over everyday routine and repetitive tasks, thereby allowing workers to focus on more complex and creative aspects of their roles. Shifting the focus from office jobs to the creative industry reveals an even more complex dynamic. In fields like writing, design, and media production, generative AI's impact is multifaceted—not only displacing certain roles, as seen in the Hollywood strikes (Anguiano, & Beckett, 2023) but also reshaping industry conditions in ways that stifle cultural production. Many creators warn of the devaluation of human artistry and the rise of homogenized content (Jiang *et al.*, 2023), raising concerns about the long-term effects on both creative labour and cultural diversity.

This dynamic extends beyond the creative sector. In fact, any analysis of generative AI's impact on labour must consider the broader socio-economic forces at play, so as not to overestimate

the power of AI or the inevitability of some impact on society. Several authors argue that generative AI can be deconstructed into a sequence of algorithms devoid of any awareness, intention or inspiration (Airoldi, 2022; Crawford, 2021; Jiang *et al.*, 2023; Nguyen, & Mateescu, 2024, *op. cit.*). Bearing that in mind, we can consider another major argument in AI and labor related literature, namely the relevance of the skills-level for determining the degree of replaceability. Several studies, in fact, agree that, differently from previous waves of automation, generative AI-based automation is seemingly affecting more high-skilled workers (Felten *et al.*, 2023). The debate around replaceability has gained particular traction in discussions of AI's role in the creative sector, where concerns about the appropriation of human labor and content extend beyond traditional definitions of artistic authorship. Although this dispute lies beyond the scope of this article, its significance lies in how it challenges conventional frameworks for analysing AI's labour impact—particularly the entrenched dichotomy between high-skilled and low-skilled work (Pasquinelli, 2023).

In this study, instead of simply assessing whether AI will displace low-skilled or high-skilled workers, we aim to challenge this dichotomy. We interrogate how the utilization of AI to expedite standardized tasks often diverges from a job's intrinsic characteristics or its presumed "replaceability".

1.2 The Social Shaping of Technology

The concept of the social shaping of technology represents a multifaceted framework that integrates different perspectives and concepts aimed at clarifying the intricate relationship between technology and society (Howcroft, Mitev, & Wilson, 2004). MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999, *op. cit.*) argue that the social formation of technology transcends mere technical or economic determinants by encompassing a broad spectrum of social, cultural, and political influences. Technologies, conceived as social constructs, not only reflect but also actively shape the dynamics of the societies in which they are developed. In this view, technological artifacts are never neutral but are embedded within complex webs of power relations, cultural meanings, and collective practices. Building on this perspective, Williams and Edge (1996) emphasize not only the impact of social factors during the development phase of technology but also the crucial role played by its consumption and use. They argue that a comprehensive understanding of how technologies evolve, stabilize, and transform society requires a holistic examination of the entire life cycle, from the initial stages of design and production to the later stages of consumption, adaptation, and everyday practical application. Technologies continue to evolve and acquire new meanings as they are appropriated, reinterpreted, and domesticated by different social groups.

In this paper, we focus specifically on the consumption and appropriation phase of generative AI technologies, rather than on their design or initial development stages. We frame the social shaping of generative AI-based applications as a process of social appropriation from below, where online users creatively integrate, adapt, and repurpose these technologies in their daily working practices. This approach highlights how technologies are not only shaped by the needs and values of society during their production but continue to be reshaped, recontextualized over time.

To conceptualize this process of appropriation, we draw on Moreno Gálvez and Sierra Caballero's (2022) definition of the social appropriation of new technologies: «[it] refers to technological and social processes of mediation in the interaction between social actors and technological devices [...] the meaningful integration of the technological devices into subjects' everyday lives and behaviour; the active and creative production of meaning; social mediation within communities of users» (*ibid.*, p. 2). This perspective emphasizes that users are not passive recipients of technology. Rather, they actively negotiate its meaning, adapting it to their cultural, emotional, and economic realities. The creative production of meaning often results in new uses and inter-

pretations that diverge from original design intentions, illustrating the dynamic and recursive relationship between technology and society (Pinch, & Bijker, 1987).

Furthermore, we build upon Julia Ticona's (2022) concept of "digital hustle" to highlight the strategic dimension of these practices. Rather than seeing AI adoption purely as a form of technological efficiency, we consider it as a set of strategic adaptations to the broader data-driven economy. This often entails leveraging tacit knowledge that remains difficult to automate and cultivating a blend of technical and interpersonal skills that enhance users' flexibility and visibility in digital labour markets. This concept captures how workers actively integrate AI-based digital technologies into both their professional and social practices in ways that are shaped by their individual positions within broader socio-economic structures. The digital hustle perspective challenges reductive, skill-based frameworks of labour analysis and underscores the need for more nuanced, user-centered understandings of technological integration in the AI era. It foregrounds a spectrum of everyday labour practices such as appropriation, reappropriation, domestication, resistance, and optimization which we can collectively situate within the broader framework of the social shaping of technology (Bonini, & Trerè, 2024; De Certeau, 2013; Erwin, & Taylor, 2004; MacKenzie, & Wajcman, 1999, *op. cit.*; Ticona, 2022, *op. cit.*).

2. Methods

We explore prompt-making practices which serve as the field site for observing the social shaping and appropriation of generative AI technologies within the context of digital labour. To answer this research question, we adopted a digital ethnography approach (Paoli, & D'Auria, 2021), drawing on principles from Grounded Theory (Khan, 2014) such as inductive coding, iterative category development, and sensitivity to emergent patterns to investigate how social norms, collaborative dynamics, and practices of prompt-making emerged on Discord.

Originally created for online gamers, Discord has significantly expanded its user base, offering VoIP and text messaging services to build and manage online communities. By 2021, the platform grew from 59 million to 151 million users, largely driven by the pandemic (Haddad, 2021). Models like ChatGPT and Midjourney are integrated directly into servers, enabling users to submit prompts and receive AI-generated outputs in real time. Our study focuses on the unofficial ChatGPT server, which at the time of observation counted around 80,000 members. Unlike the official server, it does not require adherence to OpenAI's corporate code of conduct, fostering freer experimentation with prompts. The server is organized into thematic channels, such as prompt engineering and creative projects, where interactions unfold through asynchronous discussions and real-time feedback. This open, loosely moderated environment promotes grass-roots peer-to-peer learning and the bottom-up diffusion of generative AI practices. We selected three public channels focused on prompt creation³. The first channel, named Prompt Engineering, is dedicated to creating, customizing, and sharing prompts, primarily for text-based generative AI models like ChatGPT. The second channel, named Project, focuses on the development of plugins for generative AI applications. The third channel, named Image, has a hybrid structure: it serves both for commenting on and sharing image prompts and for discussing the artistic limitations of generative AI models. Unlike the other two channels, the Image channel is directly integrated with Midjourney, allowing users to create images by submitting prompts within the channel.

³ The server's guidelines did not impose any restrictions on scraping or citing publicly available posts. The study involves both textual (ChatGPT) and visual (Midjourney) generative AI models.

Data collection was carried out between January and March 2024⁴ using a Python script, combining BeautifulSoup 4 for parsing HTML content and Selenium for automating interaction with dynamically loaded web pages. We gathered 288 posts from the Prompt Engineering channel, 205 from the Project channel, and 4,063 from the Image channel that represented the entirety of posts available at the time of collection. Within the Image channel, we further distinguished 634 discussion posts from 3,429 prompts submitted for image generation via Midjourney. All collected posts were organized into a database, including variables such as author ID, author name, post date, post content, and attachments.

The analysis focuses on the 50 most prolific users from each selected channel. This sampling strategy enabled us to capture a broad range of practices and motivations among the most active contributors, who played a key role in shaping collaborative prompt-making dynamics and the appropriation of generative AI tools within the community. The posts correspond to two different types of units of analysis. In the Image channel, we collected the instructions (prompts) submitted to AI systems such as ChatGPT or Midjourney, focusing our analysis directly on the content of the prompts. In contrast, in the Prompt Engineering and Project channels, the unit of analysis comprised the discussions surrounding prompts rather than the prompts themselves. We employed a combination of qualitative analysis procedures. Discourse analysis and thematic coding were used to inductively identify user typologies and prompt-making activities across the selected channels. These methods allowed us to explore how different user groups interact, share knowledge, and attribute value to generative AI practices in a grassroots digital labour context. Moreover, one of the authors engaged in the community through active observation in public channels, adopting a practitioner's perspective without taking on any official roles. Field notes were systematically collected to capture key impressions and community dynamics. This partial immersion complemented the scraped data, offering a more situated understanding of prompt-market exchanges.

Ethical considerations also guided our research. Data collection focused on public Discord channels, treated as semi-public spaces where anonymized observation is ethically permitted. Although some interactions in private chats occurred for experiential purposes, no private conversations and personal identifiers were reported. All data were anonymized, and observations were limited to open channels. While usernames and personal identifiers were anonymized, the names of publicly available tools (e.g., AI plugins) cited in public channels were retained when deemed essential to the analysis.

3. Findings

3.1 Types of Creators and their Prompt-Making Purposes

By examining the contents and behaviours of the users in the selected channels, we have identified distinct categories of users and the activities they perform with generative AI-based technologies on Discord. These categories are: AI Creator, Startupper, Technology Expert, and AI Curious. These types of users are not only differentiated by their approach to generative AI, but also by their specific functions and positions within the emerging prompt economy. While some users actively trade or sell prompts and plugins, others sustain the ecosystem through demand, experimentation, knowledge sharing, and feedback. This intersection between technological appropriation and economic positioning provides the analytical lens for our typology presented in the Table 1.

⁴ During the data collection phase, the main ChatGPT models available were GPT-4-turbo and GPT-3.5-turbo. Midjourney does not publicly disclose distinct version releases in the same way as ChatGPT. This makes it difficult to associate user practices with specific updates during the observation period.

Users' category	Category description	Prompt-making purposes	Type of Labour	Capital Mobilized
AI Creator	People produce images through prompts and integration between Discord and Midjourney. Images are produced both for artistic purposes and for content production that is implemented by influencers.	-Image production -Image retouching -Build communication strategies and content for social pages	Content production for social media (images, texts)	Cultural and economic (brand building, audience monetization)
Startupper	Entrepreneurs and startup founders recognize the entrepreneurial opportunities in OpenAI's AI model and utilize it to create or enhance their businesses. In doing so, they define a space to sell their prompt sets.	-Seeking experts in prompt engineering production -Sharing entrepreneurial projects based on GPT-4 technology -Searching for ways to create money by leveraging Chatgpt -Creating structured web services for producing and selling prompts	Coordination and orchestration of AI-based work	Economic and strategic (entrepreneurial discourse, labour organization)
Technology Experts	Programmers, technology experts, and computer science amateurs use the discord space both to exchange notions and opinions about prompts and as a space to sell their own prompt sets.	- ChatGPT Plugin - Prompt engineering - Resolve doubts and problems regarding prompts - They sell sets of prompts for specific tasks	Technical development (plugins, prompt engineering)	Technical and reputational (expert knowledge, peer validation)
AI Curious	Curious about the world of artificial intelligence. Want to discover technology, looking for solutions and individuals who hold knowledge about Prompt engineering. They do not have knowledge directly and interact by experimenting with generative AI	- "Casual" Image production - Request for individuals to be paid for prompt production - Ask for pieces of advice -Affective support	Experimental and emotional exploration of AI	Social and affective (community-driven learning, emotional use cases)

Table 1 - User Categories and Capital Forms in the Grassroot Prompt Market

Although all categories of users use generative AI technologies, their involvement in prompt-making varies significantly in terms of purpose, work configuration, and forms of mobilized capital. AI Creators primarily use prompts to produce visual and textual content for social media, often combining Midjourney and ChatGPT for artistic or branding purposes. Their work contributes to digital visibility and monetization, mobilizing cultural and economic capital through audience engagement and brand building. Startupper, on the other hand, do not directly produce prompts, but act as coordinators and organizers of AI-based activities. Their work is organizational and strategic, leveraging economic and entrepreneurial capital to structure new mone-

tization paths. Technology Experts operate in a more technical realm. They engage in prompt design, plugin development, and troubleshooting, offering consulting and sometimes selling prompt sets. Their contribution is practical and highly skilled and is based on a mix of technical knowledge and reputational capital earned within the community. Finally, AI Curious users explore generative AI tools with limited technical skills, driven by personal curiosity or emotional needs rather than professional goals. Their practices mobilize social and affective capital and support community dynamics by generating demand for specialized knowledge. The following sections examine each user category in detail.

3.1.1 AI Creator

Users classified as AI Creators are those who engage in social media content production using ChatGPT for text elements and Midjourney for visual elements. These users are mainly divided into AI Artists, who create images through AI and post them on their social media channels, and Influencers, who use AI applications to enhance their content production capabilities for professional purposes.

Many AI artists focus on creating specific types of images, such as logos or styles influenced by Japanese animated media culture, by crafting prompts like the following:

«Eye with Earth as iris. Logo on white background. Unrealistic eye» and «Photo showing a serene morning scene with two anime-style girls heading to school. The path is surrounded by trees and the golden sunlight creates a warm environment» (AI prompt).

Influencers, on the other hand, generate AI-driven visuals as part of a professional strategy to produce engaging content for their followers. Their objective is to create digital content that ensures consistency and coherence with their social media presence:

«Hey everyone! We're excited to share our updated approach to creating engaging social media content. Our objective is to ensure that our images perfectly align with the text of our posts, achieving a consistent and coherent online presence. Here's how we're doing it. Text Summarization: We use ChatGPT to summarize the core message of our posts. Visual Generation: With the summarized and translated text, we leverage Midjourney to create compelling visuals that perfectly match our content. This streamlined process not only saves time but also enhances the quality and coherence of our posts» (Discord post).

By leveraging these AI tools, influencers can significantly enhance the quality and quantity of their content, meeting the demands of their work more efficiently.

The prompts produced by AI Creators are often designed to appeal to a generalist audience across different platforms and reflect widespread cultural aesthetics such as anime styles, realism, and logo design. Crafting optimal prompts is often challenging and requires continuous refinement to remain effective, necessitating ongoing study and adaptation to meet various needs. Another significant use of generative AI and prompts is the creation of communication strategies and content plans for social media, such as scripting YouTube horror videos:

«Dear ChatGPT, I'm going to start a YouTube channel where I narrate real life scary stories people have "send in" for me to narrate. I want you to come up with these stories. Make the stories very believable. Write it like someone is telling this story from his own perspective. It needs to be a believable but shocking story that really scares people. Start: Ending: Plot: Negative prompt» (AI prompt).

Although AI Creators do not engage in direct prompt selling, their activities shape the prompt marketplace indirectly. By experimenting with styles, structures, and narrative techniques, they establish informal benchmarks for quality and effectiveness. These practices influence how

prompts are crafted, evaluated, and even monetized by other actors in the ecosystem. In this sense, they play a critical role as validators and content innovators and set cultural standards that affect both creative trends and economic value. From a labour perspective, AI Creators operate within the field of content production, monetizing their outputs through platform-based strategies such as audience growth, branding, and sponsorships. Their capital is primarily cultural and economic: they leverage aesthetic experimentation and narrative creativity to generate visibility and financial return. Their relationship with the marketplace is therefore not transactional but reputational and symbolic, which nonetheless contributes to structuring demand, value, and standards within the broader economy of prompts.

3.1.2 *Startupper*

Digital entrepreneurs classified as “Startupper” aim to generate wealth through the implementation of generative AI in economic sectors such as automated marketing, virtual assistants, programming, and digital content generation. In the emerging prompt economy, they engage not merely as consumers of generative AI technologies, but as organizers and potential shapers of new markets. However, most of them lack the skills needed to create suitable applications and they are continuously in search of users capable of developing effective prompts. These users do not post ‘job offers’ in the channel to hire employees for their ventures but, on the other hand, foster competition among skilled users by organizing public contests focused on their business needs:

«We are looking for the best prompt creators to improve our chatbot. Enter our contest and demonstrate your skills! The winner will be rewarded with a contract to create prompts for our company» (Discord post).

However, the competitions are carried out in private digital spaces to preserve the intellectual work of skilled users:

«I'm interested in this challenge that no one can beat you. Meaning, do you offer quick creation services? I would love to see a suggestion from you versus another person/team's suggestion. Email me and we can discuss payment options and details» (Discord post).

This hybrid model, public request followed by private negotiation, illustrates how Startupper orchestrate work rather than perform it directly by acting as brokers of expertise and organizers of digital labour.

Moreover, Startupper are not just in search of business partners but they also solicit advice about their GPT-based projects which may include ChatGPT plugins or applications. These projects are introduced to the Discord community highlighting their innovative features:

«Introducing Conceptmap: your AI-powered ChatGPT design visualization plugin. Hello, innovators and problem solvers! Let me introduce you to Conceptmap, a revolutionary ChatGPT plugin, designed to transform project planning and brainstorming into an interactive visual experience» (Discord post).

A third pattern that characterizes the activity of Startupper is their intent to structure dedicated environments for the exchange and monetization of prompts. Their goal is to replace mainstream freelance platforms like Fiverr and Patreon: «A marketplace for prompts is essential! Imagine a platform where creators and users can buy and sell perfect prompts» (Discord post). Startupper participate not only as users but as institutional entrepreneurs who seek to shape the rules, infrastructure, and affordances of the AI economy from the ground up.

Building on these dynamics, we identify two sub-types within the Startupper category. The first includes venture creators with limited technical skills who seek to outsource prompt-making through indirect and often concealed forms of competition. The second comprises micro-entrepreneurs who develop and sell AI-based applications or plugins directly to other users. Startupper, therefore, do not produce prompts themselves but instead coordinate, commission, and structure the work of others. Their contribution lies in organising competition, curating prompt quality, and envisioning monetizable applications. As intermediaries and institutional entrepreneurs, Startupper contrast with Technology Experts (see section 4.1.3), whose capital is rooted in hands-on technical expertise and peer recognition.

3.1.3 *Technology Expert*

We classify as “Technology Experts” those users on Discord who identify as programmers, data scientists, or neural network specialists. Like Startupper, they aim to generate income through generative AI, but rather than organizing or outsourcing labour, they focus on hands-on development. Their goal is not to build businesses or sell services directly, but to work as freelancers or employees for external companies. Their primary activity is the development of ChatGPT plugins. For instance, one user presented a specific plugin as a tool for streamlining tasks like market research, academic assistance, and business intelligence:

«Hi everyone, we are testing a ChatGPT plugin that enhances ChatGPT requests. Do you use ChatGPT at school or work on an ongoing basis? If yes, with the Diffbot plugin you can enrich many requests such as: Market research - Ask about the latest technology trends and get a data-driven overview without having to move a finger. Homework help - Are you writing an essay? Get instant facts and figures on historical events, scientific concepts and more with sources. Business Intel - Get company profiles, market data and information on competitors just by asking. Summarise and enrich - It can summarise long articles, provide the most up-to-date facts about a person, place or entity, help you research anything with a direct list of sources. If you want to try it out, you can download it from the plugin shop. If you have any feedback/questions/problems with your research using the plugin, please feel free to send me a message» (Discord post).

By creating high-performance plugins, these users explore both the capabilities and limitations of generative AI, often pushing the boundaries of what the tools can do. Some also reflect on ethical concerns and potential misuses of the technology: «This is really cool, but my first thought was how it could be used for exploits and shit like that, using something like RDP for instance» (Discord post).

Technology Experts also adopt a dual strategy to build reputational capital. Alongside monetizable products, they share technical advice with the community, reinforcing their expertise and peer recognition:

«Here are some quick tips: start by clearly describing the problem you want to solve, specify the programming language required, and give concrete examples of the input and output you want. Also, if there are additional requirements such as special libraries, include them in the prompt» (Discord post).

These contributions are not driven by direct profit but by a desire to support others, gain credibility, and shape standards of good practice. Many claim affiliations with large tech companies, and their authority is rarely questioned. At the same time, some express frustration with professional environments marked by vague tasks and poor management:

«Hi everyone, I wanted to share some of the difficulties I am going through at work, which are causing me no small amount of disappointment. I feel it is important to talk about these things to lighten some of the burden I feel. Lately, I have been feeling completely lost because of the lack of clarity in projects.

It is frustrating to work with no clear direction, no details or clear directions on what to do and how to do it. This creates a lot of confusion and greatly slows down the progress of my work» (Discord post).

To counterbalance this frustration, many frame their efforts as socially meaningful, emphasizing AI's transformative potential for underserved communities:

«We often hear about AI's potential, but let's focus on its real-world impact. For many under-resourced areas, AI is not just a technology but a catalyst for change, this technology is helping bridge gaps where resources are scarce» (Discord post).

Technology Experts enhance the capacity of generative AI through advanced plugin development and community engagement. They combine economic orientation with ethical narratives, portraying their work as both valuable and socially constructive. Unlike Startupper, they do not coordinate labour but enact it directly, accumulating technical and reputational capital through problem-solving and peer validation. As such, Technology Experts play a central role in the grassroots AI economy. Their innovations shape technical standards, community norms, and informal markets for AI-driven solutions—demonstrating how digital expertise becomes a form of labour and influence within this emerging ecosystem.

3.1.4 *AI Curious*

The "AI Curious" category is primarily motivated by a desire to experiment with the unknown and understand how the technology works. Despite the variety of their activities, AI Curious users share a core orientation, they engage with generative AI primarily as a tool for personal discovery, emotional experimentation, and playful interaction rather than for technical mastery or professional productivity. Their engagement is not framed as labour in the traditional sense, but rather as exploratory practice deeply tied to personal, social, and emotional concerns. These users often lack the technical skills to fully leverage AI tools, which leads them to rely on trial-and-error approaches or community guidance. As a result, they either focus on image production or seek assistance from experts by requesting custom-made prompts, such as: «*A representation of ChatGPT*» (AI Prompt).

Asking Midjourney to create a representation of ChatGPT without stylistic constraints reveals how these users explore AI's representational logic through play. This experimentation often takes on emotional significance, particularly when directed at intimate or affective goals:

«Hello guys, I lost my grandpa 2 years ago. I built a tool that allows me to call my grandpa again. I felt incredibly comforting when I am able to call my grandpa and hear his voice again, I hope I can bring this to more people who are missing the one they love a lot. If you have their voice recording, I can help» (Discord post).

While this example shows a relatively advanced use of generative technologies, it remains within the AI Curious profile due to its emotional motivation and the reliance on community support. Their inventive uses of AI often emerge from affective rather than instrumental rationality. Many AI Curious users seek emotional companionship, treating ChatGPT as a virtual confidant. Through prompt experimentation, they try to create empathetic agents that can offer support in moments of distress or loneliness: «Hi everyone! Anyone selling prompts to make ChatGPT respond more empathetically when I describe anxiety situations or panic attacks? Thank you! » (Discord post). This emotional use of AI technologies constitutes a form of affective labour, not in the economic sense, but to shape machine responses to personal needs. It also differentiates them from the more market-oriented or technically driven categories.

While they rarely engage in direct commercial exchanges, AI Curious users play a crucial indirect

role in the prompt economy. Their frequent requests for advice, explanations, or emotionally attuned responses stimulate demand for customized solutions from more expert users. In this way, they contribute to the reproduction of social and reputational capital within the community. Even when they do not wish to purchase prompts, they actively seek to understand and learn from others: «I don't want to buy prompts, I want to be able to understand how to give clearer instructions so I can understand the ai process» (Discord post). Their main contribution lies in sustaining a participatory and affective learning environment, where AI is not only a productivity tool but a medium of exploration, storytelling, and emotional experimentation.

In conclusion, the AI Curious category includes users with limited prompt-crafting skills who are driven by a shared desire to explore and understand the potential of generative AI beyond technical or professional purposes. Their engagement represents a distinct form of labour, characterized by an experimental and affective approach that draws on social and emotional capital rather than technical or economic resources.

3.2 Prompt-Making Market

Rather than taking the form of a structured market, the prompt-making activities developed within the Image, Prompt Engineering, and Projects channels on Discord can be better understood as a situated practice of social appropriation. If a user responds to a sales post, they must send a direct message to the account that posted the offer. Conversely, users who post a purchase request are automatically contacted by sellers. In private chats, users can specify their desired prompts and negotiate prices through text or voice communication. Transactions are completed via PayPal, if offered by the seller, or shifted to external platforms like Fiverr. These exchanges do not constitute a conventional marketplace; rather, they reflect the informal dynamics of digital hustling, where technically skilled users mobilize their expertise to support others' needs.

To investigate this prompt-making market, one of the researchers employed two complementary strategies. The first involved responding to posts advertising prompt sales, while the second entailed publishing a post soliciting prompt purchases. In both cases, public interaction led to private conversations in which the exchange occurred.

Transactions typically move out of the selected Discord channels and into direct messaging. In these private negotiations, prompts are categorized into two types. The first includes ready-made packages, designed for specific tasks and daily professional use, usually priced under twenty euros: «Write a minute-long script for an advertisement about [product or service or company]» (AI prompt). These requests are simple and tailored to clearly defined purposes. The second category consists of custom-made prompts, developed according to detailed user specifications, with prices starting at around fifty euros:

«We want to perform a statistical analysis on textual data collected from a set of documents using topic modelling. The aim is to identify the main topics present in the documents and to analyse their distribution. Dataset: We will use a dataset of news articles downloaded from different online sources. The dataset contains two main columns: title [article title] and content [article content]» (AI prompt).

Payments are generally processed via PayPal or platforms such as Fiverr or eBay. Terms vary: some sellers require advance payment, while others accept it upon delivery. To enhance buyer confidence, sellers often share screenshots of user messages attesting to the quality of their prompts (Figure 1). Additionally, users who operate via PayPal frequently request positive public reviews on the Discord server, as the friends and family payment method allows fee-free transfers but offers no consumer protection. Maintaining this system therefore relies on trust, which reviews help to establish.

Repeat Client

★★★★★ 5 • 1 month ago

I enjoyed working with Mark. His prompts has reduced our work load by weeks and I was very pleased with the results on both occasions. I would not hesitate to use him again. In fact he is now on our Speed Dial! I highly recommend his service.

€50–€100

Price

3 days

Duration

Helpful? Yes No

Figure 1 – Screenshot review of a Fiverr user prompt shared by a seller.

Ethnographic observation reveals not the formation of a new formal economy, but rather a re-definition of what prompts represent: they shift from technical commands to tools that carry social capital, expertise, and status within the community. While many users, particularly in the prompts channel, emphasize how generative AI accelerates tasks such as paperwork and report writing, vendors report steady demand for prompt purchases. Notably, some users have implemented subscription services through platforms like Patreon and OnlyFans, offering personalized prompts for a fixed monthly fee. Figure 2 illustrates the tiered levels of such subscriptions, allowing users to select the frequency of prompt delivery—daily, weekly, or monthly.

The image shows three subscription tiers for customized prompts via Patreon, each with a 'Unisciti' button and a description of the benefits.

Subscription Tier	Price	Description
Snippets + Prompt	5 € / mese (più VAT)	Looking for a little bit of inspiration? Not in a position to get a full prompt calendar? No worries. With this tier you'll get a patreon exclusive prompt a week to get your creativity sparking, as well as access to everything in the previous tiers. I hope it helps!
Fast Track Snippet Request	7 € / mese (più VAT)	So, anyone on here probably knows that I take and complete writing snippet requests for free on my tumblr @the-modern-typewriter and that I am happy to take writing snippet requests on every tier level here too. You'll also know that because I get quite a lot of requests that, although I do my best to write something for everyone, it can be a lucky dip for when exactly I'll respond to yours. So if there's something you really want to see like now, then this tier will put your request to the top of the priority list. (*Within reason)
Prompt Calendar	10 € / mese (più VAT)	Each month, you will get a Patreon exclusive prompt a day written by me for your own writing inspiration to use. These can be anything, from mermaids to murderers to lines of OTP dialogue. I may even do monthly themes and the occasional surprise prompt list! (Feel free to make general scenario requests!)

Figure 2 – Subscription tiers for customized prompts via Patreon.

In addition to task automation, some users seek relational prompts that enable generative AI to impersonate specific personas, particularly for use in dating or simulated conversations. One vendor specializing in this area explained:

«This prompt is designed to help a user respond appropriately and engagingly in a chat on a dating site, with the goal of maintaining a smooth and interesting conversation that can lead to a live meeting. Dating sites often require careful and sensitive communication to build an authentic connection with the other person» (AI prompt).

These relational prompts should not be interpreted merely as products; rather, they serve as narrative resources through which users emotionally appropriate AI. They allow individuals to explore affective and social needs—adding an emotional layer to otherwise instrumental uses. Such practices contribute to the formation of affective digital labour, a concept that captures the fusion of emotional expression and technological interaction in the prompt-making process. The two empirical components of the study, the user typology and the analysis of prompt-related transactions, are not disjointed but complementary. Together, they demonstrate how different categories of users (Creators, Startupper, Technology Experts, and AI Curious) appropriate generative AI in distinct ways, shaped by their economic strategies, creative expressions, and emotional investments. What might appear as a marketplace is more accurately understood as a social field, in which users continuously reinterpret and reconfigure technology in alignment with their aspirations, constraints, and everyday hustling practices.

Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the bottom-up social appropriation of generative AI technologies. By exploring prompt-making practices on Discord, we shed light on how users creatively adapt, reinterpret, and embed AI applications into their everyday labour practices.

Our analysis focused on three interrelated levels: the types of users involved, their motivations and objectives, and the functioning of a grassroots prompt-making market. Adopting Moreno Gálvez and Sierra Caballero (2022) framework, we examined the appropriation of AI across different user categories (AI Creators, Startupper, Technology Experts, and AI Curious) highlighting how social interaction, technical experimentation, and emotional engagement all contribute to making AI meaningful and usable in diverse contexts.

AI Creators, for instance, appropriate generative AI to produce aesthetic and monetizable content for social media platforms by acting as validators of visual trends and creative standards. Startupper leverage AI to organize digital labour, coordinate skilled workers, and envision new monetization infrastructures. Technology Experts mobilize their technical capital to develop and share plugins, often combining economic goals with reputational and ethical concerns. AI Curious users explore AI through experimental and affective engagements, seeking emotional support or self-expression rather than efficiency or profit. These categories reflect how prompt-making is shaped by distinct configurations of labour, capital, and social roles.

In line with Ticona's (2022, *op. cit.*) conceptualization of the digital hustle, our findings show that prompt-related exchanges on Discord are better understood not as a formalized marketplace, but as an informal and adaptive economy grounded in situated knowledge and interpersonal negotiation. These practices reflect strategic efforts to navigate the uncertainties of digital labour markets by mobilizing a mix of technical skills, social capital, and contextual improvisation. Rather than being purely transactional, the creation and exchange of prompts serve as a means for users to enhance their visibility, flexibility, and relevance within platform-mediated economies. This grassroots appropriation of generative AI illustrates how users actively shape the economic and cultural value of these technologies from below. In this sense, digital hustle is not merely about survival or monetization, but also about the everyday redefinition of roles, meanings, and boundaries in the use of generative AI technologies. Moreover, our research suggests that the appropriation of generative AI extends beyond work-related tasks. Users

often engage with AI to address affective needs, such as companionship, emotional support, or memorialization. This reveals how these technologies are embedded in personal and social life. In fact, this affective dimension challenges dominant narratives of AI as purely rational or utilitarian and highlights how emotional labour and experimentation are central to grassroots AI practices.

In conclusion, our findings emphasize that the social shaping of generative AI is not uniform or linear. Instead, it reflects a multiplicity of practices, strategies, and value. Rather than reinforcing deterministic views or binary imaginaries, this study foregrounds the situated ways in which users make AI work for them, negotiate its meanings, and co-construct its uses within everyday digital labour.

This study presents several limitations. First, our observations were confined to the Discord platform and three selected public channels, which may not fully represent the diversity of prompt-making practices in other online environments. Second, we focused on the most active users, potentially overlooking more casual or peripheral forms of engagement. Third, data collection spanned a relatively short time frame (three months). This could have limited our ability to assess long-term evolutions in user behaviour and market organization. For this reason, we advise that future research will address these limitations by comparing practices across platforms and cultural contexts, examining how grassroots prompt economies evolve over time, and exploring the broader implications of generative AI appropriation on digital labour markets.

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