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Virgínia SQUIZANI RODRIGUES

**« Boom and Burst » : Comment les travailleurs des
startups brésiliennes ressentent les effets du capitalisme
tardif dans leur propre corps.**

Sous la direction de M. Marc LORIOL

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JULY 04, 2025 by

Virgínia SQUIZANI RODRIGUES

**Boom and Burst: How Brazilian startup workers
experience the effects of late capitalism in their own bodies**

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Under the co-direction of Viviane VEDANA

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UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA
CENTRO DE FILOSOFIA E CIÊNCIAS HUMANAS
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM ANTROPOLOGIA SOCIAL

Virgínia Squizani Rodrigues

“Boom and Burst”: Como os trabalhadores de startups brasileiras vivenciam os efeitos do capitalismo tardio em seus próprios corpos

Florianópolis

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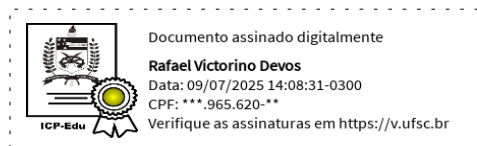
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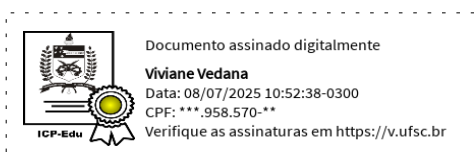
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Profa. Dra. Viviane Vedana
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Prof. Dr. Marc Loriol
Orientador

*To Mauricio and to those who fight for real
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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes how employees of Brazilian startups articulate, experience, and respond to burnout syndrome in the contemporary technology sector. Initially attracted to startup environments by promises of flexibility, horizontality, diversity, and meaningful work, many of these workers end up facing crises of exhaustion and disillusionment. The guiding question of this research is: why do individuals who claim to love their work also report suffering from burnout? Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2024, and based on 55 in-depth interviews with 30 workers from various startups in Florianópolis, Brazil, this thesis moves between macro and micro levels of analysis. It also investigates how the economic imperatives of rapid growth—driven by venture capital—interact with startup organizational cultures and the subjective experiences of workers. Startups are approached here as emblematic models of companies operating under post-Fordist flexible capitalism, where entrepreneurial ideals converge with neoliberal governance to produce new work configurations. The thesis explores how startup cultures—characterized by informality, high performance demands, and continuous availability—shape not only working conditions but also the affective and moral experiences of distress and suffering at work. It argues that burnout should not be reduced to an individual or clinical condition; rather, it emerges as a processual, socially and culturally situated phenomenon, rooted in structural tensions between the promise of personal fulfillment and the reality of intensified work. Through workers' narratives, burnout is revealed as both a physical and moral experience, articulated through a vocabulary that reflects conflicts between personal values, career aspirations, and organizational expectations. These narratives unfold in a context shaped by pressure for rapid scalability, the erosion of boundaries between life and work, and the normalization of stress as a sign of dedication. The thesis also examines the individual and collective strategies through which workers attempt to cope with, reframe, or resist burnout and its underlying causes. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader debates in the sociology and anthropology of work, as well as in health and mental health fields, by showing how burnout functions both as a lived experience and as a lens through which workers interpret and express the contradictions of contemporary capitalism.

Keywords: burnout; suffering at work; startups.

RESUMO

Esta tese analisa como funcionários de startups brasileiras articulam, vivenciam e respondem à síndrome de burnout no setor de tecnologia contemporâneo. Inicialmente atraídos para os ambientes de startups pelas promessas de flexibilidade, horizontalidade, diversidade e trabalho significativo, muitos desses trabalhadores, no entanto, acabam enfrentando crises de exaustão e desilusão. A questão inicial que orienta esta pesquisa é: por que indivíduos que dizem amar seu trabalho também dizem sofrer de burnout? Fundamentada em um trabalho de campo etnográfico realizado entre 2020 e 2024, e com base em 55 entrevistas em profundidade com 30 trabalhadores de várias startups de Florianópolis, Brasil, esta tese transita entre a análise em nível macro e micro. Além disso, investiga como os imperativos econômicos do crescimento rápido - impulsionados pelo capital de risco - interagem com as culturas organizacionais das startups e as experiências subjetivas dos trabalhadores. As startups são abordadas aqui como modelos emblemáticos de empresas do capitalismo flexível pós-fordista, em que os ideais empresariais convergem com a governança neoliberal para produzir novas configurações de trabalho. A tese explora como as culturas de startups - caracterizadas pela informalidade, altas demandas de desempenho e disponibilidade contínua - moldam não apenas as condições de trabalho, mas também as experiências afetivas e morais de angústia e sofrimento no trabalho. Assim, argumenta-se que o burnout não deve ser reduzido a uma condição individual ou clínica; em vez disso, ele surge como um fenômeno processual, social e culturalmente situado, enraizado nas tensões estruturais entre a promessa de realização pessoal e a realidade do trabalho intensificado. Por meio das narrativas dos trabalhadores, o burnout é revelado como uma experiência física e moral, articulada por meio de um vocabulário que reflete conflitos entre valores pessoais, aspirações de carreira e expectativas organizacionais. Essas narrativas se desdobram em um contexto moldado pela pressão por escalabilidade rápida, pela erosão das fronteiras entre vida e trabalho e pela normalização do estresse como um sinal de dedicação. A tese também examina as estratégias - individuais e coletivas - por meio das quais os trabalhadores procuram lidar, reformular ou resistir ao burnout e suas causas subjacentes. Em última análise, esta pesquisa contribui para debates mais amplos na sociologia e antropologia do trabalho, bem como nas áreas de saúde e saúde mental, mostrando como o burnout funciona tanto como uma experiência vivida quanto como uma lente por meio da qual os trabalhadores interpretam e verbalizam as contradições do capitalismo contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave: burnout; sofrimento no trabalho; startups.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse analyse comment les employés de startups brésiliennes articulent, vivent et répondent au syndrome d'épuisement professionnel (burnout) dans le secteur technologique contemporain. Initialement attirés par les promesses de flexibilité, d'horizontalité, de diversité et de travail porteur de sens, nombre de ces travailleurs finissent pourtant par affronter des crises d'épuisement et de désillusion. La question centrale qui guide cette recherche est la suivante : pourquoi des individus qui affirment aimer leur travail disent-ils également souffrir de burnout ? Fondée sur un travail de terrain ethnographique réalisé entre 2020 et 2024, et s'appuyant sur 55 entretiens approfondis menés auprès de 30 travailleurs de diverses startups situées à Florianópolis, au Brésil, cette thèse navigue entre les niveaux d'analyse macro et micro. Elle explore également comment les impératifs économiques de croissance rapide — alimentés par le capital-risque — interagissent avec les cultures organisationnelles des startups et les expériences subjectives des travailleurs. Les startups sont ici abordées comme des modèles emblématiques d'entreprises du capitalisme flexible post-fordiste, où les idéaux entrepreneuriaux convergent avec la gouvernance néolibérale pour produire de nouvelles configurations du travail. La thèse examine comment les cultures des startups — marquées par l'informalité, des exigences élevées de performance et une disponibilité permanente — façonnent non seulement les conditions de travail, mais aussi les expériences affectives et morales de détresse et de souffrance au travail. Il est ainsi soutenu que le burnout ne doit pas être réduit à une condition individuelle ou clinique ; il émerge plutôt comme un phénomène processuel, socialement et culturellement situé, enraciné dans les tensions structurelles entre la promesse d'épanouissement personnel et la réalité d'un travail intensifié. À travers les récits des travailleurs, le burnout se révèle comme une expérience à la fois physique et morale, articulée à partir d'un vocabulaire qui reflète des conflits entre valeurs personnelles, aspirations professionnelles et attentes organisationnelles. Ces récits se déploient dans un contexte façonné par la pression à l'hyper-croissance, l'érosion des frontières entre vie et travail, et la normalisation du stress comme marque de dévouement. La thèse analyse également les stratégies — individuelles et collectives — par lesquelles les travailleurs tentent de faire face, de reformuler ou de résister au burnout et à ses causes structurelles. En définitive, cette recherche apporte une contribution aux débats plus larges en sociologie et anthropologie du travail, ainsi que dans les domaines de la santé et de la santé mentale, en montrant comment le burnout fonctionne à la fois comme une expérience vécue et comme une lentille d'interprétation des contradictions du capitalisme contemporain.

Mots-clés : burnout ; souffrance au travail ; startups.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ABES	Associação Brasileira das Empresas de Software (Brazilian Association of Software Companies)
Abstartups	Associação Brasileira de Startups (Brazilian Startup Association)
ACATE	Associação Catarinense de Tecnologia (Santa Catarina Technology Association)
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AI	Artificial Intelligence
Anprotec	Associação Nacional de Entidades Promotoras de Empreendimentos Inovadores (National Association of Entities Promoting Innovative Enterprises)
ApexBrasil	Agência Brasileira de Promoção de Exportações e Investimentos (Brazilian Trade and Investment Promotion Agency)
B2B	Business-to-Business
B2C	Business-to-Consumer
BNDES	Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social (National Bank for Economic and Social Development)
Brasscom	Associação Brasileira das Empresas de Tecnologia da Informação e Comunicação e de Tecnologias Digitais (Brazilian Association of Information and Communication Technology and Digital Technologies Companies)
CAPES	Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel)
CASAN	Companhia Catarinense de Águas e Saneamento (Santa Catarina Water and Sanitation Company)
CBD	Cannabidiol ISSTi
CELTA	Centro Empresarial para Laboração de Tecnologias Avançadas (Business Center for the Development of Advanced Technologies)
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CERTI	Centros de Referência em Tecnologias Inovadoras (Reference Centers in Innovative Technologies)
CHO	Chief Happiness Officer
CLT	Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho (Consolidation of Labor Laws)

CMO	Chief Marketing Officer
CNAE	Classificação Nacional das Atividades Econômicas (National Classification of Economic Activities)
CNPJ	Cadastro Nacional de Pessoas Jurídicas (National Registry of Legal Entities)
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
CTO	Chief Technology Officer
D&I	Diversity and Inclusion
FAPESC	Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa e Inovação do Estado de Santa Catarina (Santa Catarina State Research and Innovation Support Foundation)
FGTS	Fundo de Garantia por Tempo de Serviço (Severance Pay Guarantee Fund)
FIESC	Federação das Indústrias do Estado de Santa Catarina (Federation of Industries of the State of Santa Catarina)
Finep	Financiadora de Estudos e Projetos (Funding Agency for Studies and Projects)
FIPE	Fundação Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas (Economic Research Institute Foundation)
GAFAM	Google, Apple, Facebook (Meta), Amazon and Microsoft
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HR	Human Resources
IBGE	Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics)
ICD-10	International Classification of Diseases
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IET	Technological Business Incubator
INSS	Instituto Nacional do Seguro Social (National Institute of Social Security)
IPEA	Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (Applied Economic Research)
IPO	Initial Public Offering
ISMA	International Stress Management Association
ISS	Imposto Sobre Serviços (Service Tax)

ISSTi	Software and Services Industry
IT	Information Technology
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MBI	Maslach Burnout Inventory
MEI	Microempreendedor Individual (Individual Microentrepreneur)
MVP	Minimum Viable Product
NDA	Non-Disclosure Agreement
NR-1	Norma Regulamentadora 1 (Regulatory Standard 1)
NR-7	Norma Regulamentadora 7 (Regulatory Standard 7)
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety
OKRs	Objectives and Key Results
PCD	People with Disabilities
PCMSO	Programa de Controle Médico de Saúde Ocupacional (Occupational Health Medical Control Program)
PJ	Pessoa Jurídica (Legal Entity)
R&D	Research and Development
RIA	Santa Catarina Angel Investor Network
ROI	Return On Investment
SEBRAE	Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas (Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service)
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SEPLAN	Secretaria de Estado do Planejamento (State Planning Secretariat)
SINDPDSC	Sindicato dos Empregados em Empresas de Processamento de Dados de Santa Catarina (Union of Employees in Data Processing Companies of Santa Catarina)
Softex	Sociedade Brasileira para a Promoção da Excelência do Software (Brazilian Society for the Promotion of Software Excellence)
UDESC	Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina (Santa Catarina State University)
UFSC	Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (Federal University of Santa Catarina)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USA	United States of America

VC	Venture Capital
WHO	World Health Organization

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 A SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

1.1.1 The global tech-industry paradox

Since 2010, a wave of technology-driven companies, known as startups, has emerged in Brazil,¹ attracting a new generation of young, recently graduated, middle-class professionals.² These companies entered the market with the bold promise of developing innovative products capable of “*disrupting*” and “*changing the world*.” Yet, their ambitions extended beyond technological breakthroughs; they also aimed to “*revolutionize*” the very nature of work itself. One of their core objectives was to “*challenge*” the corporate capitalism of traditional businesses and create new work environments where employees could find happiness, engagement, and a deep sense of purpose. The vision was clear: to implement a “*new way of doing things*,” one that promised to “*revolutionize society*” and management processes.

In some aspects, these companies appeared to have achieved their mission. Fun, vibrant offices outfitted with pool and ping-pong tables, on-tap free beer, complimentary meals, casual dress codes, and flatter organizational hierarchies became the norm in the tech world. These workspaces, celebrated in business magazines for years (Segran, 2021), epitomized the startup ethos. The prevailing narrative from successful startup founders was that employees should “*do what they love*”³ in a joyful, creative environment (Zanon, 2019).

However, despite the emphasis on “*loving what you do*,” it was widely acknowledged—by both workers and startup advocates—that employees were also expected to work intensely to get the company off the ground. The mantra “*work hard, play hard*” became a frequent refrain in media portrayals, encapsulating the

¹ Currently, the Brazilian startup ecosystem comprises more than 13,000 startups and over 235 local innovation ecosystems (Müller *et al.*, 2023).

² In general, startups employ knowledge workers (Huws, 2009), meaning individuals who can perform their tasks using personal computers connected to the internet. Startup workers often include software developers, marketing professionals, designers, salespeople, finance and administrative staff, human resources personnel, and more. These workers typically come from the Brazilian middle class, hold higher education degrees, and tend to earn salaries that range from 2.5 to 10 times the national average (Moreno, 2021).

³ “Do what you love” was the slogan of WeWork, an international coworking company based in the United States. WeWork raised over US\$22 billion, reaching a peak valuation of US\$47 billion in 2019 and becoming one of the most valuable startups in the United States. In 2023, it declared bankruptcy (Nguyen, 2023).

ethos of these new workplaces. This philosophy implied not only a focus on high-performance output but also a strategy to optimize physical and mental well-being through social events, team-building activities, and lifestyle sports, all designed to strike a balance between work and personal life.

Despite the outward appeal of this seemingly ideal work culture, I became increasingly intrigued by the growing number of burnout cases among startup workers. Beginning in 2020, a wave of reports emerged, documenting a sharp rise in burnout rates. Research conducted by global technology firms that year to assess the impact of COVID-19 on software developers revealed that 83% of USA developers experienced burnout due to factors such as excessive workloads, inefficient management practices, and unclear goals (Ali, 2021). Similarly, the Spanish tech company Yerbo published a *Burnout Index* in 2022, which revealed that 62% of technology professionals worldwide felt physically and emotionally exhausted.⁴

In the absence of comprehensive national data on the issue, at that time, these international reports on the mental health challenges facing the global tech workforce began circulating within Brazil's startup ecosystem during the early years of the pandemic. The message was clear: if burnout was a significant problem in the global tech industry, it was also affecting Brazilian tech workers. Before long, startup leaders in Brazil began to recognize burnout as a critical issue requiring attention and action from within the industry itself.

This was particularly perplexing because these workers were supposed to benefit from a modern, non-oppressive work environment—far removed from the hierarchical, monotonous conditions of the traditional corporate world. They enjoyed relatively high salaries and were part of a globalized, “modern” corporate culture. So why were they suffering? What was driving this disconnect between the idealized vision of the startup workplace and the reality experienced by its workers?

The most immediate and convenient explanation was, unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic. And indeed, the pandemic played a significant role in amplifying stress levels and increasing workloads. However, it is important to

⁴ As we will further explore in Chapter Six, these surveys are typically conducted by tech companies themselves, often without disclosing sample size, location, or participants' socio-demographic data. While I engage with them critically and recognize their role in bringing attention to burnout, they frequently frame the issue as a “market problem” followed by the offer of a ready-made solution. When I revisited the Yerbo platform in 2025, the website was deactivated, and a LinkedIn post announced the company's closure.

recognize that the capitalist system often attributes such crises to external factors, diverting attention away from the deeper, structural issues that are intrinsic to the system itself (Carcanholo, 2021). As fieldwork research revealed, burnout cases among tech workers were occurring long before the pandemic; the difference was that they were largely unspoken, concealed beneath the surface of the “*work hard, play hard*” ethos. The pandemic merely intensified stress and insecurity, bringing these underlying issues to light. What initially emerged was an apparent paradox within the global tech industry: the widespread occurrence of burnout among workers employed in environments supposedly enjoyable, stimulating, well-compensated, and, above all, committed to “*changing the world*.”

This contradiction—between the emergence of debates on mental health, stress, and burnout in workspaces once described as positive and fulfilling—became the central focus of this thesis. A striking gap appeared to exist between the optimistic narratives promoted by startups and the everyday realities faced by their workers. Understanding this discrepancy became the primary aim of this investigation.

Nevertheless, before delving into the ideological foundations of startups or exploring how individuals within these companies perceive work, productivity, health, and well-being, a critical first step is required. The very concept of a *startup*, or the *ecosystem* within which startups operate, is often difficult to define. Therefore, it is essential to first conceptualize and define what constitutes a startup, as well as the key characteristics of a startup ecosystem, before analyzing the social and labor relations embedded in these work environments.

From my perspective, startups are typically high-tech, innovative, fast-growing, and venture-backed companies that claim to develop new business, organizational, and managerial models. They operate within networks of ecosystems characterized by a distinct “*mindset*”—one that promotes agility, disruption, and innovation. This “*mindset*” not only shapes how startups function but also contributes to the formation of new generations of *neoliberal subjects* (Dardot; Laval, 2013). Startups are thus more than just businesses; they represent a social, transnational phenomenon, embodying a specific mode of operating that reflects the current capitalist ideal of *progressive neoliberalism* (Fraser, 2017), with all the inherent contradictions that this entails.

A thorough conceptualization of what constitutes a startup, how these companies are organized within innovation ecosystems, the types of organizational models they endorse, and how they rely on venture capital for growth is outlined in the first two chapters of this thesis. These foundational chapters provide the framework for understanding how startups, as entities, perpetuate a new vision of work that is both idealized and fraught with contradictions.

1.1.2 Silicon Valley's influence over the Brazilian startup scene

It is also crucial to highlight that the startup culture flourishing in Brazil did not develop organically within Brazilian society. Rather, it was directly influenced by what new generations of Brazilian tech entrepreneurs observed in Silicon Valley—the global epicenter of startup culture and technological innovation. Since the 2000s, Silicon Valley has served as a model for Brazilian businesses, informing their business strategies and utopian visions of work and society.

To fully grasp the influence of Silicon Valley on Brazil's startup ecosystem, it is essential to first review the broader technological advancements that have shaped the contemporary world. In brief, the technology enabling global-scale software production—and, ultimately, the emergence of startups—rests on five foundational pillars: The computer revolution, sparked by the advent of computers in the mid-1940s; The invention of microprocessors in the 1970s; The rise of personal computers in the 1980s; The emergence of the Internet in the 1990s; And, finally, the proliferation of technology into our daily lives through smartphones, which entered the scene in 2007.

These innovations, all primarily originating in Silicon Valley, have not only revolutionized technology but have also been accompanied by profound shifts in labor organization and capital accumulation. As we trace this trajectory, we observe the transition from Fordist models of mass production to more flexible modes of production that characterize the contemporary era, as outlined by David Harvey (1992). Within this context, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector has played a pivotal role, positioning itself at the forefront of this transition from Fordism to a system of flexible accumulation.

By framing these technological advancements within the broader socio-economic context, it becomes clear that the ICT sector has not only driven innovation

but also contributed to redefine global labor structures, capital flows, and production patterns. These transformations have, in turn, been accompanied by a series of ideological shifts in the workplace, promoting a new vision of work that prizes flexibility, creativity, and innovation (Sennett, 1998)—all highly prized values in the context of startup work environments.

In the early 2000s, albeit slowly at first, some of Brazil's wealthier middle-class actors began traveling to the United States, where they “discovered” this “*new way of doing things*,” which promised to revolutionize society. It was not long before this phenomenon reached Brazil in the early 2010s through startup advocates, including new entrepreneurs, mentors, and investors. From their perspective, it was imperative to replicate the startup model in Brazil. This sparked a long process of pedagogization aimed at a new wave of middle-class youth entering the workforce.

Surprisingly, Florianópolis, a small capital city in southern Brazil, emerged as one of the country's earliest startup ecosystems. For much of its history, Florianópolis had been a tranquil island, known for its 100 pristine beaches and exuberant nature, but since the 1970s, the city has undergone significant socio-economic changes. These changes have generally been endorsed by the city's political elites, who continue to promote the transformation and marketing of Florianópolis. The various slogans the city has been associated with over the years—such as “*Brazilian Florida, Silicon Island, St. Tropez of South America, Brazilian Capital of Quality of Life, Best Brazilian City for Entrepreneurship*” (Tischer; Tarouco, 2022), and more recently, “*National Capital of Startups*” (Law Project 4.987/2019)—give a clear indication of the entrepreneurial directions these transformations have taken.

Being labeled the “*National Capital of Startups*” underscores Florianópolis' central role within Brazil's innovation landscape. Although most startups are currently concentrated in São Paulo—the country's financial capital—this recognition reinforces the symbolic significance of Florianópolis in the construction of the national entrepreneurial scene. The city not only fostered one of Brazil's earliest startup ecosystems, but also evolved into a reference model for other regions aiming to develop their own technological hubs. This designation is further justified by the city's high density of startups per capita and a robust infrastructure for supporting technological entrepreneurship—including incubators, technology parks, accelerators, and public initiatives such as Startup SC (Sebrae). Moreover, the nomination serves as an institutional strategy to position Florianópolis as an

exemplary ecosystem within the broader national context. It is no coincidence that the city hosts one of Brazil's largest annual startup conferences, attracting caravans of visitors from across the country eager to uncover the "secrets" behind its success. As such, Florianópolis represents a privileged site for ethnographic inquiry into the sociocultural values that shape Brazilian innovation ecosystems, both locally and nationally.

1.1.3 From enchantment to disillusionment

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, startup ecosystems have undergone significant transformations. While the social imaginary of startups frequently portrays these companies as *less alienated* workspaces where individuals can pursue their true purpose (Alexandre, 2023), it is important to recall that this ideal was constructed in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis—long before the pandemic upheaval of 2020. In the early 2010s, startups in Brazil and across the globe intentionally designed their offices to reflect modern, playful environments, often incorporating open spaces, casual atmospheres, and recreational activities as part of their appeal (Faria, 2018; Chen, 2022; Palermo; Ventrici, 2023). As we have seen, these spaces embodied the promise of creativity, innovation, and personal fulfillment.

However, this research, which focuses on the Brazilian tech sector from 2020 to 2024, uncovers a starkly different reality. The initial excitement of the 2010s, characterized by rapid growth, a sense of purpose, and an energized workforce, stands in sharp contrast to the harsh realities that emerged in the early 2020s: social isolation caused by the pandemic, remote work, widespread burnout, and extensive layoffs. What was once a highly idealized work culture now faces growing scrutiny, as the realities of overwork and mental health crises have revealed the limitations of this purpose-driven narrative.

Initially, both startups and employees embraced remote work during the pandemic under the belief that it would also offer greater work-life balance. By the time I began this research, remote work had already become the new norm for most Brazilian startups. Considering many employees were already proficient in using digital tools such as Zoom, Slack, and Google Calendar, making the transition to remote work was relatively seamless for them (Morelix *et al.*, 2020). However, as the

months wore on, the shift to remote work revealed unforeseen challenges. The exuberant “*play hard*” aspect of the familiar “*work hard, play hard*” mantra began to fade, as employees faced increasingly long, grueling hours and a growing blurring of boundaries between their professional and personal lives.

Despite these difficulties, startup influencers and entrepreneurs initially celebrated remote work, citing a boost in productivity during the first year of the pandemic. Yet, this rise in productivity came at a cost. Studies reported a troubling escalation in stress, anxiety, and depression, alongside an increase in the number of hours worked per week (Oracle, 2020). As the lines between work and life became increasingly blurred, many employees found themselves constantly “on,” leading to emotional and physical exhaustion.

In Brazil, media narratives reinforced the idea that tech companies were benefiting from the crisis, actively contributing to the accelerated digitization of the economy (Bússola, 2021). Over time, venture capital funds, initially cautious in early 2020, began to reinvest in Brazilian startups. This resurgence culminated in the emergence of new startup “*unicorns*,”⁵ with 2021 recording the highest volume of startup investments in Brazilian history (Reuters, 2022).

In the startup world, new investment rounds typically signal rapid growth and market expansion. To support this, startups often embark on extensive hiring sprees, promising to double their workforce and projecting growth rates as high as 300% within a year (Irala, 2022). Following this logic, many tech workers believed they had found employment stability despite the global crisis, as the technology sector continued to grow and recruit new talent during the pandemic.

However, this surge in venture capital during 2021 was short-lived. By 2023, investments in Latin American startups had plummeted by 80% (Abreu, 2024). The geopolitical and economic uncertainties stemming from the Russia-Ukraine conflict and rising interest rates in the Global North prompted a shift in venture capital focus, leading to a global slowdown in startup investments.

As a result, startups that had rapidly expanded their teams were suddenly forced to cut costs. Since 2022, widespread layoffs have swept through the global and Brazilian startup sectors. Reports of workforce reductions ranging from 15% to 50% became commonplace throughout 2022 and 2023. Many Brazilian investors attributed these layoffs to the unsustainable growth strategies that had been pursued

⁵ Native term used to classify startups that have reached a market value of more than 1 billion dollars.

during the previous boom (Feiler, 2022). Yet this explanation often proved unsatisfactory to those who had lost their jobs just months after being hired. By 2022, reports highlighting the negative impact of mass layoffs on workers' mental health began circulating in the media and on social platforms.

From the "*work hard, play hard*" culture—promising meaning, purpose, and rapid growth—to pandemic-driven remote work, burnout, and layoffs, this trajectory encapsulates the complexities of startup ecosystems explored in this research. Initially, my intention was to explore the enchanting rise of the startup industry, but I soon found myself delving into what I now believe to be the onset of disillusionment within the sector. Despite entrepreneurial promises to "*change the world*," startups are not immune to the contradictions of capitalism; they are deeply embedded within its dynamics, just like any other industry.

The first clear indication of this is that startup companies, despite their innovative facade, continue to perpetuate the same class relations that are fundamental to the capitalist system. While these companies emphasize flexibility and autonomy, workers remain confined within the structures of wage labor that are imposed upon them. In fact, it is impossible to speak of wage labor without acknowledging the disciplinary mechanisms that inevitably accompany it. Despite the relaxed environments often promoted by startups, workers are consistently subjected to various forms of discipline and control. Through the distinct "*ways of doing things*" in startups, a particular mode of working-class subjectivation emerges—one that compels workers to internalize meritocratic, neoliberal, and entrepreneurial values as their own.

Although the contemporary tech industry no longer employs the overt forms of coercion once used to mold the early working classes (Marx, 2023), this does not mean that disciplinary mechanisms have vanished. Rather, they have become more subtle and individualized. While *disciplinary power* (Foucault, 1975) prevailed under Fordism—exercising control over workers' bodies through rigid hierarchies—under contemporary flexible capitalism, *managerialist power* now operates at the level of workers' psyches, demanding their emotional, cognitive, and libidinal investment in their labor (Gaulejac, 2007). This shift creates an environment where self-regulation is not just encouraged but demanded. With the rise of information technologies, lean management strategies, and the internalization of self-disciplinary practices, the *panopticon*—once a visible form of surveillance—has become increasingly diffuse,

concealed beneath corporate rhetoric of positivity and workplace happiness (Cabanas; Illouz, 2022). The second part of this thesis critically analyzes how contemporary workplaces operationalize discipline, control, and worker subjectivation through specific managerial mechanisms.

As a result of this shift, the space for workers to express dissatisfaction or discontent has dramatically diminished. How does one voice dissatisfaction when the company appears so “welcoming” and inclusive? How does one navigate workplace tensions when interpersonal conflicts are funneled into corporate-sanctioned processes such as “*feedback meetings*” and “*alignment sessions*”? And how does one confront the frustration of working in a system that promises much but delivers little in terms of personal fulfillment or transformative change?

Given capitalism's inherent drive toward exhausting its productive forces (Marx, 2023), we must examine how burnout emerges not merely as an individual pathology, but as a socially constituted process - one that becomes culturally legible as a mode of articulating discontent among startup workers. In part three, we examine how burnout—far from an isolated phenomenon—emerges as a symptom of contemporary work's inherent contradictions. Amid extreme individualization and eroded solidarity, burnout reflects both workers' growing frustration and the subtler violences of capitalist workplaces.

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAME

While I suspect that startups' rhetoric about “*changing the world*” serves as an effective marketing strategy to lure new generations of workers, it cannot be overlooked that the tech industry is undeniably shaping the world. Whether through its market logic, its lean management approach, or the technological products it develops, information and communication technologies have contributed to changing how we perceive and experience time and space (Harvey, 1992). However, by doing so in unpredictable ways and at unpredictable rates, the startup industry tends to push common sense to believe that technology is disrupting capitalism itself. When, in fact, most recent technological advancements have been used as a *tool* to serve capitalism's purposes (Zuboff, 2018).

With that in mind, a few theoretical inquiries arise. Firstly, we need to ask ourselves if startups possess distinct characteristics when compared to traditional

corporations. Because, if new models of work organization imply novel ways of living and experiencing life (Gramsci, 2020), then, what kind of life does “*the startup way*” encapsulate? Consequently, if we desire to unravel the paradox of burnout episodes occurring within a work environment that promises to be happy and enjoyable, it will be essential to study the startup modes of work organization and its mechanisms of enchantment.

Secondly, if we expand our inquiry from new modes of work organization to new regimes of capital accumulation, we could ask ourselves if startups could be representatives of a new regime of political-economic practices for capital accumulation. Or, perhaps, should we merely regard the startup phenomenon as a refined continuation of the neoliberal rationality that has persisted since the 1970s? In addressing these questions, I sought to contribute to socio-anthropological debates by examining how intensely competitive and unstable work environments impacted well-being and mental health.

Given that the startup environment is embedded in the present capitalist system, this thesis aligns with socio-anthropological studies that aim to comprehend neoliberalism and its impact on people's lives. According to Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013), neoliberalism is the prevailing rationality of contemporary capitalism. Within the startup context, it became crucial to explore how this rationality guides the conduct, behaviors, choices, and practices of individuals in novel ways. While it is acknowledged that neoliberal rationality has already permeated social relations and that we live in a neoliberal world (Brown, 2015; 2019), there is still room for analyzing how neoliberalism affects everyday life in a particular universe. Especially when this universe is marked by entrepreneurial ideologies that promise personal fulfillment but end up delivering increasing frustration and distress.

To analyze contemporary capitalism, this study draw on theoretical insights from economic, sociological, and anthropological scholarship, including the works of Karl Marx ([1867] 2023), Michel Foucault (1975; 2010), Richard Sennett (1998), Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello ([1999] 2011), and Mark Fischer ([2009] 2020). These analyses reveal how the pursuit of autonomy, flexibility, meaningfulness, and profit under current regimes of capital accumulation is reflected in the proliferation of enterprises promoting “horizontal” organizational models—where dynamic networks ostensibly claim to replace hierarchical structures. Yet, such ostensibly progressive labor arrangements entail emergent forms of control (Deleuze, 1992) and discipline

(Foucault, 2017), which generate contradictory workplace dynamics that may affect workers' psychological well-being.

Considering that this thesis investigates whether the startup phenomenon represents a continuation of the neoliberal rationality that took hold in the 1970s, we argue that startups are not an exception but rather a key expression of this broader neoliberal movement—one that has faced progressively less resistance, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. Lately, in the realm of technology, it does not seem that capitalism necessarily must disrupt traditional forms of collaboration or labor resistance, like unions. In general, tech workers are already hardly unionized⁶ and mostly align themselves with an individualist and meritocratic approach. Capitalism also does not have to implement the organization of work by project, since projects are already the dominant form of labor organization. In the vein of the *corrosion of character* (Sennett, 1998), startups also engage individualistic subjects who are often immersed in the pleasures and stimuli of capitalist merchandise (Brown, 2019). Unlike companies in the 1990s, startups today emerge within the prevailing neoliberal flexible model, influenced by the demands of venture capital, liberalism, and nihilism. Boltanski and Chiapello (2011), as well as Sennett (1998), had already identified during the 1990s the patterns of what could unfold, which is why this thesis perceives startups as a continuation of neoliberal processes that have been unfolding for approximately 50 years.⁷

Perhaps the distinctiveness of the current “*startup mindset*” lies in a notable prevalence of *capitalist realism* (Fischer, 2020), where the pace of work is dictated by venture capital, intertwined with compelling enchantment mechanisms widely spread through marketing storytelling. Although startups and their software platforms claim to free individuals from mundane work environments through “*purpose and meaning*”, they actually subject their workers to demanding key performance indicators, and expose them to a high-pressure, highly competitive work environment. Therefore, to debunk misconceptions and unveil the true roots of stress and burnout, it is crucial to

⁶ As of now, there is limited data on the unionization of workers in the technology sector in Florianópolis. Throughout history, numerous innovation ecosystems have discouraged the formation of unions. However, in a recent development, some of the first workers' organizations have emerged at major tech companies such as Amazon and Google. The *Amazon Labor Union* was officially established in April 2022, while the *Alphabet Workers Union* at Google was formed in January 2021.

⁷ Just as it took about 50 years for the Fordist accumulation regime to develop and reach its peak — Harvey (1992) marks 1914 as the symbolic start of Fordism and 1945 as its height, followed by a decline from the 1960s and 1970s onward, when the flexible accumulation regime emerged—, we could argue that the flexible accumulation regime also took several decades to devise methods of organizing work that more effectively embodied its concepts of work discipline and control.

act before the industry perpetuates new myths—such as claiming burnout as a “*side effect of worker's passion*”, or simplifying it as a mere hormonal imbalance.⁸

As Marx (2023) has already taught us, if capitalist modernization liberates us from scarcity, it simultaneously enslaves us with the fetishism of market exchange. Just as Marx aimed to demystify the capitalist system, we must continue scrutinizing the forms of capitalist enchantment and fetishization. In this thesis, we look at the fetishization mechanisms within startups, encompassing their entrepreneurial mythologies and the emerging contradictions evident in the bodies of their workers. By examining the practices of the “startup factory floor” and the symptomatic episodes of burnout among employees, we have sought to decipher the subtext latent in the “*startup mindset*” discourse.

Besides, drawing from Marx's observations into capital's cyclical nature of boom and bust⁹, this study has employed a cross-sectional analysis that spans from the macro to the micro level, portraying a local innovation ecosystem interconnected nationally and globally. Our focus was to uncover the ecosystem's patterns of *boom and bust*, as well as patterns of *slash-and-burn*, in which burnout emerges as a prominent symptom of this contradictory cycle. The objective was to illustrate how the influence of venture capital is manifested on the startup workplace floor and impacts the well-being of its workers. It is essential to bear in mind that capital possesses the capacity to value and regenerate itself, while individuals in startups, despite their efforts to boost productivity and value, remain finite. Consequently, when the capital

⁸ Some startup influencers argue that burnout syndrome is a “*side effect*” of the rapid growth of technology companies and the difficulty workers have in dealing with *their* own limits. “It is incredible how the culture of collaboration creates a sense of ownership and autonomy throughout the team. But many people do not know how to deal with their own limits. [...] Would any entrepreneur want their company to be a burnout factory? Certainly not. Accelerated growth has this side effect, which many companies turn a blind eye to. Balance does not mean taking it easy. It means healthy work and long-term sustainable growth” (Krummenauer, 2021, p. 292). Translated freely from the original: É incrível como a cultura de colaboração cria um sentimento de dono e de autonomia em todo o time. Mas muitas pessoas não sabem lidar com seus próprios limites. [...] Será que algum empreendedor gostaria que sua empresa fosse uma fábrica de burnout? Com certeza não. O crescimento acelerado tem esse efeito colateral, para o qual muitas empresas fecham os olhos. Equilíbrio não significa moleza. Significa trabalho com saúde e crescimento sustentável de longo prazo (Krummenauer, 2021, p. 292).

⁹ The economic literature commonly describes capitalist cycles as “boom and bust.” However, in this thesis title, I opted for a play on words with “bust” and “burst.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the noun “bust” denotes a “financial crash” or “sudden failure or collapse of trade,” often contrasted with “boom.” However, as an intransitive verb (to burst), it means “to break or fall to pieces, especially as a result of internal pressure,” and can also mean “to stop working.” Available at: <<https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=bust>> Access: 22 Feb. 2024. Since the word “burnout” originally comes from “a complete destruction by fire” also meaning “to burst out in flame” (available at: <<https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=burnout>> Access: 22 Feb. 2024), I have chosen to refer to cycles of “Boom and Burst” in this thesis.

experiences a bust—or a *burst*—it directly affects the bodies, minds, and overall well-being of startup individuals.

To further strengthen the interdisciplinary foundation of this thesis, the analysis drew not only on scholarship concerning neoliberalism and contemporary capitalism but also placed significant emphasis on the intersections of labor and technology. It also adopted a life course approach to mental health, which enabled a more nuanced understanding of how long-term individual trajectories were shaped by and responded to broader economic and technological transformations. By integrating these analytical frameworks, the thesis aimed to provide a comprehensive account of the complex interplay between labor dynamics, mental suffering, and the structural forces underpinning contemporary capitalism in its neoliberal form.

1.2.1 Labor and technology

In the realm of labor and technology, recently many socio-anthropological studies have focused on the platformization of labor and society (Srnicsek, 2017; Casilli; Posada, 2018; Grohmann, 2021). The platformization phenomenon refers to the rise of digital platforms in the early 2000s, serving as new intermediaries in the market for connecting individuals, information, and goods. While platforms can be classified in various ways (advertising platforms, industrial platforms, product platforms, etc.), they generally capture user content and data to generate value. In practical terms, platforms put users to work, engaging them in what is known as *digital labor* (Casilli; Posada, 2018). Initially, platforms like Uber claimed to liberate people from restrictive forms of work, offering more flexible and autonomous lifestyles. However, recent studies have raised concerns about how these platforms contribute to a form of privileged servitude (Antunes, 2018). Instead of fostering fair work environments, there has been a noticeable increase in how platforms contribute to precarious labor and social inequality on a global scale.

Although this thesis' subject is somewhat related to the *platformization* of labor and society, it is crucial to clarify that it does not focus on understanding platforms, their algorithms, or the phenomenon of *uberization* (Slee, 2019; Bernard, 2023). Instead, it focuses on the post-Toyotist work environment (Harvey, 1992) of those developing various software platforms. Consequently, this research examines contemporary *knowledge workers* (Huws, 2009) who create such platforms and, in

doing so, contribute to the emergence of the new *precariat* (Standing, 2014; Muntaner, 2018).

This means that, rather than examining the impact of technology platforms on the subjects at the “margins” of capitalism, it has observed different forms of job insecurity and precariousness among a specific elite of intellectual workers. Since recent “studies have shown that technology can accelerate work pace to the extent of increasing employee stress, overload, exhaustion and burnout” (Johnson *et al.* 2020, p. 406), this thesis has primarily investigated how knowledge workers similarly experience insecurity, exhaustion, and precarity.

As Tsing (2015) notes, “precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate” or of those who “dropped out” of the system, but “now it seems that all our lives are precarious—even when, for the moment, our pockets are lined” (p. 2). Echoing this broadened understanding of precarity as a condition that increasingly affects even so-called “elite” subjects, Tsing helps frame precarity as a defining feature of contemporary labor. In light of this, the present thesis has sought to contribute to socio-anthropological debates on labor by examining a parallel facet of this broader transformation: the experience of workers within startup environments, which represent, in many ways, the other side of the same coin as labor platformization.

1.2.2 Approaching mental health through life course studies

As Jan English-Lueck (2010) notes, contemporary knowledge workers navigate the dual responsibilities of managing work projects while also treating themselves as personal projects. When work dynamics intertwine with employees' self-care practices, individuals experience the effects of late capitalism in their own bodies. In light of this, and considering the global expansion of mental health discourse in recent decades (Bartlett *et al.*, 2014)—driven by growing concerns about the over-medicalization of mental health issues (Vieira; Russo, 2019), alongside rising rates of depression (Duarte, 1988), stress, and burnout (Loriol, 2000; 2019)—this thesis has built on existing explorations of mental health and care practices. It sought to deepen the understanding of how individuals' well-being is intimately connected to social, cultural, and environmental factors. Specifically, this research has observed how fluctuations within startup ecosystems, such as company

restructuring, economic volatility, and job transitions, affect the mental health of workers.

To better capture the complexities of these dynamics, this study has employed a longitudinal, life course approach. As Emmanuelle Santelli (2019) articulates, this method offers a nuanced exploration of individual experiences within broader societal contexts by examining human lives at the intersection of micro-, meso-, and macro-level analyses. By integrating these three levels of analysis, the life course trajectory approach provides a multidimensional understanding of social phenomena. It illuminates the dialectical relationship between individual agencies and structural constraints, offering a comprehensive framework for exploring how personal and societal factors intersect to shape life trajectories. Life course studies, therefore, emphasize the importance of analyzing individuals over time (longitudinally) and across various contexts (transversally), allowing for the integration of both personal choices and external influences.

As discussed in greater detail in the methodological section, the fieldwork for this thesis was conducted between 2020 and 2024 and is based on a longitudinal analysis of a consistent group of individuals, with only a few exceptions. This extended timeframe made it possible to capture not only broader economic and organizational shifts but also the evolving trajectories of individual workers. Some participants experienced burnout for the first time during this period, while others navigated prolonged recovery processes—some lasting over a year—that eventually enabled them to emerge from burnout, either by resigning from their jobs or by beginning pharmacological treatment.

Recent studies, which view workplace stress and suffering not as isolated, individual problems but as relational and contextual phenomena, have gained increasing cultural significance in recent decades (Loriol, 2019, p. 2). Specially since stress—especially within management—has become normalized as a byproduct of contemporary labor structures. Thus, an analysis of narratives surrounding stress, anxiety, and pressure, as well as the care practices adopted by startup workers—such as flexible work schedules, wellness programs, mental health days, and access to therapy—have provided crucial insights into how employees both endure and seek to alleviate the pressures of contemporary work environments.

By situating stress and burnout within broader social, historical, and economic contexts, this thesis has aimed to move beyond treating these phenomena as

isolated or purely individual challenges. Instead, it has adopted a more dialectical perspective. This approach enabled an analysis of how external forces—such as venture capital influxes, austerity policies, and corporate restructurings—reshape work rhythms and directly influence stress levels within the companies studied. The longitudinal design of the research further allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how these macro-level dynamics intersect with personal trajectories. In doing so, the thesis reveals how systemic pressures are internalized and experienced at the individual level, exposing the intricate links between organizational transformations and workers' mental health.

1.3 METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

The empirical questions guiding this thesis have centered on several key areas. First, they sought to investigate the entrepreneurial and work culture characteristic of the startup environment, with a particular focus on Brazil's technology and information sector, which underpins the broader startup ecosystem. Second, the research aimed to understand the everyday experiences of workers within Florianópolis' startup scene, examining their values, practices, and the strategies they employ to navigate their professional lives. Third, it explored how burnout is identified and addressed within the tech sector, both from the standpoint of individual workers and through the organizational responses adopted by startups. These lines of inquiry have provided the foundation for a broader analysis of the socio-economic dynamics shaping this rapidly transforming landscape. Before delving into these substantive areas, however, the following subsection critically reflects on the methodological strategies employed throughout the research process.

Characteristic of the anthropological production, an ethnographic approach aspires to construct comprehensive models of the most diverse social phenomena, as well as complex societies (Magnani, 2003). To achieve this, it is necessary for researchers to engage with the universe of their subjects, establishing reciprocal relationships to develop nuanced understandings of the social groups under scrutiny. However, how can one establish a reciprocal relationship when *studying up*? (Nader, 1972). Probably in the same way one would establish a reciprocal relationship when studying down, Laura Nader would likely say, with the difference that, when *studying up*, anthropological authority tends to be shaken.

Nader's concept of *studying up* was particularly fruitful because startup ecosystems mostly encompass a series of powerful, elite subjects. These range from very powerful investors, influential entrepreneurs, and CEOs to middle-class workers who can, sometimes, monthly earn 20 to 30 times the minimum wage.¹⁰ Although Nader emphasized the urgency of studying the powerful in the late 1960s due to their capability of affecting other people's lives, socio-anthropologists still seem to struggle with studying elites or powerful institutions today. The obstacles Nader pointed out—in terms of access, attitudes, ethics, and methodology—remain significant challenges. Especially considering that “the powerful are out of reach on a number of different planes: they don't want to be studied; it is dangerous to study the powerful; they are busy people; they are not all in one place, and so on” (Nader, 1972, p. 302).

While it was not particularly dangerous to study startup workers, fieldwork among subjects from startup ecosystems has revealed similar challenges: they are often very busy, geographically dispersed, and, in some cases, reluctant to participate in research. Thus, to gain access to this field, I had to employ a series of methodological strategies, commencing by utilizing my personal network of contacts. Since I was already familiar with some of the startup vocabulary and attitudes expected from subjects, I initially relied on my past experiences as a startup worker and on personal connections to gain access to this field.¹¹ Besides, I also started by exploring several key “places” within the Florianópolis tech ecosystem, such as tech conferences, startup association newsletters, and news articles from websites specializing in startups before reengaging with individual participants.

However, it soon became clear that the concepts of *time*, *space*, and *subjects*—already in tension within the framework of *surmodernité* proposed by Marc Augé (1992)—would pose significant challenges to the ethnographic work. This is due to the fact that both *space* and *time*, as well as the *subjects* involved in this study, are

¹⁰ Investors and prominent entrepreneurs or CEOs of startups can certainly be considered part of the Brazilian elite. After all, they control not only financial capital but also the means of production. However, labeling startup workers as “elite” may be somewhat overstated. Although they are relatively wealthier and belong to an upper-class fraction, they remain workers who must sell their labor power in exchange for their livelihood. Throughout this thesis, my interactions with investors and entrepreneurs have been somewhat more “distant,” while closer, more direct contacts have been with the working class itself.

¹¹ Before transitioning to a career as an academic researcher, I worked in the startup environment between 2012 and 2015. I began as a marketing intern at a German startup in 2012, ventured into entrepreneurship in the early stages of the Brazilian startup scene in 2013, and worked as a “YouTuber” in Silicon Valley in 2014—before the role of YouTubers became widely recognized. In 2015, I took on the position of marketing manager at a startup in Florianópolis (Rodrigues, 2023). These varied experiences provided me with valuable familiarity with the startup environment prior to commencing this research.

continually intersected by the possibilities offered by telecommunications and digital connectivity, which blur “traditional” fieldwork boundaries and add complexity to ethnographic engagement. Hence, before detailing the methodological strategies employed in this research, it is important to first explore the concepts of *space* and *time*, since both translated into ethnographic challenges.

Let’s first explore the concept of *space*. Upon initial observation, innovation ecosystems might appear as *non-lieux* (Augé, 1992), especially when navigating through coworking spaces, technology conferences, or innovation centers. As suggested by Miha Kozorog (2021), coworking spaces, incubators or creative hubs are instances of modern-day capitalist spaces. “[T]hey represent the alluring aspects of capitalism: creativity, networking, flexibility, teamwork, responsibility, comradeship, rebellion against big business, forward-looking projects, openness to differences, etc.” (idem, p. 100). Much like an airport, these locations tend to resemble across the Western world and to manifest as “global territories of modernity,” inviting individuals-turned-into-users to “navigate” through the intersections the *non-lieux* impose. Moreover, these *non-lieux* present themselves as spaces of expanded connectivity, asserting their global reach while also fostering their local communities. They collide the scales of globalization, becoming spaces that can exist simultaneously at local, national, and global levels.

However, a closer examination reveals that, despite the modernist architecture and the alluring aspects of capitalism, innovation spaces are purposefully crafted to serve as hubs for connection and networking among individuals. Besides, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the technology sector has increasingly adopted remote work, resulting in many workers performing their tasks primarily from home. As a result, when examining both the physical spaces of startup companies and the domestic environments of their employees, the innovation ecosystems began to resemble more like *lieux* rather than *non-lieux* (Augé, 1992). Suggesting that these workspaces also have a sense of place and meaning, as opposed to the transience and anonymity often associated with *non-lieux*.

Between 2020 and 2024, most Brazilian startup employees within the Florianópolis ecosystem worked either from home or in a hybrid format, with few exceptions. This shift allowed me to explore more home offices than traditional startup spaces, offering deeper insights into how work and personal life have become increasingly intertwined in contemporary settings. This entanglement is even more

evident when we recognize that workspaces, whether located at home or in traditional offices, are environments where bonds of affection and camaraderie naturally form among employees, regardless of their physical distance. Even when geographically apart, employees remained connected through communication platforms like Slack, WhatsApp, and Google Meet, fostering a sense of being “here” and “there” at the same time.

Therefore, in light of recent changes in the startup workplace—from in-person to remote work—the widespread use of digital tools for communication and work organization, and the ability to connect with individuals across diverse locations, this thesis proposes that innovation ecosystems cannot be understood solely as *lieux* or *non-lieux*. Instead, they should be conceptualized as *hyper-lieux* (Lussault, 2017). In *hyper-lieux*, individuals can “be” in two places simultaneously—both “here” and “elsewhere”—as that the physical and digital worlds intersect, enabling complex networks of interaction and meaning that transcend traditional spatial boundaries.

Given my frequent encounters with startup employees residing in Florianópolis while working for companies based in São Paulo, as well as workers living in Europe employed by startups headquartered in Florianópolis, I came to realize that many startup workers occupy—or imagine themselves as occupying—multiple locations simultaneously. They navigate the fast-paced tech environment, which is enabled by advanced telecommunications. As Michel Lussault (2017) argues, *hyper-lieux* serve as focal points where the forces of global standardization and differentiation converge, reflecting a dynamic in which individuals are both embedded in local contexts and engaged with global networks.

The concept of *hyper-lieux* is introduced in this thesis because, although the initial intention was to focus exclusively on the Florianópolis startup ecosystem, it proved impossible to delineate its boundaries with precision. Both the spatial configuration and the social relations within the ecosystem were continuously shaped and expanded by telecommunications and the transnational movements of capital. As a result, rather than remaining confined to the imagined geographical limits of the Florianópolis ecosystem, I opted to follow the *fluxes* (Hannerz, 1997) of this hub, both through in-person interactions and digital engagements.

According to Hugh Gusterson's (1997)—who revisited Nader's concept of *studying up* 25 years later—the elite communities we study tend to

disperse and link up across the globe, [...] and as we try to match the emergence of global cultures with a global anthropology, we must develop new research strategies. If virtual space increasingly becomes a real space of social interaction, then we will need virtual anthropologists to follow our subjects there (p. 116).

This is why, as the reader will see, I was not only able to conduct observations and interviews locally, but I also had to travel to São Paulo twice to follow events that extended beyond the boundaries of Florianópolis. Additionally, when I was unable to travel, I “followed” my interlocutors by conducting online interviews and making online observations—mostly on LinkedIn¹² and on online startup conferences.

Now, let’s explore the concept of *time*. This exploration sheds light on how the empirical questions about the daily routines and well-being practices of startup workers were addressed. Comprehending these workers as *subjects* (Maluf, 2013), it was imperative to explore how they navigate the porous gray zones that emerge between *temps de travail*—considering its duration, distribution, and intensity—and *temps hors travail*—comprising time off, free time, and leisure (Thoemmes, 2019).

To understand various work rhythms, it was essential to investigate the forms of work organization and its *managerialist ideology* (Gaulejc, 2007), as well as the productivity indices adopted by startup companies. To gain insights into *les temps hors travail*, it was fundamental to examine subject’s practices related to modes of consumption, engagements of leisure, activities of self-care and well-being.

Given that this research revolves around the paradox of an industry that promotes a discourse of purpose and happiness at work (Cabanas; Illouz, 2022), yet its employees experience persistent episodes of stress and burnout, it became imperative to also examine: a) how technology companies integrate employees’ well-being into their *temps de travail* (Chen, 2022); and b) how employees use their *temps hors travail* to improve their professional skills.

The shift between *les temps de travail* and *les temps hors travail* is ongoing.¹³ It is entirely possible for a startup worker to pause work activities in the middle of the day for a personal commitment. However, this does not necessarily imply a complete

¹² LinkedIn is a professional social networking platform designed for networking, and job hunting. It allows users to create profiles highlighting their work experience, skills, and education, connect with colleagues, search for jobs, and engage with industry-related content.

¹³ It was not uncommon to encounter startup employees that work at companies that offer them breakfast in the office or online meditation sessions during working hours in order to promote “*health and wellness*” within the company. On the other hand, many startup workers mentioned using their free time for work-related online classes to enhance or acquire new skills that would make them “*more productive*” at work.

disconnect from their responsibilities. Despite the apparent flexibility in working hours, individuals often remain connected to work during off-hours, as work-related messages can easily reach them through their personal phones, regardless of their location. This persistent connectivity blurs the lines between professional and personal life, reinforcing a state of constant availability that is characteristic of the contemporary tech-driven work environment.

Such daily experience of blurred times directly impacted the feasibility of accessing certain interlocutors in this research. Although their calendars were always full, the flexibility afforded by home-office arrangements allowed some of them to talk to me during typical office hours—provided they were conducted online. In other cases, it became clear that interlocutors often used the interview time as an opportunity to do something off-screen. Those were the moments when I was able to meet them in person, outside of work hours, in familiar and convenient locations such as nearby bars or cafés from their home. This flexible dynamic allowed for a more fluid interaction, adapting to the rhythms of their blended professional and personal schedules.

Considering the mentioned experiences of *space* and *time* and how the subjects of this study transition from global to local scales and various work rhythms, this thesis also had to operate in different scales and apply a mix of different data collection. As, sometimes, “participant observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure” (Gusterson, 1997, p.115), it was necessary to adopt a *polymorphous engagement* to interact with the Florianópolis’ startup ecosystems and some of its workers. According to Hugh Gusterson (1997), a

polymorphous engagement means interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form; and it means collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways [... it] also involves an eclectic mix of research techniques: formal interviews of the kind often done by journalists and political scientists, extensive reading of newspapers and official documents, and careful attention to popular culture, for example (idem, p. 116).

Overall, data collection strategy was a mix of: reading of “startup documents”, participant observation, fieldwork notes, image recordings, and in-depth interviews with a longitudinal comparison between the happenings of 2022/2023 and 2023/2024.

As Laura Lowenkron and Letícia Ferreira point out, “a large portion of anthropologists’ activities during ethnographic fieldwork consists of *reading documents* produced by their interlocutors” (2014, p. 79, emphasis added). Unlike most ethnographic accounts dealing with documents, in this research context, it was not medical reports, legal investigations, or official documents that were being dealt with. Instead, the documents analyzed were largely propagandistic in nature. These included blog posts, news articles from websites specializing in startups, company newsletters, data reports on the evolution of specific innovation ecosystems over the years, data reports on mental health produced by tech companies, recorded livestreams on YouTube channels, and books recounting the history of the Florianópolis ecosystem in particular.

Despite not having done extensive reading, the materials accessed during field research served a dual function, acting both as objects of study and as *ethnographic artifacts*. By reading them *against the grain* (Maluf, 2024), this thesis sought to uncover not only the content they were producing, but also the broader ideas they were disseminating within the tech ecosystem. Through this process, it was possible to identify some of the *pedagogical techniques*¹⁴ that have been essential in shaping both national and local startup ecosystems—techniques that remain crucial today in maintaining their perceived relevance. As demonstrated in Chapters One, Two and Six, these documents play a key role in the continuous production and reinforcement of the dominant ideologies that permeate the Brazilian tech sector.

Certainly, given the ability to immerse the researcher in the perspectives of their subjects, *participant observation* is a prominent ethnographic technique that allows for a deeper understanding of the social dynamics, cultural practices, and lived experiences within a community. Through working part-time in a startup during 2020-2021, it was possible to conduct online participant observation since we were all working remotely due to the pandemic. This allowed me to grasp some of the cultural practices of an early-stage startup and experience first-hand management strategies applied to a remote work situation.

¹⁴ Here, I address pedagogical techniques in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci, 2013). However, in the case observed, instead of education aimed at fostering revolutionary thought among the masses, what it was found in fieldwork was education promoting the current hegemonic system (liberal, meritocratic, and entrepreneurial) for a new generation of young, middle-class Brazilian workers.

Although somewhat constrained in the first couple of years, participant observation allowed me to navigate various digital and physical spaces that are integral to the startup ecosystem, especially from 2022 to 2024. These included tech conferences, the headquarters of startup associations, which are often open to visitors, startup office spaces, and home offices from interlocutors with whom I was more familiar with. Additionally, open shopping complexes frequently visited by startup workers also became sites for observation. These spaces, while diverse, collectively reveal the interconnected and fluid environments in which startup professionals circulate during leisure time or while remote working, blurring the lines between formal workplaces, semi-public venues, and personal leisure spaces.

Field notes and *image records* were especially captured during startup conferences to document the multitude of images generated by technology events. While not the primary method of fieldwork, these image records contributed to my understanding of the atmosphere¹⁵ within innovation ecosystems. Also, after attending technology events and/or conducting interviews, I would document my experiences in a fieldwork diary. This involved describing the context in which I was immersed, detailing the occurrences during the fieldwork activity, and expressing my feelings. On certain occasions, particularly after technology conferences, I opted to create an “audio diary” where I recorded my impressions of the event. Unlike writing, audio recordings helped me capture the state of excitement, information overload, and agitation induced by technology conferences. Writing, on the other hand, assisted me in processing, specially, conflicting emotions about “returning” to a work environment from which I had chosen to disengage.

Complementing participant observation, *in-depth interviews* played a crucial role in establishing personal relationships of trust between the researcher and interlocutors. Building trust was paramount, especially because the interviews delved into sensitive topics such as panic attacks, the use of legal or illegal drugs to cope with stress, and instances of workplace harassment, to cite a few examples. Out of respect for my interlocutors’ trust and the ethical understanding established, no names of startup workers or companies are disclosed here.

In order to protect interlocutors’ identity, some of the descriptive episodes that follow blend multiple stories into composite narratives. This means that actual events

¹⁵ A description of such atmosphere can be found in the first interlude: “Enjoy the party!” A day at a startup conference.

are depicted through *personas* (Pruitt; Adlin, 2006), a method adopted not only to safeguard the identities of those who willingly participated in this research, but also to engage with the *persona methodology* commonly employed in startup workplaces.

The *persona method* is a technique native to the field of design (Pruitt; Adlin, 2006), widely used by designers, marketers, and early-stage startup entrepreneurs to strategically define potential users or customers for their products. This method involves crafting an “*ideal persona*,” a fictional representation informed by real customer feedback and opinions. A *persona* typically includes detailed information about the user's demographic profile, such as gender, age, income, and occupation, as well as insight into their aspirations, goals, motivations, and behaviors. This approach enables companies to better tailor their products and services to meet the needs and preferences of their target audience.

Given the familiarity with the *persona method* within the startup community, I made it clear to my interlocutors that their stories would be instrumental in shaping and understanding the “*startup worker personas*” within the Florianópolis ecosystem. This approach proved particularly effective, as it reassured participants that their identities would be protected while allowing them the freedom to share their experiences more openly. As a result, this made it possible to foster a dialogic relationship and build trust with interlocutors.

Now, in terms of fieldwork access, to access startup workers from different companies, I firstly relied on my personal connections. Given my prior experience working in the startup realm of Florianópolis from 2012 to 2015 and my part-time engagement with a startup in 2020/2021, I already had acquaintances among startup workers. Some of my interlocutors were former colleagues, and others are still personal friends today. It is worth noting that my friends played a pivotal role in developing the semi-directive questionnaire reference guide. The initial interviews, which were broad and exploratory conversations, took place with two of my closest friends. Subsequently, they introduced me to some of their colleagues, facilitating the expansion of my network through snowball sampling.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this snowball sampling was not entirely random—as it never really is, since it relies on the social group's network under study (Becker, 1993). Since my friends were aware of my interest in understanding burnout syndrome among startup workers, they applied their own filters when indicating participants. They aimed to connect me with individuals they

believed maintained a healthy work-life balance or those experiencing severe stress. Moreover, without any prompting from me, they actively sought to ensure that I interviewed a diverse sample of subjects. Consequently, they endeavored to introduce me to individuals from various backgrounds, including black women, black men, individuals with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ members, as well as mothers and fathers. It was crucial for them to acknowledge the ongoing transformation within the ecosystem, with a shift towards greater inclusivity of “minorities” and a departure from the stereotypical image of a predominantly heterosexual, white, male environment.¹⁶

Utilizing snowball sampling also facilitated my engagement with workers from various *startup's stages*¹⁷, both within and beyond the Florianópolis ecosystem. The intention was always to gain insights into the practices of the ecosystem as a whole, avoiding the exclusive focus on a single startup company. I believe that if I had focused interviews solely on employees from one startup company, it would have been more challenging to draw conclusions that help us understand the rhythms of the Florianópolis ecosystem. Admittedly, the number of interlocutors (30 individuals) in this study is still a relatively small sample when compared to the 31,000 workers (ACATE, 2023) employed in the ecosystem. However, engaging with workers from various sectors and startup companies enabled me to expand the scope of this research and take the risk of making certain generalizations while also acknowledging the particularities of each interviewed worker's reality.

Given the diverse landscape of startups in terms of size and organizational structure, I interviewed workers from early-stage startups with up to 20 employees, those from growth-stage startups with over 200 employees, and individuals employed by scale-ups with over a thousand employees. It is crucial to note that, despite the

¹⁶ Socio-demography of startup workers and Diversity and Inclusion policies in startup environments is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five. For now, it is important to note that, according to data from the Santa Catarina Technology Association (ACATE) in 2021, men make up 51.7% of the technology sector workforce in Florianópolis. Additionally, 37.8% of employees in this sector hold higher education degrees, with the average age being 35. Currently, there is no available data on the representation of Black individuals, people with disabilities, or LGBTQIA+ members within the Florianópolis technology ecosystem.

¹⁷ As per YCombinator (Choi, 2024), a renowned Silicon Valley startup accelerator, the stages of a startup often align with fundraising rounds. For investors, determining a startup's stage is crucial as each stage implies distinct team sizes, levels of technology/product maturity, and potential compensations. In this research, interviewing employees across various stages of startups was important for comprehending the intricacies of work rhythms, accumulation of job functions, formal or informal hiring practices, as well as the benefits provided by the companies. Typically, the more advanced the stage of a startup, the more developed the company's organizational processes and the more attractive the compensation and benefits. Chapter Three of this thesis deepens this point.

differences in company size, most interlocutors, with few exceptions, were associated with companies that uphold the “*startup mindset*” or the “*startup way*” of doing business (Ries, 2011; 2018). Even companies currently classified as scale-ups often claim to preserve the “*core DNA of a startup*”, with founders frequently expressing nostalgic reflections on their early days as a small team of five entrepreneurs united by a shared dream (Faria, 2018).

Throughout the research process, a longitudinal comparative approach was adopted. This means that from 2022/2023 to 2023/2024, the same participants were interviewed at least twice, while I also attended the same annual technology events twice, with just a few exceptions. The objective of this longitudinal comparison was to comprehend the changes, rhythms, and emerging innovations in a sector known for its high dynamism. But not only, since I was also interested in the dynamic and complex relationships between stress, burnout, well-being and work. In this sense, longitudinal comparison provided a more nuanced understanding of well-being risk factors, work constraints and the collective or individual autonomy subjects had to deal with imposed limitations that directly affected their stress levels. By considering the broader context of an individual’s personal and professional journey and by following up with them from one year to another, it was possible to observe both cases of improvement and relief from stress at work, as well as cases of aggravation and illness that, sometimes, culminated in diagnosed burnout, resignation or medicalization.

According to Santelli,

it is necessary to distinguish between micro-, meso- and macro-social levels, both during observation and analysis. The analysis of trajectories relies on the ability to grasp what each level provides in terms of understanding the studied phenomenon, and then to articulate them; an operation that reveals the multidimensionality of the social (2019, p. 156).¹⁸

Thus, through these interviews, I aimed to conduct a trajectory analysis capable of: a) Understanding micro-social aspects related to individuals, their subjectivities, and emotions at work; b) Grasping meso-social aspects related to how individuals establish social relations in startup work environments and act on

¹⁸ Translated freely from the original text: Il est nécessaire de distinguer, lors de l’observation, puis au cours de l’analyse, les niveaux micro-, meso- et macro-social. L’analyse des parcours repose sur la capacité d’appréhender ce que chaque niveau procure comme compréhension du phénomène étudié, puis de les articuler ; opération qui permet de faire apparaître la multidimensionalité du social (Santelli, 2019, p. 156).

constraints that often emerge; and c) Considering macro-social influences, as reflected in their narratives when they mentioned the ecosystem they were part of, venture capitalists and their potential investments, or market trends counterbalanced by widespread layoffs.

Before each second interview, I would revisit the first interview, summarizing the main events of the previous year to discuss them with participants and ascertain what had changed and what had remained constant in their lives. This allowed me to observe how some interlocutors managed to transition from states of stress and burnout to less stressful conditions. Conversely, I also tracked a few cases in which rising levels of stress occasionally culminated in burnout syndrome, necessitating the use of antidepressants, extended periods of leave from work, and even resignations.

The interviews lasted an average of one and a half hours, they were conducted in Portuguese and transcribed using the *Transkriptor software*. Following transcription, the data was analyzed and categorized under broader themes like: work practices and activities; daily routines; personal relationships in the workplace; feelings of hope or disappointment; health and wellness practices; burnout and stress symptoms.

In terms of ethics, I prioritized transparency throughout fieldwork. During my time as a part-time worker in a startup (2020/2021), I made every effort to inform my colleagues and interlocutors of my dual role as both a researcher and an observer. I consistently clarified that I was not only present as a coworker or friend but also as a socio-anthropologist, observing and collecting data. Besides, as Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira aptly notes, “for the researcher *per se*, who rigorously examines the cognitive element of the moral values of any [social] group [...], the first step, in terms of ethics, is to make moral values tangible to ethnographic investigation” (2001, p. 67).¹⁹ In this spirit, I committed myself during the writing and analysis phases to portraying as accurately as possible the moral values that exist within and are transmitted by the startup ecosystem of Florianópolis. This includes values with which I, as an individual, may not personally align, but which need to be understood as part of a wider social system in which we all participate. By doing so, I aimed to maintain a balanced and faithful representation of the socio-cultural dynamics within

¹⁹ Translated freely from the original text: Para o pesquisador *per se*, que examina rigorosamente o elemento cognitivo dos valores morais de qualquer grupo étnico ou sistema interétnico, o primeiro passo, em termos de ética, é tornar os valores morais tangíveis a investigação etnográfica (Cardoso de Oliveira, 2001, p. 67).

this community, staying true to the ethical standards required in socio-anthropological research.

1.4 FIELDWORK

This thesis is grounded in fieldwork conducted from 2020 to 2024.²⁰ However, it also draws on impressions from my personal experiences between 2012 and 2015 when I actively participated, first as a “*wannabe*” startup entrepreneur and later as a startup worker, in the Florianópolis ecosystem. I mention these experiences because they somehow have paved my way into this thesis, but also because they provide insight into a decade of transformation within the Brazilian technology sector. From the emergence and enchantment of the startup scene in the early 2010s in Florianópolis, to the beginnings of its disillusionment after 2021. Therefore, while I present almost four years of fieldwork observations, I also rely on a decade of familiarity with this distinct “*startup mindset*.”

The fieldwork conducted here can also be presented in two aspects: through its layers of methodological strategies and/or its time frame. Let’s first delve into its layers before exploring its time frame.

1.4.1 Fieldwork layers

From a methodological standpoint, data collection is structured into three distinct layers, or three main methodological strategies: A) Accessing literature and materials generated by the Florianópolis startup ecosystem (including books detailing the history of ecosystem development, data reports from local and national startup associations etc.); B) Working part-time in a local startup and actively participating in and observing technological events organized within startup ecosystems; C) Conducting interviews with startup workers to gain insights into their work routines and wellness practices.

²⁰ Although I officially began my PhD doctorate in May 2021 at the Federal University of Santa Catarina and in September 2022 at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, the project to study the startup ecosystem in Florianópolis had been in development since February 2020. Naturally, the project has evolved over time. However, from the moment I selected the startup world as my object of study, I resumed following industry news closely and started to work part-time and remotely as a marketing content producer for a local startup. In this sense, I consider 2020 to be a pre-fieldwork year, which has also informed the foundation of this thesis.

These three layers allowed me to examine how “*the startup way of doing things*” solidifies and circulates within the institutions that constitute the ecosystems and the working practices of the individuals within them. Furthermore, it is essential for the reader to recognize that the studied layers are interconnected. This interconnectedness facilitates the circulation and transmission of the “*startup mindset*” in diverse ways throughout the Florianópolis startup ecosystem and beyond.

1.4.1.1 *First layer: Gray literature*

During fieldwork, I delved into books, reports, and media news authored by key players and institutions within the Florianópolis startup ecosystem. While my coverage of this literature is not exhaustive, it provides valuable insights into the ecosystem's history, demographic and financial data, and the shared beliefs among its leaders. In addition to the materials concerning the Florianópolis startup ecosystem, I also accessed a series of global and national reports from startup associations and Brazilian technology company associations. So, at the beginning of 2020, I set up a new email²¹ account to subscribe to newsletters from different innovation hubs and startup companies. This allowed me to stay updated on the ecosystem's local news, the release of new reports, and upcoming technology conferences.

Regarding the reports, some focused on the Brazilian ICT sector, while others analyzed the startup landscapes in Latin America, Brazil, or specifically Santa Catarina. These reports generally provided extensive economic and financial data, highlighting the growth and development of the respective technology hubs. Other reports and e-books often served as manuals and guides for startups. To narrow the

²¹ Maintaining a dedicated email account to handle newsletters and event registrations became essential due to the sheer volume of content received. With the widespread adoption of the Inbound Marketing Strategy in the technology sector, email subscriptions have become the initial stage of a potential buyer's journey. The core concept of Inbound Marketing is to attract customers through valuable content. For instance, if I wanted to learn about “*7 steps to avoid burnout among tech employees*,” provided as content by a health tech startup, I would need to sign up for the startup's newsletter. The company would then include me in an email automation setup. Utilizing email marketing platforms, this automated system would regularly send newsletters featuring updates on new products, services, and industry developments. Consequently, my inbox became inundated with email marketing and tech news after signing up for newsletters from various startup companies and technology events. While I could not always keep up with every newsletter, they served as a valuable source of information regarding upcoming events and updates on the ecosystem, including investment trends, startup acquisitions, or even the extent of layoffs occurring.

scope of my research, I concentrated on reports addressing employees' mental health and well-being. These were frequently produced by Brazilian Health Tech Startups and served as marketing materials to inform and promote their health tech services. Access to these reports and newsletters occurred continuously throughout the research process, spanning from 2020 to 2024.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2011) previously highlighted how management literature targeted at executives in the 1960s and 1990s served to “inform executives of the latest innovations in corporate management and the leadership of men, [positioning itself as] a key site for embodying the spirit of capitalism” (p. 100).²² Although the timeframe under consideration in this research differs, it becomes evident that the contemporary literature produced by the technology sector bears a significant moral and prescriptive tone, reminiscent of the managerial literature from earlier decades.

Furthermore, as highlighted by Richard Pfeilstetter (2017) in his examination of the startup ecosystem in Manchester, United Kingdom, a crucial early step in establishing a tech startup community involved the collection and presentation of statistical data that justified the recognition of a startup community. Consequently, I observed that documents originating from the Florianópolis ecosystem also functioned to substantiate its existence, underscore its significance in comparison to other national and international ecosystems, prescribe methods essential for ongoing growth, and advocate for a singular vision of the future. It is in shaping this vision of an entrepreneurial and meritocratic future that I discern the transmission and circulation of Californian ideologies (Barbook and Cameron, 1996) within reports and documents generated by the studied startup ecosystem.

1.4.1.2 *Second layer: Participant observation*

Throughout this research, I experienced a series of “moments of total and partial immersion” (Strathern, 1991) in the Florianópolis startup ecosystem. Given that startup ecosystems are complex environments, composed of various actors, companies, and institutions, whose social relations can occur both in physical spaces and through various online mediations, I employed a range of strategies to observe

²² Translated freely from the original text: d’informer les cadres des dernières innovations en matière de gestion des entreprises et de direction des hommes [...] comme un des lieux d’inscription principaux de l’esprit du capitalisme (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2011, p. 100).

the behaviors and interactions among managers, workers, and other individuals who navigate and constitute these ecosystems.

To this end, I worked part-time, albeit remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at a local startup; participated in a series of technology conferences and meetups, both in-person and online; and, as the pandemic subsided, I sought to frequent common work and leisure spaces such as coworking spaces, bars, and cafes, which are commonly visited by workers in this sector. This juxtaposition of field activities enabled the observation and collection of data in the most open manner possible. Even though, at the time of field observation, it was not possible to know in advance which data and information would prove to be truly relevant. According to Marilyn Strathern, this can only be known in the ethnographic moment, that is, through the “relationship that joins what is understood (which is analyzed at the moment of observation) to the need to understand (what is observed at the moment of analysis)” (1991, p. 350).

Working part-time in a startup was crucial for understanding remote work during the pandemic and observing the establishment of social relations and company rituals through telecommunications. It provided valuable insights into the dynamics of tech people management, the adaptation of corporate culture in a remote environment, and the evolution of startup ecosystems during a global crisis that, at that moment, was being considered as an “accelerator of digital transformation” (Bússola, 2021). These observations allowed me to grasp native concepts of work culture, social interaction among managers and employees, and the technological mediation that allows *knowledge workers* to work remotely.

On the other hand, the startup conferences I have been able to attend have proven to be a moment of reinforcement and dissemination of the beliefs upheld by the individuals constituting the startup ecosystem. It was a moment when investors, entrepreneurs, and workers stepped away from their regular work routines to connect with individuals from other companies, forge new social connections, and potentially establish new business deals. The event days resembled a festive atmosphere and appeared to dissolve the boundaries between personal and professional life, creating an environment of almost complete engagement for attendees. To me, these technology events represented a significant moment of ideological reinforcement, where participants were encouraged to practically embrace the “*work hard, play*

hard” mantra that had been popularized by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs in the early 2000s (Alexandre, 2023).

Furthermore, through invitations extended by some of my interlocutors, I had the opportunity to visit a few startup offices and coworking spaces. As Robert Thomas (1995) pointed out, corporations have gates, guards, and security devices, and some scale-up startups are no different. One reason I was only able to enter one or two startup offices was that, with the rise of remote work, offices tended to be somewhat empty in 2022/2023, and some workers felt comfortable enough to share their “*hot desking*”²³ areas with me—after I registered at the reception, which involved having my photo taken and signing in, followed by security contacting my interlocutor to escort me. My interlocutor would, then, specifically show me where I could sit and which areas I could access (desk, cafeteria, bathrooms) while she was in her private, closed-door meeting room with her team. Although brief, these visits enabled me to work closely with some of my interlocutors, offering valuable insights into their work environments and collaborative practices.

1.4.1.3 *Third layer: In-depth interviews*

Not taking into account the spontaneous conversations I was able to have during participant observation activities, I conducted 55 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 individuals. The first 30 interviews happened from August 2022 to March 2023, and the subsequently 25 interviews happened from September 2023 to March 2024.

Each interview was supplemented by a questionnaire that sought socio-demographic information, including age, gender, ethnic-racial self-identification, marital status, presence or absence of children, level of education, salary range, work regime (whether hybrid, remote, or in-person), area of work and position, length of time working for the company, and the number of employees at the company. Additionally, the supplementary questionnaire served as an informed consent form, seeking permission from the interviewees to record the conversation and utilize their testimonies in the research.

²³ Hot desking is a workplace strategy where employees do not have assigned desks or workstations. Instead, they use any available desk on a first-come, first-served basis.

When scheduling interviews, I often found that the only access I had to my interlocutors was through their online calendars and virtual spaces. Since many were accustomed to working remotely, my suggestion of an in-person meeting sometimes came as a surprise, as online meetings were their default mode of interaction. For some, given their demanding work schedules, online meetings were the only feasible option to accommodate our discussions. The virtual environment, which allowed for a seamless transition between professional and personal commitments, became the preferred choice for some interviewees to fit me into their busy agendas. Ultimately, 30 interviews were conducted online, while 25 took place in person after work hours, often in cafes, bars, or even the living rooms of my interlocutors.

Overall, the in-depth interviews aimed to explore both the life trajectories of the interlocutors, and their emotions related to their work environments. Conducting in-depth interviews with a one-year interval between each session enabled me to observe and compare the evolving aspects and constants in the lives of the workers. These interviews provided valuable insights into their personal and professional journeys, allowing me to see how work-related events directly impacted their daily lives and well-being.

Initially, the collection of biographical and professional material involved questions about their higher education, entry into the job market, transition into the technology sector, and recent career progressions. Following this, the interview moved to a phase where interlocutors were asked about their work activities and relationships with colleagues, managers, or subordinates, and the emotions and feelings these relationships evoked—ranging from admiration, friendship, and camaraderie to stress, anger, hatred, frustration, and disappointment.

Subsequently, I inquired about their episodes of stress or burnout and their leisure and relaxation activities. What symptoms emerged during episodes of burnout? How did they cope with stress or feelings of frustration? This led to an analysis of their narratives concerning health, illness, stress, and well-being. In the interviews, interlocutors described various strategies for regulating their emotions at work. These included engaging in mindfulness practices, such as meditation or therapy, to manage stress in real-time. Some relied on physical activities, like surfing, practicing yoga, or going to the gym, to release tension. Others found solace in talking with trusted colleagues or mentors, using these conversations as a way to process and reframe their experiences, as well as to strategize possible next steps.

Additionally, many mentioned attempting to set clear boundaries between work and personal life to prevent burnout, such as designating specific times for work and relaxation. These strategies collectively helped them navigate the emotional demands of their professional environments and maintain their mental well-being.

1.4.2 Fieldwork time frame

From a chronological standpoint, this thesis fieldwork happened in three phases: A) Working in a startup; B) Conducting first round of in-depth interviews and tech conference attendance; C) Conducting second round of in-depth interviews and tech conference attendance.

1.4.2.1 Phase one: Working in a startup

During 2020 and 2021, I worked part-time as a Content Marketing Producer in an early-stage startup. During an eighteen-month period, I was responsible for planning, creating, and publishing marketing content for the startup's newsletter, blog, and social media channels, notably Instagram and LinkedIn. I also actively participated in daily and weekly meetings with the marketing team, as well as quarterly strategic planning sessions. Throughout this time, I witnessed the company's evolution from a five-person startup to a fifteen-person team.

To effectively manage my responsibilities, I also had to adopt specific software platforms and work methodologies tailored to overseeing and evaluating my tasks. I engaged in feedback sessions, team-building activities, and both online and in-person social events, such as happy hours and quarterly plannings. While my colleagues were aware of my role as a researcher studying startups, I maintained confidentiality by refraining from directly quoting any observations made during my tenure at the company. Nonetheless, I maintained a fieldwork diary where I recorded impressions as a startup worker during the initial years of the pandemic.²⁴

Subsequently, after leaving the company, I was able to conduct interviews with some of my former colleagues to deepen my insights into the startup ecosystem. This practical experience significantly informed my anthropological research, allowing

²⁴ If and when observations are made, such as during the Second Interlude, stories are presented under the persona method that blends different episodes and subjects.

me to develop hypotheses about the impact of remote work on team cohesion, productivity, and the integration of new employees. It also highlighted the role of digital platforms in shaping modern work practices and corporate identities.

1.4.2.2 *Phase two: First round of interviews and technology conferences*

From August 2022 to March 2023, I was able to attend to five technology conferences and startup company meetups, both online and in-person, as it follows:

Framework 1 – Technology conferences attended between August 2022 and January 2023

Conference	Main theme	Type of event	Number of participants	Location	Duration	Month/Year
Startup Conference	General (various subjects regarding startups)	In-person, held by local and national public and private institutions	Over 5000 participants from all over the country	Florianópolis, Brazil	2 days	August 2022
People Management Conference	Tech people management	Hybrid, held by a local association of tech companies	Over 1000 participants online from all over the country and up to 600 participants in person from Florianópolis	Florianópolis, Brazil and online	2 days	September 2022
Marketing Conference	Marketing and innovation	In-person, held by a private company	Over 13000 participants from across Latin America	Florianópolis, Brazil	3 days	October 2022
Sales Meetup	Networking among sales tech workers	In-person, held by a private company	About 30 people from Florianópolis	Florianópolis, Brazil	1 evening	December 2022
Mental Health Conference	Employees' well-being and mental health	Hybrid, held by a private company	Over 1000 participants online from all over the country and up to 300 participants in person from São Paulo	São Paulo, Brazil and online	2 days	January 2023

Source: elaborated by the author.

The events promoted in and by local startup ecosystems are crucial moments for networking among their participants, but also for introducing and spreading new technological and business management trends. Most of the events I attended were held in-person in Florianópolis, while some followed a hybrid format, and I could only participate online.

Each of the events mentioned above provided valuable insights into various trends within the tech industry. In terms of scale and significance, some events I attended had a national reach, whereas others were more regionally or locally focused. Regarding themes, some events concentrated on several key areas such as tech people management, inspirational content, people development, networking, sales and marketing strategies, innovation, emerging technology trends such as the metaverse and artificial intelligence, investment trends and strategies for pitching to investors, the emergence of new startups, and the drive for international expansion and connectivity.²⁵

Various events were organized by Brazilian startup associations with public incentives, while some were hosted by local private companies from Santa Catarina. Most conferences were financially supported by the organizing companies, as well as through sponsorship contributions from supporters and sponsors, booth space sales at trade fairs, and ticket sales to participants.

Besides, during this second phase, I also conducted 30 in-depth interviews with a diverse group of individuals from the technology sector.²⁶ Overall, I aimed to construct a relatively equitable sample in terms of gender. However, in terms of race and age, the vast majority of the sample consists of white individuals between the ages of 30 and 39. Marital status and the presence or absence of children were also considered, revealing a relatively balanced sample between single individuals and those in stable relationships. However, regarding the presence of children, most respondents do not have children. As for education levels, most of the respondents have completed higher education, with some even holding an MBA, and one-third of the workers interviewed earn more than US\$2,501²⁷ per month (equivalent to more than R\$12,000). These data confirm that the majority of the respondents belong to Brazil's middle class. Lastly, regarding their areas of activity within the company, I

²⁵ This latter trend was particularly evident through the presence of foreign speakers and consulate booths from countries such as Portugal, Israel, and the United States at some of the conferences.

²⁶ See appendix A.

²⁷ All conversions are based on an estimated exchange rate of 5 Brazilian reais (BRL) to 1 USA dollar (USD).

sought to interview individuals from various sectors, covering twelve different areas ranging from senior management, such as CEOs, to support teams and customer service.

Table 1 – Average age of interlocutors

Age (in 2023/2024)	Number of people
20 - 29	7
30 - 39	21
40 - 49	2

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 2 – Gender identification

Gender	Number of people
Male	14
Female	16

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 3 – Racial and ethnic identification

Race/ethnicity	Number of people
Asian	1
White	23
Indigenous	0
Brown/Mixed	4
Black	1

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 4 – Marital status

Marital status (in 2023/2024)	Number of people
Single	14
In a stable relationship	13
Married	3
Divorced	0

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 5 – Presence or absence of children

Children	Number of people
Yes	5
No	25

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 6 – Level of education

Education (in 2023/2024)	Number of people
Completed high school	1
Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	7
Higher education completed (undergraduate)	15
Specialization incomplete (MBA /	3

specialization)	
Specialization complete (MBA / specialization)	4

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 7 – Salary range

Range in US dollars (in 2023/2024)	Number of people
Between US\$220 and US\$500 per month	4
Between US\$501 and US\$800 per month	4
Between US\$801 and US\$1,300 per month	1
Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month	5
Between US\$1,701 and US\$2,100 per month	3
Between US\$2,101 and US\$2,500 per month	2
More than US\$2,501 per month	11

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 8 – Area of activity within the company

Area (in 2023/2024)	Number of people
CEO	2
Financial administration	1
Human resources	3
Software development	5
Product management	2
Product design	1
Data analysis	4
Sales	4
Marketing	4
Customer service	1
Community management	2
Support	1

Source: elaborated by the author.

Also, due to the lack of any mention of unions, I actively sought out unionized tech workers. My goal was to understand why unions were hardly ever mentioned and whether anyone had ever attempted to build a workers' movement in the tech sector of Florianópolis. I was able to get in touch with one active union leader and two unionized tech workers. Through the union leader, I learned about the difficulties of mobilizing tech workers, and through the other two unionized workers, I learned about the attempt to build a collective called *Infoproletários* (Infoproletarians) in

Florianópolis during 2018-2019. However, despite having been part of the Infoproletarians movement for a couple of years, these workers were no longer working or living in Florianópolis when I interviewed them.

Regarding the startup stage, the study was able to interview a relatively balanced number of workers from early-stage, growth-stage, and scale-up startups. In terms of labor legislation, most of the participants in this research held employment contracts regulated by the Brazilian Consolidated Labor Laws (CLT). However, a few individuals were informally employed as independent contractors.

When it comes to working hours, the majority officially worked 44 hours per week. However, as will be discussed further, it was common for them to work overtime without receiving additional compensation. Finally, concerning the work model, the majority of participants were working remotely, with some already transitioning to a hybrid mode.

Table 9 – Stage of the startup they worked for

Startup stage (in 2023/2024)	Number of people
Early-stage (0 - 50 employees)	10
Growth-stage (51 - 500 employees)	8
Scale-up (501 - 1000 employees)	12

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 10 – Employment legislation

Legislation (in 2023/2024)	Number of people
Consolidated Labor Laws (Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho - CLT)	22
Individual microentrepreneur (MEI/CNPJ)	8

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 11 – Working hours

Hours (in 2023/2024)	Number of people
44 hours per week	28
26 hours per week (part-time)	2

Source: elaborated by the author.

Table 12 – Work model

Model (in 2023/2024)	Number of people
Remote work	23
Hybrid work	6
In-person work	2

Source: elaborated by the author.

1.4.2.3 *Phase three: Second round of interviews and technology conferences*

From August 2023 to March 2024, I continued attending the same technology conferences, both online and in-person, as I did in the previous year, with one exception, as it follows:

Framework 2 – Technology conferences attended between August 2023 and March 2024

Conference	Main theme	Type of event	Number of participants	Location	Duration	Month/Year
Startup Conference	General (various subjects regarding startups)	In-person, held by local and national public and private institutions	Over 10000 participants from all over the country	Florianópolis, Brazil	3 days	August 2023
Startup Book Launch	Book launch on the history of the Florianópolis ecosystem	In-person, held by the book publishers and a public institution	About 100 people from Florianópolis	Florianópolis, Brazil	1 evening	August 2023
People Management Conference	Tech people management	Online, held by a local association of tech companies	Over 1000 participants online from all over the country	Online	2 days	September 2023
Marketing Conference	Marketing and innovation	In-person, held by a private company	Over 19000 participants from across Latin America	São Paulo, Brazil	3 days	November 2023
Mental Health Conference	Employees' well-being and mental health	In-person, held by a private company	Over 1000 participants from all over the country	São Paulo, Brazil	2 days	March 2024

Source: elaborated by the author.

As observed, the nature of events has evolved significantly from one year to the next. Some events have increased in the number of attendees and duration, while others have relocated from Florianópolis to São Paulo. Additionally, certain events have transitioned from a hybrid format to being exclusively online or entirely in-person. For instance, one smaller event, the Sales Meetup, did not recur; however, I was able to attend a startup book launch focusing on the Florianópolis ecosystem.

These varying event dynamics from year-to-year highlight: a) The efforts of startup conferences to continually evolve and expand; b) The interconnectedness of the Florianópolis startup ecosystem with the broader Brazilian startup ecosystem, particularly that of São Paulo; and c) The evolution or downfall of certain tech trends. For example, while Metaverse was a hot topic in 2022, by 2023, the use of Artificial Intelligence dominated lectures and startup pitches. Nevertheless, distinguished figures from the local, national, and international tech industries continued to serve as speakers. Business leaders from different regions and countries were invited to share their expertise and provide “shortcuts” for achieving rapid business growth. Additionally, networking and closing deals remained the primary goals of all events.

In terms of interviews, I successfully conducted follow-up interviews with 25 out of the 30 participants during this third phase of research. Two participants were not contacted again, as they had already begun to disengage from the Florianópolis startup ecosystem by 2022. The remaining three did not respond to my attempts to schedule a follow-up interview. Given the sensitive nature of the topics I was exploring and considering that some participants had previously expressed discomfort during our discussions, I chose not to persist and respected their decision to withdraw from further participation.

Among the 25 participants who re-engaged, nine had changed jobs and were working for different companies in the following year, while eight had received salary increases due to either a job change or a promotion. In contrast, two participants experienced salary reductions after being laid off and having to reposition themselves within the job market.

In terms of well-being, five participants reported feeling better and less stressed, largely due to changing jobs, switching teams, or starting treatment for symptoms of burnout. However, nine participants experienced acute stress episodes from 2022/2023 to 2023/2024, or were already showing signs of severe exhaustion related to their workplaces. Several were considering resigning or had already left their jobs due to the accumulated stress. All the transformations observed throughout the longitudinal research are discussed in detail in Chapter Seven, along with the broader implications of these transitions on interlocutors’ mental health and well-being.

1.5 HOW THIS THESIS IS ORGANIZED

This thesis is structured into three parts, progressing from the macro to the micro level. Each section addresses a distinct scale examined during the research process. In the initial part, we immerse ourselves in the concepts of startups and their ecosystems. From a global standpoint, we explore the emergence of startups in Silicon Valley and their global expansion. Following this, we scrutinize the origins and development of the Florianópolis startup ecosystem from the 2010s to 2024. This first part extensively relies on the gray literature produced by both international and local startup ecosystems in Brazil.

Moving to the second part, the focus shifts to describing the startup factory floor. Transitioning from the idealized realms of meaning, success, and well-being at work, we delve into *“The Anatomy of a Startup Organization”* (Bailey, 2020) to comprehend how early-, growth-, and late-stage startups typically structure the key areas of their businesses. Additionally, in this section, we seek to understand who the knowledge workers are, both from a socio-demographic perspective as well as through observed patterns of behavior. This part draws upon the startup gray literature, fieldwork, and in-depth interviews.

The third part of this thesis extensively analyzes the work rhythm of startups and delves into episodes of stress and burnout among tech employees. We explore the concept of burnout, its emergence in the 1970s, and its official recognition by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2022. The primary focus is on comprehending the routines of startup workers and understanding what they mean when they say they experienced burnout. This part heavily relies on in-depth interviews, reports from Health Tech startups, and a literature review of burnout.

Each part of the thesis is preceded by an interlude—a brief, descriptive ethnographic episode. These interludes draw on fieldwork observations and/or in-depth interviews. While rooted in real experiences, I consider them “almost fictional” as they combine elements from various ethnographic situations to create “new” episodes. The interludes aim to immerse the reader in different startup atmospheres, such as technology conferences, the work rhythms of an early-stage startup, and burnout episodes. So to speak, the interludes serve to depict the reality of a series of lived or heard experiences and emerge from the “desire to achieve a more precise

fidelity” (Bastide, 1977) of what it was like to be immersed in a world of technological and social innovations.

2 FIRST INTERLUDE - “ENJOY THE PARTY!”

It is 8:30 a.m., and I find myself en route to *CentroSul*, Florianópolis' bustling events center. Unlike the majority of attendees, I have opted for public transport, arriving by bus at *TICEN*, the city's central bus terminal. To reach *CentroSul*, I embark on a walk across the *Aterro Baía Sul* footbridge. From this vantage point, I am greeted with a sweeping view of the location where I will be immersed for the next three days. As I approach *CentroSul*, I notice a queue forming at the entrance. These individuals, much like myself, need to register to the event. Some arrive carrying luggage with sleepy faces, likely fresh from the airport or bus station. While the event is rooted in Florianópolis and organized by key local institutions, its reach extends nationally, drawing attendees from various corners of the country.

It has been seven years since my last foray into the world of technology events. As I make my way, a sense of unease lingers, though its source eludes me.²⁸ Yet, it is not as if I do not know what I am in for. Perhaps it is precisely this familiarity with tech events that seems to be the root of my apprehension. Or is it the possibility of encountering figures from my past, from my days in the startup scene, that unsettles me?

Strolling along the *Aterro Baía Sul* footbridge, I notice clusters of attendees walking in small groups of three or four people. Their matching, vibrant T-shirts bear the insignia of a tech company unfamiliar to me. Among them, a palpable camaraderie and ease prevail. I suspect they are part of the company's promotional team, engaged in friendly wagers on who will secure the most *leads*²⁹ this year. They also seem well aware of the next few days' routine. This probably is not the first time they have attended a startup conference.

²⁸ The first in-person startup conference I attended during my fieldwork in 2022 marked a significant return to normalcy in Florianópolis after the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, most technology conferences were canceled, and those that did take place in 2021 were predominantly held online. In 2022, only few attendees still wore masks due to ongoing vaccination efforts. Part of my anxiety also had to do with the fact that I had to decide whether or not to wear a mask while I was in the field. Ultimately, since I was vaccinated, I decided against wearing one because I felt it created an additional barrier between myself and the other participants, a barrier I wanted to avoid. By 2023, mask-wearing had largely disappeared at these events, indicating a shift towards pre-pandemic norms.

²⁹ In marketing and startup terminology, a “lead” is someone or an organization that has expressed interest in a business's product or service. Leads are crucial as they signify potential customers who are at the initial stages of the purchasing journey. For startup marketers and sales professionals, events are viewed as valuable sources of leads. Consequently, one of their key goals is to collect as many qualified leads as they can.

The night before, I checked the event app, where the complete schedule of the 210 talks happening across eight simultaneous stages, as well as the list of the 100 exhibitors, 1000 startups and almost ten thousand participants, is available. The app features a forum where attendees can introduce themselves, aiming to foster networking. However, the forum quickly turns into a bulletin board where entrepreneurs and workers advertise themselves through their companies: *“Curious about the largest sales machine in Santa Catarina's ecosystem but don't know who to talk to? We're ready for another amazing experience. Come chat with me! My name is Roberta, and I'll be at XSales booth for all three days of the event. Let's boost your business together!”* These messages remind me that networking at tech events is not just about meeting new people; it is primarily about doing business and establishing some form of exchange relationship.

Perhaps this is what is making me nervous — I feel like I have lost my *“currency.”* When I attended tech events as a YouTuber, my currency was promoting the company of the person I was talking to. But now, I am not sure what I have to offer would be of interest to entrepreneurs or startup workers.

I finally reach the front of *CentroSul's* building and wait in the accreditation line while I observe the space that has been completely decorated and modified by the event organizers. In addition to the physical structure of the space, which accommodates up to 3500 people, new tents have been set up in the parking lot so that the event can accommodate the nearly ten thousand participants expected for this year's edition. A food truck area with more than 50 trucks has also been added, and it seems that there is a lounge area with swing chairs and sea view.

I enter the entrance hall of the building and all of a sudden I am surprised by a group of smiling dancers dressed in flashy costumes. They dance to the sound of the violin duo playing live adaptations of pop songs. Around the performers, there are about 40 electronic kiosks where I can enter my identification number, print my badge and collect an eco-friendly bag filled with event essentials — a booklet, pen, buttons, and an eco-cup that will definitely be needed later, during Happy Hour. The space is relatively small for the number of people passing through. There is a sense of excitement and impatience in the air, exacerbated by the performance and by other participants who stop to film and photograph them. In addition to the raised cell phones collecting images for their users' Instagram accounts, there are professional photographers and videographers in the space. They are recording the beginning of

another edition of this tech conference that promises to be the largest startup conference in Brazil.

Once I have my badge, I notice it is almost 9:30 a.m. and opt to head straight for the main stage. Since the rooms have limited capacity, arriving early at Stage 1 ensures a good spot for the opening. Upon entering, I find myself in a vast, dimly lit room with a DJ spinning an Alok Remix of the electronic hit “Piece of your heart.” The space is bathed in colorful lights from cannon fixtures, making it impossible to discern whether it is morning or night outside. Despite the lingering scent of coffee in the air, it seems we're all geared up for a party.

As I wait, the room gradually fills up. Suddenly, a woman in a pink suit and white sneakers asks if the chair next to me is free. I confirm and invite her to sit. Curious, she inquires if this is my first time here. I respond in the negative and return the question. She reveals that it's her first startup conference and shares her excitement. She explains that she works as a business consultant in a nearby city and is seeking potential business collaborations for her consulting company. She adds, *“I came to this conference because we know that it sets a benchmark for innovation, and it's crucial to stay updated with new management methodologies nowadays.”* Intrigued, she asks about my occupation, and I mention that I am a socio-anthropologist studying the burnout phenomenon among startup workers. Although surprised, she expresses interest in my research. *“Wow, super important! After the pandemic, companies started focusing a lot on the mental health of their employees, didn't they?”* I nod in agreement, but our conversation is cut short. We are captivated by a countdown accompanied by music reminiscent of a superhero movie. The event's institutional video begins playing on three giant LED panels that light up behind the stage. *“It's about to start!”* she exclaims, her eyes shining with a broad smile on her face.

The event's institutional video begins with a depiction of the Big Bang explosion, transitioning to a satellite view of the Earth. It then zooms in, focusing on a bustling urban city with its towering skyscrapers. Simultaneously, a voiceover prompts the audience to reflect on their entrepreneurial aspirations, recognizing the arduous journey to success. Images of people smiling and working together in offices appear. The voice asserts that *our* ambitions always exceed the obstacles that tempt us to abandon our dreams. *“Growth and evolution depend on your effort and determination. Today is your day, a day to embrace a singular experience.”* The

deep, resonant music, which still sounds like it's straight out of a superhero movie, swells, causing the room to reverberate. On the screen, words like “*movement, trend, innovation, investment, technology, determination*”, and “*success*” flash by. As the video concludes, the cannon lights illuminate the room once more, applause fills the air, and the presenter bursts onto the stage, weaving through the audience. Microphone in hand, he exclaims with vigor and cheer, “*Gooooooooood morning, Florianópolis!!!*” The crowd cheerfully shouts back, waving both hands in the air.

As he introduces himself as the host and entertainer of Stage 1, I glance around the room, which is now completely full. Dozens of cell phones are pointed upwards, capturing this moment. I am speechless. While I have attended technology events in the past, none have been of this magnitude. In 2013-2015, tech events in Florianópolis were just beginning, with audiences of around 500 people and much smaller production budgets. Fast-forward 7 to 10 years, and tech events have evolved into immense entertainment productions, featuring live music, sub celebrities as stage hosts, lounge areas, and very expensive entry tickets.³⁰

Furthermore, in the past, the audience at tech events confirmed the geek stereotype: young white men as software developers, and slightly older white men in sports jackets as main entrepreneurs and investors. I can still recognize these figures among the crowd. However, the audience nowadays appears much more diverse in terms of age and gender. There are many women in the audience as well as in the speaker's program (the organizers have been promoting on social media that half of the speakers are women in this year's edition). Although the audience and the speakers are still predominantly white, the program indicates the organization's efforts to include Black people and people with disabilities as speakers. The tech sector seems to be making an effort to appear more diverse and inclusive.

I look up at the stage again and notice the host inviting the Santa Catarina's governor, the mayor of Florianópolis, and all the directors of the main sponsoring institutes on stage. The atmosphere in the room has shifted to a more serious tone. The colorful cannon lights have ceased, and the stage is now illuminated, revealing several white men dressed in formal suits. Some people from the audience leave the

³⁰ The cost of tickets for different startup conferences can vary based on factors such as the event's scale, sponsorships, and organizers. For some conferences I attended, I purchased early-bird tickets, which ranged from US\$40 to US\$100. In other instances, I received complimentary tickets from one of my interlocutors, for which I am especially grateful, as they were valued at over US\$600. If it had not been for her help, I would not have had the opportunity to participate in one of the largest technology conferences in Brazil and Latin America.

room, including the lady in the pink suit next to me, who says, *“So nice to meet you! I hope we can see each other on Happy Hour.”* (I’ll never see her again). I stay behind because these formal openings, despite being monotonous, intrigue me a lot. This is my chance to understand the perspectives of the main authorities on the Florianópolis ecosystem.

Somehow, each speech reinforces the others. Each authority praises the magnitude and importance of the current startup conference. They mention that ten thousand tickets have been sold and that there are more than twenty-five thousand participants registered to watch main talks online. Additionally, they report that participants from 26 states and the federal district of Brazil are attending the event. Caravans of players from other Brazilian innovation ecosystems have apparently come to Florianópolis to attend the event and get to know the local ecosystem. *“This is a moment of encounter”*, they say. After all, the Florianópolis ecosystem, also known as the *Silicon Island* and the *National Capital of Startups*, is recognized among *“startuppers”* as one of the most innovative startup ecosystems in Brazil.

Being men of politics, the men on stage do not fail to mention that only 3% of Brazil's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) comes from the technology sector.³¹ They celebrate the recent creation of the Startups Legal Framework (2021) but say that more government investment and tax incentives are needed if technology companies are to thrive in Brazil. *“This startup conference, which happens annually, is the driving force behind innovation and the country's transformation. It is the innovative companies, such as the startups we will have the chance to visit at the business fair, that will bring differentiation and innovation to the other 23 million companies supported by SEBRAE”*, says the representative of SEBRAE³² on stage.

³¹ The ICT macro sector in Brazil, including services such as Software, Services, Cloud Computing, Business Process Outsourcing, State-Owned Companies, Hardware, Exports; and In-House IT (Digital Technologies in companies with other social objects); along with Telecom (Voice, Cellular, and Data Telecom and Implementation Services), represented 6.6% of the national GDP in 2022. Specifically, the ICT sector alone accounted for 3.1% of the national GDP, with a turnover of US\$59.3 billion (BRASSCOM, 2023). Currently, the Brazilian market represents 1.45% of the global IT market (ABES, 2023).

³² SEBRAE (Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas), the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service, is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to fostering the competitiveness and sustainable growth of small businesses in Brazil. It provides entrepreneurs and micro and small companies with support, guidance, and training to help them thrive in the market. Each region in Brazil has its own regional SEBRAE entity. Since the early 2010s, SEBRAE Santa Catarina has been a pioneer in promoting startups, contributing significantly to the development of the local startup ecosystem. It has implemented various programs focused on incubation, mentoring, and financing. In 2023, SEBRAE nationalized these local initiatives by launching SEBRAE Startups, a national platform designed to support innovative new companies. This platform assists startups with fundraising, international expansion, and networking opportunities.

Once again, I find myself taken aback by what unfolds before me. Reflecting on my early days as a startup entrepreneur, I recall the fervent declarations of disruptiveness that echoed through the startup community. They positioned themselves in stark contrast to corporate giants and governmental institutions, rejecting anything that appeared rigid or formal. Yet, as I observe this conference, it becomes evident that the Brazilian startup movement has undergone institutionalization. This event is not merely orchestrated by tech “independent” private entities; it is also orchestrated by local political institutions and has seamlessly integrated into a national government initiative for innovation. I cannot help but shake my head at my own naivety. It is clear that startups cannot thrive without governmental support.³³ The presence of numerous local authorities on stage should not have surprised me.

As the formal opening concludes, a tech specialist is invited on stage to discuss the future of technology, but I decide it is time to explore the event a bit. I begin to map out key areas of the event, such as the business fair, bathrooms, coffee spots, and rest areas. As I stroll through the corridors, I notice several Instagram-worthy spots—decorated areas featuring the event's logo where groups of colleagues are snapping selfies. I also spot entertainers dressed as aliens, spaceship pilots, and even as Darth Vader. Suddenly, someone taps me on the shoulder and asks if I can take a picture of them with Darth Vader. After snapping the photo, I walked through an LED tunnel displaying images related to technology and connectivity, heading towards the business fair. Along the way, I bump into two men who greet each other animatedly and inadvertently overhear the final bit of their conversation: *“Enjoy the party! I mean, enjoy the fair!”*³⁴ I am not the only one with the impression that we are at some sort of “party”.

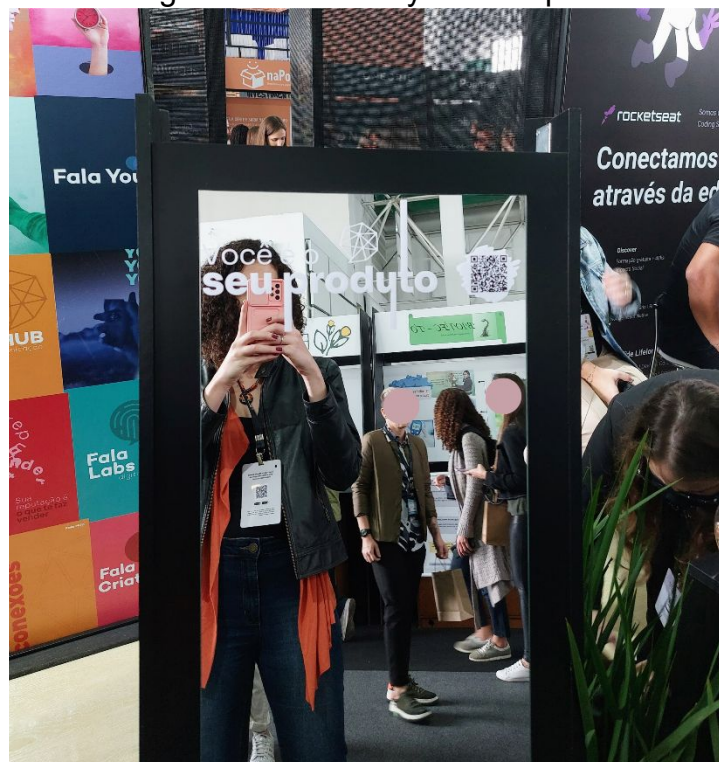
The business fair is definitely the busiest and loudest part of the event. A cacophony of voices fills the pavilion, punctuated by the constant hum of espresso machines and what sounds like a boxing bell. There are over 1000 small startup booths showcasing innovative solutions for various sectors: marketing, agriculture,

³³ “Entrepreneurs living in Florianópolis can register their projects for the city government's Innovation Tax Incentive Program, which focuses exclusively on innovation. The initiative selects projects to raise part of the Services Tax (ISS) and the Urban Property Tax (IPTU) from taxpayers in the municipality to help companies that focus on technology and innovation. This program allows ISS and IPTU taxpayers to allocate up to 20% of these taxes to programs that foster innovation and technology” (G1 SC, 2021).

³⁴ In Portuguese, the original sentence—“Boa festa! Opa, boa festa não, boa feira”—accentuates the fact that the words “festa” and “feira” are slightly similar.

health, sports, finances, education, and so on. Besides, there are 100 large sponsor stands, each showcasing a solution promising to aid startups growth. These range from startup incubator programs to cloud storage offers. To attract attention, each booth offers a gift—T-shirts, water bottles, plush mascots, buttons, coupons, or just a fancy cup of coffee. I see several people lining up for a chance to receive their “*gift*,” a souvenir of the event. However, no gift is entirely free; to receive it, people must sign up and try their luck. As the booth owner scans the QRcode on attendees' badges, they spin wheels of fortune to determine their prize. The main currency here is *personal data*. Each scanned badge collects the participant's full name, cellphone number, and corporate email, with each scan counting as a *lead* generated. After the event, everyone who signed up at these booths will likely be bombarded with emails from various marketing lists. I abstain myself from entering the booths' lines, but I cannot avoid taking a picture of myself in front of a mirror that says “*you are your own product*.”

Figure 1 – You are your own product



Source: image record made by the author in August 2022.

As I continue walking, I reach the central area of the business fair, and I finally spot the source of the boxing bell sound. There is a small ring with a stand around it

and a panel of judges—it is a startup “*pitch battle*”.³⁵ In each round, two startup entrepreneurs are invited to the ring. They have one minute to pitch their company. When the minute ends, the bell rings, and the crowd and judges vote on the best pitch. Apparently, there will be several rounds, and the startup that “*survives*” until the end of the event will win a special prize.

Since I am already dazzled by the excessive noise, I turn around to avoid the ring arena, but as I do so, I bump into Bernardo, a former colleague of mine from when I used to work as marketing manager at a local startup in 2015. I was delighted to see him, and he seemed equally pleased. We reminisced about our time at our former company, vented about our old boss once more, updated each other on our professional journeys, and recalled stories of our former colleagues, trying to piece together where everyone had ended up after the startup was bought by a major player. He shared that after years of working as a salesperson for various startups, he had decided to launch his own startup—a sales training platform that assists companies in finding top-tier salespeople in the market. In turn, I shared details about my research, which prompted him to suggest a sales approach: “*You could make some money by advising companies on how to prevent burnout.*” He also mentioned his practice of organizing Happy Hours for his employees to help them unwind, have a moment to laugh and, by doing so, prevent burnout. During our conversation, he kept a keen eye on passing badges, scanning for potential clients and partners.³⁶ When he spotted someone he knew, I bid him farewell so he could proceed with his networking.³⁷

It occurs to me, it is almost lunchtime. While I could grab something to eat at the crowded food truck area, I decide to step outside the event for an hour to find a

³⁵ A startup pitch battle is an event where startup entrepreneurs pitch their business ideas to a panel of judges or an audience. Each entrepreneur typically has a limited amount of time, often just a few minutes, to present their idea, explain its value proposition, and convince the judges or audience of its potential. The pitches are competitive, with winners selected based on criteria such as innovation, feasibility, and market potential. Startup pitch battles are common at startup events and competitions, and they can provide valuable exposure and opportunities for startups to attract investors, partners, and customers.

³⁶ Throughout 2022 and 2023, I crossed paths with Bernardo at several startup conferences. What stood out to me was his demeanor change between the two years. In 2022, he exuded confidence and success as his company thrived and delivered strong results. However, in 2023, following a wave of layoffs in the technology sector, his business model faced challenges. His company's performance declined, leading him to downsize his team and return to directly seeking new clients. While his demeanor at the 2022 events was relaxed and vibrant, in 2023, he was focused on securing new deals, which prompted him to adopt a more decisive and astute approach.

³⁷ I realize it is generally considered polite to mingle and network with a variety of people at startup conferences, rather than talking at length with just one person. Circulating allows people to meet more individuals and expand their network.

restaurant. As I make my way out, I record an “audio-diary,” my voice reflecting my agitation. My head is spinning from the overload of information. My senses, overwhelmed by the stimulation, feel dulled. The lights, the electronic music, the constant cacophony of voices, the espresso machines humming non-stop, and the boxing bell ringing every minute... I could definitely use a break from such an immersive event.

I cross the *Aterro Baía Sul* footbridge to re-enter the conference once again. After my pause, I am finally less anxious. I have a plan now. I know what I will be doing this afternoon and this helps me ease the question that has been on the back of my mind during all morning, “how to ethnograph a technology event?” So far, my best guess is to do a bit of everything: observation, image recordings, and spontaneous conversations when they occur. Additionally, there is a talk on “*Burnout and the importance of looking after your team’s mental health*” scheduled for this afternoon, which I must attend. I also intend to visit a startup booth I noticed earlier, claiming to be a mental health platform that promotes psychological safety in work environments.

When I reach Stage 6, a much smaller and sober venue than the main stage, there are already 30 people awaiting the talk on burnout. The speaker, a psychologist from one of Brazil’s major health insurance companies (sponsoring the lecture), begins by defining mental health at work as a state of well-being enabling individuals to cope with everyday stresses and work productively. She then describes the symptoms of burnout: a feeling of exhaustion accompanied by cynicism, difficulty in establishing good relationships with coworkers, and decreased productivity. Inviting the audience to reflect on the importance of discussing mental health at work, she highlights that burnout was classified as an occupational disease in January 2022 by the WHO’s International Classification of Diseases. This classification grants employees the right to paid leave for burnout treatment. However, the speaker notes that from the company’s perspective, paid leave implies decreased productivity and increased costs. Therefore, companies should “*invest*” in employee benefits beforehand, while managers should be vigilant for symptoms and warning signs to “*prevent*” burnout.

She also highlights other potential burnout symptoms, that may “*harm*” the company, such as increased employee absences and tardiness, employees working excessive overtime to meet deadlines (because *they* could not get the job done within the eight hours³⁸), and, again, a decrease in overall productivity. For prevention strategies, she emphasizes the importance of breaking the taboo around mental health in the workplace and raising awareness among leaders and employees, enabling managers to better *care* for their teams. She concludes by suggesting that companies should offer health benefits, including access to therapy, through partnerships with health insurance providers—just like the one she is representing.

The lecture lasts no more than 45 minutes, with the final 20 minutes dedicated to open questions from the audience. That is when a man, appearing to be in his 40s, identifies himself as a startup manager. He acknowledges that he has been proactive in caring for his team, but then poses a crucial question: “*Who takes care of managers? And what can we do to prevent burnout among managers?*” The speaker's response is laconic: “*self-knowledge.*” The man remains impassive, hoping for an answer that truly addresses his anguish. Another audience member then intervenes, sharing her personal story. She recounts experiencing burnout ten years ago, how she overcame it, and how she turned her experience into the founding theme of her new business: a company dedicated to helping others develop self-knowledge to avoid burnout. She looks at the man and hands him her business card. At that moment, the speaker announces that time is running out, and the lecture must come to an end.

The audience lingers in the room, forming small groups of two or three people around the man and the woman who intervened in the lecture. They are also managers, eager to learn how to address their own stress. There is a sense that the lecture was an opportunity to tackle the issue, but it fell short. “*Self-knowledge*” alone is not sufficient to avoid the consequences of work overload and the significant pressure managers face to be responsible for both themselves and their employees' well-being.

Another lecture on how Artificial Intelligence is transforming the workforce is set to begin in five minutes. More people arrive and take seats in Stage 6, removing the previous participants of the room. I try to approach the man to see if I can talk to

³⁸ In Brazil, labor legislation establishes a standard working day of up to 8 hours a day and 44 hours a week, with the possibility of up to 2 hours of overtime a day, by collective agreement or convention.

him, but I already lost him to the crowd. With over 200 lectures happening simultaneously across eight different stages, there is little time to absorb and reflect on what was just heard. The conference pushes everyone to move on to the next activity.

I left the room feeling a tinge of disappointment, though it was not entirely unexpected. The lecture on burnout felt somewhat superficial to me. So I decide to seek out the Health Tech Startups in the hopes to glean deeper insights into how the tech industry is tackling the burnout syndrome. I go through the bustling corridors, weaving through the crowd of attendees. Back at the noisy business fair, I spotted a popcorn cart, its aroma wafting enticingly. I spend some time navigating through the myriad startup stands, until I eventually located the one I sought: *“Vibrancy — Mental Health Platform”*.

The startup stand is modest, manned by a man and a woman, both founders of the company. Positioned at the back, a panel proudly displays the company's name and logo, alongside the slogan *“Ideal benefit for technology companies that seek talent retention, increased productivity, and a healthy culture.”* The founders' T-shirts emblazoned with the motto *“Work hard, play hard, do therapy, repeat.”* Upon my arrival, they are engaged in conversation with others, so I take a moment to observe the stand and pick up one of their brochures. The brochure poses the question *“How to deal with burnout?”* and offers the following advice:

In personal life: Define your life goals and values clearly; Review your habits and organize your routine; Spend leisure time with family and friends; Avoid toxic substances and habits.

For those you lead: Establish clear schedules and deadlines; Reinforce positive professional attributes; Celebrate achievements; Recommend therapy. (Fieldwork notes, 2022).

As I am reading the brochure, the woman from the startup approaches me and presents herself as Sandra. *“Looking for a mental health solution for your company?”* she asks. I excuse myself and explain that I am a PhD student with a keen interest in the burnout syndrome among tech employees, and that their company has caught my attention. Although slightly disappointed that I am not a potential client, Sandra seems pleased that burnout is a topic of interest. Curious, I inquire about the company's backstory—when it was founded, how long it has been in the market, and if it hails from Florianópolis. She happily informs me that the company has been in operation for two years. Originally from Curitiba, the capital of a neighboring state,

they have come to Florianópolis to showcase their company at the startup conference. She quickly adds that they operate nationally; being an online platform allows them to offer therapy to companies and individuals across the country. I then inquire about their funding³⁹, to which Sandra explains that they are actually a spin-off of a private hospital in Curitiba. *“The hospital board sought to expand their business into the tech realm, and my business partner and I already had the project and the experience—I am a psychologist, and he is a software developer. It was a perfect match!”*

I inquire about the profile of their main B2B (business-to-business) clients⁴⁰, curious to learn if their services are primarily sought after by tech companies and startups or by larger corporations. She explains,

Currently, our main clients are all from the tech sector because, retaining professionals in this sector is a challenge. We attempted to market our platform to major retail companies, but retention is not a pressing issue for them. They are accustomed to high employee turnover and can easily replace staff. Tech, on the other hand, faces a different scenario. There is a scarcity of developers and other specialists, and training them is intricate. Hence, preventing stress and burnout in the tech industry is crucial, as replacing these individuals is both costly and time-intensive. This is the market gap we aim to address (Fieldwork notes, 2022).

I notice other people approaching the stand, so I thank her for her time and bid farewell—I do not want to hinder her from speaking with potential clients. She hands me her business card and a button before I depart. *“Follow us on Instagram, it was a pleasure to meet you!”* she says. I reciprocate the sentiment. As I walk away, I read the button: *“Therapy done, milestone achieved!”*⁴¹

Talking to Sandra was enlightening. It made me realize how much the discussion about mental health in the workplace is part of a bubble of knowledge workers in the tech sector. These professionals are at the forefront of today's cutting-edge industry. Unlike the retail sector, if a knowledge worker in the tech industry decides to quit or to take paid leave due to burnout, it is not easy to replace them.

³⁹ Questions like the ones I asked are quite common among startups, especially because investors typically ask early-stage startups a range of questions to assess the viability and potential of the business. These questions can cover various aspects of the startup, including: Business Model (How does the business make money?); Market Opportunity (What problem does the startup solve? How big is the market?); Product or Service (What is unique about the product or service?); Team (What is the background and expertise of the founding team?); Financials (What are the current revenues and what is the projected growth?); Funding Needs (How much funding does the startup need?).

⁴⁰ B2B clients refer to “business-to-business” clients. These are companies or organizations that sell products or services to other businesses rather than to individual consumers.

⁴¹ In the Portuguese version: “Terapia em dia, meta batida!”

Moreover, the recruitment and training processes for new tech professionals are lengthy. It can take months to replace a professional, and have s/he to perform and achieve the company's goals as expected. All of this has an impact on productivity levels, a key concern for high-growth startup companies. The discourse on caring for workers' mental health and investing in burnout prevention strategies is framed as "*humanizing work processes*." However, its practice is thought out and justified by economic calculations aimed at maintaining high levels of productivity and company profits.

It is almost the end of the day, and my head is overwhelmed. I record a new "audio-diary" to capture my impressions of the talk with Sandra. The Happy Hour is starting, and I can see the mass of participants heading towards the stage set up in one of the tents outside the main building. I decided to grab my one free beer and observe the festive side of the business fair. A samba group is playing live on stage, and people are excited, dancing, taking group pictures, and celebrating the end of the first conference day. I am exhausted and two more days of fieldwork observation await me. Time to head home.

3 PART I - STARTUPS AND ITS ECOSYSTEMS

Understanding the work culture of startups and its impact on workers' well-being requires a closer look at how startups operate and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the tech industry. Therefore, to lay the groundwork for this analysis, in the first chapter, we will begin by exploring the key concepts that define a startup, the way these organizations are structured within innovation ecosystems, and their deep reliance on venture capital.

Given the lack of a unified definition of a startup among institutions, entrepreneurs, and scholars, this thesis seeks to navigate this complexity by exploring various perspectives and interpretations of what constitutes a startup. As we will demonstrate, startups are not merely companies that produce scalable products; they represent a particular *“mindset”* shaped by speculative investment, rapid growth, and a set of liberal, meritocratic ideals, which influence how the labor market perceives work and success in the context of the tech industry.

In the second chapter, we shift from a global perspective to a local focus, examining the Brazilian startup ecosystem with a particular emphasis on the historical development of the tech ecosystems in Santa Catarina and Florianópolis—the primary setting for this thesis' observations. This chapter demonstrates how the liberal, meritocratic logic that drives global startup culture has similarly permeated Brazilian society. By contextualizing this ecosystem, we will explore the ways in which local tech actors have adopted and adapted these global narratives to fit their unique circumstances.

The analysis of the Brazilian and Florianópolis startup ecosystems draws on a range of sources, including books, blogs, and other writings by local stakeholders such as startup founders and investors. These individuals often shape a “cohesive narrative” about the future of the region's social, political, and economic landscape. However, this discussion will take a critical approach, interrogating the ideologies that emerge from these narratives.

These first two chapters will thus set the stage for further investigation into how the values and structures of the startup ecosystem shape not only companies but also the working lives and subjectivities of their employees.

4 CHAPTER 1 - STARTUPS: A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

It is not possible to discuss the startup work culture and its effects on workers' well-being without understanding what a startup is and how it operates. However, defining startups and their ecosystems is surprisingly difficult. Evidence of this is the lack of unanimous agreement among governmental institutions, entrepreneurs, and social scientists regarding the definition of a startup. Thus, in this first chapter, we will begin our investigation by exploring a few startup definitions according to different perspectives. We will then focus on how startups grow, how they rely on venture funding and how they tend to be organized through innovation ecosystems. Finally, we will also explore the social imaginary surrounding startups and the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the tech industry.

4.1 WHAT IS A STARTUP

On the entrepreneurial realm, the serial entrepreneur and author Eric Ries defines startups as “a human institution designed to deliver a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty” (2010). Investor Paul Graham, sees a startup as a company “designed to grow fast” (2012). And the Brazilian serial entrepreneur Felipe Matos defines it as “a new company creating a highly scalable innovative solution” (2017, p.35).⁴² Overall, they all seem to align with the understanding that a startup represents something new, characterized by *innovation*, *scalability*, and *rapid growth*. But what does that actually entail?

Let's first delve into the concept of *scalability*. According to Matos (2017), in a scalable business, costs increase at a proportionally lower rate than revenue. Few sectors can achieve this, and the tech sector is one of the rare economic areas that enables growth and scalability at reduced costs. When we compare a tech company—which can be started in a garage with just a few individuals, personal computers, internet access, and some data storage—with a clothing factory, for instance, which requires a suitable space for its production area, equipment such as sewing machines and finishing tools, as well as raw materials and storage areas for both raw and finished goods, the differences become evident. For a traditional factory to

⁴² Translated freely from the original text: é uma empresa nova que cria uma solução inovadora altamente escalável (Matos, 2017, p. 35).

expand, significant investment in more space and machinery is necessary. In contrast, for a tech company to scale, it might only need additional data storage, a few more software developers, and investment in online marketing, depending on the business model. Therefore, although startups can generate millions of dollars, they tend to be, or at least start as, much less costly enterprises compared to other types of companies. This cost efficiency allows younger generations of entrepreneurs with limited initial capital to swiftly launch a business.⁴³

Now let's discuss *innovation*. Startups are often said to create disruptive services and products that change the way we live, work, and socialize. Examples of innovative companies that began as startups and then expanded nationally and internationally include Uber (which revolutionized the global transportation market), Tinder (which transformed the landscape of romantic and social relationships), iFood and Deliveroo (which disrupted the food delivery markets in Brazil and France), NuBank (which aimed to revolutionize the financial market in Brazil), and Netflix (for streaming movies and series). The list goes on, and according to Matos (2017), most startups are innovative because their solutions simplify, accelerate, and reduce the cost of traditional industries.⁴⁴ In this sense, technical innovation is typically championed by startups as a means to make processes less costly, more efficient, and more intelligent. By being innovative, startups are often said to have the potential to “*make the world a better place*” and to disrupt “*traditional and bureaucratic*” industries. Additionally, their cutting-edge nature makes them more likely to attract risk investments—a topic we will explore further later.

Having established a general understanding of why startups emphasize scalable and innovative solutions, let's explore the necessity for *rapid growth*. For a company to experience rapid growth, it must develop a product or service with widespread appeal and the capability to reach a large audience before its competitors do. Startups operate in a highly competitive environment, and the one that can scale its solution to a broader audience the quickest is likely to dominate the market. Since startups are viewed as assets from the perspective of investors

⁴³ Throughout the 2010s, it was not uncommon to find headlines on the covers of management and business magazines announcing “*the secrets of Brazilian startups*”, pointing out how young people - with little business experience and low financial resources were finding investors and making money from their ideas.

⁴⁴ Another way to think about innovation, according to Harvey (1992), is through its effect of “devaluing, if not destroying, past investments and labor skills. Creative destruction is embedded in the very circulation of capital. Innovation exacerbates instability and insecurity, ultimately becoming the primary force that drives capitalism to periodic paroxysms of crisis” (idem, p. 102).

(Shestakofky, 2024), it is crucial for them to grow rapidly, even if it means breaking things⁴⁵ along the way—and, as we will see throughout this thesis, things, processes, and people *do* tend to break along rapid growth.

As noted thus far, entrepreneurs generally agree that for a company to be considered a startup, it must be *innovative*, *scalable*, and capable of *rapid growth*. They do not necessarily specify that startups must be tech-related, suggesting that startups do not have to be technology companies. However, although startups are not required to be software products, software products and services tend to scale more easily than other types of products. They also automate various work processes, thereby increasing global productivity. As a result, most successful startups we know are indeed tech-based.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that a non-tech company can not adopt a “*startup mindset*”.⁴⁶ Indeed, for some, a startup also represents a “*mindset*” (Moon, 2022)—a collection of entrepreneurial ideas to embrace, or a “*path to follow*” (Ries, 2017), signifying a specific manner of undertaking tasks and navigating challenges that can be adopted by various industries. In this context, we can consider that a specific type of performance is expected from both managers and workers in startups. This applies not only to the types of funding pursued or the modes of work organization implemented, but also to aspects such as dress codes, language (with the frequent adoption of English terms in their daily routines), and the attitudes expected from workers. From my perspective, it is precisely this notion that a startup can transcend being just a tech, innovate company and become “*a way of building things*” that imbues startups with a distinctive aura of enchantment, making them complex to define.

⁴⁵ Initially, Facebook's motto, established in 2004, was “Move Fast and Break Things.” This phrase inspired a generation of entrepreneurs who believed that rapid growth was inherently beneficial. Over the years, however, the motto evolved. It changed first to “Move Fast and Build Things,” then to “Move Fast with Stable Infra,” and finally settled on the simpler “Move Fast.” In 2019, the Harvard Business Review declared, “The Era of ‘Move Fast and Break Things’ Is Over,” suggesting that startups should now prioritize sustainable growth (Taneja, 2019).

⁴⁶ An example of a company that considers itself a startup, because it adopts an innovative and fast-growing “*mindset*”, but which initially did not offer any technology-based products, is the coworking company WeWork. In its 2019 S-1 filing to go public in the financial market, it has defined itself as a tech company. However, many argue that “it is not a tech company, but a modern-day real estate company — purchasing long-term leases from landlords and renting them out as short-term leases to tenants” (Govindarajan and Srivastava, 2019). This perspective challenges WeWork's self-identification, suggesting that despite its claims, its core business model is rooted in real estate rather than technology. WeWork's assertion of being a tech company likely stems from its use of technology to optimize space usage and enhance tenant experiences, but the fundamental nature of its operations remains a point of contention.

After this brief exploration of startup definitions through the emic perspectives of entrepreneurs, investors, and startup mentors, we should now examine what social scientists have said about startups and add more complexity to their definitions. Louise Faria (2018) states that, overall,

when the word startup is mentioned, the first image that comes to most people's minds is of high-tech, competitive, flexible, and vibrant companies that introduce a myriad of innovations in ways of producing and organizing business, creating new markets, products, and services (p. 6).⁴⁷

She adds to our discussion the *social imaginary* that news media companies and common sense tend to have about startups. Researcher Michael Melia (2018) introduces startups as *world-making companies* and entrepreneurs as *dream chasers*. According to his research, a startup typically emerges from a problem or discontent with the world, a challenge that technology promises to address. Thus far, we may infer that startups are vibrant, world-changing entities, capable of innovating modes of production.

Nevertheless, anthropologist Nathalie Schipounoff (2019) offers a less optimistic view of startups. According to her, despite their disruptive rhetoric against traditional companies, startups are not designed to evade capitalism but rather to re-enchant it. Her research hypothesis posits that the startup ecosystem serves as a tool for exerting capitalist power within a new elitist moral framework, attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable and humanize the dehumanization of work. Gabriel Lira categorizes startups as a *transnational phenomenon*. In his dissertation, he defines startups as “companies founded by young entrepreneurs with a focus on technology and the internet, financed by venture capital, and at an early or intermediate stage in the development of their business” (2020, p. 26).⁴⁸ He adds to our analysis the observation that most startups rely on external capital, often sourced from venture funding. This reinforces the notion that, although *disruptive*, startups do not oppose capitalism but rather represent a new attempt to re-enchant it, as suggested by Schipounoff (2019).

⁴⁷ Translated freely from the original text: Geralmente quando se fala a palavra startup a primeira imagem que vêm à mente da maioria das pessoas são empresas de alta tecnologia, competitivas, flexíveis e vibrantes, que introduzem uma miríade de inovações em modos de produzir e organizar negócios, criam novos mercados, produtos e serviços (Faria, 2018, p. 6).

⁴⁸ Translated freely from the original text: empresas fundadas por jovens empreendedores com foco em tecnologia e internet, financiadas por capital de risco e em estágio inicial ou intermediário do desenvolvimento de seus negócios (Lira, 2020, p. 26).

The various conceptualizations above highlight different elements that constitute a startup. However, it was Marion Flécher (2021) who proposed the most comprehensive definition of startups. According to her, the definition of a startup is based on three key aspects: a) Conforming their *business model*, which includes companies involved in technological or non-technological innovation, seeking strong, rapid growth; b) As per their *organizational and managerial model* that aims to be disruptive “by emphasizing horizontality, cooperation, team spirit, community, a good working atmosphere, pleasure, and fulfillment at work” (p. 17);⁴⁹ c) And according to the *ideological model* followed by most of these companies, which is “based on the American myth of the self-made man and meritocratic ideology” (p. 17).⁵⁰

As observed, the common thread in understanding a startup among social scientists also involves its association with innovation, rapid growth, and transformative ambition. But they also add to the startup conceptualization elements such as its role in re-enchanting capitalism (Schipounoff, 2019), its transnational nature and reliance on venture capital (Lira, 2020), the propagation of neoliberal and meritocratic ideals (Flécher, 2021), and its embodiment of the high-tech, competitive, and vibrant image within the social imaginary (Faria, 2018).

To understand some of the definitions above, it is necessary to take a few steps back in history and recognize that startups emerge from a series of accumulated transformations—social, technological, managerial, and structural within the capitalist system. The first modern tech companies, such as Apple and Microsoft—pioneers of the personal computer—emerged in the 1970s, coinciding with the transition to *flexible accumulation* (Harvey, 1992). Many other industry giants, such as Google, appeared in the late 1990s, following the rise of the Internet and new methods of work control and organization (Sennett, 1998). Most importantly for our analysis, the majority of startups emerged after the advent of smartphones in 2007 and the economic crisis of 2008, which pushed a legion of middle-class workers toward entrepreneurship as an alternative to structural unemployment and wage devaluation (Corsi *et al.*, 2021).⁵¹ The advancement and cost reduction of new

⁴⁹ Translated freely from the original text: se veut en rupture avec celui des grandes entreprises classiques, en mettant l'accent sur l'horizontalité, la coopération, l'esprit d'équipe, la communauté, la bonne ambiance de travail, le plaisir et l'épanouissement au travail (Flécher, 2021, p. 17).

⁵⁰ Translated freely from the original text: sur le mythe américain du self-made man et l'idéologie méritocratique (Flécher, 2021, p. 17).

⁵¹ According to Corsi *et al.* (2021), the global financial crisis, which began in December 2007 and spread worldwide throughout 2008, triggered an economic downturn that resulted in declines in production, employment, and wages. In an attempt to recover, capital resorted to fiscal austerity, wage

telecommunications technologies, along with structural transformations in the capitalist system and the expansion of globalization, created conditions for startups to emerge not only as a USA-based phenomenon, as it initially was, but as a transnational one, specially during the 2010s.

Therefore, in accordance with Lira (2020), I also hypothesize that startups constitute a transnational phenomenon, organized through networks of various ecosystems, that carries a distinct “*mindset*.” From my perspective, this mindset enables these companies to generate and disseminate work practices that not only influence innovative organizational models but also contribute to the formation of new generations of *neoliberal subjects* (Dardot; Laval, 2013). By doing so, they typically adhere to the ideology of the self-made man, as mentioned by Flécher (2021), and propagate the ideals of a *neoliberal American lifestyle* (Ong, 2006), also found in the *Californian ideology* (Barbrook; Cameron, 1996), underpinned by liberal and meritocratic principles. Moreover, as a *business model mindset*, the startup approach can extend to various industries such as education, health, finance, and marketing, rather than being confined to the specific sector of tech. This means that even a non-tech company with innovative ideas and growth potential could adopt “*a startup way of doing things*.”

To summarize, from my perspective, startups tend to be high-tech, innovative, rapid-growth, venture-backed companies that imply new business, organizational, and managerial models. But, above all, they are a social, transnational phenomenon that embodies “*a specific way of doing things*,” currently representing the forefront capitalist mindset of *progressive*⁵² *neoliberalism* (Fraser, 2017), with all the contradictions that this entails.

4.2 HOW STARTUPS EVOLVE

suppression, and the curtailment of workers' rights. However, these measures proved insufficient, and the ongoing crisis has extended into a prolonged period of low growth that has persisted for over a decade now. Certainly, the crisis that emerged in 2007 can only be fully understood within the context of deeper determinants rooted in the accumulation pattern established following the crisis of the 1970s. Within this context of stagnated growth and the devaluation of salaried employment, I hypothesize that entrepreneurial practices in the technology sector—an industry requiring significantly less capital investment compared to other productive sectors—and the establishment of new high-growth-potential companies have attracted a considerable number of new workers from the middle classes. These workers perceive the technology sector as offering greater opportunities for maintaining their social status and potential for economic advancement in the face of a decelerating global economy.

⁵² For more progressive ideals, see part two of this thesis.

Having established a clear understanding of what startups are and their emergence, our focus now shifts to exploring how startups survive failure and achieve growth—through various different phases—to become successful or reach the dream *exit*.

In the mid-2010s, it was commonly said that 90% of startups failed⁵³, often for one of three reasons: 1) They were building products nobody wanted; 2) They did not grow fast enough and ran out of cash; or 3) The founding team was not versatile enough to “*pivot*” when necessary (Patel, 2015). Today, the failure rate has decreased significantly, at least in the Brazilian startup ecosystem. According to SEBRAE, approximately 25% of Brazilian startups fail within the first two years, meaning about 75% survive this period. Nonetheless, 50% of startups fail to survive beyond the first five years, while small businesses in general have a slightly better outlook, with 21.6% closing after five years of operation (Portal SEBRAE, 2023).

These entrepreneurial failure rates reinforce the notion that building a startup (or any other kind of company) is challenging and that the chances of survival are slim. However, our current interest lies less in understanding why startups fail and more in how they grow through different stages in order to succeed.

Matos (2017) delineates that a startup undergoes five distinctive stages: curiosity, ideation, operation, traction, and expansion. During the stages of curiosity and ideation, also known as seed-stage, entrepreneurs explore potential business ideas that could evolve into scalable, viable ventures. Their primary objective is to identify a problem within a significant market that can be resolved and to prototype various solutions. In other words, they aim to build a “*Minimum Viable Product*” (MVP) and test the value proposition of their product or service (Blank; Dorf, 2012). On average, these initial stages can last about two years and are typically led by the founders themselves. Generally, the seed-stage relies heavily on extensive market research, industry networking, and participation in public-private seed-stage acceleration and mentoring programs that help validate the business concept.⁵⁴ The

⁵³ Reported data is usually based on Silicon Valley rates.

⁵⁴ According to Carcanholo, “capitalist production can only ascertain what, how, at what cost, and in what manner it should have produced *after* it has already produced” (2021, p. 137, emphasis added). This elucidates the inherent difficulty in aligning the production process with the social demands of the market and the circulation of commodities. To mitigate this challenge, startups adhering to the methodologies of Blank and Dorf (2012) and invert this process by *first* aiming to identify the ideal product for the ideal market before fully committing to production. During this initial phase of discovering the “*product-market fit*”, most startup entrepreneurs focus on developing an MVP—a rudimentary and underdeveloped version of the product designed to validate the potential market promise. Only after achieving *product-market fit* do these companies seek additional capital to develop

stereotypical mental image of a seed-stage startup often conjures up the picture of two or three individuals brainstorming business ideas from a dorm room or a garage, as represented in the movie *The Social Network* (2010).

Once entrepreneurs have transformed their ideas into a functional business, they enter the operation (early-stage) and traction (growth-stage) phases. During early-stage, startup entrepreneurs should assemble a team—with the requisite skills and expertise—and progress from prototypes to a half-baked product or service. In general, these initial stages are characterized by a trial-and-error approach and require employees to demonstrate resilience and versatility in dealing with change. Once the product has been accepted by the market, the startup transitions to the growth-stage. This phase involves expanding marketing and sales strategies, collecting and analyzing feedback from early customers to refine the product or service, scaling operations to meet growth demands, and tracking *Key Performance Indicators* (KPIs) to measure growth and success (Ries, 2011). Also, to advance from early-stage to growth-stage, companies need to streamline operations and implement sophisticated management practices to sustain growth. In this case, the stereotypical mental image of an early-stage or growth-stage tech company aligns closely with what common sense usually envisions as a startup: a 20-person company in a shared workspace or co-working environment, bustling with energy and innovation.⁵⁵

Finally, once the startup has achieved a stable level of traction—thus, a late-stage—the focus shifts to scaling the business and expanding its market presence, either geographically or by targeting new customer segments. The late-stage is also when the company might diversify its product line or services to meet broader customer needs. Generally, startups that reach this stage are referred to as *scale-*

the ideal product. Until their ideas are validated, startups will continue “*pivoting*,” making incremental adjustments to the MVP until they find a customer who perceives sufficient value to pay for the offered service or product. This initial phase can last up to two years, as it involves experimentation and a process of trial and error aimed at determining what should be produced before it is produced in full. Experimentation and *pivoting*, however, can also be ongoing processes according to the demands of venture capital, as we will see further along. Translated freely from the original text: A produção [capitalista] só tem como checar o que, como, a que custo, de que forma, deveria ter produzido depois que já produziu (Carcanholo, 2021, p. 137).

⁵⁵ During fieldwork, I had the opportunity to work in an early-stage startup. When I joined the company in April 2020, there were five people, but by the time I left, there were almost 20 people. In contrast, most of my interlocutors were employed by startups that were either in the growth-stage or late-stage. Those working for the smaller startups still in growth-stage were more susceptible to market fluctuations and the risk of failure, while those in late-stage companies experienced a relatively more stable work environment. We will delve deeper into the nuances of working in different stage startups in Chapter Three.

ups. As a scale-up, a startup might resemble a more traditional company, with hundreds of employees occupying a multi-story office building dedicated to tech workers. The atmosphere is more structured, with established departments, comprehensive Human Resources (HR) policies, and a clear hierarchy, yet it often retains an innovative culture with collaborative spaces, cutting-edge technology, and ongoing efforts to maintain the agility and creativity of its early days.

Once a startup builds an innovative product that scales rapidly and achieves expansion, does it cease to be a startup? Not necessarily. In the entrepreneurial sphere, the debate about when and how a startup ceases to be classified as such remains inconclusive. According to the *Brazilian Legal Framework for Startups and Innovative Entrepreneurship* (2021), a company ceases to qualify as a startup after six years of operation. However, this timeframe is widely disputed within the entrepreneurial community.

Some argue that a startup can transition to a *scale-up* or even a *unicorn* within a year, while others believe this transformation could take a decade. Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition, *scale-ups* are generally recognized as companies that have sustained an annual growth rate of at least 20% for three consecutive years, often in terms of revenue or number of employees (ScaleX, 2021). These companies have typically progressed beyond the initial startup phase and are focused on rapidly expanding their operations, entering new markets, and scaling their business model. *Unicorns*,⁵⁶ on the other hand, are frequently tech companies that have experienced rapid growth, achieving a valuation exceeding US\$1 billion. They are often perceived as having the potential to disrupt industries or emerge as market leaders.

Despite the evident success and growth of scale-ups and unicorns, they are still classified as startups by many investors, who view a startup's status as more of a “*mindset*.” Some even suggest that a startup only stops being a startup when it no longer prioritizes long-term valuation growth (Kepler, 2020) or when an “*exit*” occurs.

⁵⁶ It is intriguing to observe how the global startup community appeals to the magical world of fantastic creatures to represent the rarity and mythical nature of such a venture. Anyhow, it is also worth mentioning that since 2017 there is an ongoing debate within startup ecosystems advocating for more “*zebra companies*” over the pursuing of the unicorn fantasy. According to Zepeda (2017) a Zebra company is real (to state the obvious), and, most importantly, it focuses on building sustainable businesses that benefit society as a whole.

An “exit”, often regarded as a highly successful outcome, refers to the event in which founders and investors divest their ownership positions, typically by selling the company to another entity (acquisition) or by offering shares to the public for the first time (*Initial Public Offering*—IPO). This can happen once the startup is well established or even during its traction phase. As noted by Distrito *et al.* (2023), startups are the largest buyers of other startups in Latin America. This means that larger startups often acquire smaller ones to incorporate their technologies and workforce, allowing early-stage founders to “cash out” and “exit” before fully developing their own companies.

As we have seen, every startup goes through various stages of development, striving to avoid failure and achieve rapid growth, ultimately aiming for a successful “exit.” It is crucial to understand that each startup stage involves different work rhythms and varying levels of versatility from the workers. In the early-stages, startup employees often face frequent experimentation. This can mean completely redoing recent work as the startup's product pivots and evolves. Workers at this stage are expected to be highly adaptable and open to rapid changes. During the growth stage, as startups begin to resemble more structured *organizations* (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977), employees shift their focus toward establishing management processes and developing documentation. This stage also involves implementing several metrics to monitor growth effectively. Workers are required to balance operational stability with the dynamic environment of a growing company. In the late stage, startups evolve into fully structured organizations where employees are increasingly engaged in due diligence practices and find themselves under a stronger emphasis on achieving growth metrics. This stage requires keen attention to detail and a strategic approach to scaling the business efficiently.

Acknowledging these distinct stages and the demands they place on startup workers is essential for us to understand the different work rhythms and levels of worker engagement, both with the company and their daily activities. This is something we will delve into further in Chapter Three of this thesis.

4.3 HOW VENTURE FUNDING WORKS

Now that we have a basic understanding of the various stages a startup might go through—and are aware of the fact that most startup entrepreneurs either fail or “*cash out*” before “*changing the world*”—we are better prepared to delve into the fundamentals of how venture funding works and discover that each startup stage requires a different kind of investment.

In a nutshell, there are three primary ways to fund a company: securing a traditional loan from a commercial bank, “*bootstrapping*”, or obtaining venture funding. This discussion will provide a brief overview of each funding option, with a particular emphasis on Venture Capital (VC) firms.⁵⁷

Given that most startups are developing experimental and innovative businesses with high chances of failure, commercial banks are typically reluctant to invest in these ventures. As noted by Peter Ester and Arne Maas (2016), “the investment logic of banks and VCs differ markedly” (p. 101). While banks tend to be risk-averse, VC firms embrace risk and maintain high-risk, high-return portfolios. According to Matos (2017), entrepreneurs who choose to create a business through a commercial bank loan are more likely to establish what he terms a “*lifestyle business*” rather than a startup. While some tech companies in Brazil do rely on commercial bank loans to sustain their operations—as I was able to ascertain during field research—it is important to recognize that this is not the optimal method for funding a rapid-growth startup.

Furthermore, in the startup realm, “*bootstrapping*” means relying on personal savings and internal cash flow from initial sales to grow the company organically. Also, according to Matos (2017), an entrepreneur who opts for “*bootstrapping*” has the benefit of becoming the sole owner of the company and to have more autonomy in decision-making. However, this approach often leads to a shortage of resources, risking slower growth and being undermined by a venture-backed competitor. In any case, even those startups that successfully initiate their operations through “*bootstrapping*” eventually seek venture capital. A notable example is GitHub,⁵⁸ which started as a “*bootstrapped*” company in 2007. But, by 2012, it received funding from the Venture Capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, and in 2018, it was acquired by Microsoft.

⁵⁷ While there are undoubtedly various ways to finance a business's development, such as crowdfunding and grants, this thesis will focus specifically on the financing options that are most commonly observed.

⁵⁸ GitHub is a developer platform that enables developers to create, store, manage, and share their code. The company is currently based in San Francisco, California.

Given the challenges of securing a commercial bank loan and the inherent risks of “*bootstrapping*”, many startups turn to venture capitalists for funding. Therefore, venture funding plays a crucial role in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Proof of this is the fact that all the tech giants today have, at some point, received Venture Capital funds to develop their businesses. As an example,

Sequoia Capital, founded in 1972 and one of the most influential VC firms in the [Silicon] Valley, funded Apple, Atari, Cisco, Oracle, Google, Yahoo, YouTube, LinkedIn, PayPal, WhatsApp, Airbnb, Instagram, to mention just a few of the bigger names (Ester; Maas, 2016, p. 101).

Despite its prevalence in the startup sector, obtaining venture funding is difficult and requires entrepreneurs trading an ownership stake (i.e., “*equity*”) in their company for the capital needed to expand. In general, startup investment varies according to the company’s stage and includes sources such as friends and family, public funding programs focused on fostering innovation,⁵⁹ early-stage angel investment, and series A, B, C, and D+ rounds of venture capital.

In the early stages, most startups rely on what is colloquially known as the “FFF round” (Friends, Family, and Fools). This implies that only loved ones, who do not require substantial proof of concept, will invest at such an early stage. This round is typically used to gather initial capital to kickstart the business, develop a prototype, or cover early operational costs. It is often considered a more accessible and quicker way to raise funds compared to more formal investment avenues, but it also carries a high level of personal risk and potential strain on personal relationships (Matos, 2017).

Once the startup validates its idea and begins implementation, early-stage angel investment is typically sought to build its operations and hire a first team of employees.⁶⁰ Angel investors typically “offer a combination of cash, know-how, time, mentorship, and personal networks that are specifically relevant to startup founders and beginning entrepreneurs” (Ester; Maas, 2016, p. 105). They can be either older generations of entrepreneurs seeking financial return or individuals looking to “*give back*” to the ecosystem. Additionally, they might be young, cashed-out startup

⁵⁹ Public funding programs are not very common in Silicon Valley, but they are an integral part of the Brazilian startup ecosystem. This topic will be explored in further detail in Chapter Two.

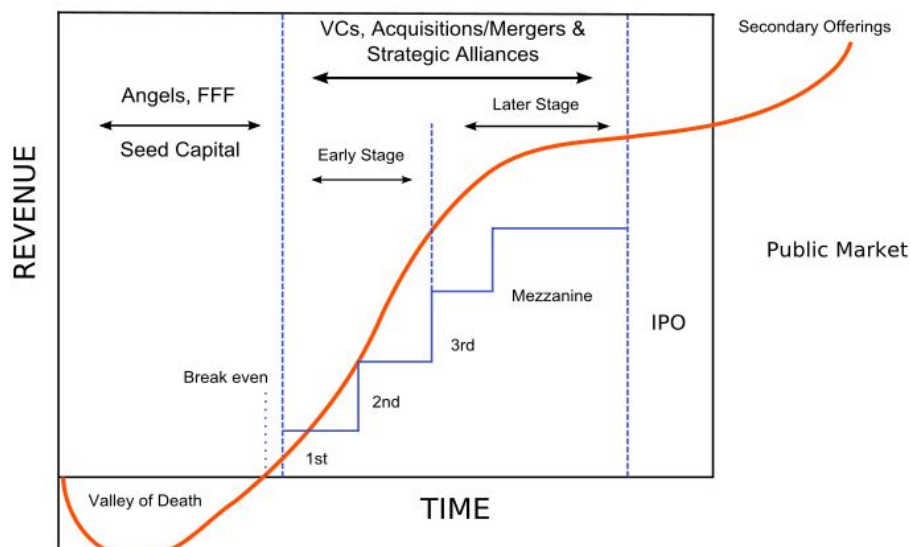
⁶⁰ Specifying investment amounts can be challenging, as they vary significantly by country and period. However, to provide an estimate, in Brazil, investments ranging from US\$10,000 to US\$100,000 (at an exchange rate of R\$5.00 to US\$1) are typically made by FFFs (Friends, Family, and Fools), public funding programs, accelerators, and Angel Investors. Investments exceeding these amounts, reaching into the millions, are usually made by Brazilian or foreign venture capitalists.

entrepreneurs venturing into the funding business. In either case, they guide startup founders by offering “*smart money*”, which is commonly known among “*startupper*s”⁶¹ as financial support accompanied by expertise and advice.

Series A, B, C, D+ rounds of Venture Capital investment tend to occur when the business models of startups have already been validated. In these cases, VC firms pool resources from various investors to target startups typically characterized by their innovative business models, cutting-edge technologies, or unique market approaches, with the potential to disrupt entire industries (Gompers; Lerner, 2001). In return, VCs receive ownership stakes, which they hope will increase in value as the company grows. The ultimate goal for both founders and investors is a successful “*exit*”, which can be achieved through an IPO or acquisition by a larger company. As in the words of Benjamin Shestakofsky (2024), “venture capital investors fund startups that they believe have the potential to yield enormous returns, banking on the fact that, in the future, someone else may be willing to pay far more for equity in the company than they initially paid” (p. 20).

⁶¹ According to the WordSense dictionary, a *startupper* is “an entrepreneur who is a founder/co-founder of a startup.” Available at: <<https://www.wordsense.eu/startupper/>>. The blog “Startupper Club” defines a *startupper* as “a startup creator, and by extension, someone who works in the ecosystem of innovative businesses.” Available at: <<https://startupper.club/en/startupperpedia/what-is-a-startupper-definition/>>. In this thesis, the term *startupper* is used to refer to those who work in an innovation ecosystem, specifically mentors, influencers, and entrepreneurs. Native terms, also spoken in English in Brazil, will always appear in italics and quotation marks to highlight the use of English language elements adopted by the individuals in innovation ecosystems.

Figure 2 – Startup financing cycle



Source: Startupxplore Blog.

Nevertheless, VC investments are inherently risky and the returns on investment are uncertain. Many investors claim that out of every ten startups they invest in, nine will fail. However, the one successful company often generates enough returns to cover the losses of the other investments (Ester; Maas, 2016). In other words, venture capital firms operate under the *financial logic of speculation*, “introducing the future into the present in an astonishing way” (Harvey, 1992, p. 152) or, as Marcelo Carcanholo (2021) puts it, the *logic of fictitious valorization*.

According to Carcanholo (2021), contemporary capitalism is a response to the last major structural crisis that began in the 1970s. Consequently, current capitalism is characterized by both the reduction in the turnover time of capital and its fictitious nature. This fictitious nature does not refer to the fictitious capital mentioned by Marx, but rather to “a fiction that may eventually become reality, but (as of yet) is not” (idem, p. 140).⁶² Thus, the *logic of fictitious valorization* is an inversion of the capital logic, which first ascribes value to the future production of value and only later verifies if the production and value indeed correspond to the speculation. From my perspective, it is precisely under this logic that venture capital firms operate. However, for these firms to sustain themselves, they need a foothold in reality. This is why mythic success stories are so crucial. Entrepreneurs, and to some extent even employees, engage in entrepreneurial activity with the aspiration that their startup will

⁶² Translated freely from the original text: uma ficção que pode até se tornar realidade, Mas (ainda) não é (Carcanholo, 2021, p. 140).

become the next significant disruptive force,⁶³ choosing to focus on potential financial gain while “ignoring” the speculative tendencies they are involved with.

Nevertheless, between the promises made, and the success stories told, failure lurks. Consequently, given that the majority of startups are unsuccessful within the first five years, VC firms typically assume an active role in the startups they invest in, offering strategic guidance, industry connections, and operational support. The objective of this involvement is to enhance the probability of success and to mitigate the considerable risks associated with startup investments. This is precisely why it is common practice for a seat on the startup’s board of directors to be awarded to the lead investor of each venture capital deal. As a member of the board of directors, an investor is granted the right to vote, thereby enabling them to exert control over the startup’s most critical decisions (Shestakofsky, 2024). This includes the appointment or dismissal of the *Chief Executive Officer* (CEO),⁶⁴ as well as the ability to directly influence managers’ decisions and impose a specific rhythm of work and product development.

According to Shestakofsky (2024), it is precisely this hands-on approach that tends to cause a series of pervasive effects in day-to-day operations. Since investors aim to scale companies as quickly as possible, they “favor risk-taking over efficiency and emphasize relentless innovation geared toward rapid— and even arguably reckless—growth” (idem, p. 22). Given that venture capitalists are less concerned with the present and more interested in future returns, their involvement in a startup represents a strategy for ensuring a positive *Return On Investment* (ROI). By focusing on ROI and the value of their shares, venture capitalism “prescribes a startup’s goals and techniques, it also advances a particular set of ideas about how business should be done, and about the moral status of the startup in our world” (ibidem, p. 25). This signifies that, during the expansion phase, which occurs immediately following the receipt of funding, growth becomes the primary focus of a venture-backed startup, superseding profitability.⁶⁵ During this period, while investors

⁶³ And by disruptive force, I am in accordance with Harvey (1992), who defines technological disruption as the destruction of a previous industry. An illustrative example of this can be seen in Netflix, which “disrupted” the entertainment industry by displacing traditional video rental services, significantly altering the landscape of media consumption and paving the way for a new era of streaming in the early 2000s.

⁶⁴ Notable instances of a board of venture capitalists dismissing the CEO include the cases of Apple, where Steve Jobs was terminated in 1985 and subsequently reinstated in 1997, and the WeWork board of directors, which dismissed Adam Neumann in 2019.

⁶⁵ Uber serves as a quintessential example of this trend. Launched in 2009, Uber raised approximately US\$24.7 billion from 2010 to 2018. The company expanded its operations to over 60 countries and

are primarily focused on financial metrics and projections, teams must continuously adjust their objectives and strategies to align with investors' expectations.

As observed, most startups relying on external funding are fundamentally based on financial capital, thereby directly experiencing the processes of financialization and speculation (Harvey, 1992; Shestakofsky, 2024). Consequently, their financing systems make it evident that startups emerge from both the technological advancements of recent decades and the dynamics of *flexible accumulation*. According to Harvey (1992), flexible accumulation depends on both the flexibilization of labor processes and the comprehensive reorganization of the global financial system. It is characterized by “the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation” (p. 140).

This logic gave rise to the *shareholder revolution* that initiated in the 1980s, where executives prioritize shareholder interests—aligning their actions within the company to maximize value—over other stakeholders such as employees, customers, and communities (Ho, 2009). As a result, this shift has led to the adoption of various management practices, ranging from outsourcing and layoffs to different forms of employee engagement and performance-based compensation (Bernard, 2020). These practices often aim to reduce costs and maintain a productive workforce for as long as possible, but there is more to the story. As mentioned before, startup companies financed by venture capitalists also tend to prioritize growth and experimentation. However, growth and experimentation are complex processes that demand significant “*resilience*” from entrepreneurs and employees, particularly when things change or “*break*”. As one of the interlocutors highlighted, during the growth phase of a startup, “*everything breaks down*”:

It's great to see growth of 300% in the news, but in practice, everything breaks down, everything falls apart! In just one year, we doubled in size. We've gone from 40 to 80 people, and even the hiring process has had its hiccups. It's just too much to handle. You can't cope. For example, you have to send people notebooks for them to work [from home]. Before, we had to send just two or three, but now it's ten a week! How do you make that work? Everything breaks down, everything's changing all the time, you know? [...]

went public in 2019. Until its IPO, Uber struggled to achieve profitability. Nevertheless, the IPO significantly increased the wealth of its two founders and three primary investors. For instance, Benchmark Capital invested US\$12 million during Uber's Series A round in 2011, and by the time of Uber's IPO in 2019, their stake was valued at approximately US\$7.9 billion. This represents a return of about 657 times their initial investment (O'Connell, 2020).

Even my role as CEO changed, and there are people who can't adapt. So it looks great on paper, but [VC money] isn't for everyone. Some people manage to grow the business, and it's not that they're better or worse, but they have the resilience and understanding of the process (Ricardo, 42-year-old, CEO of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

From Ricardo's statement, we might conclude that when a startup receives "VC money", it is not merely exchanging equity for capital but also surrendering its managerial autonomy and reinforcing the expectation that workers and entrepreneurs demonstrate flexibility, acceptance of change, and resilience to achieve the expected growth rates at a rapid time. With venture capitalists focused on growth, expansion, spreadsheets, and quarterly meetings, they possess significant power to influence managerial decisions. However, they are often indifferent to the nuances of daily growth, "unaware" that growth can manifest as a high-pressure work environment, with employees exerting accumulated functions and working extended hours, under the looming threat of company failure or mass layoffs.

Therefore, when considering startups, it is essential to recognize that they embody a distinct approach to operations and development, heavily influenced by their unique funding mechanisms. This model prioritizes rapid growth and expansion over immediate profitability, driven by the speculative anticipation that shareholder value will increase over time. Consequently, startups are perceived as innovative and future-oriented not merely because they employ cutting-edge technologies, but because they leverage financial capital to accelerate future advancements into the present. This dynamic reflects a broader capitalist framework where speculative investment drives economic activity, often at the expense of stable, equitable development. The relentless pursuit of growth under this model underscores the contradictions inherent in capitalist economies, where the potential for long-term societal benefits and the well-being of employees is frequently overshadowed by the immediate demands of capital accumulation and market speculation.

4.4 STARTUP ECOSYSTEMS

At the beginning of this chapter, it was stated that to comprehend the well-being conditions of startup workers, it is essential to understand the nature of startups and how they operate. So far, we have seen that startups can be more than just tech companies, that they endorse a specific "*mindset*" and a specific "*way of*

doing things”, that they evolve through different stages and that most startups rely on Venture Capital to grow their businesses and achieve significant expansion. Nevertheless, “if we want to understand why organizations do the things they do, we must first understand the environments in which they operate” (Shestakofsky, 2024, p. 32).

As Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg (1977) emphasize, no organization operates in isolation; rather, it must establish relations with its environment, which can serve as both a source of instability and a zone of uncertainty that must be navigated. Startups, in particular, are inherently fragile businesses whose core objective is to develop disruptive products—often innovations that exist within legal and regulatory gray areas. Given this inherent instability, it is unsurprising that startups tend to cluster in innovation hubs, where they can leverage collective resources, regulatory flexibility, and strategic networks. As startup advocate Matos (2017) argues, a defining feature of startups is their deep entanglement with their environment—their ecosystem—which plays a crucial role in their development and survival. In this subsection, we will examine how startups organize themselves into ecosystems or innovation hubs, analyzing their strategic interactions and the broader structural dynamics that shape these formations.

As for the emic definition of “*startup ecosystems*”, also known as “*innovation ecosystems*”, “*startupper*s” frequently apply concepts from the natural sciences to elucidate their communities. The term “ecosystem” implies the pursuit of internal balance to sustain a “natural” and ongoing evolution in the capitalist development of the sector. According to José Fiates, Director of *Innovation and Competitiveness of the Federation of Industries of the State of Santa Catarina* (FIESC), innovation ecosystems should “create the conditions for the birth, growth and permanent evolution of the company” (2021, p.76).⁶⁶ A “*well-balanced and competitive*” environment must maintain the characteristics of “*resilience*”, “*adaptability*”, and “*evolution*”. Therefore, an innovation ecosystem is advisable to encompass a network comprising entrepreneurs, mentors, investors, knowledge workers as well as universities, incubators, accelerators, coworking spaces, a “*friendly*” regulatory environment, and public and private equity funds. All aligned under an

⁶⁶ Translated freely from the original text: criar condições para o nascimento, o crescimento e a evolução permanente da empresa (Fiates, 2021, p.76).

“*entrepreneurial mindset*” geared towards supporting emerging companies in the market.⁶⁷

In general, innovation ecosystems are presented as open, horizontal and friendly environments (Alexandre, 2023) that welcome new entrepreneurs and foster the creation of hubs for new companies.⁶⁸ These hubs, in turn, attract new talents, including skilled employees, and stimulate further innovation. The supposedly collaborative nature of these ecosystems encourages knowledge sharing and “*networking*”, which are crucial for the growth and sustainability of startups. Additionally, such environments often provide access to essential resources, including funding, mentorship, and business development services, thereby enhancing the overall success rate of new ventures (Feld, 2012). This “*synergy*” is often presented as something that not only benefits individual startups but also contributes to the economic development and technological advancement of the broader community.

Being part of an innovation ecosystem means that entrepreneurs should actively participate in startup “*meetups*”,⁶⁹ conferences, and associations. By doing so, they gain access to valuable resources that can help them succeed in a highly competitive environment (Matos, 2017), while also learning from the successes and failures of others. The underlying idea is that as startups and ecosystems evolve, experienced entrepreneurs who have benefited from the ecosystem's support will eventually “*give back*” to the community. According to “*startupper*”, this creates a “*virtuous circle*” of economic development and continuous growth.

Despite being inherently linked to biological, natural, and ostensibly spontaneous ecosystems, startup hubs do not arise organically; instead, they depend on pivotal figures known as “*Community Leaders*”. Generally, these individuals undertake several critical roles such as: a) Networking and Relationship Building: They connect various stakeholders, establish partnerships among private,

⁶⁷ The perspective of many entrepreneurs and investors on startup ecosystems is predominantly Spencerian, leading to the belief in a form of social Darwinism where only those who can adapt and grow more quickly and aggressively are able to survive (Drouard, 2015).

⁶⁸ Despite the rhetoric of openness and horizontality, the majority of startup ecosystems are predominantly composed of people who are similar to each other: mostly white, from middle and upper classes, and male (Shestakofsky, 2024). Although the landscape has been changing in recent years through policies promoting female entrepreneurship, for example, it is still quite common for political and social connections to dictate who can or cannot be part of innovation and entrepreneurship centers.

⁶⁹ A startup meetup is supposed to be an informal, often recurring event where entrepreneurs, tech professionals, investors, and startup influencers gather to network, share knowledge, and discuss industry trends.

governmental, and educational institutions, and organize events to foster community cohesion; b) Advocacy and Representation: Serving as the community's voice, they advocate for policies that bolster innovation and entrepreneurship at the governmental level; c) Resource Provision: They offer young entrepreneurs access to essential resources, such as coworking spaces, legal advice, and funding opportunities; d) Community Monitoring: They track the growth and development of the startup community, including metrics like the number of startups, funding raised, and job creation (Leipnitz; Lossio, 2021).

Additionally, “*Community Leaders*” strive to align startup ecosystems with macro trends that emerge in Silicon Valley, such as internationalization, diversity of the workforce, and the well-being of founders and employees. Thus, the formation of diverse startup ecosystems is driven by the concerted efforts of these strategic actors. By analyzing these roles and their impacts, it becomes evident that the development of startup ecosystems is a highly orchestrated process, reliant on the active engagement and strategic vision of “*Community Leaders*” that frequently draw inspiration from Silicon Valley’s culture to cultivate new business environments.

According to Startup Genome, as well as other “*startupper*s” across the globe, Silicon Valley is considered the foremost and primary innovation ecosystem in the world.⁷⁰ Situated as the headquarters for some of the most prominent technology companies (Apple, Google, Meta, X etc.), the region not only harbors a substantial number of startups but also attracts the highest volume of venture capital investment funds, entrepreneurs, top talented software developers, salespeople, marketing experts and so on.⁷¹ Entrepreneurs from various parts of the world frequently migrate to or visit Silicon Valley to immerse themselves in its “*entrepreneurial culture*”,⁷² to seek capital funds, and “*to learn from the best*” in order to replicate the Silicon Valley model in their home country. Matos (2017) states that upon his initial visit to Silicon Valley in 2011, he was “dazzled by the culture of Silicon Valley, the way they collaborate, the willingness to listen and help, without expecting anything in return,

⁷⁰ For the story of Silicon Valley see the ethnographies of Abélès (2002), Lécuyer (2007), English-Lueck (2017), Flécher (2021), Alexandre (2023).

⁷¹ In Wendy Liu's “Abolish Silicon Valley” (2020) and Anna Wiener's “Uncanny Valley: a memoir” (2020), we can glimpse how Silicon Valley is also a point of desire and attraction for those who dream of working in the region's biggest companies.

⁷² Even I, during my brief stint as an entrepreneur back in 2013, found myself exploring Silicon Valley with fellow Brazilian entrepreneurs. Our “mission” was to “unravel the secrets” of Silicon Valley and transpose them into the burgeoning startup culture of the early 2010s in Florianópolis.

but at the same time, knowing that these connections always come back” (p. 19).⁷³ This experience inspired him to create a similar environment in Brazil, which he did through a series of initiatives and pre-acceleration programs such as *Startup Farm* and *Start-Up Brasil*.⁷⁴

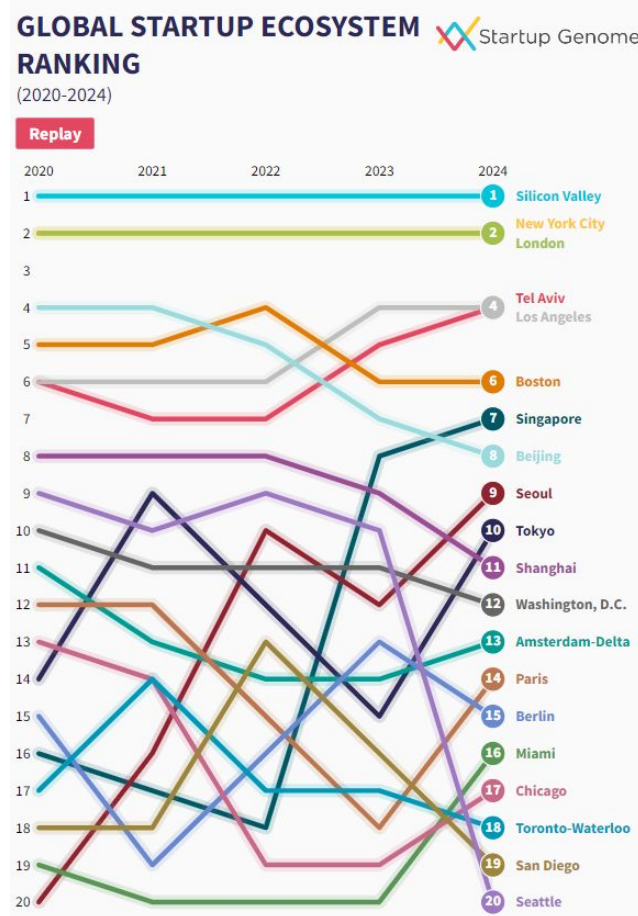
Indeed, through the *Global Startup Ecosystem Report* (2024) facilitated by the Startup Genome Company, we can observe the widespread presence of innovation ecosystems globally. According to their database, there are presently 4.5 million startups across 300 global ecosystems in over 55 countries. Despite the difficulties in gathering this data, organizations like Startup Genome are continuously seeking to map existing ecosystems and rank them according to performance (number of “exits” per year and successful companies) and the volume of investments made. Annually, the top 40 global ecosystems are identified and assessed. As might be expected, Silicon Valley has been at the top of these rankings for years, along with other financial capitals of the world.⁷⁵

⁷³ Translated freely from the original text: deslumbrado com a cultura do Vale do Silício, com a forma de colaboração que eles tinham, com a disponibilidade em ouvir e ajudar, sem esperar nada em troca, mas ao mesmo tempo, sabendo que essas conexões sempre voltam (Matos, 2017, p. 19).

⁷⁴ *Start-Up Brasil* was a Brazilian government-led accelerator program launched in 2013 to foster innovation and support tech startups. Selected startups received grants and access to private accelerators. The program was discontinued in 2018 due to budget cuts and shifted priorities under the new administration.

⁷⁵ The Startup Genome ranking is developed through a multi-method research, including over 100 interviews with startup entrepreneurs and an extensive analysis of global datasets related to funding, exits, and the geographical distribution of startups and investors. According to their website, the overall global ecosystem ranking is calculated as a weighted average based on several key factors. Performance accounts for 30% of the score, reflecting the success and growth of startups in each ecosystem. Funding, which constitutes 25%, evaluates the availability and quality of financial resources. Market Reach, at 15%, assesses the global influence of the startups, while Connectedness, representing 5%, measures the level of network integration within the ecosystem. Experience & Talent, accounting for 20%, gauges the quality of the workforce and leadership, and finally, Knowledge, which makes up 5%, reflects the innovation and research capabilities present within the ecosystem. For more details, see: <https://startupgenome.com/article/methodology-2022> Retrieved on: 22 Oct. 2024.

Figure 3 – Global Startup Ecosystem Ranking (2020-2024)



Source: Startup Genome's website.

What is intriguing about startups and innovation ecosystems is that, despite their emphasis on innovation, they are often structured to serve as models for replicable innovation centers. As observed by Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (*apud* Shestakofsky, 2024), “firms in unsettled fields model themselves on organizations and organizational forms that are widely recognized as successful” (2024, p. 50). Thus, it is no wonder that “*Community Leaders*” from diverse ecosystems utilize an arsenal of books and methodologies designed to help them emulate the successful “*innovation formulas*” of larger innovation centers. Examples include the *Techstars Startup Weekend*⁷⁶ event and books such as *Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle* (Dan Senor; Saul Singer, 2011), *Startup Communities: Building an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Your City* (Feld, 2012), and

⁷⁶ *Startup Weekend* is a three-day program where aspiring entrepreneurs come together to build a minimum viable product and pitch their ideas to potential early-stage investors. Promoted by the startup accelerator *Techstars*, this event has been held in more than 150 countries, engaging over 428,000 participants. Available at: <https://www.techstars.com/communities/startup-weekend> Retrieved on: 22 July 2024.

Ponte para Inovação: Como Criar um Ecossistema Empreendedor (Leipnitz; Lóssio, 2021).⁷⁷

Additionally, the methodologies currently employed in innovation ecosystems are designed not only to inspire entrepreneurship globally, but also to prescribe specific formulas for startup growth.⁷⁸ These methodologies perpetuate a particular vision of success: a robust, rapidly expanding company or environment capable of generating substantial ROI for its stakeholders. Consequently, it shapes the expectations and strategies of entrepreneurs and investors alike, guiding them towards models that prioritize swift scalability and financial performance. This prescriptive framework underscores liberal and meritocratic goals that drive contemporary innovation ecosystems, reinforcing a uniform definition of entrepreneurial success.

By analyzing these ecosystems, we can better understand how startups organize themselves into networks, or *global assemblages* (Ong; Collier, 2005), of entrepreneurs and tech companies that promote an “*entrepreneurial mindset*” along with an eagerness to replicate similar organizational models and work practices across different parts of the world. Nevertheless, considering startup ecosystems as *global assemblages* does not imply viewing them as part of a deterritorialized world (Appadurai, 1996). Instead, it involves recognizing a globalized system interconnected by relationships based on transnational capital, which are facilitated and accelerated by technological means.

Also, while ecosystems are often portrayed as fostering entrepreneurship and innovation by supporting the creation of new local companies, they also reflect a broader network of relationships, particularly between established tech giants like GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft) and emerging tech startups. Unlike the more hierarchical networks of subcontractors and principals found in industries like automotive or aeronautical manufacturing, where exploitation, competition, cooperation, and the circulation of employees are more rigidly structured, tech ecosystems operate with a more fluid and interconnected dynamic. However, despite this fluidity, these ecosystems reveal underlying dependencies and power imbalances.

⁷⁷ Bridge to Innovation: How to Create an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem.

⁷⁸ One notable example is *Predictable Revenue* (Ross; Tyler, 2011), a sales strategy-focused methodology that promises to help startups grow by 300% annually. This methodology became particularly popular among Brazilian entrepreneurs during the mid-2010s.

For example, having a branch of a GAFAM company within a local ecosystem is often perceived as a marker of development and prestige, from the point of view of startup advocates. Yet, this presence tends to reinforce existing global power structures. GAFAM companies typically relocate less appealing jobs to emerging economies, thus influencing the international division of labor by concentrating lower-wage, less prestigious positions in regions like Brazil. Furthermore, many local startups become dependent on the data services provided by these tech giants, creating a form of technical and economic dependence, as these services are predominantly controlled by companies headquartered in the United States. This dynamic mirrors the subcontractor-principal relationship, where smaller firms are both dependent on and at risk of exploitation by larger, more powerful entities, despite the rhetoric of collaboration and innovation that ecosystems are meant to inspire.

Taking this into account, we can understand how examining the organizational dynamics of startup ecosystems lays the groundwork for analyzing local ecosystems, specifically that of Florianópolis. While acknowledging that each ecosystem possesses unique characteristics influenced by culture, country, and city, they all progress in the same direction, with some advancing more rapidly than others based on the speed at which they adopt and integrate the vectors of the “*startup mindset*.” Ultimately, all ecosystems are driven by the concept of *value in motion* (Marx, 2023), striving towards the universalizing force of capital. This convergence towards common practices and goals underscores the pervasive influence of global capital flows and the shared aspirations of startups worldwide.

Therefore, when discussing the Florianópolis ecosystem at a local level, it is crucial to recognize that it is not an isolated or self-contained innovation hub. On the contrary, this ecosystem is part of a broader, interconnected network, both nationally and globally, shaped by a shared and ideological “*mindset*”. The ideas of what constitutes a startup, how these companies grow and are financed, and what defines success in the entrepreneurial world are not purely local. Instead, they reflect a set of values that contribute to a global social imaginary, with Silicon Valley’s culture serving as the ideal model to emulate.

4.5 THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY OF STARTUPS

Given the influence of Silicon Valley culture on startup mentality, it is essential to examine the social imaginary surrounding startups to gain insight into the values it espouses. Since social imaginaries and systems of power are “transformed each time into real social relations, into words, gestures, institutions, rituals, monuments and works of art” that “engender quite simply the framework of people’s daily life in society” (Godelier, 2020, p. 98), we must examine the social imaginary of startups if we want to understand the effects it has upon the individuals that are part of this symbolic world.

Considering that startups are often depicted as dynamic, forward-thinking entities that value creativity and disruption, the social imaginary surrounding them encompasses the allure of innovation, the promise of personal and professional growth, and the romanticization of entrepreneurship. Overall, promises of “*meaningful work*” intertwined with the appealing aspects of startup culture, such as “*innovation, flexibility, autonomy, rapid career growth*”, and “*success*” seemed to have captivated a generation of young individuals, primarily from the middle class, who were entering the job market for the first time during the 2010s.

For early entrepreneurs, innovation meant “*breaking the rules*”⁷⁹ and “*building things from scratch*”. They were convinced they were creating products that would “*change the world*”⁸⁰ and make them extremely wealthy. As a result, working long hours was seen as a worthwhile sacrifice to “*make things happen*.” Tech entrepreneurship seemed to offer the perfect solution to many capitalist problems. The days of alienated work appeared numbered as a young generation of entrepreneurs took charge of their lives to build “*meaningful*”⁸¹ and *lucrative* products capable of disrupting entire industries and “*making customers happy*.”

As pointed by Wendy Liu, tech entrepreneur stories are often portrayed as the “age-old story of the underdog”:

⁷⁹ “Rule 1: All rules can be broken.” Quote from the Silicon Valley venture capitalist Marc Andreessen. Available at: <https://www.zephram.de/blog/startups/quotes-about-startups/> Retrieved on: 09 July 2024.

⁸⁰ “Startups are painful, stressful and at times demoralizing. You need to be a true believer in the vision of what you are doing. You need to be passionate about it and love what you’re doing. If you don’t, there is no way you can sustain the hours, stress and disappointment. There’s no way you’re going to be able to convince investors, customers and most importantly recruit a world-class team if you’re not building something you think is going to change the world.” Quote from the Silicon Valley entrepreneur Steve Blank. Available at: <https://www.zephram.de/blog/startups/quotes-about-startups/> Retrieved on: 09 July 2024.

⁸¹ “The best reason to start an organization is to make meaning; to create a product or service to make the world a better place.” Quote from the Silicon Valley venture capitalist Guy Kawasaki. Available at: <https://www.zephram.de/blog/startups/quotes-about-startups/> Retrieved on: 09 July 2024.

They start out with nothing, but persist despite the odds, studying and hustling and innovating until they achieve success under the system as they understand it. [...] In their head, they're still the underdog. They are the protagonist of the story, being the good guy, making the world a better place—deserving their success (2020, p. 172).

What she is depicting as the “story of the underdog” is, indeed, how tech entrepreneurs absorb and promote the liberal and meritocratic values of the *Californian ideology*. Which, according to Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, comes from “a loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists, and artists from the West Coast of the USA” that merges “the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley” (1996, p. 1). The fusion of the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies from the 1960s and the USA's New Left ideals with the disciplines of market economics and the USA's New Right framework, supported by technological determinism, allowed the Californian myth—through a *progressive neoliberalism* approach (Fraser, 2020)—to emerge during the past few decades. Therefore, while Californian tech entrepreneurs seek individual self-fulfillment through therapy and spiritualism, they also rely on “free market” dogmas, market competition, and the promise that new information technologies will lead humankind to progress and freedom.

Additionally, from the perspective of individual liberties, many technology companies have lately fostered an increasingly progressive character within their workforce, aligning themselves with the liberal currents of new social movements (feminist, ecological, LGBTQ+, among others).⁸² However, as Fraser (2020) aptly points out, *progressive neoliberalism* encompasses both economic structures and class divisions (distribution) and moral markers of belonging (recognition). In this framework,

there is no abolition of hierarchies, but rather a ‘diversification’ through the ‘inclusion’ of individuals from underrepresented groups—such as ‘empowered’ women, Black individuals, and LGBTQ+ people. In a neoliberal project à la Milton Friedman, repackaged as progressive through the ethos

⁸² With regard to the progressive agenda within the tech industry, its trajectory in the coming years remains uncertain. In 2025, figures such as Mark Zuckerberg announced the discontinuation of diversity and inclusion programs within their companies, even arguing for the need to “restore masculine energy” in the workforce (Allen, 2025). Given that Silicon Valley has historically been built on traditionally masculine ideals—where competition, dominance, and aggressive expansion have been heralded as the foundations of success—it remains to be seen whether tech companies are undergoing a new transformation or merely revealing their true nature. This will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Five.

of recognition, social equality is transformed into meritocracy (Rodrigues, 2021, p. 53).⁸³

However, the diversity within technology companies generally tends to be confined to the workforce. In the entrepreneurial realm, entrepreneurs remain predominantly male and white (Abstartups, 2024), often depicted as contemporary “*heroes*” of our world—solitary figures who “*fought against the system*” to create a better future. Movies such as *The Social Network* (2010) or *Jobs* (2013)—which share the stories of Mark Zuckerberg and the creation of Facebook; or Steve Jobs and the creation of Apple—reinforce such imaginary. However, most of the time, these entrepreneurs are far from being the underdog, as they actually represent an elite of global entrepreneurship.

Whether in Silicon Valley or Brazil, most startup entrepreneurs tend to be “from upper-middle-class homes, with higher education in business schools [or software engineering], and work experience in areas related to management, innovation, and communication, with extensive international exposure” (Faria, 2020, p. 557).⁸⁴ Under the guise of a lack of motivation to work in corporate environments (that is, environments of companies considered traditional, hierarchical, and bureaucratic), young people with access to influential networks “see entrepreneurship and startup companies as ideal places to maintain their position in the world and reproduce a self-image that amalgamates naturalized notions of class, merit, and expertise” (idem, p. 566).⁸⁵

Nevertheless, the social imaginary surrounding technology companies attracts not only entrepreneurs but parts of the workforce as well. Soon enough, Silicon Valley tales of college dropouts becoming successful entrepreneurs were followed by stories of Brazilian startups that allowed employees to work in slippers, play pool during working hours, and enjoy a beer at the end of the day. Through tech companies, the labor market seemed to finally abandon the rigid Fordist image of

⁸³ Translated freely from the original text: não há abolição das hierarquias, mas ‘diversificação’ por meio do ‘acolhimento’ de indivíduos de grupos sub-representados - como mulheres ‘empoderadas’, pessoas negras e LGBTQ+. Em um projeto neoliberal à la Milton Friedman, reembalado de progressista através do ethos do reconhecimento, a igualdade social é transformada em meritocracia (Rodrigues, 2021, p. 53).

⁸⁴ Translated freely from the original text: provenientes de lares de camadas médias altas, com formação superior em escolas de negócios [ou de engenharia de software] e experiência de trabalho em áreas ligadas à gestão, inovação e comunicação e largo trânsito internacional (Faria, 2020, p. 557).

⁸⁵ Translated freely from the original text: enxergam no empreendedorismo e em empresas startup os locais ideais para manter seu lugar no mundo e reproduzir uma autoimagem que aglutina noções naturalizadas de classe, mérito e expertise (Faria, 2020, p. 566).

well-defined boundaries between work and leisure (Zanon, 2019). The “*work hard, play hard*” mentality was as pervasive as the “*do what you love*” mantra.

For early-age startup workers, working in a startup was more than a job—it was the possibility for self-actualization, personal development, purpose, and meaning, all while having fun. Long hours, job insecurity, and a high-stakes environment were not concerns for 24-year-old employees during the 2010s, as we can see below:

[Back in 2016] everything was very new, and we were very young. I was 24 years old. So it felt like being in college. We'd finish work, play pool, then go to the bar, get drunk, and that was on a Monday. The next morning, everyone would be hungover, even my boss, you know? We were all very young (Nathi, 32 years old, Senior Marketing Analyst of a late-stage startup, 2022).

In the beginning [2017], it was paradise, it was a party. [...] I quickly made friends with everyone, and every day we had a snooker break at 4 p.m. I'd go down to have my coffee and play another game of pool [laughs]. In the evening, we'd have a party. I worked a lot too—there was always this culture of working hard. It was a time when we worked our asses off, but it wasn't so heavy, you know? The company wasn't heavy. It was exhausting, sometimes tiring, but it wasn't a heavy, energy-sapping kind of tiring. It was all connected. It made sense (Fernanda, 30 years old, Product Manager, unemployed, 2022).

Supposedly, startup companies “value collaboration, creativity, team spirit, autonomy, and the freedom of workers” (Flécher, 2021, p. 10).⁸⁶ Among the organizational enchantment strategies of startups, the following seemed to emerge: a) Fresh relaxed and non-hierarchical work environments, where employees could work in jeans and sneakers and even share a beer with their boss; and b) Novel flexible working arrangements, including remote work and autonomy in decision-making up to a point that everything “*felt connected*”.

These elements have been, and continue to be, essential in shaping the imaginary of what it means to work in a startup. They also instill in young employees a sense of importance and urgency in “*doing what you love*”. As Breilla Zanon (2019) observed, by “*doing what you love*”, individuals do not perceive themselves as “merely” working, but dedicating themselves to something directly tied to their happiness, thus becoming the “owners” and protagonists of their work. The “*do what you love*” discourse promoted by startup companies thus evokes both the pursuit of individual freedom and satisfaction; and the promise that new work environments and

⁸⁶ Translated freely from the original text: valoriserait la collaboration, la créativité, l'esprit d'équipe, l'autonomie et la liberté des travailleur·ses (Flécher, 2021, p. 10).

fresh organizational models will help employees to achieve personal fulfillment. This narrative suggests that within startup innovative spaces, employees will find not only professional success but also profound “*personal meaning*” and satisfaction.

However, the idea of “*doing what you love*” does not, in fact, originate from Silicon Valley or is unique to startups. As Marc Lorient and Nathalie Leroux (2015) point out, the notion of *passion at work* has been employed in various fields over time, particularly among artists and athletes, where passion was traditionally synonymous with dedication and talent. However, in recent decades, this concept has been increasingly adopted by managers and workers alike, giving rise to the notion of *passionate work* or *travail passionné*. In this context, passion for work often signifies a deep investment, total engagement, or a powerful source of motivation and pleasure. The authors also note that this passion can manifest itself in two ways: either for the act of working itself or for the object of the work:

It is important to differentiate between a passion for work as a value and a passion for one's work itself. The former signifies a general love for work, regardless of its specific nature, whereas the latter refers to a fervor for the particular task or role one performs at work (for instance, a nurse may feel a passion for caring for patients, while a police officer may feel a passion for apprehending criminals). Management often encourages employees to cultivate a passion for their work, regardless of its specific content (Lorient and Leroux, 2015, p. 23-24).⁸⁷

As we can see above, in the case of managerial passion, the focus frequently shifts away from the object and toward the act of working itself. This raises important questions about whether passion for work is being strategically used to extract more surplus value from workers. Yet is it solely a tool of capitalist exploitation?

The answer may lie in the broader social context. With the weakening of traditional collectives—such as associations, unions, and even family structures—particularly in the wake of neoliberalism, work has increasingly become one of the few remaining spheres for personal and collective engagement. As Carolyn Chen (2022) argues in her study of Silicon Valley, work is gradually taking on the role that religious institutions once played, filling a void left by the decline of other forms of social cohesion. In this sense, passion for work is not merely a tool of exploitation,

⁸⁷ Translated freely from the original text: Il faudrait alors distinguer entre la passion du travail comme valeur et la passion au travail, la première traduisant un amour pour le travail en général quel qu'il soit et la seconde pour l'objet particulier de son travail (par exemple, la réalisation d'une oeuvre reconnue, la prise en charge de malades pour l'infirmière ou l'arrestation de délinquants violents pour le policier). Le management voudrait des salariés passionnés par le travail, quel que soit son contenu (Lorient and Leroux, 2015, p. 23-24).

but also a reflection of how central work has become in shaping personal identity and meaning in contemporary society since, for many workers, there are few other avenues for fulfillment.⁸⁸

Simultaneously, from a managerial perspective, this emotional investment represents an “opportunity” to further integrate workers into the labor process. By appealing to their emotions and passions, managers can deepen workers' engagement, not only increasing productivity but also blurring the lines between personal fulfillment and labor, reinforcing work as the primary site of identity formation and meaning-making in modern life.

However, as Daniele Linhart (2023), Marie-Anne Dujarier (2018), Lorient and Leroux (2015), and Christophe Dejours (2000) argue, the weakening of social collectives and the growing influence of work on workers' subjectivity can lead to boundaryless labor, ultimately resulting in exhaustion, stress, and burnout. In this context, passion for work often acts as a mask, concealing the suffering it causes. Thus, while it may seem paradoxical, it is not surprising that in work environments where people are encouraged to “*do what they love*”, burnout is so prevalent.

Since 2020, numerous reports of burnout among entrepreneurs, software developers, and other startup workers have surfaced across various ecosystems, scratching the social imaginary of startups as “*cool and relaxed*” working environments. This thesis specifically addresses the breakdown of this imaginary and its contradictory effects. Throughout this work, we will see that it is precisely because individuals are compelled to “*love what they do*” and invest a deep desire for personal fulfillment in a high-pressure work environment fraught with uncertainties that some of the interlocutors interviewed in this study are experiencing panic attacks and burnout.

4.6 THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STARTUP ECOSYSTEMS

Before we continue our analysis, it is essential to examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on startups and startup ecosystems worldwide. Initially, startup

⁸⁸ Not surprisingly, as it is detailed in Part Three of this thesis, many startup workers often turn to hobbies and lifestyle sports in their quest for alternative sources of meaning. These activities—whether surfing, yoga, climbing, or cycling—serve as attempts to reclaim a sense of purpose and identity outside the demands of their professional lives. In a work environment where personal fulfillment is increasingly tied to labor, these pursuits represent an effort to regain balance and find meaning beyond the boundaries of their startup roles.

employees, like many other non-essential workers, were transitioned to remote work. However, unlike many other employees, most startup workers never returned to the office, instead adopting remote work as the new norm of the Brazilian tech sector.

As *knowledge workers* (Huws, 2009) accustomed to tech-friendly environments that primarily require a computer and a stable internet connection, many startup employees had prior experience with occasional remote work.⁸⁹ Therefore, the initial challenges were more related to the social isolation imposed by the pandemic rather than the practical aspects of working from home. Most startup workers were already proficient with online meetings and digital tools; thus, the main difficulties laid in finding a suitable space within their homes to set up a home office and maintaining a balance between work and leisure time.

Indeed, as is elaborated in Parts Two and Three of this thesis, the pandemic has significantly impacted the mental health and well-being of startup workers, among others. However, it is not the sole factor contributing to burnout among technology professionals. As discussed subsequently, burnout incidents had already been occurring unnoticed and persistently, and the pandemic has merely served to exacerbate their prevalence and bring them into public discourse.

Research conducted by global technology companies to assess the impact of COVID-19 on software developers began to emerge in the early 2020s. These studies reported that 83% of US software developers experienced burnout due to factors such as excessive workloads, inefficient management processes, and unclear goals (Ali, 2021). Additionally, 70% of Brazilians reported that companies were ill-equipped to address mental health issues (Digital; Lam, 2022). The concept of burnout swiftly gained prominence, along with the notion that therapy was essential for managing emotions and avoiding potential episodes of stress and burnout at work.

Nevertheless, beyond the escalation of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms, studies have also noted a rise in productivity and the number of hours worked per week among tech workers (Oracle, 2020). Despite the worldwide tumult, the global technology sector embraced remote work and celebrated an apparent subsequent increase in productivity rates during the first year of the pandemic. While many other industries were economically suffering,⁹⁰ the tech sector “*thrived*” in the

⁸⁹ This is explored in greater detail in Chapter Four.

⁹⁰ In fact, “from a factual standpoint, the average growth rate of the global economy decreased from 3.8% in 2017 to 3.6% in 2018, and further to 2.9% in 2019. Therefore, even before the global

first two years of the pandemic. GAFAM companies saw significant revenue growth and substantial increases in stock prices due to increased digital adoption and augmented company valuations. For instance, Amazon's revenue grew by 38% in 2020 (Weise, 2021), and Apple's stock price more than doubled from March 2020 to December 2021 (Martins, 2021).

Moreover, it was widely reported that “the global pandemic g[ave] Silicon Valley titans a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to expand their power, crush rivals, and change their political fortunes” (Dwoskin, 2020). In terms of funding, venture capital investments peaked in 2021, particularly in sectors like health tech, fintech, and remote work technologies. The year 2021 was notably acknowledged as a period witnessing the highest volume of investments in startups (Reuters, 2022). As Grabow (2022) noted, “Silicon Valley recorded more VC activity [in 2021] than we saw in all of 2000, which was the height of the dot-com era. In addition, [it] nearly doubled what it raised in 2020, breaking the US\$100 billion barrier for the first time.”

Brazil's tech sector was not left behind. Although on a smaller scale compared to Silicon Valley, it experienced a notable surge in startups, particularly in fintech, e-commerce, and health tech. The country emerged as the leading tech hub in Latin America, with venture capital investments in Brazilian startups reaching unprecedented levels. For instance, in 2021, the venture capital market in Brazil totaled US\$2 billion, representing half of the entire turnover in Latin America (Exame, 2022). Moreover, during this period, ten tech companies achieved *unicorn* status in Brazil (Fonseca, 2021), reinforcing the notion that technology-oriented companies stood to gain from the global crisis by actively contributing to the increased digitization of the economy (Bússola, 2021).

Despite reports of burnout and high stress among tech workers, the technology sector experienced significant expansion during the initial two years of the pandemic. This expansion was predicated on a reliance on digitization and automation of a series of work processes. However, the venture capital resurgence of 2021 proved short-lived. Following the peak in 2021, global venture capital

pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020, the world capitalist economy was already on a trajectory of crisis” (Carcanholo, 2021, p. 121). Consequently, the initial growth of technology companies in 2020 and 2021 can be seen as a result of yet another speculative bubble. Translated freely from the original text: “de um ponto de vista factual, a taxa média de crescimento da economia mundial passa de 3,8% em 2017 para 3,6% em 2018, e atinge 2,9% em 2019. Portanto, mesmo antes da mundialização pandêmica da COVID-19, no ano de 2020, a economia mundial capitalista já vinha em uma trajetória de crise” (Carcanholo, 2021, p. 121).

investments plummeted from US\$531.4 billion in 2022 to US\$344 billion in 2023, marking the lowest level since 2019 (Moore, 2024). In Latin America alone, startup investments dropped by 80% in 2023 (Abreu, 2024). Amidst a backdrop of geopolitical, macroeconomic, and other challenges, including conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, rising interest rates by central banks in the Global North, and inflation, Venture Capital has shifted its focus, resulting in a significant decrease in startup investments worldwide.

Considering that most startups rely on Venture Capital to initially expand their operations and only later seek profitability, the shortage of resources compelled startups with bloated teams to cut costs. Since 2022, extensive layoffs have been occurring in both the global and Brazilian startup scenes. Throughout 2022 and 2023, reports of startups reducing their workforce by 15%, 20%, 30%, or even 50% were not uncommon. A 20% reduction in workforce, depending on the company's size, could entail letting go of 50, 100, 300, or 500 employees at once. According to many Brazilian fund investors, these layoffs are attributed to the consequences of unsustainable accelerated growth in startups (Feiler, 2022). An explanation that often felt insufficient to those who had just lost their jobs after only three or six months of employment. Reports on the impact of mass layoffs on workers' mental health have been circulating in newspapers and on social media since 2022. The *Layoffs Brazil* platform was established to document and bring attention to ongoing layoffs, specifically to expose the extensive job cuts executed via Zoom meetings. The platform also aimed to publicize details about the affected workers, hoping to facilitate their swift reemployment.

In dialogue with research interlocutors, I asked the opinion of those knowledgeable about the Venture Capital market about the supposed investment crisis in startups and consequent layoffs. Frequently, they responded that the massive layoffs were not a genuine crisis but merely an “*adjustment*”, a “*return to normalcy*” after the excessive investments made during the pandemic. They implied that the pandemic, an exogenous factor to the capitalist system, had caused disruptions in the technology sector, inadvertently suggesting that this sector was not also subject to the cyclical crises of capital.

Thus, in the startup context, the pandemic emerged as mystifying in two ways: First, startups obscured the underlying capitalist crisis by presenting the pandemic as the cause, when the crisis was already underway (Carcanholo, 2021). Second, they

have also obscured the potential causes of burnout syndrome, implying that this condition among workers was solely due to the pandemic rather than the inherent contradictions of capitalist production modes.

The emergence of burnout syndrome and massive layoffs has gradually tarnished the allure of the startup industry. The “*work hard, play hard*” mantra, which thrived in the post-2008 crisis of the early 2010s, lost its resonance in the pandemic-stricken 2020s. Vibrant office spaces with pool tables and relaxed break times were replaced by isolated home offices, burdened with incessant online meetings. The speculative optimism that once fueled startups (Shestakofsky, 2024) became increasingly unstable as Venture Capital resources dwindled and layoffs surged. Additionally, data breaches and privacy violations involving tech giants like Facebook and Google have gradually eroded public trust, transforming the collective understanding of the technological world. The vision of a hyperconnected world without borders and with free access to information revealed itself to be a fragmented landscape, rife with misinformation and hypervigilance (Zuboff, 2021).

Although the social imaginary of startups promotes the idea that tech companies are “less alienated” workspaces where individuals can follow their true purpose, it is crucial to remember that this notion was constructed in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and before the pandemic crisis of 2020. This research, focusing on the Brazilian tech scenario from 2020 to 2024, highlights a different reality.⁹¹ The period contrasts the initial excitement, promises of meaning and purpose, and extensive growth with the harsh realities of social isolation caused by the pandemic, widespread burnout, and massive layoffs. After all, despite their promises to “*change the world*”, startups face the same contradictions of capitalism as any other industry.

4.7 PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

In this first chapter, we focused on understanding what startups are, how they develop, and how they are financed. We have verified that they are more than

⁹¹ The majority of research carried out on the world of startups portrays the pre-pandemic startup scene, highlighting their glamorous offices and the perceived potential for rapid wealth creation through entrepreneurship (Zanon, 2019; Flécher, 2021; Chapus, 2021; Chen, 2022; Palermo and Ventrici, 2023; Alexandre, 2023; Krepki, 2024; Shestakofsky, 2024). There is still a lack of research on startups that addresses their experiences in a pandemic context, permeated by stress, burnout and massive layoffs.

innovative companies developing scalable products through strong and rapid growth. We have seen that they also embody a “*mindset, a way of doing things*” (Ries, 2017) driven by Venture Capital and its speculative logic (Shestakofsky, 2024). We have observed that startups have high failure rates, traverse different developmental phases, and seek not only to “*change the world*” with their products and services but also to achieve a successful “*exit*”.

Furthermore, we have examined how startups organize themselves through ecosystems, forming a *global assemblage* (Ong; Collier, 2005) of companies aligned under the same liberal, meritocratic, and progressive ideals often perpetuated by Silicon Valley culture. We have also seen that startups contribute to a specific imaginary that presents the labor market in a different light. Through startup work environments, work becomes perceived as more “cool, fun, and relaxed” (Flécher, 2021).

However, we also observed that following the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of transformations have been occurring in this sector. Instances of burnout and mass layoffs seem to have gradually disrupted the enchantment of the startup world, revealing some of its contradictions. It is precisely these contradictions that we delve into throughout this thesis. However, before proceeding, it is necessary to state that this first chapter not only aimed to contextualize the research object but also to establish the foundational framework for our analysis.

Frequently, researchers question whether startups bring genuine innovation to capitalism or merely reinforce its existing structures (Alexandre, 2023). What, then, constitutes the true innovation of startups? Do they fundamentally change the world? As this chapter has demonstrated, the answer is partially affirmative—startups have indeed reshaped aspects of the world of work. Their emphasis on flexibility and agility, enabled by digital technologies and novel organizational models, has contributed to a cultural shift in labor practices. However, these transformations are deeply embedded within a broader ideological project aimed at re-enchanting capitalism (Schipounoff, 2019), infusing work with meanings of purpose, passion, and self-realization (Leroux, 2015). In this sense, startups position themselves as the antithesis of Fordist enterprises (Zanon, 2019).

Yet from a critical perspective, these changes do not represent a radical rupture with the historical evolution of capitalism. Rather, they signify a refinement and intensification of managerial strategies that trace back to earlier paradigms, such

as Toyotism and the model of flexible accumulation. Accordingly, startups are better understood as continuations of processes that began in the 1970s (Harvey, 1992) and intensified in the 1990s (Sennett, 1998).

As this thesis will further explore, startups flourish in *zones of uncertainty* (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977) and within the *gray areas of employment* regulation (Bureau *et al.*, 2019; 2024), both of which are characteristic of neoliberal instability. Their so-called “*new way of doing things*” appears far less unprecedented when examined through the lens of the *lean managerial revolution* (Gaulejac, 2007). Emerging from the Toyota Production System, this approach replaced rigid hierarchies with agile, responsive management models. Like earlier industries that adopted lean practices, startups prioritize employee participation, continuous optimization, and the elimination of inefficiencies. However, as demonstrated by Michael Burawoy (*Manufacturing Consent*, 1979) and Danièle Linhart (*La comédie humaine du travail*, 2015), such managerial innovations often function as instruments of labor control. They enhance productivity while reinforcing discipline, all under the guise of autonomy and empowerment.

Thus, while startups have contributed to the transformation of work culture, their influence does not equate to a foundational reconfiguration of capitalism. Rather than inaugurating a new economic paradigm, they represent a sophisticated iteration of preexisting managerial and ideological frameworks—perpetuating rather than dismantling the capitalist structures from which they emerge.

In this light, the cultural transformations associated with startup work should be interpreted not as revolutionary breaks, but as symptomatic responses to the material conditions of capitalism in the post-2008 period. This era was marked by the global expansion of speculative financial logics, rising unemployment, and intensified austerity measures (Corsi *et al.*, 2021). Within this context, the discourse of entrepreneurship emerged as a strategic response to mounting precarity. The imperative to “create one’s own conditions for survival” (Dardot; Laval, 2013) became central to contemporary work culture, reconfiguring economic vulnerability as an opportunity for self-enterprise and reinvention. This logic was crystallized in the myth of the *entrepreneurial hero*—celebrated not only as an economic agent, but as a symbol of resilience and self-sufficiency in an increasingly uncertain world.

If the 1990s were marked by the emblem of financial success embodied by Wall Street, the post-2008 era ushered in a new symbol of triumph: figures such as

Mark Zuckerberg, who positioned themselves as underdogs challenging a “*broken*” and “*hierarchical*” system—one they claimed needed to be dismantled and rebuilt (Liu, 2020). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the 2010s witnessed the convergence of several key developments: technical innovations such as personal computing, the internet, data storage, and smartphones; a surge in interest from speculative financial capital; the rise of lean management practices; and the consolidation of neoliberal ideological models. Together, these factors catalyzed the global boom of startups.

However, from the early 2010s to the 2020s, the tech industry underwent significant transformations. The initial optimism surrounding technology gradually gave way to increasing skepticism. Former icons of innovation and connectivity became associated with privacy violations and the spread of disinformation (Zuboff, 2021). The once-celebrated mantra of “*work hard, play hard*” came under strain, as growing numbers of tech workers reported experiences of burnout. Still, for many entrepreneurs and employees, startups continue to embody a vision of success and purpose. Yet, for others, this image has begun to unravel.

This thesis examines those emerging nuances from a Brazilian perspective, focusing specifically on the local startup ecosystem of Florianópolis. While the empirical emphasis remains on this locale, it is understood as embedded within a broader transnational network shaped not only by regional cultural values but also by global influences—chief among them, the enduring ideological and organizational legacy of Silicon Valley. This interconnectedness underscores the complex and multilayered dynamics of startup culture, both locally and globally.

5 CHAPTER 2 - BRAZIL, ITS STARTUP ECOSYSTEMS AND FLORIANÓPOLIS

With a foundational understanding of what startups are and how they typically operate and evolve, we will now shift our focus to the Brazilian startup ecosystem, particularly in Florianópolis. Our primary objective is to examine how the general concepts of startups manifest in this specific context. To achieve this, it is essential first to provide an overview of the Brazilian economy and the overall size of the Brazilian ICT sector. This will pave the way for a deeper exploration of technology hubs and their comparatively minor impact on the Brazilian economy, despite startup influencers frequent assertion that startups are the “*economic engine*” of emerging societal structures. Following this, we will delve into the recent history of the Brazilian startup ecosystem, offering detailed insights into the unique characteristics and developments of the Florianópolis startup ecosystem.

5.1 THE BRAZILIAN ICT SECTOR

Since startups are mostly technology-based companies with the capability to operate in various sectors such as education, health, finance etc., can we consider them part of the ICT sector? This is a challenging question to answer precisely, given that the ICT sector itself is quite complex and broad. Nevertheless, since the Brazilian *National Classification of Economic Activities* (CNAE) for most of the companies where the interlocutors of this study worked corresponds to the Information Technology (IT) sector, we will focus on it and conceive Brazilian startups as part of a smaller subsection of the ICT. Thus, in this chapter, we will first familiarize ourselves with the Brazilian ICT market before moving on to the configuration of the national and local startup ecosystem.

In very general terms, the Brazilian economy is distributed among three major productive sectors: the agricultural sector (accounting for 7% of GDP), the industrial sector (responsible for up to 25.5% of GDP), and the services sector (currently responsible for 44% of GDP) (CNI, 2023). At first glance, we might quickly consider that the ICT is part of the services sector. However, according to the *Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics* (IBGE), the ICT

encompasses industrial, commercial, and service activities [... involving] telecommunications, computer activities (hardware and software), as well as maintenance and repair services for office and computer equipment, data and information capture, transmission, and dissemination (Bridi, 2014, p. 281).⁹²

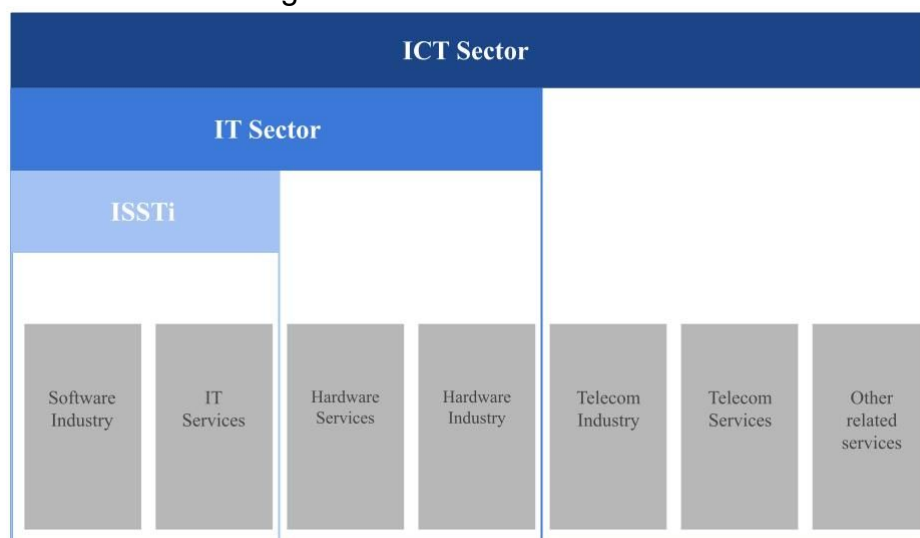
Given the highly distinct subsectors classified under ICT, there is a certain difficulty in standardizing concepts, as well as in measuring the size of the ICT sector in Brazil and its consequent labor market. Precisely for this reason, some of the research found provides relatively different data depending on the methodologies and classifications used. In this study, to understand the size and relevance of the Brazilian ICT sector, we will primarily rely on indicators from institutions such as the *Association of Information and Communication Technology Companies* (Brasscom), the *Brazilian Software Companies Association* (ABES), the *Association for the Promotion of Excellence in Brazilian Software* (Softex), and the *National Bank for Economic and Social Development* (BNDES).

Brasscom evaluates the ICT macrosector as a whole, which encompasses the sum of ICT (technology companies), In-House IT (referring to the hiring of technology professionals by companies from other sectors such as banks, e-commerce etc.), and Telecom (telecommunications operators). The ABES institute, on the other hand, assesses that the ICT market corresponds to the IT sector (Software, Services, and Hardware) and Telecom. Meanwhile, the Softex Observatory considers the ICT sector to consist of the software and services industry (which they term ISSTi), the hardware industry and services, Telecom, and other related services.

In this thesis, we will primarily consider the data provided by Brasscom related to the ICT sector, the data from ABES related to the IT sector, and Softex's data on ISSTi. However, for the sake of standardization, we will adopt the nomenclature of the Softex Observatory (as outlined in the table below), making the appropriate nominal correspondences when presenting the data.

⁹² Translated freely from the original: comporta atividades industriais, comerciais e de serviços [... envolvendo] das telecomunicações às atividades de informática (hardware e software), assim como serviços de manutenção e reparação de equipamentos de escritório e de informática, de captura, transmissão, divulgação de dados e informações (Bridi, 2014, p. 281).

Figure 4 – ICT Sector Definition



Source: elaborated by the author based on the Softex Observatory (2023).

According to Brasscom (2024), the ICT sector produced a sectoral output of US\$ 142.3 billion in 2023, thereby contributing 6.5% to the Brazilian GDP. However, the IT sector alone (Software, Services, Cloud, BPO, Business Consulting, State-owned Enterprises, Hardware, and Exports) produced a sectoral output of US\$ 70.4 billion in 2023, thereby contributing 3.2% to the Brazilian GDP.⁹³ In comparison to the other previously mentioned productive sectors, the Brazilian IT market is relatively small. However, it is on the rise, having registered a growth of 9.5% in 2023, and it holds a prominent position when compared to other Latin American countries, as the Brazilian IT sector represents 30% of the IT market in Latin America.

When we examine the market share of different segments within the ICT sector (i.e. the ISSTi sector), we find that traditional software production accounts for 12% (US\$ 8.8 billion), IT services account for 31% (US\$ 21.5 billion) and companies offering SaaS, IaaS, and PaaS⁹⁴ account for 13% (US\$ 9.3 billion) of the Brazilian ICT market (Brasscom, 2024). Combined, these segments represent only 1.7% of the Brazilian GDP. I highlight these sub-segments specifically because the majority

⁹³ For a comparative overview, according to the International Trade Administration of the United States, “one third of the US\$ 5 trillion global information technology market is in the United States, making it the largest tech market in the world. The industry accounts for US\$ 1.9 trillion of USA value-added GDP (more than 10 percent of the national economy) and 12.1 million jobs [in 2019]”. Available at: <https://www.trade.gov/selectusa-software-and-information-technology-industry> Retrieved on: 08 Aug. 2024.

⁹⁴ According to Google Cloud, “cloud computing has three main cloud service models: IaaS (infrastructure as a service), PaaS (platform as a service), and SaaS (software as a service)”. Available at: <https://cloud.google.com/learn/paas-vs-iaas-vs-saas?hl=en> Retrieved on: 07 Aug. 2024. The overwhelming majority of startups in Santa Catarina are SaaS-type companies.

of startups fall within them. Although these figures are not entirely precise, they give us an approximate economic dimension of the extent to which startups contribute to the Brazilian economy.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that Brazilian exports of software and services are relatively limited, which is indicative of the prevailing emphasis on the production of software for the domestic market (ABES, 2023).⁹⁵ In terms of regional distribution within the domestic IT market, the Southeast region (comprising São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and Espírito Santo) emerges as the dominant region, accounting for 62.63% of IT production. This is followed by the South region (encompassing Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul), which represents 13.82% of IT production. This indicates that the state of Santa Catarina, the location of our study, accounts for just over 3% of the distribution of software and services nationwide.

Despite the modest production of the Brazilian software industry, it maintained relatively steady growth rates throughout the 2010s (Softex 2022). Moreover, since 2018, the ICT macro sector and the Brazilian GDP have been moving in opposite directions. While the Brazilian GDP decreased by -3.9% in 2020, the ICT market experienced a growth of 12.2%, largely due to increased investments in digitalization by companies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in the following year, 2021, the ICT market saw a slight deceleration in its growth rate, increasing by 7%—a level still considered high in economic terms.

5.1.1 The Brazilian ICT labor market

The ICT market data presented above is crucial because it helps us understand the economic dimension of the Brazilian ISSTi sector, beyond the entrepreneurial rhetoric of innovation ecosystems. Additionally, it allows us to better comprehend the labor market encompassing this sector. According to Brasscom (2024), the ICT sector employs more than two million people. Within this, the Software and Services sector, which also includes Cloud workers, employs around 859,954 people.⁹⁶ Although IT professionals account for 28% of ICT sector jobs, this sector also includes administrative and financial professionals (18%), sales and

⁹⁵ Indeed, the ICT market is characterized by a deficit, as it relies on imports from abroad, particularly for the production of hardware (ABES, 2023), revealing a structural dependence on other international technology sectors.

marketing professionals (12%), and human resources (2%), among other technical and general professionals. As for average salaries, those in high-value services and software are 2.5 times higher than the national average salary,⁹⁷ making it the highest among professionals in the ICT market as well.

Brasscom also evaluated the levels of informal labor in the technology sector (2023). As the institute itself states, “although technology is often associated with well-paid and highly skilled jobs, the reality is that there are also workers in this sector who face precarious conditions in various forms” (idem, p. 2).⁹⁸ In Brazil, formal employment is currently governed by the Brazilian Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT). However, in recent years, there has been a growing number of professionals hired as a “corporate entity” (*Pessoa Jurídica, PJ*)—a situation in which a worker establishes a formal company without a physical or operational structure. The continued provision of services as an independent contractor to a single client violates the principles of the CLT and disguises an employment relationship. As Maria Bridi (2014) notes, it is a mistake to think that informal contracts, commonly referred to as *PJ* or *pejotização*, only occur among workers without specialized training; this practice is quite prevalent in the IT sector, even among professionals with experience, higher education, and elevated salaries.

This type of *PJ* contract further complicates the measurement of the Brazilian IT sector, as “independent contractor technology professionals” end up being grouped with the 25.4% of self-employed workers currently in Brazil (PNAD Contínua, 2024). However, the problem runs even deeper. When a professional is no longer governed by the CLT, they forfeit all social security benefits, including contributions to retirement (INSS), their severance fund (FGTS), and the right to paid vacations. Additionally,

⁹⁶ It is worth noting that the current Brazilian population exceeds 203 million (IBGE, 2022), with an economically active population of 108.8 million (IBGE, 2024). In the initial three-month period of 2024, the proportion of employees in the private sector with a formal contract was 73.9%, with one of the highest rates of formal contracts observed in the state of Santa Catarina (87.2%). The proportion of the country's employed population engaged in self-employment, operating under the CNPJ of an Individual Micro-Entrepreneur (MEI), was 25.4%. The informality rate for Brazil was 38.9% of the employed population (PNAD Contínua, 2024).

⁹⁷ Brasscom (2024) provides us with the average salary data. However, as noted by Moreno (2021), the salary of some IT professionals can be ten to fifteen times higher than the Brazilian minimum wage.

⁹⁸ Translated freely from the original text: “Embora a tecnologia seja frequentemente associada a empregos bem remunerados e altamente qualificados, a realidade é que também existem trabalhadores nesse setor que enfrentam precariedade em diferentes formas” (Brasscom, 2023, p. 2).

for salaried workers under the CLT, remuneration is defined through negotiations between unions and companies and is related to the type of company they are employed by. But what about the wide range of self-employed workers who operate as PJ or service providers? How are their salaries and pro labore determined? (Bridi, 2014, p. 286).⁹⁹

The reality of those individuals who work as independent contractors (*pejotização*), is frequently mediated by a direct relationship between individual workers and employers. This dynamic is also present among startup workers, particularly those employed in early-stage companies.¹⁰⁰ Also, considering that most IT workers are not directly linked to trade unions (Moreno, 2021), we can see that the pattern of individual negotiations between workers and employers also repeats itself among those who are employed under the CLT regime.

As analyzed by Angelina Moreno (2021),

[IT] workers identify with the issues raised by the union and acknowledge that the union, as an active body, holds a beneficial power relationship for the labor causes in the sector. However, at the same time, workers do not directly engage with it, resulting in the weakening of more effective collective action (p. 26).¹⁰¹

This lack of direct worker engagement in collective mobilization has created an opening for the entrepreneurial discourse, which is ideologically aligned with neoliberal notions of autonomy, flexibility, freedom, and innovation. This discourse gains even greater momentum within startup ecosystems, where the workforce tends to be younger and employment contracts more precarious. As a result, individualism and the pursuit of entrepreneurial success are often prioritized over collective labor rights, further weakening the potential for organized action.

According to Brasscom (2023), from 2021 to 2023, the average rate of informal employment in companies that make up the ICT market was 16.3%. When conducting the “entry survey”, which measures the percentage of professionals who

⁹⁹ Translated freely from the original text: para os trabalhadores assalariados celetistas, a remuneração é definida pelas negociações entre sindicatos e empresas e tem relação com o tipo de empresa na qual está inserido. Mas e a gama de trabalhadores por conta própria que trabalham na condição de PJ ou como prestadores de serviços? Como são definidas suas remunerações, seus pro labore? (Bridi, 2014, p. 286).

¹⁰⁰ Within the research sample of this thesis, 26% of the interlocutors had a CNPJ-based “employment relationship” with the companies they worked for.

¹⁰¹ Translated freely from the original text: os trabalhadores [de TI] apresentam identificação com as pautas levantadas pelo sindicato e o reconhecimento de que o sindicato enquanto órgão atuante apresenta relação de poder benéfica para as causas trabalhistas do setor, contudo, ao mesmo tempo, os trabalhadores não se vinculam de forma direta, ocasionando no esvaziamento de uma ação coletiva mais efetiva (Moreno, 2021, p. 26).

transitioned from precarious conditions to formal employment, the rate was 17.5% during this same period. Conversely, the “exit survey”, which tracks professionals leaving formal jobs and moving into precarious working conditions, showed a rate of 13.7%. Among these, 4.1% of the professionals who left their jobs moved to CNPJ-based contracts with companies that do not have a headquarters in Brazil. While these figures encompass the entire ICT sector (including Hardware, Software, Services, and Telecom), they particularly reflect trends within the software industry, underscoring the fierce competition between local startups and the global IT market for skilled labor.

A study by Google for Startups (2023) projects that by 2025, Brazil will face a shortfall of 530,000 technology professionals. Moreover, 92% of Brazilian startups report a significant lack of specialized talent in the labor market. The shortage of skilled technology professionals in Brazil, as well as in other Latin American countries, is generally attributed to several factors. These include limited access to computers and the internet during childhood, insufficient teaching of logical and mathematical thinking in schools, and a lack of clear guidance on potential career paths in the tech industry. As proposed by BNDES (Puga; Castro, 2018), this issue could be addressed by better integration between schools and companies, aiming to develop a new workforce that is aligned with the current needs of the IT market.

Furthermore, 73% of respondents in the Google for Startups study indicated that “more attractive opportunities exist internationally, which depletes the national market” (Google for Startups, 2023, p. 21). This suggests that the shortage of skilled labor in Brazil is partly driven by the allure of opportunities in countries like the United States and other parts of Europe, drawing talent away from the domestic market. Additionally, 60% agreed that compensation in the Brazilian market is not competitive when compared to international standards. These “more attractive opportunities” often refer to higher salaries paid in USA Dollars or Euros, coupled with the flexibility of remote work.¹⁰² Notably, for knowledge workers, working for foreign companies does not necessarily entail relocation. According to a study conducted by the *Boston Consulting Group*, 88% of Latin American developers express a desire to work remotely for companies based abroad (Lobo, 2022).

¹⁰² During fieldwork, I interviewed two interlocutors who were living in Florianópolis and were already working for international companies, notably based in California, as well as three others who were preparing to transition to foreign companies.

It is important to recognize that these transformations in the technology and telecommunications sectors occur within the broader context of labor *flexibilization processes* (Harvey, 1992). In the IT sector, in particular, this has led to an unusual combination of factors: the geographical and ideological fragmentation of the workforce, precarious working conditions, and, paradoxically, high remuneration (Rodrigues; Mulinari, 2024). The precarious nature of IT labor, despite its high salaries, can be better understood by drawing parallels with early Fordist production models in the United States. As Antonio Gramsci (1968) observed, during the initial phase of developing new productive sectors under Fordism, high wages were often a *temporary form of compensation*. Similarly, today's cutting-edge technological sectors do not yet face a surplus labor force and thus offer higher pay as a temporary solution to attract skilled workers.

In this sense, the current technology sector can be seen as the frontier of contemporary capitalist development. It remains a rapidly evolving and dynamic field, yet one that still lacks both an excess supply of skilled workers and appropriate labor regulations for these new forms of employment (Rodrigues; Mulinari, 2024). This duality of precarious work conditions masked by high remuneration reflects the broader challenges posed by the sector's global nature and its fast-paced innovation, leaving significant gaps in worker protections and collective bargaining.

5.1.2 Startups as a fraction of the Brazilian ICT market

Based on the above, we can conclude that the Brazilian ICT market is a broad and complex sector that encompasses a range of activities, including telecommunications, software, services, and hardware, making it challenging to standardize and measure its overall size. Startups are therefore only a fraction of this sector. Recently, both the ICT market and the Brazilian startup ecosystem, as we will detail below, have shown notable growth, particularly due to increased digitalization following the COVID-19 pandemic, although they remain relatively small compared to other major sectors of the economy.

Furthermore, the labor market within the ICT sector is significant, employing over two million people. However, it faces challenges such as a shortage of skilled technology professionals, low levels of unionization, and elevated levels of labor precarization. Despite offering remuneration that is 2.5 to 10 times higher than the

national average, these challenges persist. This contradiction can be attributed to the *avant-garde* nature of the current technology sector, which also affects startup ecosystems. Therefore, both the ICT market and the Brazilian startup ecosystem compete nationally and internationally for IT talent but also benefit from labor precarization.

Given that most startup entrepreneurs and tech community leaders in Brazil perceive startups as entities with the potential to “*change the world*,” it was imperative to take into account the broader economic context within which they operate. Specially when, *startup utopias* (Pfeilstetter, 2017), rather than addressing the issue of precarization, often leverage precarious labor conditions to fuel their own growth (Palermo; Ventrici, 2023).

In the following sections, we will examine how the characteristics of the ICT market are mirrored in the development of startup ecosystems. Furthermore, we will also examine the strategies employed by entrepreneurs and startup influencers to navigate the intricate dynamics between public and private investments, the formation of ecosystems and communities, the balance between world-changing ideals and the pursuit of profit.

5.2 THE BRAZILIAN STARTUP ECOSYSTEM

As Laval (2020) astutely observes, “since *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault had begun to show that in a liberal society, power is far from being confined to disciplinary institutions” (p. 39).¹⁰³ In other words, there are much more diffuse ways of guiding individuals and regulating the population. From this perspective, Foucault understands that neoliberalism is not “merely” an extension of capitalist globalization. It is, above all, a form of governance, a means of producing subjectivities, and even of reshaping the State.

As Laval recounts Foucault’s thought, “it is through the *environment* that the subject becomes governable, an adaptable environment in which the individual is ‘free’ to act as they wish, much like a fish is free to swim in its aquarium” (p. 42).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Translated freely from the original text: desde Vigiar e Punir, Foucault havia começado a mostrar que, em uma sociedade liberal, o poder estava longe de se resumir às instituições disciplinares (Laval, 2020, p. 39)

¹⁰⁴ Translated freely from the original text: é pelo meio que o sujeito se torna governável, um meio adaptável em que o indivíduo é ‘livre’ para agir como quiser, como um peixe é livre para nadar em seu aquário (Laval, 2020, p. 42).

Thus, when examining the Brazilian startup ecosystem, we must understand it as an environment capable of prescribing a liberal and meritocratic *conduct of conducts*. It is precisely for this reason that we are interested in understanding how this small economic sector seeks, in its own way, to govern through *management and data*, and even to reshape the State through *Silicon Utopias* (Pfeilstetter, 2017).

In his analysis of the development of tech startup ecosystems in Manchester, UK, Richard Pfeilstetter (2017) observed that one of the initial steps in establishing these communities involved “the collection and display of statistical data that justified speaking of a startup-community in the first place” (p. 95). This was followed by the creation of physical and social infrastructures, such as coworking spaces and regular networking events, which facilitated face-to-face interactions between tech entrepreneurs and investors. “Hence, in order to visualize the existence of a tech startup community, it had to be pictured, mapped, measured and named, mainly because it is an industry that is ill-defined and constantly changing” (idem).

When analyzing the development of startup ecosystems in Brazil, we observe a similar pattern. Every year, local and national startup conferences are held in multiple cities, serving as ritualistic gatherings that reinforce the entrepreneurial, innovative, and collaborative values of these ecosystems. Additionally, both national and regional startup associations regularly release statistical data that not only legitimizes the discourse around a Brazilian startup ecosystem but also tracks its exponential growth and highlights areas for improvement, such as increased funding for ecosystem development. However, much like in the broader ICT sector, the data from research reports on startup ecosystems tend to vary depending on the methodologies and classifications used.

In this thesis, we primarily rely on indicators from institutions such as the *Brazilian Association of Startups* (Abstartups), the Sebrae Startups Observatory platform, the market research agency Distrito, and the *Santa Catarina Technology Association* (ACATE) to understand the size and relevance of the Brazilian startup ecosystem. Considering the aspirations to govern by numbers and technology, it is essential to keep in mind that these studies often portray startups as the “*engines of contemporary society*”. However, given the ISSTi sector's relatively modest contribution of approximately 1.7% to Brazil's GDP, this claim may seem somewhat hyperbolic.

Therefore, our focus will not be on evaluating the accuracy or validity of the data gathered, but rather on understanding how these reports function as *discursive devices* (Foucault, 1994) that contribute to the spread of techno-neoliberal values in contemporary Brazilian society. Throughout this section, data on the advancement of the Brazilian startup ecosystem will be examined alongside the entrepreneurial narratives through which they have been packaged and presented to the general public via reports and media releases. Gradually, we will observe how startup ecosystem leaders have been acting as intermediaries between “*global*” entrepreneurial ideals, originally from Silicon Valley, and the local context, consistently striving to integrate a *private sector mentality* in public policy, much like Pfeilstetter (2017) observed in Manchester, UK.

5.2.1 The trajectory of Brazil's startup ecosystem

Although Brazil is a vast nation with over 235 startup¹⁰⁵ ecosystems currently spread across its territory (Sebrae, 2024), the regional distribution of these ecosystems mirrors the distribution of the domestic IT market. According to Abstartups (2024), the Southeast region concentrates 57.6% of Brazilian startups, with São Paulo being the state with the highest number of startups in the region. This is followed by the South region, which accounts for 21.2% of startups, with Santa Catarina leading in startup numbers within the region. As we explore in the following chapters, the interconnection between the ecosystems of these two regions is quite strong and was evident during the field research.

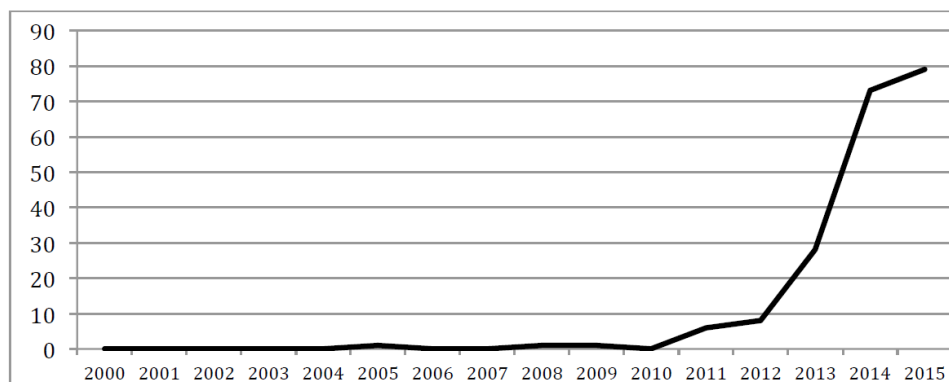
However, the Brazilian startup ecosystem has not always exhibited the same density as it does today. As discussed in chapter one, the first startups in the United States emerged in the 1970s and saw significant expansion during the 2000s. In contrast, the emergence of startups in Brazil occurred much later. Although technological development centers existed in the country, particularly those associated with universities, the term *startup* only gained widespread recognition from 2010 onwards.

As observed by Marcel Maia (2016), until 2012, the term startup was virtually unknown to the general public. Maia's analysis of the frequency of journalistic articles

¹⁰⁵ The number of start-up ecosystems in the world and in Brazil is susceptible to variation due to the differing methodologies employed by various private organizations conducting these surveys.

mentioning the term startup in the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper between 2000 and 2015 reveals that it was not until the 2010s that the concept began to gain prominence in Brazil.

Figure 5 – Number of articles mentioning the term startup in the Folha de São Paulo newspaper



Source: Folha de São Paulo, by Marcel Maia (2016).

Besides, the expansion of startup enterprises in Brazil during the 2010s is evident from the increasing number of new companies established and accumulated, as revealed by research conducted by the Distrito agency (2023).

Figure 6 – Number of Brazilian Startups founded between 2013 and 2023



Source: Panorama Tech América Latina 2023 by Distrito (2023).

Currently, Brazil is home to over 13,000 active startups (Abstartups, 2024)—a significant figure, though still representing only a small fraction of the country's ISSTi market. Since the early 2010s, the discourse surrounding startup development has

consistently emphasized the “*challenges*” of building an ecosystem from the ground up.

As highlighted in the *10th-anniversary celebration of Abstartups*’ live transmission,¹⁰⁶ the early community leaders were volunteers “*driven by a deep passion for technology, entrepreneurship, and a commitment to educating new entrepreneurial talents*” (Field Notebook, 21 Nov. 2021). From the outset, efforts were made to forge partnerships with institutions like SEBRAE to establish digital entrepreneurship communities across various regions of the country. As per my field notes, during the aforementioned live event, the speakers repeatedly emphasized that startups are “*instruments of social transformation, capable of providing individuals with a more dignified existence and greater autonomy from governmental structures*” (Field Notebook, 21 Nov. 2021).

As one of the primary objectives during the early days of the Brazilian startup ecosystem was to attempt to replicate the innovative and collaborative values observed in Silicon Valley, associations like Abstartups and accelerators such as Startup Farm were established in 2011. The goal was to create spaces where emerging entrepreneurs could be recognized, and where new ventures could be nurtured and accelerated through specialized programs. Moreover, tech community leaders were continually underscoring the importance of “*attracting and retaining talent*”. From the live transmission, as well as other startup conferences I was able to attend from 2022 to 2024, it remains evident that there was, and there still is, a persistent effort to instill entrepreneurial aspirations in individuals from as early as their school and university years. As Gramsci (1992, *apud* Palermo; Ventrisci, 2023) notes, the relationship of hegemonic domination is inherently *pedagogical*. Therefore, it is not surprising that to “*startupper*” there has always been a constant need “to inspire and *educate*” individuals to motivate them to become tech entrepreneurs and/or software developers. After all, it is through a *pedagogical* process that the ruling class presents its worldview as a common sense to the entirety of society.

¹⁰⁶ The live event, which I was able to follow online, was broadcasted via the Abstartups YouTube channel on November 19, 2021. It brought together three former presidents of Abstartups, along with the current president at the time. During the one-hour discussion, they reminisced about the association’s early days, examined the sector’s advancements, and reflected on the “*next steps*” necessary for further development. In general, the presidents of Abstartups are serial entrepreneurs or individuals who have either achieved a successful “*exit*” from their business and who wish to contribute to the development of the startup community. The individuals in question were all upper-class, white, male, and in their mid-40s. As will be discussed in greater detail subsequently, they acknowledged the necessity for greater diversity and proposed that the future Abstartups president should be a woman.

So when startup lobbyists speak of “*creating innovation ecosystems that are inspiring and conducive to the development of startups*,” they underscore the importance of nurturing individuals who are “*resilient, entrepreneurial, and innovative*.” These individuals are expected to join the tech workforce, whether as employees or as angel investors and entrepreneurs—ultimately serving the interests of venture capitalists. In other words, by fostering an “*innovative environment*,” tech leaders are actively shaping new subjectivities and producing a new generation of subjects (Dardot; Laval, 2013) tailored to fit within a tech-driven society.

In 2018, after several years of “tech entrepreneurial education,” a segment of the Brazilian working and middle classes had developed a clearer understanding of what startups are and how they operate. In other words, a startup culture had begun to take root in Brazil. This maturation was further evidenced by the emergence of the first five unicorn startups (InfoMoney, 2022), prompting Brazil's national startup ecosystem to declare itself “*mature*.” This period also saw the largest number of new startups founded, coinciding with a phase of growth in the ICT market relative to the broader Brazilian economy. Notably, the total investment in startups surpassed the US\$ 1 billion mark for the first time.

By 2020, the Brazilian startup landscape was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during its early months. Initially, startups seemed better equipped to navigate the crisis due to their more digitalized processes, which allowed for a relatively smooth transition to remote work. However, despite this initial advantage, 75% of Brazilian startups monitored by Abstartups during 2020 reported experiencing negative effects on their operations. Startups in sectors such as travel, entertainment, and physical retail faced substantial revenue declines, while another 50% struggled, adopting what they termed “*survival mode*” to endure the crisis. Conversely, only 25% of startups, particularly those in telemedicine, remote education, and remote work, saw their businesses grow (Morelix *et al.*, 2020). Health Tech startups, especially those offering online therapy to address stress, anxiety, and depression, attracted the attention of new venture funds. This led the startup media to declare that in 2020, “*burnout had become a business*” (Brazil Journal, 2022).

Following the global trend in other startup ecosystems, mental health became a prominent topic of discussion in Brazil during this period, particularly concerning both startup workers and founders. During field research, it was possible to observe a significant increase in the number of workshops focused on mental health between

2020 and 2022. I witnessed the emergence of internal workshops (which I personally experienced as a startup employee at the time), as well as the publication of content on mental health and burnout through e-books and social media platforms of startups and startup associations. Additionally, there were numerous talks on the subject at various technology conferences. These presentations and content were generally developed by companies offering psychological health services to tech workers.

Indeed, from the startup entrepreneurial point of view, burnout had become both a “*business opportunity*” and a problem to be addressed. Startups and their associations started tackling the issue by “*educating*” people about the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and burnout. Their approach emphasized the importance of awareness and prevention as the best strategies to avoid burnout and its consequent impact on workplace productivity. Furthermore, it became essential to “*educate*” leaders and managers on how to effectively manage their teams to prevent burnout. These strategies and actions will be discussed in detail in the third part of this thesis, but it is important to note, at this point, how the year 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the increased visibility of mental health issues within startup ecosystems at a national level.

Moreover, in that same year, the issue of diversity in startup companies gained traction. Although the discussion had been ongoing for several years,¹⁰⁷ it was in 2020 that Abstartups conducted its first diversity mapping. It is worth noting that when startup leaders refer to diversity, they typically mean the representation of women, Black individuals, transgender people, and people with disabilities (PCD) within companies, whether as entrepreneurs or employees.

According to 2020s mapping,

26.3% of startups in Brazil have no women on their teams, only 5.8% of founders in Brazil are Black, and 12.6% are women. Additionally, only 4.5% of startups employ transgender individuals, and 6.7% employ people with disabilities (PCD). In contrast to these figures, 87.7% of startups claim to support diversity (Abstartups, 2020).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ The tech sector is predominantly male, especially in the field of software development. However, since 2016, a collective of female software developers known as *Rails Girls Floripa*, for example, has been organizing to share knowledge in tech and promote educational activities aimed at inspiring other women to code. Typically, they rely on support from their startup companies, which often provide the necessary infrastructure for their gatherings. A few other similar initiatives like this also happened simultaneously, possibly inspired by former Facebook’s COO, Sheryl Sandberg’s book *Lean In*, published in 2013, which encouraged women to pursue their ambitions, take on leadership roles, and challenge the barriers to gender equality in the workplace. The book emphasizes the importance of “*leaning in*” to opportunities, overcoming self-doubt, and advocating for oneself, while also addressing the structural and societal challenges that women face in their careers.

Studies like this prompted many startups to create specific hiring programs for women, Black individuals, transgender people, and PCDs in order to “*turn supportive words into reality*”. This also highlighted the need to once again “*educate*” the tech workforce on diversity and inclusion issues.

Right after all this sudden awareness about the diversity and the mental health status of the startup workforce, the true startup boom occurred in 2021. While fewer new companies were established that year, those already in the growth phase attracted substantial investments, with ten new startups entering the “*unicorn*” club. For the first time, total startup investments exceeded US\$ 2 billion in Brazil. This year was marked by a wave of tech optimism, with startups declaring themselves better prepared for a digitalized future and a more inclusive society. The *10th-anniversary celebration of Abstartups*’ live transmission, highlighted these achievements, as tech community leaders celebrated record investments, the approval of the *Startups Legal Framework*,¹⁰⁹ and the growing interest from large corporations in collaborating with startups to innovate their own businesses.

However, a few challenges persisted, notably around issues of diversity and mental health within the startup community, leading tech community leaders to point to the need of developing a “*Diversity Guide for Startups*”. Such “*playbook*” should provide startups with practical steps to foster inclusion, in order to expand opportunities to underrepresented groups. According to the startup influencers I was able to follow during the 2021’s live stream, “*tech companies inherently carry the potential to drive social mobility, offering individuals the chance to transform their economic standing*” (Field Notebook, 21 Nov. 2021). By fostering diversity and

¹⁰⁸ Translated freely from the original text: “26,3% de startups em todo o Brasil não possuem nenhuma mulher na sua equipe, apenas 5,8% dos founders no Brasil são negros e 12,6% são mulheres. E mais: apenas 4,5% de startups empregam pessoas transexuais e 6,7% pessoas com deficiência (PCD). Em contraste a esses números, 87,7% das startups dizem apoiar a diversidade (Abstartups, 2020).”

¹⁰⁹ The *Brazilian Legal Framework for Startups*, or *Marco Legal das Startups e do Empreendedorismo Inovador*, was established through Law No. 182/2021, effective June 1, 2021 (Brasil, 2021). It defines startups as businesses with up to 10 years of registration, operating in innovation-driven sectors with annual revenues up to approximately US\$ 3.2 million. The framework simplifies regulations, particularly in corporate governance and labor laws, to encourage entrepreneurship. It includes regulatory “*sandboxes*” for testing innovative products in controlled environments with relaxed rules, especially in sectors like fintech and health tech. Additionally, it offers tax benefits to investors and startups to promote investment in innovation. Startups can also participate in government contracts through a simplified bidding process, *Soluções Inovadoras* (Innovative Solutions), which promotes the use of innovative technologies in public administration. Lastly, the law fosters venture capital development by providing greater flexibility in fund structuring and management (Freitas *et al.*, 2021).

inclusion, startups could, then, extend these opportunities to a broader range of people, “*contributing to greater social equity*” (idem).

The ways in which diversity and inclusion are integrated into the daily lives of startup workers will be thoroughly examined in Chapter Five. At this juncture, however, it is important to highlight how the tech sector gradually appropriated progressive agendas, rebranding them within a liberal economic framework. As Fraser (2020) points out, one of the goals of *progressive neoliberalism* is to create a new vision of economic distribution and moral recognition of belonging, while avoiding any conflict between these two realms. However, in *progressive neoliberalism*, social class hierarchies are not abolished but rather “diversified” through the “inclusion” of underrepresented individuals. As a result, justice and social equality are reframed as meritocracy.

Consequently, it is not surprising that IT workers identify with the issues raised by unions (Moreno, 2021), as the startup rhetoric itself claims to promote social equity. Nevertheless, these employees seldom affiliate with labor unions, as their workplaces are predominantly shaped by meritocratic and individualistic principles. Moreover, a multitude of managerial techniques are in operation, emphasizing the individual and undermining the collective. This influence is so pervasive that some of the interlocutors I spoke with could not even perceive a reason to join a union when I asked them about it.

The company really encourages feedback. So if there's anything you're not happy about, whether it's about your manager, HR, or even a harassment complaint, the company is open to listening. I think that's why there's no union movement (Nathi, 32 years old, Senior Marketing Analyst of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Thus far, it has been demonstrated that from 2011 to 2021, Brazil's startup sector experienced significant advancements. These included the strengthening of startup culture, the expansion of business incubation and acceleration programs, increased venture capital investment, and a growing focus on the demographics and mental health of the startup workforce. Although burnout had already emerged as a critical issue within the startup ecosystem by 2020, startups continued to promote themselves as promising work environments, often attributing burnout to external factors related to the pandemic rather than to the inherent pressures within the industry.

However, the euphoria surrounding the startup boom of 2021 quickly dissipated, giving way to a wave of massive layoffs. According to the independent website *Layoffs.fyi*, between early 2022 and January 2024, 58 Brazilian tech companies collectively laid off 7,785 professionals (Almeida, 2024). These layoffs have generated widespread instability and fear among startup employees across the country—a sentiment that was palpable among my interlocutors. At least two of them experienced layoffs in 2022, necessitating a search for new employment opportunities. Meanwhile, those who retained their positions faced the burden of increased workloads, as they were compelled to absorb the responsibilities of their departed colleagues.

The prevailing startup discourse rationalizes these mass layoffs as a response to a confluence of factors: economic uncertainty, the rise of artificial intelligence, and the downsizing of companies following the aggressive hiring practices during the pandemic (Almeida, 2024). This narrative positions layoffs as a necessary correction to an “*investment anomaly*” that emerged during the pandemic—a means to “*rebalance*” the ecosystem of startups. However, this discourse fails to recognize, or deliberately obscures, the broader consequences of the speculative investment logic that underpins much of the startup economy (Shestakofsky, 2024).

Speculative investments during the pandemic were often driven by an overinflated sense of optimism, where capital was funneled into tech companies at unprecedented rates, regardless of their long-term viability. This influx of capital led to bloated valuations and unsustainable business practices, setting the stage for the inevitable “*market corrections*” that followed. The current wave of layoffs, therefore, can be seen not merely as a response to external economic pressures, but as a direct consequence of this speculative bubble bursting.

Moreover, the framing of these layoffs as a “*necessary correction*” reinforces a neoliberal logic that prioritizes market efficiency over human welfare. It also reflects a broader ideological commitment to the idea of the “invisible hand” of the market, where downturns and layoffs are seen as natural, self-regulating processes. This narrative effectively depoliticizes the layoffs, presenting them as inevitable rather than as outcomes shaped by specific economic policies and investment strategies.

Consequently, in the context of the post-pandemic economic crisis, the sharp decline in new startup investments has pressured these companies to restructure and liquidate assets, mirroring the practices of Wall Street firms that prioritize

shareholder value (Ho, 2009). Perhaps most striking was the way my interlocutors internalized this logic. Many expressed a resigned acceptance, acknowledging that, *“once the anger had passed,”* they understood their companies' actions as inevitable. This sentiment reflects a certain *capitalist realism* (Fisher, 2020), wherein individuals resign themselves to the precarious conditions of their jobs as an unchangeable reality, naturalizing cycles of boom and bust, as we can see below:

It's a cycle. If the market crashes and the company does poorly, it'll affect the people inside the company because tough choices will have to be made. [...] 2020 and 2021 were an outlier moment for startups. [...] The way most technology companies are valued is based on a multiple of their revenue. And we were doing pretty well. Then, out of nowhere, we started seeing growth multiples of 20, 30, and more. Wow, that's tough. Before, it was one or two companies that could do that. But in 2020, there was a real explosion. That's why there were some pretty crazy valuations and so many hires and companies becoming unicorns. Now, in 2022, we're getting back to a level like 2017, without those crazy valuations (Ana, 33 years old, Controller manager of a late-stage startup, 2022, emphases added to highlight English words used by the interlocutor).

In response to these challenges, there has been a renewed emphasis on cultivating a diverse, resilient, and adaptable workforce, which essentially “invites” workers to economically rationalize the downturns in the startup investment market. Startup advocates have also begun framing 2022 as a pivotal moment of reckoning, suggesting that only *“the strongest startups will survive.”* This narrative, rooted in the logic of survival of the fittest, once again draws on the social Darwinism inherent in startup ecosystems. By invoking this framework, the industry continues to normalize competition, risk, and precariousness as central components of the startup world, reinforcing the notion that resilience and adaptability are essential traits not just for companies, but for workers themselves.

Nevertheless, despite the post-pandemic economic downturn, Brazil's startup ecosystem remains one of the most developed in Latin America. It currently boasts 24 *“unicorn”* companies and 15 technology firms that have gone public (Distrito, 2023), signaling a considerable level of advancement. These achievements highlight Brazil's ability to produce high-value companies, attract international venture capital, and develop innovations tailored to regional needs. However, the positioning of Brazilian ecosystems within the broader international division of labor reflects a dual dynamic of autonomy and dependence, especially in relation to the United States and, to a lesser extent, European countries.

On one hand, Brazilian startup ecosystems have cultivated a degree of autonomy by establishing local technology hubs, attracting foreign investment, and crafting solutions for the regional market. Given the country's vast size, many in the startup community view Brazil's internal market as a substantial opportunity. Yet, this same vastness reduces the motivation for many entrepreneurs to pursue international expansion, creating challenges from the perspective of national investors. This inward focus allows the national ecosystem to maintain a certain level of independence. However, this autonomy is limited by structural dependencies on major technological powers, particularly the USA. Core technologies—such as cloud infrastructure, data platforms, and productivity tools—used by Brazilian startups are predominantly controlled by USA companies like Google, Amazon, and Microsoft. Additionally, a significant portion of the funding for these startups originates from international venture capital firms, making the Brazilian ecosystem reliant on global capital flows for sustained growth.

Still, Brazil's dependency on global tech giants differs from that of other emerging markets like India and the Philippines, offering valuable comparative insights into its positioning within the global division of labor. Both India and the Philippines, for example, have successfully integrated into global value chains through outsourcing and the establishment of IT service centers for multinational companies. For instance, Shestakofsky's (2023) ethnography illustrates how a Californian startup relies on a colonial background to outsource routine tasks to independent contractors in the Philippines.

Such practices are less prevalent in Brazil due to the distinct colonial relations and linguistic variations. Indeed, language barriers play a key role in this distinction, as many Brazilians lack fluency in English, limiting their involvement in international outsourcing. Nevertheless, parts of the Brazilian tech workforce do engage with foreign companies, often in higher-level positions, especially when these companies seek to enter the Brazilian market and require local expertise to adapt products and strategies to the national context. In those specific cases, it is not uncommon for individuals employed by foreign companies to demonstrate a proficiency in both Portuguese and English, or in Portuguese and Spanish.

Finally, it is evident that the Brazilian startup ecosystem has undergone substantial transformations over the past 15 years, in conjunction with the broader shifts witnessed in the Brazilian economy. While this thesis does not specifically

focus on these events, it is essential to acknowledge other major developments in the Brazilian economy during this period: the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, which marked a profound political shift; the 2017 labor reform, which further weakened employment protections and facilitated the growth of precarious work conditions; and the 2018 election of far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro, whose administration has been defined by deregulation, privatization, and an aggressive neoliberal agenda. The economic instability triggered by these political shifts has reshaped Brazil's labor market, fostering an environment of heightened uncertainty. As this thesis will demonstrate, these forces have deeply impacted workers' experiences, intensifying pressures on the working class and fundamentally altering work environments—reflecting broader trends of neoliberal restructuring in the country.

5.3 THE SANTA CATARINA AND FLORIANÓPOLIS STARTUP ECOSYSTEM

Before exploring Florianópolis' startup ecosystem, it is crucial to first understand the broader context of Santa Catarina and its capital city, Florianópolis. As Jaime Osorio (2012) propose, despite its global aspirations, the capitalist system develops unevenly, creating a landscape where different regions are incorporated into the global economy with distinct roles and characteristics. This process is marked by antagonistic dynamics, as capitalism assigns particular functions to specific regions over time, reinforcing global inequalities while promoting certain areas as centers of innovation or labor, and relegating others to peripheral or extractive roles. This uneven development shapes the ways regions interact within the international division of labor, highlighting the systemic contradictions inherent in the global capitalist framework. Since Florianópolis' startup ecosystem is embedded within this capitalist framework, it is essential to recognize the geographical, historical, and politico-economic characteristics that shape the city's productive structure and contribute to the development of its technological hub.

Santa Catarina, home to 7.522 million inhabitants, accounts for approximately 3.71% of Brazil's population. Of this, 4.193 million people are part of the workforce, with 96.8% of them employed as of 2024. This positions Santa Catarina as one of the most economically developed regions in the country, a fact often emphasized by

local entrepreneurs and technology sector lobbyists. According to the *State Planning Secretariat* (SEPLAN), Santa Catarina is

the second most competitive state in the country, [a region where] the best social and economic indicators in Brazil are found. [...] Of the 4.059 million employed, 56% were working in the private sector (88.2% with formal contracts, the highest percentage in the country); 4% were domestic workers; 9% were employed in the public sector; 5.2% were employers; and 24.6% were self-employed. [...] The unemployment rate in the state is 3.2%, the lowest in the country in the first quarter of 2024, where the national average is 7.4% (SEPLAN, 2024, p. 5).¹¹⁰

While Santa Catarina's economy follows the national pattern, with industrial production focused on sectors such as food, textiles, clothing, and construction (CNI, 2024), Florianópolis diverges from this trend. The capital city is not the center of the state's industrial sector, nor is it the most populous city, with just over 573,000 residents (IBGE, 2022). Instead, Florianópolis' distinct geographical characteristics—97% of its area located on the island of Santa Catarina—have led to a socio-spatial formation centered around land management, commerce, and public administration (Heinen, 2022). The island itself is 54 kilometers long and 18 kilometers wide, connected to the mainland by only two bridges, which has played a significant role in shaping the city's development.

For much of its history, Florianópolis used to be a peaceful town. It was not until the 1960s that the city began to experience significant change, driven by the establishment of state-owned enterprises such as Eletrosul, Celesc, and Telesc,¹¹¹ as well as the creation of universities like the *Federal University of Santa Catarina* (UFSC) and the *State University of Santa Catarina* (UDESC). This ushered in a wave of migration from other parts of the country, integrating middle-class workers into the city's economy, particularly in civil service and education (Lunardelli, 2013). Florianópolis thus solidified its role as both the political-administrative center of Santa Catarina and a hub for higher education.

¹¹⁰ Translated freely from the original text: O segundo [estado] mais competitivo do país. [Região onde] encontram-se os melhores indicadores sociais e econômicos do Brasil. [...] Dos 4,059 milhões de ocupados, 56% estavam empregados no setor privado (88,2% com carteira assinada, o maior percentual do país); 4% eram trabalhadores domésticos; 9% empregados no setor público; 5,2% eram empregadores; 24,6% trabalhavam por conta própria. [...] A taxa de desocupação no Estado está em 3,2%, a menor do país no trimestre de 2024, cuja média é 7,4%. (SEPLAN, 2024, p. 5).

¹¹¹ State-owned electricity and telecommunications companies.

political project, one that seeks to shift away from the city's historic reliance on public administration.

Beyond public administration and commerce, Florianópolis' economy diversified further in the 1970s, with a burgeoning tourism and construction industry. During this period, the city underwent a “modernization” process, attracting waves of new workers and accelerating urban growth. However, this development also sparked tensions between long-time residents (*natives*) and new arrivals (*outsiders*), leading to conflicts over housing, employment, and divergent lifestyles (Lunardelli, 2013). These tensions remain palpable in the city today.

As Daniel Lunardelli (2013) explains, the political and business elites of the 1970s sought to position Florianópolis as both a model urban center and a premier tourist destination. With over 100 beaches, the city—also known as the *Magic Island*—sees its population triple during the summer, as tourists flock from around the world to experience its natural beauty. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the tourism sector became a cornerstone of the local economy, creating jobs in hospitality, retail, and services. At the same time, the surge in tourism highlights Florianópolis' infrastructure challenges, particularly in transportation and housing.

The vision to transform and market Florianópolis remains a driving force today, though its scope has evolved. Modern development projects now aim to solidify the city not only as a premier tourist destination but also as a leading technology hub. Business and event tourism have become key focus areas, with stakeholders seeking to attract international attention to Florianópolis' burgeoning startup scene.

As noted by Tischer and Tarouco (2022), Florianópolis has been associated with various slogans over the years, including: “*Brazilian Florida, Silicon Island, St. Tropez of South America, Brazilian Capital of Quality of Life, Best Brazilian City for Entrepreneurship, Brazilian Capital of the Oyster*”, among others. In 2019, Florianópolis adopted the slogan “*Floripa, Creative City*”, a designation awarded by the City Hall as part of a strategic effort to reposition the city's image. This branding reinforces its status as a member of the *UNESCO Creative Cities Network* in the Gastronomy segment. However, the City Hall's initiatives extended far beyond merely establishing a series of gastronomic routes designed to lengthen the tourism season in the so-called “*creative city*.” To solidify Florianópolis as a hub for the broader creative economy, several complementary strategies were put in place, including:

a) audiovisual production, aiming to reposition Florianópolis in the context of MERCOSUR tourism; b) the creation of specific legislation focused on stimulating and developing startups and technology incubators related to the creative economy; and c) the implementation of the Street Art Tour Project, promoting, disseminating, and valuing urban art (Tischer; Tarouco, 2022, p. 389).¹¹²

In the promotional video¹¹³ developed and released by the Florianópolis City Hall in 2019—which was shown at the opening of several startup conferences that I attended in the following years—it is possible to see a series of testimonials from Brazilian and foreign tourists praising the island's natural beauty, quality of life, hospitality, and local safety. Amidst images of beaches, colonial buildings, and people engaging in outdoor sports, there are also shots of technology hubs, followed by statements from local entrepreneurs who highlight the innovative environment, the connection with nature, and, based on these observations, declare that “*Florianópolis is the Brazilian Silicon Valley*.”

Most recently, however, the city received yet another slogan. In 2024, Florianópolis was officially designated as “*National Capital of Startups*”, a title sanctioned by Law Project 4.987/2019, which clarifies that:

The Brazilian Association of Startups (Abstartups) conducted a survey on the distribution of companies operating with advanced technologies and in cutting-edge sectors. [...] When considering the density of startups, the capital of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, has an indicator nearly ten times higher than that of São Paulo, the capital of the state with the same name. [...] It is evident that the metropolitan region of Florianópolis stands out as a national leader in innovation, supported by a network of universities specializing in technology and strong social indicators, such as the Human Development Index. Thus, it is necessary that this achievement of Florianópolis be officially recognized, not only as a form of acknowledgment but also to encourage other regions to invest in fostering technology-based companies (Law Project 4.987/2019).¹¹⁴

¹¹² Translated freely from the original text: a) produção audiovisual, buscando reposicionar Florianópolis no contexto de turismo do MERCOSUL; b) criação de legislação específica com foco no estímulo e no desenvolvimento de startups e incubadoras tecnológicas relacionadas com a economia criativa; e c) implementação do Projeto Street Art Tour, com a produção, difusão e valorização da arte urbana (Tischer; Tarouco, 2022, p. 389).

¹¹³ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yISqkYllvzc&t=98s> Retrieved on: 27 Aug. 2024.

¹¹⁴ Translated freely from the original text: A Associação Brasileira de Startups (ABStartups) elaborou um levantamento sobre a distribuição das empresas que operam com tecnologias e em setores de ponta. [...] Quando se considera a densidade de startups, a capital catarinense, Florianópolis, tem um indicador quase dez vezes maior que a da cidade de São Paulo, capital do Estado homônimo. [...] Fica claro que a região metropolitana de Florianópolis se destaca como líder nacional em inovação, concorrendo, para tal indicador, a rede de universidades na área tecnológica e os bons indicadores sociais, como o Índice de Desenvolvimento Humano. Dessa forma, faz-se necessário que essa conquista da cidade de Florianópolis seja reconhecida em termos oficiais, até mesmo para estimular outras regiões a investirem no fomento a empresas de base tecnológica (Projeto de Lei 4.987/2019).

Through this Law Project, we can understand that naming Florianópolis as the “*National Capital of Startups*” is more than just recognition of its innovation ecosystem. It is, in fact, a strategic move to reinforce and promote the local technology sector to other regions of the country. Also, being recognized as the “*National Capital of Startups*” highlights several distinctive features of Florianópolis' startup ecosystem. Established in the early 2010s, this ecosystem was among the first in Brazil and has since evolved into one of the country's most robust and comprehensive environments for tech entrepreneurship. Advocates of the startup sector attribute this strength to several factors, including a skilled available workforce supported by the presence of two major public universities—and a well-developed infrastructure aimed at fostering technological innovation. Organizations such as ACATE and SEBRAE-SC play a key role in this infrastructure, providing crucial support to emerging companies.

Moreover, the government of Santa Catarina has a well-established track record of backing the innovation sector. Through the provision of tax incentives, streamlining of bureaucratic processes, and the creation of specific laws designed to encourage innovation, the local government has created a “*business-friendly*” environment that facilitates the growth of new enterprises. This support is further bolstered by various funding initiatives and public-private partnerships, all of which contribute to the dynamism of the region's startup ecosystem.

A particularly notable aspect that distinguishes Florianópolis from other Brazilian tech hubs is its high quality of life. The city combines professional opportunities in the technology sector with the natural appeal of beaches, scenic landscapes, and a less chaotic urban experience. This unique lifestyle draws talent from across Brazil and even internationally, creating a diverse community of professionals. The convergence of these factors positions Florianópolis as a distinctive technology hub within Brazil, one that simultaneously reflects the core values imported from Silicon Valley. As such, Florianópolis offers a microcosm of a broader, global trend in tech innovation, where local conditions intersect with global influences to shape a unique entrepreneurial landscape.

Thus far, we have seen that the city of Florianópolis has undergone significant economic and social transformations since the 1960s. From the “*Magic Island*”, celebrated for its natural beauty and quality of life, to the “*National Capital of*

Startups”, the city is both enveloped in a mystical aura, symbolizing tourism, leisure, and quality life, and positioned as a hub of technological innovation and entrepreneurship—despite ongoing issues with basic infrastructure, such as inadequate sanitation,¹¹⁵ real estate speculation,¹¹⁶ and persistent traffic congestion.

As we will explore next, the expansion of this new tech-driven economic frontier, much like the shifts in the public sector in the 1960s and tourism in the 1980s, has also attracted an influx of new workers to the city, further straining infrastructure, particularly in terms of housing and the sharp rise in rents after 2020. However, before examining some of the impacts of the technology sector in Florianópolis, it is necessary to present the startup ecosystem studied to understand how the public sector has embraced and leveraged it to market the city to the rest of the country.

5.3.1 From an IT sector to an ecosystem of startups

According to Carlos Schneider (2021), the IT sector in Florianópolis began to develop in the 1980s as an alternative to the existing economy and as a strategy to retain the workforce graduating from UFSC, which tended to leave the city in search of employment. “A city focused on public services and seasonal tourism, [in 1985 Florianópolis] faced rising unemployment” (p. 24).¹¹⁷ It was during this time that the *CERTI Foundation* (Foundation for Reference Centers in Innovative Technologies) was established, aiming to address the following question: “*How can jobs be created using information technology?*”

The CERTI Foundation, in collaboration with UFSC and UDESC, established the region's first *Technological Business Incubator* (IET) and an *Information Technology Industrial Park* (CII). Both initiatives received investments from the government of Santa Catarina at the time, with the goal of bringing together technology-based companies, fostering entrepreneurship, and generating

¹¹⁵ As reported by the Companhia Catarinense de Águas e Saneamento (CASAN), the current coverage of the sewage system in the municipality of Florianópolis is only 58%, a markedly low figure in comparison to other capitals in the southern and southeastern regions of the country, which have a coverage rate of approximately 80% (Amorim, 2023).

¹¹⁶ A study conducted by FipeZap, a research division of the Economic Research Institute Foundation (FIEPE), has identified Florianópolis as one of the Brazilian cities with the highest average rental prices. From December 2022 to December 2023, the accumulated increase in rent prices in the city reached 26.54% (Pacheco, 2024).

¹¹⁷ Translated freely from the original text: Cidade de serviços públicos e de um turismo sazonal, [em 1985 Florianópolis] confrontava-se com desemprego crescente (Schneider, 2021, p. 24).

employment in this sector. As Schneider (2021) presents, in Brazil, the foundations that give rise to and sustain a technological hub are rooted in the formulation of public policies. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the first “*incubators*” for innovative companies emerged within public universities, which were able to provide essential initial resources such as knowledge, human capital, infrastructure, and public funding. The promoters of this model considered the establishment of the Florianópolis Technological Hub so successful that it became a template for public policies in other centers of entrepreneurship and innovation (Schneider, 2021).

The complete history of Florianópolis' ecosystem can be found in the book *Ponte para Inovação: Como Criar um Ecossistema Empreendedor* by Daniel Leipnitz and Rodrigo Lóssio (2021). However, what is of interest at this moment is the role played by both the government of the state of Santa Catarina and the City Hall of Florianópolis in promoting spaces and fiscal incentives that enabled the city to become a technology hub.

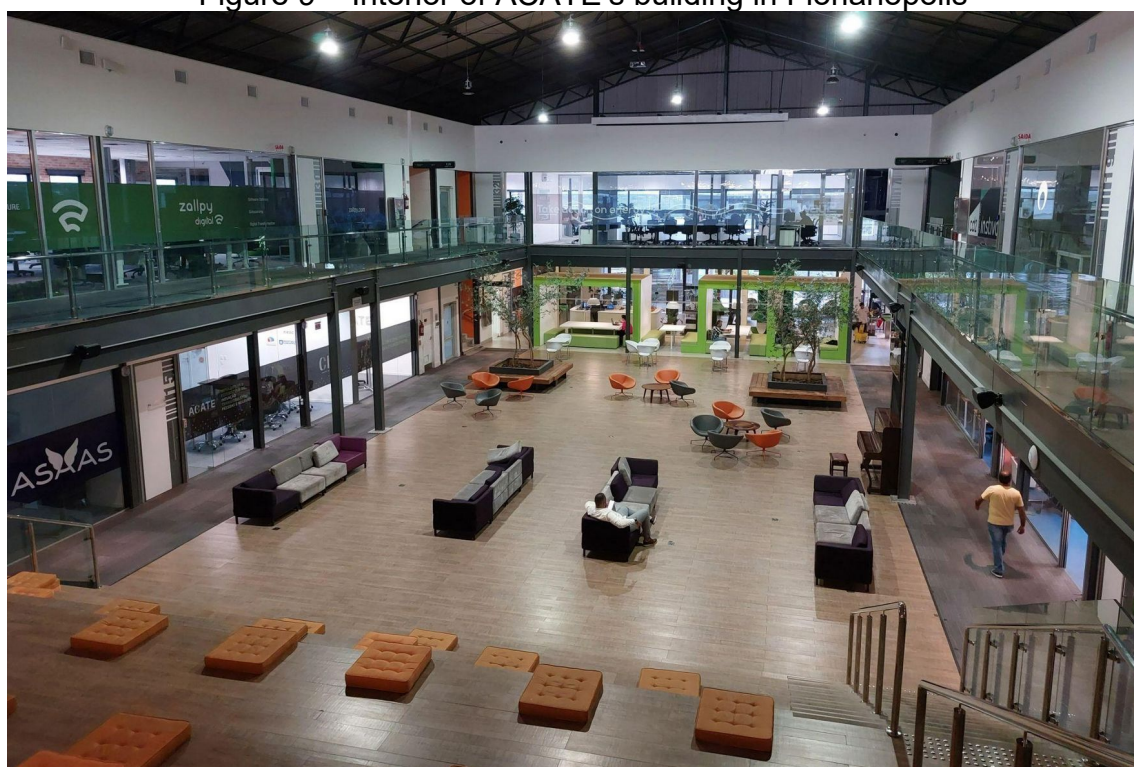
As we can observe, the spaces built throughout the 1980s and 1990s remain in place today and indeed form the foundation of the current startup ecosystem. Spaces like the *CERTI Foundation* continue to operate today and remain connected to UFSC. Others, such as the IET, evolved into the *CELTA Incubator* (Center for the Development of Advanced Technologies), housing some of the region's first successful startups in the early 2010s, while the CII transformed into the *ACATE Innovation Center*, now one of the largest startup hubs and a symbol of technological entrepreneurship in the city.

Figure 8 – Front view of ACATE's building in Florianópolis



Source: image record made by the author in October 2022.

Figure 9 – Interior of ACATE's building in Florianópolis



Source: image record made by the author in October 2022.

In addition to the public investments already mentioned, the *Alfa Technology Park* (ParqTec Alfa) was inaugurated in 1993 and *Sapiens Park* in 2019, thus creating what local startup lobbyists call the “*Innovation Route*” (*Rota da Inovação*). This route, which stretches from *Hercílio Luz International Airport* in the south of the

island to *Sapiens Park* in the north, connects a series of enterprises and incubators, as well as including universities.

Figure 10 – Florianópolis' Innovation Route



Source: UFSC à esquerda.

Beyond the implementation of various infrastructures that have fostered the development of an innovation ecosystem, it is also crucial to consider the fiscal incentives that have been, and continue to be, essential for attracting and retaining numerous technology-based companies in the city. As early as the 1980s and 1990s, the City Hall of Florianópolis began offering tax benefits by reducing the Service Tax (ISS) rate. However, it was in 2003, with Decree No. 2,154, that Florianópolis solidified its fiscal incentive policy by setting the ISS rate at 2% for companies in the technology sector (De Rolt, 2021, p. 62).

Regarding the revenue and contribution of Florianópolis's software and services sector, we have access to data from 2010 and 2022. According to data from the Municipal Revenue Secretariat presented by the City Hall (2017), in 2010, the revenue of the software and services sector was US\$ 120.4 million, while the declared ISS was around US\$ 2.4 million (i.e., 2% of the revenue). At that time, the sector had 576 active technology-based companies, and the ISS declared by these companies represented about 10% of the ISS collected in the municipality.

By 2022, according to ACATE, the ISS collected from startups and technology companies amounted to about US\$ 18 million (Digital, 2024). Thus, considering that the collection rate is only 2%, we can estimate that in 2022, the sector's revenue was approximately US\$ 900 million, which means that the sector's revenue more than tripled since early 2010. Furthermore, according to ACATE, there are currently 1,046 technology companies associated with the entity that belong to the Greater Florianópolis region.¹¹⁸ This represents an increase of more than 80% in the number of companies in the Florianópolis region alone. When considering the entire state of Santa Catarina, it is noteworthy that:

At ACATE, the number of associated companies has already reached 1,790 across the state of Santa Catarina, with 58.49% of them located in Greater Florianópolis. Among the total number of associates, 47.5% are startups, 40.5% are small and medium-sized companies in growth, and 5% are scale-ups undergoing rapid growth.

'These are associates of various sizes that need to connect. Florianópolis is the largest hub in the state, but others are growing significantly, with favorable environments for the emergence and attraction of new companies. This is already a characteristic of Florianópolis, which attracts many companies because of the quality of life and incentives for the technology and innovation sector. We want the other hubs to follow this growth and for Santa Catarina to become the state of innovation,' says Thaís Nahas, director of the Greater Florianópolis regional hub and ACATE's Smart Cities Vertical (Digital, 2024).¹¹⁹

Thus, based on the aforementioned data, it can be said that it is partly thanks to a series of public incentives that today Florianópolis hosts over a thousand technology-based companies and employs around 31,000 workers in the technology sector (ACATE, 2021). As mentioned earlier, throughout this research, it was possible to interview 30 workers in the technology sector who work or have worked in about 20 technology-based companies in Florianópolis. Although the sample is small compared to the total number of companies, it follows the same varied composition

¹¹⁸ 1046 represents the number of companies currently affiliated with ACATE. In total, the organization estimates that there are more than 3,000 technology-based companies in the Greater Florianópolis region (ACATE, 2021).

¹¹⁹ Translated freely from the original: Na ACATE, o número de associadas já chegou a 1.790 empresas em todo o estado de Santa Catarina, sendo 58,49% delas na Grande Florianópolis. No total de associadas, 47,5% são startups, 40,5% são pequenas e médias empresas em crescimento e 5% são scale-ups, que estão em acelerado processo de crescimento. 'São associados de vários tamanhos que precisam se conectar. Florianópolis é o maior polo no estado, mas os demais estão crescendo bastante, com ambientes favoráveis para o surgimento e a atração de novas empresas. Isso já é uma característica de Florianópolis, que atrai muitas empresas por causa da qualidade de vida e dos incentivos ao setor de tecnologia e inovação. Queremos que os outros polos acompanhem esse crescimento e que Santa Catarina se torne o estado da inovação', afirma Thaís Nahas, diretora do polo regional da Grande Florianópolis e da Vertical Smart Cities da ACATE (Digital, 2024).

of startups, growing small and medium-sized companies, and scale-ups, allowing us to observe how the “*startup mindset*” currently circulates in the sector that is considered to be the current “*economic engine*” of Florianópolis.

Moreover, the transformation of the city into a prominent technological hub in Brazil is not merely the result of entrepreneurial individuals implementing innovative infrastructures. It is also a consistent public policy of fiscal incentives that have attracted and retained technology-based companies over the past decades. The significant growth of the sector, evidenced both by the increase in revenue and the number of companies and workers in the technology sector, reflects the success of these policies. However, it is important to highlight that the narrative of Florianópolis as a “*technological city*” is also linked to the dissemination of the “*startup mindset*”, revealing a continuous effort to position the city in competitiveness and innovation rankings, both nationally and internationally. This dynamic, observed through the interviews conducted in this research, illustrates how competitive logic transcends the private sector and permeates municipal and state development strategies.

5.3.2 Acceleration programs

Through the example of Florianópolis, we can observe how some centers of technological innovation emerged in Brazil thanks to public investment, the establishment of public-private partnerships between small businesses and university incubators, and the gradual integration of other mechanisms such as coworking spaces, business centers, and accelerators.

However, between the 1980s and 2010s, the discourse predominantly centered around *technology-based innovative companies* rather than *startups*. This distinction—not merely a matter of vocabulary, but rather a question of conceptual understanding—supports the hypothesis proposed in this thesis that startups represent more than just *technology-based innovative companies*, as they embody and prescribe a particular way of “*making things happen*” (Faria, 2020). Moreover, it is evident that the way technology-based companies bring their ideas to fruition is significantly influenced by the level and type of support they receive during their early stages, with notable differences emerging between those nurtured by “*incubators*” and those accelerated by “*accelerators*”.

As noted by Maia (2016), even in the early 2000s, “*incubators*” guided nascent companies to develop business plans, aiming to minimize the risks associated with new ventures and to align them with public financing agencies. However, as explored in Chapter One, startup-type companies are not risk-averse; on the contrary, they tend to embrace and attract high-risk investments for the development of their businesses. It was with the emergence of the first Brazilian accelerators—entirely private entities—that *innovative companies* began to adopt the characteristics and practices of the *startup model* we recognize today. Let us now examine the differences between incubators and accelerators.

Framework 3 – Incubators versus Accelerators

	Incubators	Accelerators
Objectives	Supporting the creation and initial development of companies, offering infrastructure, mentoring and administrative support.	Accelerating the <i>growth</i> of startups that already have a product or service validated in the market.
Focus	Early-stage companies that are still developing their ideas, products or services.	Startups at a more advanced stage, ready to <i>scale</i> quickly and attract investment.
Duration	Long term (usually 1 to 3 years).	<i>Short term</i> (usually 3 to 6 months).
Infrastructure	Provides physical space, such as offices and laboratories, as well as basic services such as internet, telephony and legal support.	Can offer physical space, but the focus is on intensive <i>mentoring</i> and <i>networking</i> with <i>investors</i> .
Support	Mentoring focused on building the business, from conceiving the idea to developing the minimum viable product (MVP).	An intensive program of mentoring, workshops and events to connect startups with investors, clients and strategic partners.
Counterpart	Some incubators may charge small monthly fees, but in general their services are offered free of charge.	At the end of the acceleration process, some accelerators may require a <i>shareholding</i> in the startup, incorporating themselves into the company's board.
Brazilian examples	Innovation centers at universities or technology parks such as CELTA (Florianópolis).	Programs such as Startup Farm and Darwin Startups (Florianópolis).

Source: elaborated by the author based on Portal Sebrae and Endeavor Brazil's blog.

According to the *National Association of Entities Promoting Innovative Enterprises* (Anprotec), Brazil is home to 363 business incubators, 43 operational

technology parks, and 57 accelerators (2024). In Florianópolis alone, there are at least three incubators: *CELTA*, *MIDITEC*, and *Cocreation Lab*. Additionally, the region is home to two technological parks—*ParqTech Alfa* and *Sapiens Park*—as well as three accelerators: *Darwin Startups*, *InovAtiva Brasil*, and *Cubo Itaú*. There are also public-private acceleration programs, which we will explore further.

As observed in the table above, incubators tend to operate in alignment with the pace of research and innovation within Brazil's public universities, while accelerators follow the fast-paced rhythms of capital. Moreover, the introduction of accelerators in Brazil represents a significant paradigm shift in local business management practices. These institutions have played a pivotal role in systematically implementing *lean methodologies* for developing new businesses (Blank; Dorf, 2012; Ries, 2011). As Maia (2016) observed, traditional incubators heavily relied on the formulation of business plans, which were predicated on the assumption that business objectives could be clearly defined in advance. These plans aimed to provide a detailed, step-by-step roadmap for the business to follow. However, this approach has been increasingly challenged by authors like Ries (2011), who emphasize the importance of flexibility in new business development, particularly in uncertain markets.

Therefore, the introduction of private accelerators in the early 2010s marked a gradual shift within the Brazilian tech sector towards the integration of entrepreneurial startup principles. Yet, it is important to note that the Brazilian startup ecosystem remains significantly dependent on public-private partnerships for its continued growth. Currently, both incubators and accelerators coexist in Brazil, along with a range of hybrid programs, such as the *Sebrae SC Program*, which incorporates characteristics of both incubators and accelerators.

In 2012, the *Sebrae SC Program* was launched in Florianópolis, representing one of the first acceleration programs in the country to articulate public and private sector efforts to foster the development of innovative companies. At the time of its launch, the technological landscape in Santa Catarina was predominantly composed of more traditional technology firms, and the startup concept was still relatively unknown. The *Startup SC Program* played a pivotal role in strengthening Santa Catarina's ecosystem, ultimately establishing it as a model for other regions of the country. As highlighted by the Sebrae SC Portal (2022), since 2012 Sebrae Santa

Catarina became a reference hub for startups in Brazil due to its program, which currently offers a series of activities that include:

- A) Training and Mentoring: Through a series of workshops, lectures, and training sessions on business models, digital marketing, sales, and more, the program promises to connect mentors with entrepreneurs to facilitate their development.
- B) Networking: By holding events such as *meetups* and large conferences such as *Startup Summit*, the program commits itself to developing an extensive network of contacts among entrepreneurs, mentors, and investors.
- C) Access to Investment: All startups that undergo the training and acceleration process are coached and prepared to receive investment from venture capital funds or other sources at the end of the four-month training period.
- D) Support for Internationalization: The program also offers support to startups that wish to expand their businesses into international markets through business missions and participation in global fairs and events, such as the *Web Summit* in Lisbon, Portugal or the *TechCrunch Conference* in San Francisco, USA.

As we can see, the *Startup SC Program* transcends the typical functions of a private accelerator by not only identifying and accelerating emerging startups, but also actively fostering the broader innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystem in Florianópolis and Santa Catarina. Over the years, the program's initiatives have been pivotal in shaping not only the entrepreneurial culture of the local area but also that of the Brazilian startup ecosystem as a whole. They have been especially instrumental in introducing and reinforcing the "*startup mindset*" among entrepreneurs.

5.3.3 Public incentives, private innovations

As recognized by Sérgio Gargioni (2021), for the development of various innovation ecosystems,

economic subsidies, zero-interest loans, guarantee funds, venture capital, state purchasing power, incubators, accelerators, technology parks, and the

promotion of entrepreneurship generally constitute the menu offered by local, state, or national governments (idem, p. 125).¹²⁰

As he himself points out, the direct involvement of the State has been, and continues to be, crucial for the consolidation of the startup ecosystem in Florianópolis.

As previously mentioned, the Florianópolis municipal government played a significant role by setting the ISS contribution at 2% for software and service companies in the city, while other sectors contribute with 5%. However, beyond reducing the tax contribution at the municipal level, the government of the state of Santa Catarina also stands out as one of the most important financiers of the regional technology sector. Through the *Foundation for Research and Innovation Support of Santa Catarina* (FAPESC), a number of startups have had their projects funded by the state. Currently, according to information observed on the FAPESC Portal and at startup conferences I have attended during fieldwork, there are at least five public funding projects aimed at different stages of company development (Field Notebook, 14 Aug. 2024).¹²¹

A) The *Nascer Program* is an initiative by FAPESC in partnership with Sebrae SC. It offers support to entrepreneurs from the conception of the idea to the validation of the business model. While it does not provide participants with direct financial resources, it offers a range of services such as mentoring, consulting, and access to tools for business model development. The indirect value of the support provided can be estimated at around US\$ 6,000 to US\$ 10,000, considering the benefits delivered throughout the program.

B) The *Acelera SC Program* is a FAPESC initiative designed to support innovative companies in more advanced stages. It provides financial resources, ranging from US\$ 20,000 to US\$ 100,000, depending on the company's needs and the project's phase. In addition to funding, the program also offers training and mentoring for startups that already have a validated product or service and are seeking scalability and expansion.

¹²⁰ Translated freely from the original text: Subvenção econômica, juro zero, fundos de aval, venture capital, poder de compra do Estado, incubadoras, aceleradoras, parques tecnológicos e estímulo ao empreendedorismo geralmente constituem o cardápio oferecido por governos locais, estaduais ou nacionais (Gargioni, 2021, p. 125).

¹²¹ Beyond the funding programs offered by FAPESC, there are also other local startup financing initiatives that are carried out through local incubators. However, we will focus solely on FAPESC's programs due to their scale and statewide reach. For more information on FAPESC's programs, visit <https://fapesc.sc.gov.br/>.

C) The *Centelha Program* is an initiative to promote innovative entrepreneurship, carried out in partnership with Finep (Funding Authority for Studies and Projects). The program offers up to US\$ 12,000 per approved project, distributed in the form of economic subsidies. This funding is intended to cover expenses related to prototype development, market research, marketing, and other aspects necessary to turn an innovative idea into a viable business.

D) The *TechInova Program* primarily targets companies seeking to develop new products or services based on cutting-edge technology. Therefore, it focuses on research and technological development projects. The amounts granted can vary from US\$ 40,000 to US\$ 200,000, with part of the funding potentially being matched by the participating companies.

E) The *Impulsiona Program* by FAPESC aims to accelerate the growth of startups and emerging companies in Santa Catarina. It offers financial contributions that can range from US\$ 30,000 to US\$ 100,000, depending on the startup's stage. Additionally, the program may include mentoring and access to investor networks.

All these programs consistently emphasize their aim of promoting and fostering entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic development through the creation of new businesses. In doing so, they reinforce the dominant ideology of private property, capital accumulation, and entrepreneurship as the sole viable path, positioning the entrepreneur as a “*hero*” willing to take risks in the development of their own enterprise. Moreover, these programs represent the allocation of public investments to the benefit of private companies, highlighting the alliance between the State and the interests of capital, where costs are socialized while profits are privatized.

In addition to public funding and incentives, startups in Florianópolis also benefit from the support of angel investors and small venture funds, whether local or international. The first angel investor network in southern Brazil, *Floripa Angels*, was established in 2007. However, at that time, there were not enough startups to absorb the capital that was becoming available. Consequently, partnerships with ACATE and SEBRAE were crucial not only in encouraging the emergence of new startups, but also in fostering angel investors willing to make small investments ranging from US\$ 4,000 to US\$ 8,000. In 2015, the *Floripa Angels* group transformed into the *Santa Catarina Angel Investor Network (RIA)* with the goal of attracting startups from across the entire state of Santa Catarina, rather than just from Florianópolis (Cazado, 2021).

Following the development pattern of the Brazilian startup ecosystem, the first venture capital funds in Florianópolis (*Triaxis* and *Bzplan*) also emerged in 2010 and 2011, making investments in some of the first successful local startups, which were soon acquired by larger companies from São Paulo (Wolowski, 2021). Both funds remain active today, but have merged with other groups, expanding their investment networks across Brazil. Although local funds operate with smaller amounts compared to those in the United States, due to their more modest scale, they follow the same investment logic outlined in the first chapter of this thesis. Specifically, they operate speculatively, seeking to invest in companies with potential for growth and scalability, with the aim of receiving a return greater than the initial investment. After all, “the investor *wants* to exit the partnership or *disinvest* in the future” (Wolowski, 2021, p. 138, emphasis added).¹²²

5.3.4 Towards the internationalization of a local ecosystem

As previously discussed, many startups and venture capital funds originating from Florianópolis have gradually expanded their reach, first regionally and nationally, and eventually setting their sights on international markets. This section delves into how this ecosystem prioritizes internationalization to meet the demands of scaling their products and services globally.

According to startup enthusiasts, a central tenet of Silicon Valley’s entrepreneurial philosophy is the principle of “*going global*”. This mindset reflects the nature of the capitalist market, which operates on a global scale. As Leandro Piazza (2023) observes, “building a dream to remain confined to one’s language and borders runs counter to the winning [Californian] mindset” (p. 99).¹²³ Thus, while the ideology of “*going global*” is closely associated with Silicon Valley, startups from various regions, including Florianópolis, are in fact responding to global flows of capital, which seek to maximize returns by moving across borders.

But what does internationalization actually entail for startups? Broadly, internationalization can take three forms: exporting software services (which, as previously discussed, remains a slow-moving trend in Brazil); establishing operations

¹²² Translated freely from the original text: o investidor quer sair da sociedade ou desinvestir no futuro (Wolowski, 2021, p. 138).

¹²³ Translated freely from the original text: construir um sonho para fiar limitado à sua língua e a suas fronteiras vai na contramão do *mindset* vencedor [californiano] (Piazza, 2023, p. 99).

abroad, typically in Latin America or European countries like Portugal; or attracting foreign investment, often from USA-based venture capital funds.

Given the complexities involved, internationalization is a significant challenge for Brazilian startups, which is why many rely on public institutions for support. One key organization in this process is the *Brazilian Trade and Investment Promotion Agency* (ApexBrasil). As an example of internationalization efforts, in 2022 alone, ApexBrasil supported 71 Brazilian startups with plans to expand their operations internationally, with a focus on markets in Portugal, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates (Bazuchi *et al.*, 2023). During my brief participation in the 2023 *Viva Technology Conference* in Paris, I was struck by the presence of a booth showcasing several Brazilian startups. Conversations with the entrepreneurs revealed that ApexBrasil had facilitated their participation. This highlights the agency's critical role, not only in promoting international expansion, but also in showcasing Brazilian startups at prominent global tech events.

In fact, “*international trade missions*” have historically been crucial to both the Brazilian startup ecosystem and the emerging ecosystem in Florianópolis. These “*missions*”, sometimes supported by public funding, are typically organized with specific economic or technological objectives, targeting countries that represent potential markets or serve as models for technological advancements that Brazil seeks to import (Leipnitz, 2023). Participants regularly attend international fairs such as *Web Summit* (Lisbon, Portugal), *TechCrunch* (San Francisco, USA), and *SXSW* (Austin, USA). These events also offer opportunities to engage with accelerators, venture capital funds, local companies, and government or industry representatives. While Silicon Valley was the primary destination in the early 2010s, the scope of these missions has since broadened to include other innovation hubs like Portugal, Israel, and South Korea. Several of these international missions have been organized within the *Startup SC Program*.

Overall, these international missions are more than just business trips—they serve as vital channels for the transmission of global entrepreneurial ideologies. Entrepreneurs and lobbyists frequently describe these experiences as “*eye-opening*,” reshaping their perspectives on their own businesses and local ecosystems. Upon returning to Brazil, it is common to see attempts to “*improve*” the local startup culture, often influenced by the practices and ideologies observed abroad.

It was a sunny, mild late afternoon in the fall of 2014 in East Asia. I was sitting on a bus on my way back to Seoul from Daejeon, a city in central South Korea, when I had a *life-changing insight*, almost like a *formula for how to make things work*.

Tired from an intense day of learning, with the sun streaming in through the bus window, I looked at the scenery on the way and wondered how Koreans manage to have such a *uniform vision of their future*. How could it be that, after visits with representatives from various organizations, they all had exactly the same vision?

This led me to a series of reflections on the importance of orchestrating the players in an innovation ecosystem in order for it to thrive. I humbly write here that this was fundamental in awakening the importance of all the leaders sitting down at the same table and writing a plan for the future of Santa Catarina. This changed our reality and, in the following four years, we grew twice as fast as the rest of Brazil in terms of the number of technology companies (Leipnitz, 2023, p.83, emphasis added).¹²⁴

As we can observe, the startup lobbyist and investor above was deeply invested in crafting a “*unified vision*” for the Santa Catarina economy, one that mirrored the entrepreneurial liberal values and practices observed abroad. In general, stakeholders like him do not hesitate to actively shape public policies to promote neoliberal economic frameworks that align local ecosystems with global capitalist principles. Consequently, internationalization for Brazilian startups seems to be less about directly exporting services or software and more about aligning with broader neoliberal ideologies, thereby positioning themselves to integrate seamlessly into global markets.

When discussing international missions, we are fundamentally addressing a strategic process in which investors and entrepreneurs travel abroad to establish networks, with the dual aims of exporting services and attracting venture capital. However, market expansion also entails establishing operations in foreign countries, which introduces new challenges—particularly regarding the capacity of their workforce to operate effectively in an international context. One of the most

¹²⁴ Translated freely from the original text: Era um final de tarde ensolarado e ameno do outono de 2014, na Ásia Oriental. Eu estava sentado em um ônibus, voltando de Daejeon, cidade na região central da Coreia do Sul, a caminho de Seul, quando tive um aprendizado que mudou a minha vida, quase como uma fórmula de como fazer as coisas funcionarem. Cansado de um dia intenso de aprendizados, com aquele solzinho entrando pela janela do ônibus, olhava a paisagem no caminho e pensava como os coreanos conseguem ter uma visão tão uniforme sobre o seu futuro. Como era possível, após visitas com representantes de diversas organizações, todos apresentarem exatamente a mesma visão? Isso me levou a uma série de reflexões sobre a importância da orquestração dos atores de um ecossistema de inovação para fazer com que ele prospere. Com toda humildade, escrevo aqui que isso foi fundamental para o despertar da importância de que todas as lideranças se sentassem na mesma mesa e escrevessem o plano de futuro para Santa Catarina. Isso mudou nossa realidade e, nos quatro anos seguintes, crescemos o dobro do resto do Brasil no que tange à quantidade de empresas de tecnologia (Leipnitz, 2023, p.83).

significant barriers is language proficiency, which remains a critical factor for global engagement.

According to research by the British Council, only 5.1% of Brazilians aged 16 and older report any knowledge of English, and fewer than 1% possess advanced or fluent proficiency (Noronha, 2023). This linguistic limitation poses a significant obstacle to the ability of startups to scale globally, especially given the dominance of English in international business and the tech sector. In response, many companies offer English language courses as an employee benefit, underscoring the “*pedagogical*” need to train their workforce to compete on a global scale. This investment in language training reflects a broader attempt to bridge the gap between Brazil’s local labor force and the linguistic demands of internationalization.

In cases where language barriers persist, companies often turn to foreign employees. Immigrants play a growing role in this dynamic. For instance, one of my interlocutors, Lara, a Colombian national who migrated to Brazil in the 2010s, has worked in various startups in Florianópolis, particularly in roles focused on international expansion into Latin American markets. Her cultural and linguistic fluency in Portuguese and Spanish has positioned her as a key asset in navigating cross-border operations.

Conversely, the reverse scenario is equally common: Foreign companies seeking to enter the Brazilian market frequently hire English-Portuguese bilingual professionals to facilitate their expansion. These workers often act as intermediaries, bridging the cultural and linguistic divide between foreign management and the Brazilian market. This process highlights the fluidity of parts of the workforce within the global tech ecosystem, where linguistic skills and cross-cultural competencies are increasingly seen as essential assets in a company’s growth strategy.

In short, the internationalization of Brazilian startups is a multifaceted process that extends beyond simply exporting products or attracting foreign capital. It entails a profound alignment with global entrepreneurial ideologies and underscores the necessity for capital to mold the labor force in accordance with its requirements for international expansion.

5.3.5 Magical-Silicon Island?

As we have discussed so far, Florianópolis is often referred to as the “*Silicon Island*” by startup entrepreneurs that draw a direct parallel with Silicon Valley in California. According to the prevailing discourse among local entrepreneurs and the media, “both there and here, the setting is coastal, with the sea and beautiful nature, but what seems merely inspirational is, in fact, a favorable condition for creating this [innovative and digital] environment” (Inácio, 2023).¹²⁵ This notion, combined with the city’s high quality of life and the myth of the “*Magic Island*”, has fostered the idea that in Florianópolis, it is possible to balance leisure, quality of life, and work—despite persistent infrastructural problems.

Much like Silicon Valley, which is located in California’s Bay Area near beaches and natural parks, Florianópolis also cultivates a lifestyle where outdoor sports like cycling, surfing, canoeing and kite surfing are common pursuits. Enthusiasts of these activities and tech entrepreneurship often advocate for a certain work-life balance that prioritizes flexibility and freedom in the workplace (Alexandre, 2023). In Silicon Valley, entrepreneurs emphasize the “*work hard, play hard*” ethos, where “*play hard*” refers not just to working intensely, but also to embracing a lifestyle that includes fun and personal fulfillment. Furthermore, given Silicon Valley’s status as a multicultural hub, it attracts talent from all over the world, creating a melting pot of progressive elites.

In a similar fashion, Florianópolis’ entrepreneurial community draws cultural parallels with the Bay Area that extend beyond economic ambition. They position the island as a place where residents can surf in the morning, work in the afternoon, and relax or enjoy themselves on the weekends, blending the island’s mystical aura with a culture of technological innovation. This narrative intertwines the island’s natural beauty with the idea of an ideal work-life balance, where the “*magic*” of the city complements its forward-thinking, entrepreneurial spirit.

Thus, in the early 2010s, the city first emerged as a magnet for entrepreneurs, who were drawn not only by the natural beauty and quality of life but also by various tax incentives offered for setting up businesses in the city. Shortly thereafter, the city also became a magnet for skilled workers in the technology sector. These professionals were initially drawn by promises of career growth in rapidly expanding

¹²⁵ Translated freely from the original text: Tanto lá quanto cá, o cenário é praiano, com mar e bela natureza, mas o que parece apenas uma inspiração é, na verdade, uma boa condição para se criar esse ambiente [inovador e digital] (Inácio, 2023).

companies, followed by competitive salaries, and most importantly, the allure of living by the beach while enjoying nature and outdoor sports.

As is frequently observed, Brazil faces a chronic shortage of skilled labor in the technology sector (ABES, 2023), and Florianópolis is no exception. By 2020, hundreds of workers from other Brazilian states—including São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul, and Minas Gerais—had migrated to Florianópolis to work for the city's growing tech companies. This influx of talent, however, is not a completely new phenomenon. According to the 2022 Census, approximately 53.3% of Florianópolis residents were originally from other cities (IBGE, 2022). While the local tech hub did not attract all of these people, it has certainly benefited from a migratory trend that has been occurring since the 1960s, thus expanding the city's labor pool.

In recent years, *knowledge workers* have increasingly migrated to Florianópolis, drawn by the promise of well-paying jobs in the technology sector without having to sacrifice the highly sought-after quality of life the city offers. However, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the institutionalization of remote work, the relationship between tech professionals, their jobs, and the city itself has undergone significant shifts. As previously mentioned, startups were among the first companies to transition to remote operations in 2020, and many have maintained this model since then. Consequently, Florianópolis has not only attracted workers from other regions but also become a popular destination for digital nomads alike.

Platforms such as *Nomad List* estimate that between 2018 and 2023 (excluding 2020 due to the pandemic), the number of remote workers in Florianópolis surged by 152%, making it the second most popular destination for remote work in the world (Muller, 2023). As a result, the city now serves as a hub not only for local tech professionals, but also for workers employed by companies and startups based in other regions.

Additionally, a study conducted by the Institute for *Applied Economic Research*, *ipea* estimated that, in 2022, approximately 40.4% of Florianópolis residents had the potential to work remotely (Góes *et al.*, 2023). The study defines telework as a form of remote employment that relies on personal electronic devices—such as computers, mobile or landline phones, and tablets—while excluding workers engaged in service provision or e-commerce via digital platforms. The study further revealed that the majority of those capable of telework were women (58.3%), white

(60%), held a higher education degree (62.6%), and were aged between 20 and 49 (71.8%). This profile, despite the gender imbalance, closely mirrors the general demographic of workers in the tech sector (Góes *et al.*, 2023).

These findings provide insight into how the trend of remote work among technology professionals in cities like Florianópolis has taken hold. For the vast majority of respondents, one of the main advantages of their jobs was the ability to work remotely while enjoying flexible hours. These factors are seen as essential for achieving a balance between work, leisure, and quality of life.

Moreover, during this thesis' interviews, it became clear that many workers, particularly during the pandemic, had shifted away from local companies based in Florianópolis in favor of remote job opportunities with tech firms in other major cities like São Paulo and Curitiba, or even internationally. One of the primary reasons for this “digital migration” was the higher wages offered by foreign and out-of-state companies. This shift allowed workers to earn higher salaries—comparable to those in São Paulo, for instance—without having to forgo the lifestyle associated with living near Florianópolis' peaceful beaches. However, this strategy has presented new challenges since the easing of the pandemic, as some of these employees are now required to travel to their company's headquarters—often in São Paulo—on a monthly basis, necessitating frequent flights to the megalopolis.

Another trend that has emerged is that companies based in Florianópolis have increasingly begun recruiting workers from other regions of Brazil. As a result, some of the city's startups and scale-ups now employ a significant number of remote workers from outside the local area, enhancing the characteristics of *flexible capitalism* we mentioned earlier. In general, these developments highlight how advancements in communication technologies, which are integral to the tech sector, have facilitated the geographic dispersion of the workforce. Which makes it impossible to confine Florianópolis' tech ecosystem to a single, fixed location. Instead, the city has evolved into a *hyper-lieux* (Lussault, 2017)—a global, interconnected ecosystem that links different parts of the world while also celebrating its forged identity as a high quality of life and innovative city.

In summary, Florianópolis' evolution as a technological hub reflects not only the city's ambition to emulate Silicon Valley's innovative spirit but also its ability to capitalize on a lifestyle that blends work, nature, and leisure. By intertwining economic growth with cultural narratives of freedom, flexibility, and quality of life, the

“National Capital of Startups” has positioned itself as a prime destination for both entrepreneurs and skilled professionals looking for a balanced, fulfilling life. The question of how much these professionals are actually able to enjoy the benefits of the city, however, will be explored in greater detail in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

5.4 PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

In order to gain a more precise understanding of the real economic contribution of startup ecosystems within the Brazilian economy, this chapter began by analyzing the broader ICT sector before focusing more closely on the ISSTi sector. It is within ISSTi, we believe, that most startups—primarily software-producing companies—are concentrated. By following this analytical approach, we have observed that the Brazilian startup field remains relatively modest when compared to other productive sectors of the economy. Nonetheless, this reality tends to be obscured by the discourse of influencers, investors, and entrepreneurs, who consistently promote startups as *“engines of the Brazilian economy and society.”* This narrative not only amplifies the sector’s economic relevance but also reinforces the ideological weight that the startup sector carries within broader economic and social discussions.

Building on this observation, we also explored key aspects of the historical development of the startup ecosystem, both at the national level and in Florianópolis specifically. We found that the histories of these ecosystems are deeply interconnected. While Florianópolis often asserts that the origins of its ecosystem trace back to the 1980s—thus positioning itself as one of the most developed ecosystems in Brazil—our findings suggest that the startup movement in the region only truly began to consolidate after the 2010s. Over the course of that decade, a range of associations and organizations emerged with the explicit aim of formalizing and reinforcing these new entrepreneurial communities. As Pfeilstetter (2017) noted in other startup ecosystems, one of the primary strategies of this dynamic and continuously evolving sector has been to strengthen the visibility of startup communities through the strategic use of data, further legitimizing their presence in the economy.

This historical perspective leads us to a crucial point: the development of both national and local startup ecosystems required significant *pedagogical efforts* (Gramsci, 2013), particularly on the part of the new entrepreneurial elites. In order to cultivate a robust startup culture within the country, these elites undertook a series of “*educational and inspirational*” initiatives aimed at producing new subjects: individuals who are characterized by their adaptability, competitiveness, global outlook, and fluency not only in English but also in the specialized lexicon of technology and startups. This effort to construct a startup-friendly environment relied heavily on success stories that helped shape the entrepreneurial mindset in Brazil. The creation of the startup ecosystems in Brazil and Santa Catarina required not only the mobilization of capital but also the *reshaping of subjectivities* (Dardot; Laval, 2013)—both of the working class, which needed to be integrated as a labor force, and of potential entrepreneurs, who were encouraged to invest their resources into the creation of new companies. These startups, in turn, became fuel for the venture funds that were beginning to emerge across the country.

However, despite the self-sustaining narrative surrounding startups as “*instruments of social transformation, capable of providing individuals with greater autonomy from governmental structures,*” (Field Notebook, 21 Nov. 2021) the reality is that these ecosystems would not have thrived without critical support from government frameworks. Public-private initiatives, as we have seen, were instrumental in laying the foundation for the Brazilian startup ecosystem. As was the case in Santa Catarina, in other regions of Brazil, entrepreneurs and community leaders actively engaged with public infrastructure, such as university incubators and technological parks, to foster innovation ecosystems aligned with the principles of technological capitalism. In this process, they leveraged public infrastructure, tax incentives, and small amounts of public funding while attempting to import and adapt the Silicon Valley model of company development.

In this context, Brazilian startup ecosystems offer a compelling case for analyzing how neoliberal ideals are integrated with public infrastructures to create new private entities. Incubators, technological parks, and public funds—which could have been allocated to public Research and Development (R&D) programs, for example—have increasingly been redirected toward startup development. These startups are positioned as innovative entities, fulfilling the goals of R&D, even though their ultimate objective is often private profit rather than public benefit. This

redirection of public resources underscores the role of the State in fostering an environment conducive to private enterprise under the guise of innovation.

Furthermore, this analysis would be incomplete without acknowledging the systemic precarization of the tech working class, as early-stage companies often hire employees as independent contractors, thereby stripping them of essential labor rights—a process that has often been masked by *high transition salaries* (Gramsci, 2020). Nevertheless, we have observed that massive layoffs have been occurring within the tech industry, particularly since 2022. This contradiction between attractive salaries and job instability points to a broader trend of labor precariousness in the sector. Additionally, the low levels of unionization we observed suggest that this segment of the working class is poorly organized, making it difficult for them to resist the increasing precarity and intensification of work. The lack of a robust labor organization, combined with the rapid pace of change within the industry, has left the tech workforce vulnerable to fluctuating labor demands. Therefore, we can assume that the lack of collective regulation in startups makes it difficult to prevent problems such as burnout, as these companies tend to be less shielded from the relentless rhythms of the capitalist machine due to fewer regulatory protections.

As we will explore in the following chapters, these dynamics are essential for understanding the current condition of the tech working class. Their work environment, shaped by the promises of innovation and the realities of precarious labor, has direct implications for their health and well-being. By examining how issues like mental health, diversity, and job stability (and instability) are addressed—or neglected—within these ecosystems, we can gain deeper insight into the broader social and economic forces that shape the contemporary tech industry.

Lastly, the startup ecosystem in Florianópolis provides a particularly revealing vantage point for examining how labor precarity can coexist with high salaries. This paradox manifests as both *objective precarity*—where workers forgo basic labor rights in exchange for competitive wages—and *subjective precarity*, which demands unwavering engagement and self-discipline (Linhart, 2015). Within this framework, the *passion for work* (Leroux, 2015) and innovation becomes deeply interwoven with stress and burnout, highlighting the contradictions inherent in the startup work culture. This context allows for an examination of the disparities between entrepreneurial and elitist discourses, and the day-to-day realities faced by workers. Most importantly, Florianópolis provides a key site for analyzing how workers

navigate survival within the fragmented and often unforgiving landscape of contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

6 SECOND INTERLUDE - AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON THE STARTUP FACTORY FLOOR

I joined Wxpto in April 2020 as a freelancer, becoming the fourth “employee” in a nascent, three-person company based in Florianópolis. At that time, the idea of hiring a full-time Marketing Content Producer seemed impractical for the company—not only was the team small, but the budget was stretched thin. Being hired as a freelancer suited me, though; I was in the midst of transitioning from my Master’s program to a PhD in Social Anthropology, and a part-time role in a startup aligned perfectly with my shifting academic priorities. So, I took on the role as independent contractor, embedded in the early days of a company still defining its objectives.

The pandemic had officially been declared in Brazil just a month prior on March 16th of 2020, so by the time I joined Wxpto, remote work was already the norm. My primary responsibility was to craft text and visual content for the company’s social media accounts (Instagram and LinkedIn) and to write more in-depth blog content for the website. In essence, my job was to help sell the “*company’s vision*”—or at the very least, to shape and communicate its brand and value proposition—while the platform itself was still under construction. As an early-stage startup in 2020, Wxpto’s business model was still evolving, and “we” were collectively searching for the right language to convey its purpose. Overall, the platform aimed to connect freelancers with businesses in need of design services, but this concept was still taking shape, much like the company itself.

Our small team consisted of the CEO, a software developer, an operations manager, and me. The CEO was responsible for “*pitching*” the company to potential clients, investors, and startup accelerators, while also overseeing platform development. The software developer focused on building the platform from the ground up, and the operations manager handled client relations, ensuring early adopters were satisfied and gathering insights into how we could improve. My role, in comparison, was relatively straightforward but crucial in setting the tone for the brand’s public presence.

Throughout those early months, my work with the company was steady, albeit limited in scope. Once a month, I’d meet online with the CEO to review the content strategy and communication agenda, then I’d write and produce the required materials, submitting them for his feedback before publication. Despite the minimal

contact, I was already part of a WhatsApp group where we shared both personal and professional updates. This channel kept me connected to the daily rhythm of the team, fostering a sense of belonging even from a distance. In this intimate startup environment, I had the chance to witness the company's ambitions and struggles up close, as we all worked to bring Wxpto's vision into focus during a period of unprecedented global uncertainty.

However, by mid-2020, everything began to change. While my role from April to June had been confined to content production, the CEO had spent his time "*pitching*" the company—selling not just to potential clients but also to investors and business accelerators. His efforts bore fruit at the start of the new semester, when he secured an initial round of funding from a local angel investor. Though the investment was modest, it provided a crucial twelve-month runway. For the first time, the company had the resources to expand its core team, aiming to build both its product and its revenue stream. Even more importantly, the investment validated Wxpto's value proposition in the eyes of an outsider; the company's vision was starting to resonate in the market.

With this momentum, the team quickly began to grow, and new subgroups started to form within the company. First, a second software developer joined to accelerate work on the platform—the heart of the business. A UX designer followed, tasked with refining the platform's interface to make it more user-friendly and intuitive. Alongside this expansion of the product team, the CEO brought in a growth strategist to help chart a path for scaling up, and a salesperson to connect the company directly with new clients and generate revenue.

The sequence of these hires reflected the dual priorities of the startup at this stage: first, to drive product development (with additional developers and UX expertise), and second, to fuel market expansion (with growth strategies and active sales efforts). In the context of a traditional business, it might seem unusual that I, a marketing content producer, had been hired before any of these roles. But in the world of startups, this order made perfect sense. The first step was to build a compelling brand narrative and clearly communicate the company's value proposition to attract interest and investment. Only once that groundwork was laid did the company move on to developing the platform itself and scaling its client base.

In this new phase, Wxpto was no longer a tiny operation held together by a handful of generalists; it was evolving into a structured, multi-disciplinary team with a

shared mission and a growing sense of “*purpose*”. The validation of the initial investment gave the startup confidence, and the arrival of new colleagues brought fresh energy. Even though many of these new hires were young and relatively inexperienced, to the CEO, this was an advantage. He saw an opportunity to “*shape and inspire*” a group of ambitious beginners with “*Wxpto’s DNA*”. Salaries were modest, and everyone, including the new recruits, was brought on as an independent contractor. But the CEO’s message was consistent: if we could make the company grow, we would grow with it. In time, he assured us, the founding team would be financially rewarded for the “*risks*” we were taking at that moment.

It was an enticing vision, and it worked—for some. The promise of future rewards and shared success is a powerful motivator in the startup world, one that shapes not only work identities but the very sense of self that employees bring to their roles. I remember when one of my coworkers, Thomas, posted a celebratory story on Instagram¹²⁶ about being part of Wxpto. In a sequence of heartfelt stories, he described joining the company as “*the beginning of a dream*” and spoke of it as “*building a path full of learning*.” He ended with an expression of gratitude to the company, adding that each person “*is responsible for chasing their own dreams*” in order to “*make it happen*.”

For him, Wxpto was not just a job—it was a journey, an opportunity to define himself and his ambitions through his work. His words, though part of the familiar startup rhetoric, felt sincere, charged with the hope and optimism that so often fuels young companies. I could see how, for those still new to the world of startups, this vision of personal and professional growth through collective effort held a deep allure.

And yet, from my vantage point, I knew how precarious such dreams could be. I had heard these promises before, the seductive language of shared success and eventual reward. Still, I could not deny the impact that startup narratives had on my coworker and others like him. It was a success story they wanted to believe, a story that gave their work “*meaning*”.

For most of my coworkers, both the startup mantra and the tech world itself were entirely new. Apart from the software developer and the designer, many were in their first startup job, still learning the language and rituals that defined this unfamiliar

¹²⁶ Stories is a feature on the social media platform Instagram that enables users to share photos, videos, and other content that disappears after 24 hours.

landscape. They were confronted with a steady stream of English terms commonly adopted in the Brazilian startup scene—*daily meetings*, *calls*, *feedbacks*, *one-on-ones*, *quarters*, *KPIs*, *ROI*, an odd layer of imported jargon in a Portuguese-speaking country. Some struggled to grasp these terms, while others wrestled with the demands of “*organizational soft skills*” and the pressure to track and optimize performance metrics.

With new hires arriving almost every month at Wxpto, the operations manager eventually instituted a formal “*onboarding*”¹²⁷ plan to smooth the transition. Each newcomer was now expected to spend their first two weeks immersed in training materials, studying the company’s value proposition and clarifying their role within it. This was not just a logistical exercise; it was an initiation into the startup culture, a crash course in the language and “*mindset*” of the Brazilian tech industry through the eyes of an emergent startup.

As part of the “*onboarding*”, new employees were also required to develop a “*Personal Development Plan*”. In this document, they outlined areas for improvement—whether it was mastering English tech jargon, enhancing time management, or strengthening their grasp of industry metrics—and set specific goals for growth. The aim was to foster a sense of ownership over their own professional development from the beginning, aligning each individual’s progress with the broader goals of the company.

For those new to the startup world, these rituals could be daunting, even overwhelming at times. Yet they also served as a rite of passage, marking the transformation from outsider to insider. Through “*onboarding*” plans, development goals, and online “*daily meetings*”, the company was turning a disparate group of novices into a team that spoke the same language, navigated the same metrics, and shared a common purpose. This process of adaptation and self-improvement became part of the collective identity, a defining feature of life at Wxpto.

However, in a growing startup, expansion is not just about adding new faces to the team; it is also about continually reshaping fragile work processes to adapt to an evolving dynamic. With each new hire, roles needed to be redefined, responsibilities

¹²⁷ As we will discuss in Chapter Three, the “*onboarding*” process is a structured approach designed to help new hires acclimate to the organization’s culture, values, workflows, and expectations. It also provides the necessary tools, resources, and knowledge for new employees to understand their specific responsibilities and how their role contributes to the company’s success.

redistributed, and a more structured meeting routine put in place to keep everyone aligned.

To help the remote team function smoothly, the CEO established a set of “*rituals*”—a series of “*daily*”, “*weekly*”, and “*monthly*” meetings designed to maintain alignment and cohesion. Every Monday from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m., the team would gather for “*weekly planning*” to set priorities for the days ahead. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, there was a brief “*daily*” check-in from 11:30 a.m. to noon, a quick touchpoint to keep everyone connected and updated on immediate tasks. Fridays were reserved for the “*review*” meeting, held from 5:00 to 6:30 p.m., where the team reflected on the week as a whole—sharing insights, challenges, and small victories. Beyond these fixed meetings, a steady flow of online ad-hoc gatherings would inevitably arise to address specific issues or urgent tasks.

During 2021, I could not always attend all of these meetings, as my PhD classes sometimes conflicted with the work schedule—a constant reminder that I was there not only as a coworker, but also as a researcher observing startup culture. Still, I could appreciate how essential these gatherings were. They provided team members with a rare chance to connect and build a sense of intimacy across the distance of remote work. I joined the review meetings whenever I could, along with the broader monthly planning sessions and, of course, the monthly content planning meetings that directly impacted my tasks. The content planning meeting was particularly important, as it set my agenda and priorities. The other meetings, while less directly related to my work, kept me informed about the company’s broader direction and offered a window into my coworkers’ lives. It was common for us to share a few personal stories along with our work updates, creating a unique space where connection and professional alignment intersected. In this way, these “*rituals*” did more than just keep the team organized; they fostered a shared sense of purpose and belonging, crucial for a remote team navigating the growing pains of a startup.

But it was not just the online meetings that kept us connected. We also had dedicated communication channels on Discord¹²⁸ and WhatsApp.¹²⁹ There were

¹²⁸ Discord is a communication platform designed to create communities and facilitate real-time interaction. Originally developed for gamers, it has expanded to serve a diverse range of users, including businesses. The platform supports text and voice messaging, as well as video calls and screen sharing, making it a versatile tool for collaboration and communication.

¹²⁹ WhatsApp is a widely used messaging and communication platform that enables users to send text messages, make voice and video calls, and share media. It also allows users to create groups with up to 256 participants (as of the latest updates in 2025) for shared conversations, media sharing, and coordination.

general groups that included the entire team, as well as smaller, function-specific groups. The Wxpto general WhatsApp group was where we shared links and news about the startup world, along with our opinions on the ecosystem itself. I remember my coworkers discussing the lack of real *“diversity”* in this male-dominated, mostly white space, a recurring theme in the company’s conversations. The WhatsApp group was also a place for celebration—whenever the company landed a major client, the entire team joined in, not just the salespeople. Messages like *“Let’s gooooo team!”* *“Onwards and upwards!”* *“This team is amazing!”* and *“This victory is thanks to everyone’s hard work!”* would flood the chat, creating a sense of collective achievement.

On Discord, however, the tone was more work focused. We used it for task notifications, project updates, and day-to-day organizational discussions, keeping the chatter mostly professional. In this blend of structured meetings and informal communication channels, Wxpto’s growing team was beginning to find its rhythm. Yet, as the company scaled, communication challenges continued to arise. Small conflicts began to surface, particularly as team members grappled with questions like *“Who is responsible for what? Who are the managers? Who are the subordinates?”*

Many tech startups like Wxpto start out with a *“horizontal”* structure, simply because there are not enough people to justify a hierarchy. In the early days, everyone wears multiple hats. Back in 2020, with a team of only four people, it was easy to bring everyone together for a single meeting where we could discuss tasks and responsibilities openly. But by 2021, with a team of seventeen people, this informal approach no longer worked. The division of labor now demanded a certain degree of hierarchy. Managers who had once been hands-on workers, juggling multiple tasks themselves, suddenly had to learn how to delegate, supervise, and—perhaps most importantly—serve as a bridge between their team and the company’s leadership. And it was in this shift, in this adjustment of roles, that tensions began to simmer.

I noticed that the managers at Wxpto were somewhat reluctant to embrace this new hierarchical structure. Yet, work requests were beginning to overlap, and projects were often interrupted as team members unknowingly stepped on each other’s toes. This led to frequent, and sometimes stressful, situations for employees. A prime example was the marketing team.

When I first joined Wxpto in April 2020, I was brought on as an external communications contractor, handling everything on my own—from defining the editorial line for blog and social media content to writing, designing, and posting. By April 2021, a year later, I was no longer a lone operator; I was part of a “*team*.” What had been a one-person job was now shared among four of us, with a coordinator, a designer, a SEO specialist, and myself as the writer.

By May 2021, we had only been working in this new setup for two months, and we were still finding our footing. Just as we were beginning to settle into our roles, a new hire joined the sales team and started “throwing ideas” our way, requesting actions from the marketing team that did not quite fit into our freshly reorganized structure. We found ourselves navigating the competing demands of our team and the sales department. In response, we aimed to establish clear boundaries by acknowledging the sales team’s proactivity and creativity while respectfully explaining that we were not yet in a position to fulfill their requests. We needed time to solidify our new processes and were not ready to disrupt them—not yet.

To address tensions like these, the People Manager—a one-person HR department—set up a series of feedback tools and methodologies designed to keep “*teams aligned*.” As a result, although conflicts between teams, employees and leaderships were clearly present, they were rarely acknowledged as conflicts. Instead, they were labeled as “*communication issues*” that could be resolved through “*feedback sessions*” mediated by a software platform. This approach kept the atmosphere calm on the surface, but beneath it, the challenges of scaling remained—and parallel gossip channels on WhatsApp emerged among smaller groups of employees, providing a space to voice complaints about their work routines.

As the startup grew, so did the complexity of navigating roles, boundaries, and expectations. And in this evolving structure, it was clear that Wxpto was still learning how to strike a balance between ambition and cohesion, between the rapid growth it aspired to and the stability it needed to sustain. Nevertheless, a month after the tense mediation efforts between the marketing and sales teams, we had to drop our internal battles and change course anyway. Suddenly, we had bigger fish to fry. The CEO had brought in an external financial consultancy to map out all the company’s processes and activities, and their evaluation revealed a serious bottleneck in sales. The consultancy determined that although the company’s cash flow was strong, it was still fundamentally unstable. Our “*runway*” was shrinking fast as the last of the

investors' money dwindled, and if we hoped to make it through to the end of the year, we would need to improve our sales and accelerate market expansion.

But the problem was deeper than sales alone. The software platform—the core of our business—still was not ready, which meant the company had to keep hiring people to handle grunt work that could only be automated once the platform was fully operational. We were caught in a loop: we needed more sales to survive, but to increase sales, we needed a finished platform. And to finish the platform, we needed more money coming in. It felt like we were perpetually one step away from a solution that remained just out of reach.

From my perspective, this kind of crisis was not unusual for a growing startup. Yet it triggered a cascade of changes throughout the entire company. My manager soon called an urgent meeting to explain the situation. *“We’re not hitting the quota for this quarter,”* he said. *“And if we want to reach our annual goal, we’ll need to change course immediately.”* The entire company was called to join a *“task force movement.”* *“Drop everything you’re doing. We’ll be revising our annual plan. Details will be provided in Friday’s meeting,”* the CEO announced in the company’s WhatsApp group. The content plan our marketing team had just finalized for June 2021 was already obsolete. We would need to scrap it and create a new one aligned with the company’s urgent and more aggressive sales objectives.

From the outside, it might look like startups operate under well-planned strategies, given the abundance of organizational methodologies they adopt. At the end of each year, startups typically set ambitious growth targets for the year ahead. At the start of each quarter, they review and update their Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).¹³⁰ External consultants and mentors are frequently brought in to advise on the *“best path”* to achieve these targets. It almost creates the illusion that everything is under control.

But in practice, as an employee embedded in the chaos of a fledgling startup, I found myself watching my plans go up in smoke nearly every month as new crises unfolded. Sometimes it was because the company’s overall strategy had shifted;

¹³⁰ Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) is a goal-setting framework widely used by startups and organizations to define and track measurable goals and outcomes. It focuses on achieving clear, actionable objectives by identifying key results that indicate progress. One of its primary benefits is alignment, ensuring that everyone in the organization works toward the same goals. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), on the other hand, are measurable values used to evaluate the success of an organization, team, or individual. They serve as critical metrics that provide insights into performance, progress, and areas for improvement. A key benefit of KPIs is accountability, as they hold teams and individuals responsible for achieving specific performance targets.

other times, a new demand would come down unexpectedly from the top, or an unanticipated issue would arise—like a new feature requested by a client that we suddenly needed to market. I learned that I always needed an ace up my sleeve—or, in my case, an extra content idea ready to go—to keep things moving forward, no matter how many times we changed direction.

It became clear to me that startups invest countless hours in planning and “*alignment rituals*” in an attempt to control and manage their sky-high goals. But because those targets and projections are often exceedingly ambitious, the day-to-day can feel volatile, with everyone in the company constantly scrambling to chase after nearly impossible numbers set by investor expectations and financial forecasts.

The result was a strange blend of frenetic urgency and disciplined planning rituals, as if we could tame the inherent instability of startup life through sheer force of structure and process. But the reality was less tidy: we were all running on shifting ground, adapting and readapting in real time, hoping that each frantic “*pivot*”¹³¹ might bring us a little closer to the market stability we so desperately needed.

My original plan was to work at Wxpto from April 2020 to April 2021. But when I spoke to the CEO early that year, he asked me to stay a little longer—just until the company had enough cash flow to hire a full-time replacement for my role. Then July 2021 arrived, along with the “*task force*” push, and they asked me to stay a bit longer. The company needed to cut costs and scale according to investors' demands, so hiring a new writer for the marketing team was postponed. August came, and to everyone's surprise, Thomas—at that moment, my manager who had often declared his love for the company—was let go. Again, it was not a good time for me to quit the company.

Over time, Thomas had worn many hats—salesman, marketing coordinator, head of growth—which meant he was deeply connected with people across the company. His roles had brought him in contact with nearly every team, making him a familiar face and a central figure in the company's daily rhythm. Therefore, the announcement of his departure was a chock to everyone, including myself. According to him, his departure was the result of gradual wear and tear. His relationship with the CEO had frayed over time, and he felt that his growth within the company had hit a ceiling. As he put it in a parallel conversation through WhatsApp,

¹³¹ Pivoting is a common practice for startups that need to adapt in order to survive, grow, or capitalize on new opportunities. It involves a strategic shift in a company's business model, product, or target market, and is often pursued when the current strategy fails to achieve the desired results.

the company was either “*too small*” for his ambitions or lacked the necessary momentum to bring his ideas to life.

Thomas announced his departure to the marketing team on a Monday. By the end of the week, he would be gone. What struck me most was how he framed his exit as the natural culmination of a larger cycle in his life. It was a season of change for him: he had ended a long-term relationship and now, left Wxpto—all in the span of a few days. “*It was meant to be,*” he said. “*I’m not leaving anything undone. This is the end of a cycle.*”

The news left the team reeling. For many of my coworkers, this was not just a professional departure; it felt like a personal loss. Thomas was not just a coworker; he was a friend. After Thomas’ dismissal, I was asked once again to stay on for a few more weeks. The company could not afford to lose two members of the marketing team at the same time. So I stayed through August and into September 2021. Then, at last, a new round of investment came through, allowing the company to hire two new people—a new marketing coordinator and a content writer. Finally, after 18 months with Wxpto, I was able to say my goodbyes and step away from the company.

In the end, the team I left behind looked very different from the one I had joined. The company was no longer the early-stage startup it had been, it was shifting into something more structured, a bit more mature in spite of the constant changes. Also, my role as a part-time worker no longer fit their needs. By the time I said my goodbyes, Wxpto required full-time, fully committed employees—people willing to dive in headfirst and take on the next wave of challenges, the inevitable new “*task forces*” that lay ahead.

The startup was growing up, and with that growth came the need for a different kind of energy, a different level of dedication. As I stepped away, I realized that my time there had been part of the company’s formative stage. Now, it was ready for a new chapter, and so was I.

7 PART II - THE STARTUP FACTORY FLOOR

In the first part of this thesis, we established a foundational understanding of the macro-level dynamics of the startup ecosystem and contextualized the fieldwork upon which this study is based. Now, in the second part, we turn our attention to a detailed examination of how work is structured within startups, leading to an analysis

of the social profiles of workers in this industry. Recognizing that this category of workers is embedded in distinctive relations of domination, we aim to identify broader patterns within this specific form of labor control (Leite Lopes, 1988) that characterize work in the startup sector.

Accordingly, in the third chapter, we will analyze how work organization varies across different stages of startup development. From the early stages through periods of rapid growth to late-stage consolidation, we will examine how startups evolve as organizations shaped by power dynamics, influence, strategic maneuvering, and negotiation processes (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977). As these companies develop, their organizational structures tend to grow increasingly complex and hierarchical, reshaping work dynamics and reinforcing mechanisms of control.

In the fourth chapter, we will examine how work organization evolved with the widespread adoption of remote work following the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we will explore how workers have navigated and continue to navigate remote, hybrid, and in-office work arrangements after the reopening of physical workspaces. Additionally, we will analyze how the flexibilization of workspaces has led to an increasing encroachment of work time into personal time, blurring the boundaries between professional and private life. In response, we will investigate the strategies and negotiations workers employ in an effort to carve out and preserve spaces for leisure and well-being.

In the fifth chapter, we will turn our attention to the socio-demographic composition of startup workers and examine how Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) policies have been leveraged in recent years to reshape the image of an industry historically dominated by white, heterosexual, cisgender men. Furthermore, we will analyze how these policies intersect—and at times conflict—with class dynamics and the broader dismantling of organized labor resistance, which has become increasingly scarce and fragmented in this sector. Lastly, we will explore the emergence of distinct patterns of behavior within this workforce, illustrating how aspirations for belonging, fulfillment, and professional success—as well as the frustrations that accompany them—are shaped within startup work environments.

This section of the thesis is primarily based on the 55 interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024 with the 30 research participants. By mapping the structural and subjective dimensions of work in startups, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conditions that shape workers' experiences, aspirations, and

limitations. This analysis sets the stage for the third and final part of the thesis, where we will examine how the tensions inherent in this work environment—marked by high demands, precarious stability, and the erosion of collective support—culminate in stress and burnout. In doing so, we will explore how workers navigate these pressures, the coping and resistance mechanisms they develop, and the broader implications of burnout as a structural, rather than merely individual, phenomenon in the startup ecosystem.

8 CHAPTER 3 – “THE ANATOMY OF A STARTUP ORGANIZATION”

In this thesis, we start from the premise that understanding suffering and well-being in the tech sector necessitates a critical examination of how work environments in this industry are structured. Therefore, this chapter explores the *organization of work* in startups, tracing its evolution through various stages of development and the *managerialist ideology* that underpins it (Gaulejac, 2007).

However, before engaging in this analysis, it is essential to first establish a clear definition of work as a category and the theoretical lens through which it will be examined. Marie-Anne Dujarier (2018) suggests that the concept of work can be approached from three distinct perspectives: anthropological (social), economic, and legal.

From a social perspective, work is understood as the performance of an activity guided by an objective. In this view, and drawing on Ricardo Antunes (2009), work is seen as a vital activity—a means by which human beings establish their place in the world and a space for sociability.

From an economic perspective, work is defined as the production of *value*, crystallized in the form of commodities. In other words, as the production of *use values*, necessary for human subsistence, and *value* carried out in the form of wages in capitalist society (Marx, 2023). Work, in this sense, becomes *labor*: a central activity to the process of capital accumulation.

Finally, from a legal perspective, work is understood in terms of its institutionalized forms of employment. This includes distinctions between formal and informal employment, often determined by the regulatory frameworks of nation-states, which define work through contracts, protections, and obligations—or the lack thereof.

As Antunes (2009) articulates, work, as a social activity, holds an inherently emancipatory potential, capable of endowing human existence with meaning. He states that “in the long history of human activity, in its incessant struggle for survival and social happiness [...] work is, in and of itself, a vital activity” (idem, p. 12).¹³² However, under the capitalist economic model, this emancipatory potential becomes subordinated to the logic of alienation. The author explains that “devoid of a humanly

¹³² Translated freely from the original text: Na longa história da atividade humana, em sua incessante luta pela sobrevivência e felicidade social [...] o trabalho é, em si e por si, uma atividade vital (Antunes, 2009, p. 12).

significant orientation, capital assumes, in its process, a logic in which the *use value* of things has been totally subordinated to their *exchange value*" (ibidem, p. 18).¹³³ Consequently, workers are exploited for the extraction of surplus value from their labor power. In this process, the meaning and emancipatory potential of work are appropriated by the capitalist system, where alienation becomes "capital's struggle to survive, capital's struggle to subordinate labor [...] capital's incessant struggle for power" (Holloway *apud* Antunes, 2009, p. 132).¹³⁴

In addition to being subsumed under the capitalist economic model, work today is shaped by the specific legal and structural conditions imposed by the *techno-neoliberal capitalist* framework (Palermo; Ventrici, 2023). This contemporary configuration not only intensifies economic imperatives but also reconfigures the very boundaries of work and labor, introducing new challenges to their definition and regulation. A key driver of these transformations lies in the disruptions and restructuring brought about by digital platforms (Dujarier, 2018), which blur the lines between employment and entrepreneurship, autonomy and subordination, formal and informal employment. As Antunes (2009) highlights, "despite the appearance that a system of regulation can override capital, and ultimately control it, its uncontrollability is a consequence of its own fractures" (p. 24).¹³⁵ These fractures become increasingly evident in the ongoing deregulation of employment relations, dismantling many of the protective structures and rights that had been consolidated throughout the 20th century. What emerges, then, is a landscape in which precarization is not merely an outcome but a structural feature of contemporary capitalism, demanding a reassessment of traditional labor categories and power dynamics.

As extensively discussed by several theorists (Harvey, 1992; Sennett, 1997; Boltanski; Chiapello, 1999; Gaulejac, 2007; Bernard, 2020; Linhart, 2023), the deliberate dismantling of the Fordist/Taylorist model of stable employment has given way to precarious, flexible, and increasingly deregulated forms of labor, shaped by the imperatives of flexible accumulation. These transformations, unfolding over the

¹³³ Translated freely from the original text: desprovido de uma orientação humanamente significativa, o capital assume, em seu processo, uma lógica em que o valor de uso das coisas foi totalmente subordinado ao seu valor de troca (Antunes, 2009, p. 18).

¹³⁴ Translated freely from the original text: a alienação é a luta do capital para sobreviver, a luta do capital para subordinar o trabalho (...), é a luta incessante do capital pelo poder (Holloway *apud* Antunes, 2009, p. 132).

¹³⁵ Translated freely from the original text: apesar da aparência de que um sistema de regulação possa se sobrepor ao capital, e no limite controlá-lo, a incontrollabilidade é consequência de suas próprias fraturas" (Antunes, 2009, p. 24).

past five decades, have been further exacerbated by the advent of digital capitalism, which not only erodes workers' rights but also deepens the structural alienation of labor, intensifying the contradictions inherent in contemporary capitalism. In this sense, the current configuration of work underscores a fundamental tension between capital's relentless pursuit of profit and the human need for stability, autonomy, and meaningful labor.

Moreover, the shift from Fordist mass production to a regime of flexible accumulation has reshaped workplace power structures, introducing new forms of control and subjectivation. As Vincent de Gaulejac argues (2007), while *disciplinary power* (Foucault, 1975) prevailed under Fordism—exercising control over workers' bodies through rigid hierarchies—under flexible capitalism, *managerialist power* now operates at the level of workers' psyches, demanding their emotional, cognitive, and libidinal investment in their labor. In the tech sector, this shift is particularly evident: rather than enforcing discipline through hierarchical constraints, companies mobilize workers' desires, aspirations, and sense of purpose, cultivating an ethos where self-exploitation is internalized as a form of professional fulfillment.

Given this transformation, we must critically examine the broader implications of work as a human activity now subsumed under neoliberal, flexible capitalism, which demands not just labor but the emotional and psychological engagement of its workforce. If, as Gramsci (2020) argues, hegemony is born in the factory, then what kind of life does the “*startup way*” of work encapsulate? What forms of subjectivity emerge under the managerialist ideology that has been adopted and further refined by the tech sector? And, ultimately, how are workplace well-being and suffering reconfigured within these conditions of intensified labor flexibilization and self-exploitation?

Given that work organization is a central focus in socio-anthropological studies on labor—alongside other key themes¹³⁶—understanding the “*startup way*” requires an in-depth examination of its work organization and managerialist ideology. As a starting point, this chapter will focus precisely on these aspects, shedding light on the structural and ideological frameworks that shape labor within startups.

¹³⁶ Such as professional relationships and workplace conflicts, the role of union movements in worker organization, employment relationships, the meanings of work, professional trajectories, and so on (Weber, 1991; Leite Lopes, 1988; Antunes, 2009; Erbès-Seguin, 2010; Santelli, 2019; Palermo; Capogrossi, 2020; Gibert; Monjaret, 2021).

By adopting a sociological approach to the organization of startups as a *problem to be explained* (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977), we aim to understand “the social structuring of the field of action” (ibid., p. 18) in which our interlocutors navigate. However, the study of work organization extends beyond socio-anthropological inquiry; it is also a critical concern in disciplines such as the *psychodynamics of work* and the *socio-anthropology of health*, both of which explore the profound impact of organizational structures on workers’ psychological experiences and overall well-being. These fields provide key insights into how managerial models, workplace cultures, and modes of labor control influence mental health and shape subjective experiences (Dejours, 2000; Lorient, 2000; 2012; Buscetto *et al.*, 2008; English-Lueck, 2010; 2017). By integrating socio-anthropological and psychodynamic perspectives, we can more effectively analyze how the startup model—despite its rhetoric of autonomy, flexibility, and innovation—ultimately reinforces contemporary forms of stress, alienation, and precarity, profoundly shaping workers’ lived realities.

According to the psychodynamics of work, developing an understanding of work organization often serves as the foundation for analyzing broader workplace dynamics, including how individuals experience both suffering and satisfaction in their roles. As Christophe Dejours (2000; 2009) argues, studying work organization requires recognizing it not as a fixed or monolithic structure, but as a fluid set of social dynamics that continually evolve.

At its core, examining work organization involves investigating not only the prescribed modes of work—the formal structures and processes established by management—but also the discrepancies between these prescribed frameworks and the actual practices of work as they unfold on the ground. These tensions and contradictions offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between theory and practice, exposing the gap between intended organizational design and lived workplace experiences (Dejours, 2000).

In this chapter, we analyze both the *prescribed organization of work*—encompassing the formal structures articulated by startup founders, industry influencers, and workers themselves—and the *real organization of work*, which reflects the day-to-day practices of employees. This analysis explores how startups evolve from early-stage ventures to scale-ups, emphasizing the critical role of venture capital funding in driving this transformation. In doing so, we also address

how such funding accelerates the pace of work, reshaping organizational practices along the way.

Moreover, this study considers the evolving dynamics of management structures throughout the different stages of a startup's development. As we will see, in the early phases, management tends to be deeply intertwined with production processes, operating within a flat and informal hierarchy where roles are fluid, and decision-making is often collective. However, as the company scales, intermediate layers of management begin to emerge, bringing with them an increasing reliance on management tools and performance-tracking mechanisms (Dujarier, 2015). This shift reflects a transition from an organic and flexible mode of coordination to a more structured and bureaucratized organizational model, culminating in the late-stage development of a formalized hierarchy composed of directors, coordinators, and managers, whose primary function is to oversee the company's expanding operations and workforce.

Despite these structural transformations, startup management remains fundamentally guided by the *managerialist ideology* described by Gaulejac (2007). While these organizations often promote a humanist discourse centered on collaboration, creativity, and purpose-driven work, their management models ultimately prioritize profit maximization, efficiency, and the instrumentalization of workplace relationships—principles that have shaped corporate governance since the rise of neoliberal managerialism in the 1980s. This paradox highlights how startups, despite their rhetoric of innovation and disruption, often reproduce and refine longstanding techniques of labor control, intensifying the rationalization of work.

8.1 FROM EARLY-STAGE TO SCALE-UP

Regardless of the size or stage of the startup, nearly all the interlocutors in this study began our conversations by describing how *“hectic”* and *“intense”* their work week had been. This recurring theme led me to observe that, despite notable differences in organizational structures across various stages of startup growth, most workers appeared to experience a similarly intense work rhythm.

In most cases, this fast-paced rhythm was attributed to what interlocutors frequently referred to as the *“demands of the market”* or the *“demands of the board*

[of investors].” Whether it involved the push to develop a “*minimum viable product*” in an early-stage startup or the pressure to scale rapidly in a growth-stage company, the work culture was invariably fast-paced and relentless.

The company culture is definitely what sets the pace for work. And then there's the product itself, how established it is, and where the company is in its life cycle. All of these things influence how intense the work is (Isabel, 34 years old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Therefore, to understand why so many startup workers report experiencing episodes of burnout, we must critically examine the nature of startup “*company culture*” and how it evolves as companies scale from early-stage ventures to late-stage enterprises. Therefore, this study systematically analyzes the three main developmental phases of a startup, tracing how work environments and managerial structures transform over time.

Given the methodological approach of this research, which does not focus on a single startup but instead draws from workers across multiple companies, it was possible to incorporate insights from professionals who had been employed in approximately 28 different startups/tech companies, each at varying stages of development, with varying styles of management.¹³⁷

Rather than focusing on specific case studies, this research aims to analyze the broader organizational logics that underpin startup development across the startup ecosystem of Florianópolis. Therefore, the classification of startup development stages in this thesis should be understood as general patterns rather than rigid trajectories. While many startups follow similar phases, their paths may diverge significantly. Nevertheless, the central hypothesis is that, constant productivity pressures and demands for rapid responsiveness tend to happen across various stages, as they are not incidental but foundational forces shaping daily routines, well-being, and experiences of suffering at work.

This approach is particularly relevant given that our focus lies in understanding how the management structures of startup-type companies take shape independently of the specific products they develop. While it may not always be possible to determine the exact size or product focus of every startup examined, what remains evident is that—despite this variability—startups at different stages consistently

¹³⁷ It was only possible to “monitor” a large number of companies due to the high employee turnover rates in his sector, combined with the longitudinal nature of this study, which allowed for tracking interlocutors across different companies from 2022 to 2024.

adhere to and reproduce the core tenets of managerialist ideology (Gaulejac, 2007) in their organizational practices.

As we will observe, the key difference across these developmental stages lies in the degree of *uncertainty* and the configuration of *power dynamics* (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977). In the early stages, zones of uncertainty tend to be broader, and power dynamics more horizontal, allowing workers greater flexibility and maneuverability within the organization. However, as managerialist strategies are gradually implemented, these zones of uncertainty contract, limiting employees' autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing verticalized power structures.

8.1.1 Early-stage

According to startup specialists (Matos, 2017), an early-stage startup is defined as a company with a scalable idea actively seeking funding for expansion, with an initial team focused on developing a prototype that meets market needs. This stage is frequently characterized by a trial-and-error approach, which frequently entails modifying product features, marketing strategies and organizational structure in a dynamic and responsive manner. As one of the interlocutors observed, to work in an early-stage startup *“feels like you're building a car... while it's in motion... and on fire!”* (Gustavo, 33 years-old, Sales Consultant of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

During the formative years of startups, organizational structures tend to be fluid and undergo frequent reconfigurations. At this stage, it is common for startups to adopt a flexible, low-hierarchy framework supported by a lean team, with each individual assuming multiple, overlapping roles. This improvised and experimental structure, often romanticized through the symbolic image of a *garage*, captures the ethos of early-stage startups as spaces for innovation and entrepreneurial trial-and-error. Notably, workers in the early stages of a startup operate in a manner closer to an artisanal mode of production, maintaining greater autonomy and direct involvement in various aspects of their work. At this stage, organizational structures remain fluid, allowing employees to exercise a higher degree of discretion over their tasks. Moreover, *zones of uncertainty* (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977) are particularly pronounced—not only for company owners, who face fundamental questions about the viability and survival of their enterprise, but also for employees, who often seek to

navigate and capitalize on this instability¹³⁸ as a means of accelerating their career trajectories within the organization.

During this phase, the team typically ranges from five to 30 people, and it typically consists of a few key players—a software developer, a sales specialist, and a marketing specialist—and evolves according to the company’s development needs. Besides, the entrepreneurs work directly alongside employees, taking on roles as CEOs or Chief Technologie Officers (CTO) and actively shaping both the business strategy and the product. Due to the small team size and close collaboration, formal meetings and structured methodologies are often minimal or even nonexistent. Workers frequently mention the ease of engaging in spontaneous discussions to address pressing matters, highlighting the fluid and informal communication style characteristic of this stage. This horizontal structure and the accessibility of colleagues and founders alike contribute to a sense of connection and collective problem-solving, fostering a work environment where early-stage employees feel more engaged and empowered to make decisions.

During the research for this thesis, I conducted interviews with six employees and one CEO, all of whom worked at early-stage startups at the time.¹³⁹ The companies they represented ranged in size from 11 to 30 employees and had not yet secured venture capital funding. However, they had received angel investments by that point, which, combined with modest revenue streams, allowed them to support a limited number of employees. Except for the CEO, all participants had been employed at their respective startups for two years or less, with salaries ranging from US\$ 220 to US\$ 800 per month (as of 2022). Notably, five of the six employees were classified as independent contractors (*pejotização*), with only one holding a formal employment contract with the company.

Most employees at this stage worked remotely, a practical solution given the limited funding of early-stage startups. Remote work helps reduce operational costs,

¹³⁸ It is important to consider that, as Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg (1977) argue, the degree of instability within an organization directly influences the room for maneuver available to each actor. In this sense, while instability often correlates with precariousness, within the startup environment, it can also create opportunities for rapid career advancement, allowing individuals to ascend to management positions more quickly. This contradiction—where uncertainty simultaneously generates both vulnerability and professional mobility—tends to be a defining characteristic of early-stage startups and has also been observed in other sectors by Leroux (2015) when analyzing the company Decathlon France.

¹³⁹ Although only seven of my interlocutors were officially working in early-stage startups at the time of the research, many others had previous experience in such environments, particularly during the early years of their careers.

such as office rent, allowing startups to allocate resources toward other critical needs. However, founders and CEOs typically organize in-person gatherings for specific occasions, such as quarterly planning meetings. In these instances, shared spaces—such as coworking offices, accelerator hubs, or even the homes of founders or employees—serve as meeting points, reflecting the improvisational nature of early-stage startups.

This data highlights the fact that, at this stage, early-stage startups are often either “*bootstrapping*” or relying on limited funding from angel investors while striving to achieve “*product-market fit*”. These financial and strategic limitations often result in unstable work environments characterized by precarious employment conditions, with jobs that are typically less secure and lower-paid compared to those in more established organizations. Such conditions demand employees who are highly flexible and deeply committed to building the company from the ground up.

As a result, early-stage startups often attract younger workers, such as recent graduates, or professionals amid career transitions who are engaging with the startup ecosystem for the first time.¹⁴⁰ Reflecting these dynamics, hiring practices at this stage tend to prioritize personality traits and cultural alignment over formal qualifications or extensive experience. Instead of seeking seasoned professionals, who might challenge existing practices or demand competitive salaries, early-stage startups often favor younger, adaptable workers or career-changers willing to conform to the fluid and often demanding nature of the startup environment. This approach reinforces the emphasis on flexibility, autonomy and alignment with the startup’s evolving goals, even if it comes at the cost of job security and fair compensation.

Lara, who has been working in various startups in the Florianópolis ecosystem since the early 2010s, shared with me her experience entering the startup ecosystem of Florianópolis during 2013, when she was helping to structure the business of a new company:

¹⁴⁰ By “younger workers,” I refer to individuals who are either still in college or have recently graduated and are between 20 and 26 years old. However, early-stage startups also attract workers undergoing career transitions—generally individuals between 27 and 32 years old—who are shifting from traditional jobs to roles in the technology sector. These transitioning workers, despite being somewhat older, often accept lower-paid positions to gain experience in the startup ecosystem. This experience often serves as a steppingstone, enabling them to later secure better-paying roles in more established startups.

When the startup is small, you do everything: plan, write, translate, execute. The only thing I didn't do was make coffee [laughs]. But I didn't mind because I was doing what I wanted. [...] I said to myself, 'I really want this'. I was doing it for me, too. When you're first starting out, you're so caught up in the business, and you have so much energy that you don't realize how it's affecting your sleep and your own energy. You're so excited! (Lara, 32 years-old, New Business Coordinator - Key Account Manager of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

She reflects on how the startup world initially appeared to her as new and “*exciting*.” This highlights how the company’s future-oriented promises captured the aspirations of a young worker, deeply engaging her in its growth and development. Later in the interview, Lara described her early experiences in startups as being “*like a school*,” where she gained invaluable learning opportunities and accelerated her skill development.

Like Lara, other interlocutors in this research described their inaugural experiences in the technology sector as “*a kind of school*.” However, the expertise gained through these work environments goes beyond mere mastery of technical competencies. Indeed, workers are immersed in the rhythms, jargon, and informal yet high-pressure culture of the startup world, which entails a specific *savoir-faire*. This *savoir-faire* requires learning to navigate the day-to-day pressures inherent to the startup culture and “*mindset*”. Consequently, the integration into an early-stage startup can be conceptualized as a *rite of passage* (van Gennep, 1972; Leite Lopes, 1988) into the tech industry, where novices are initiated into a distinct set of values and demands, encompassing rapid innovation, elevated expectations, and an embrace of risk.

When you join a small startup, you've got two choices: you can either get scared or you can see it as an opportunity. An opportunity to help the company structure itself and for you to grow with it, right? Of course, you have to be ready to face the challenges head-on (Lara, 32 years-old, New Business Coordinator - Key Account Manager of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

However, not all startup employees are as comfortable with the startup atmosphere. While Lara saw the new startup culture she faced as both a challenge and an opportunity for growth, Isis told me she was initially “*shocked*” by the prevailing startup mentality. Isis shared:

The startup took me from one world to another, right? My family is pretty left-wing, and most of them are civil servants. My world was very different. I'd never lived with [startup] people like that before. [...] I really enjoyed the work

environment. It's excellent. The people are really nice, but they're very different from my social circle. They're also very different people to talk to. They're people who go to different places, have different political and cultural views. What really surprises me is this whole meritocratic mentality. Because the [founding] entrepreneurs have been through the mentoring and investment process, they end up putting a lot of meritocracy into the company culture (Isis, 31 years old, Social Media Specialist of an early-stage startup, 2022).

This case illustrates that Isis was not merely shocked by the startup's meritocratic ethos but was also accustomed to a different form of disciplinary power and was now experiencing a managerialist mode of control that was unfamiliar to her. As Gaulejac (2007) argues, “the managerialist model represents progress compared to the hierarchical and disciplinary model, as it promotes autonomy, initiative, efficiency, responsibility, communication, and mobility” (idem, p. 195). While Isis appreciated certain aspects of this new work environment, she was among the few who recognized that alongside the apparent flattening of hierarchies, meritocratic imperatives were deeply embedded in the system, reinforcing new forms of control and performance pressure.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that Lara was enthusiastic and willing to sacrifice hours of sleep when she entered the startup world in 2013 at the age of 23, whereas Isis, an architect by training who shifted careers in 2022 at the age of 31, found herself shocked by the prevailing startup mentality. While Lara interpreted her initial “*culture shock*” as an opportunity for growth within a meritocratic framework, viewing startup culture as a chance to advance, Isis struggled with the individualistic and meritocratic mindset that often characterizes startups. This contrast underscores the argument that early-stage companies tend to favor younger workers, who are generally more inclined to embrace the startup ethos with fewer resistance.

It was also within a context of shifting careers that I met Priscila—a 32-year-old white woman with a degree in Journalism, who had been working remotely for a year and a half at an early-stage startup in Florianópolis. Priscila's experience in an early-stage startup offers a compelling illustration of how “*cultural fit*”, lower pay, a sense of ownership, and perceived autonomy intersect. Her trajectory highlights the nuanced ways in which these dynamics are negotiated, demonstrating how startups leverage these elements to navigate financial limitations while maintaining worker engagement.

When I started at the company, I wasn't totally sure what the job would be like. I knew it had to do with communication and that my manager was looking for someone who could communicate well. I mean, that's really what I do all day, right? I talk to people, understand and mediate conflicts. The company was more interested in the person's profile than their experience. Also, the Community Manager area is still pretty new in Brazil. [...] When I started, the area wasn't structured. There were some actions, but nothing was strategic. There was nothing defined. So I had to design all the work processes (Priscila, 32 years old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2022, emphasis added).

As illustrated above, Priscila was hired primarily for her “*profile and cultural alignment*” with the company, having been referred to the position by a friend who already worked at the startup. The area to which she was assigned lacked predefined processes or specific organizational structures, effectively giving her a blank slate to shape her role. With nine years of prior experience in social media, this position marked her first foray into the startup world and a significant career transition into a new field: Community Management.

As Priscila explained, Community Management was still an emerging area in Brazil at the time, and many startups were unfamiliar with the organizational tasks the role entailed. Given the lack of established practices in her field, Priscila, who was fluent in English, turned to external resources to navigate her new responsibilities. She delved into eBooks, online courses, and YouTube lectures created by Silicon Valley experts to learn, define, and build her role in the startup. Through this process, Priscila engaged subjectively with her work (Dejours, 1999), constructing not only her identity as a Community Manager but also a new role within the company. This dynamic illustrates how workers’ personal engagement and self-investment tend to be mobilized in early-stage startups to fill structural gaps and create organizational value.

Despite the low compensation and her status as an independent contractor—meaning she was not entitled to traditional social security benefits or other forms of job security—when I met Priscila in 2022, she valued the elevated level of autonomy in her role. She perceived it as an “*opportunity to invest and grow with the company,*” aligning herself with the startup’s vision.

The idea of a startup isn't to just grow 2% per year. The idea of a startup is to scale up, and we have the team to do that. We have the potential to do that... and we want to grow, we want to invest, because we work a lot, right? [...] Well, you do know the work routine of a startup. It's not about working long hours and keeping your current salary. No, we're investing our time now

to get a return later (Priscila, 32 years-old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2023, emphasis added).

Through Priscila's words, we can reflect on the notion of "*investing*" one's time in poorly remunerated work *today* with promises of *future* improvements as a strategy of *suportability* (Leite Lopes, 1988) for enduring present precariousness. Moreover, in terms of employer-employee relationships, this dynamic reflects a form of reciprocal exchange, akin to the *gift/counter-gift* relationship proposed by Marcel Mauss (2017) and further refined by Norbert Alter (2002). However, in this context, reciprocity is deferred, with no clearly defined deadline for return. In such cases, the employees' contribution is less of a tangible investment and more a demonstration of dedication to the company. As Alter (2002) points out, "the employee never knows when exactly he will benefit from his investment" (idem, p. 267), reinforcing the asymmetry of this exchange.

Priscila's narrative also reveals how deeply startup culture has shaped her understanding of her work. She uses the investment jargon common in startups to describe her own labor experience, framing her sacrifices in terms of potential future returns. This incorporation of business language into her personal narrative reflects a broader trend in startup environments, where the language of growth and investment blurs the lines between individual and organizational goals. Through her trajectory, we see how startup employees internalize these concepts, perceiving their labor not merely as a job but as a high-stakes contribution to the company's collective vision. This sense of commitment is reinforced by the expectation of eventual rewards—whether through career advancement, stock options, or recognition—which serves as a powerful mechanism to sustain subjective engagement, even in the absence of immediate, guaranteed returns.

Nevertheless, the rhetoric surrounding one's time investment in work is a recurring theme in the discourse of entrepreneurs and investors, underscoring its broader ideological function within startup culture. At this stage, financial scarcity often compels CEOs to implement strategies designed to "*promote a sense of ownership*" among workers. While this may appear pragmatic, it also serves as a mechanism of ideological alignment. By framing the startup as an innovative, high-risk enterprise with the potential to "*change the world*", founders and executives appeal to a *morality of the common good*—which legitimizes the pursuit of individual profit under the guise of building a product that serves society. Additionally, they

invoke a *morality of risk*, which glorifies the image of dynamic and bold workers, as well as a *morality of innovation and progress*, which presents the company as a driver of social improvement (Gaulejac, 2007). However, by portraying low-paid, precarious, and high-risk labor as an “*investment*” in the worker’s future, what startup culture effectively does is to reconfigure economic insecurity as a virtue.

This discourse not only sustains worker commitment but also fosters an internalization of the company’s mission. In general, workers are encouraged to view their precarious labor as a form of personal growth and long-term payoff, even when tangible benefits remain distant or uncertain. Often, they operate under the hope that their dedication will not only drive the startup’s success but also yield future rewards for themselves, whether in the form of financial compensation, career advancement, or professional growth. In doing so, startup culture transforms loyalty and resilience into commodities, reinforcing a cycle where precariousness is normalized as part of a “*greater journey*.”

This dynamic illustrates how early-stage startups strategically harness workers’ aspirations by framing their efforts as part of a shared entrepreneurial vision, thereby attempting to re-enchant the world of labor (Schipounoff, 2019). In response, employees often feel pressured to exhibit resilience and adaptability, internalizing the frequent shifts and uncertainties as intrinsic to their roles within the fast-paced and ever-evolving startup ecosystem.

Overall, the founding entrepreneurs play a crucial role in developing such “*sense of ownership*” among workers, especially when they are recruiting new employees. They are responsible not only for selling the company’s vision to potential customers and investors, but also for “*inspiring*” new employees to believe in the startup’s potential. At the same time, founders must ensure that this vision translates into concrete action, guiding the team to execute plans effectively in order to achieve the desired results.

There are a few things that can be done [to achieve growth], like promoting a sense of work that's 100% focused on results; making people love their work so they'll stick around until the end of the day; or promoting a sense of ownership, even though the person doesn't own anything. [...] All of these are ways to make sure your team is as efficient as possible and gets the job done. Obviously, I'm still learning a lot about management, right? But from my experience, I can see that there are a lot of things that can get in the way of a plan coming together. It's not just basic math like, 'If I hire this number of people, I'll get more revenue', you know? There are a lot of other factors to consider, like the company culture, performance, engagement, and keeping the team together and working towards the same goal. It's a complex issue,

it's about people, not machines (Fabiano, 38 years-old, CEO of an early-stage startup, 2023).

Although the CEO recognizes *“it's about people, not machines”*, he is keenly aware of the disciplinary techniques often used to engage employees in the company's growth mission. He understands the importance of aligning workers' personal goals with those of the organization, effectively channeling their aspirations toward the company's objectives. However, he also acknowledges the limits of conventional *“growth formulas,”* recognizing that a startup's trajectory is influenced by a variety of external and internal factors, including its access to venture capital and the specific contours of its internal culture.

Another crucial aspect at this stage of a startup's development is the level of autonomy and creativity employees are granted. While employees often show strong motivation to acquire new skills, joining a startup is not solely about skill acquisition. In general, many of these workers display a notable sense of ambition and derive significant satisfaction from the *“freedom and autonomy”* they have in shaping their roles and communicating their ideas.

For me, freedom is autonomy. I have a lot of autonomy to suggest things. I'm able to have a conversation with [my superiors] as equals. I can even make proposals that can influence important and strategic financial decisions within the company. I really like having this freedom (Isis, 31 years-old, Social Media Specialist of an early-stage startup, 2022).

As we can see from Isis's experience, the first employees in new startups often enjoy greater freedom to shape their roles, propose ideas, and directly influence the company's direction. This level of autonomy and impact, which can take years to achieve in more established, traditional organizations, is a hallmark of the startup environment. Considering that Isis had recently left her career as an architect—a field often characterized by traditional, hierarchical structures where her creativity was constrained by the demands of clients and superiors—it becomes easier to understand why she valued the autonomy to propose ideas in her new role as a Social Media Specialist in a startup.

However, the work reality is more complex, and the *“fluidity of work organization”*, or the lack of it, often gives rise to conflicting work situations, primarily stemming from the absence of clear parameters, the constant evolution of processes, and the pressure for results. While the *“autonomy”* promoted within startup culture is

highly valued by employees, it simultaneously imposes a significant sense of responsibility for each worker's role in the organization. This dynamic reveals the existence of a *circumscribed autonomy* (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977; Leite Lopes, 1988; Gaulejac, 2007; Bernard, 2020), where the perceived freedom to act and make decisions is tightly bound by a predefined framework of goals and expectations established by the company's management. Far from being genuine independence, this autonomy is conditional and instrumental, opening up a field of ambiguities and contradictions that arise from the “co-participation of the dominated themselves in the construction of domination” (Leite Lopes, 1988, p. 114).

When I reconnected with Priscila in 2023, much of the initial excitement she had expressed about working in an early-stage startup had noticeably waned. While she still valued the “*freedom*” her job afforded her, she had grown keenly aware that this autonomy was contingent upon her ability to meet the goals and objectives defined by the company. For Priscila, the freedom to shape her own role had evolved into a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it granted her opportunities to exercise creativity and take initiative, reinforcing a sense of ownership over her work. On the other hand, this same autonomy had become a source of pressure, as she remained constantly accountable for delivering measurable results. The very independence that initially attracted her to the role latter intersected with heightened expectations, revealing the precarious balance between autonomy and performance in startup environments.

It varies. There are times when I wish someone would just tell me what to do. So that I don't have to think about it too much, you know? Sometimes, I'd like to be the person who doesn't tell other people what to do because it can be really exhausting. There have been times when I've thought, 'I'm going to drop everything and work for someone who'll tell me exactly what to do, so I don't have to think' (Priscila, 32 years-old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2023).

While Priscila showed signs of fatigue from the overwhelming autonomy in her role, Camila, a 25-year-old white woman who work as People Manager, on the other hand, expressed a fear of making mistakes.

Before [becoming People Manager], my manager used to check in on my work every week. But now, it has been two months that I feel like I'm pretty much alone in the area. On the one hand, it's good because I'm taking more ownership and responsibility for the area itself. But, sometimes, it can also feel overwhelming. I'm like 'Who do I exchange with? Who can confirm that

I'm on the right track? Who do I even talk to? (Camila, 25 years-old, People Manager of an early-stage startup, 2022).

The experiences of both Priscila and Camila underscore a common tension in startups: while autonomy can be empowering, it also brings its own pressures and potential for isolation. The demand to consistently meet ambitious targets can make daily work feel exhausting and relentless, transforming what initially felt like freedom into a persistent source of stress. This *circumscribed autonomy* reflects the high-intensity, results-driven ethos of startup culture, where flexibility and creativity are encouraged—but only insofar as they lead to measurable outcomes and drive company growth.

Besides, in this environment, it is not unusual for CEOs to focus solely on outcomes, displaying little concern for the methods employees use to achieve them. As founder and CEO Fabiano described: “*I'll give you a goal and a sales figure, and then I'll turn my back. You're in charge of the strategy, the execution, and the result. And if you don't meet them, it's on you.*” (Fabiano, 38, CEO of an early-stage startup, 2022). This approach illustrates the intense responsibility placed on employees to independently devise and execute strategies, with accountability resting squarely on their shoulders if targets are missed. Furthermore, it demonstrates how companies under *managerial management* tend to exercise power over their workers. Instead of an organization centered on surveillance, there is a shift to “management centered on the expectation of objectives, under adherence to logic” (Gaulejac, 2007, p. 124).

Based on the ethnographic cases presented above, we can see that, in early-stage startups, much of the work-related stress and emotional strain arises from: the lack of structured organizational processes; the pressure to deliver high performance despite an often underdeveloped product; and an underlying instability due to the inherent risk of the company's failure. At this stage, stress appears to stem not only from the discrepancy between *prescribed work* and *real work* (Dejours, 2000), but also from the strikingly low level of organization or formal guidelines. The lack of clear structures and prescriptions forces workers to navigate chaotic workflows, amplifying their sense of uncertainty and fear of failure. Coupled with lower wages, these conditions raise important questions: How long can workers endure such circumstances? Why do they choose to stay in the company despite the challenges? And, most importantly, what defensive strategies do they adopt to cope with the suffering associated with their work?

Regarding employee tenure in early-stage startups, the duration varies significantly. However, data from the broader technology sector suggests that most employees remain with a company for up to two years (Sullivan, 2018). This trend reflects a high turnover rate, not only in startups but across companies of varying sizes and sectors (Leroux, 2015). Early-stage startups, often seeking lower compensation workers, provide an entry point for individuals to gain the skills they need to secure better-paying roles elsewhere. While some employees do stay and grow alongside the company, the majority tend to change jobs within this two-year timeframe.¹⁴¹

The question of why workers choose to remain and collaborate in these demanding environments also lies at the core of this investigation. As Alter (2002) argues, purely economic and strategic reasons are insufficient to sustain collaboration—whether among peers (employees-employees) or within hierarchical relationships (employees-employers). Despite the conflicts inherent in these dynamics, people continue to collaborate out of a deeper desire to participate in and achieve something collectively. Several factors contribute to this decision, from the pervasive influence of entrepreneurial narratives (Palermo; Ventrisci, 2023) and the promises of a distinctive work culture to the mobilization of workers' passions and the allure of meaningful, autonomous work with the prospect of eventual returns (Leroux, 2015; Linhart, 2023). While future success and personal development play a role in reinforcing commitment, these perspectives alone would limit the analysis to economic and strategic determinants. To fully grasp workers' engagement, we must also consider their intrinsic motivation—the pursuit of meaning through collective endeavors that transcend individual effort.

For many startup workers, employment in such an environment represents a deliberate departure from traditional forms of wage labor, embodying the pursuit of an “*alternative*” to conventional employment structures (Flécher, 2021). Moreover, the camaraderie that often develops among colleagues during the early stages of a startup's growth fosters a sense of belonging that can be deeply compelling. This relational dimension of work, under the theory of the *gift* (Alter, 2002), intertwined

¹⁴¹ Indeed, between 2022 and 2024, eleven out of the 30 interlocutors in this sample transitioned from the startups where they were employed to other technology companies. Enabled by the increasing prevalence of remote work, some secured positions at international tech firms, significantly increasing their monthly salaries—sometimes by as much as threefold. Others moved to tech companies based in Brazilian cities such as Florianópolis, São Paulo, Curitiba, Lages, and Blumenau, seeking new opportunities within the national market.

with professional commitments, becomes a powerful factor in retaining employees even during periods of intense stress or uncertainty.

When I asked Priscila why she chose to stay with the company despite enduring a particularly difficult year, her response was swift and revealing:

The people. I'm still at the company because of my colleagues. [...] There have been times when I've questioned myself a lot and thought a lot about leaving the company. But I don't want to leave a company and a culture that I believe in, that has values that I believe in. I thought, maybe I'm just not the right person for leadership. Maybe I'm not the right person to be in charge of the area. Maybe it's better to hire someone with more experience than me. I'll step down, I can stay in the company, but not in a leadership position. (Priscila, 32 years-old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2023).

By 2023, Priscila's stressful journey affected her self-perception as a manager. Despite having occupied the role for over two years, she doubted her own abilities in leadership.¹⁴² However, she remained committed to the company and her colleagues. In this context, despite the constraints, Priscila relied heavily on her coworkers for support, drawing strength from their collective shared experiences.

According to Dejours (2000), camaraderie among employees functions as a collective defense mechanism, allowing workers to endure the stress and uncertainty inherent in an unstable work environment. Lorient (2019), however, extends this perspective by framing camaraderie not only as a coping strategy but also as a form of collective resistance, essential for preserving the meaning of work and bridging the gaps between prescribed tasks and actual work practices. In this sense, solidarity among workers serves both a protective function, mitigating the psychological toll of precarity, and a subversive function, enabling them to challenge or reinterpret managerial expectations.

In early-stage startups, where instability is particularly acute, camaraderie emerges as one of the most prominent collective mechanisms—a means through which employees navigate uncertainty, manage collective suffering, and construct alternative narratives of work. Despite the high-pressure environment and frequent changes, these startups tend to foster friendly and dynamic workplaces. Strong

¹⁴² A concern she directly addressed to her CEO. When she communicated that the pressure she was under was affecting her well-being, the CEO explained that he was experimenting with a new management approach. He emphasized that the increased pressure was not meant to undermine her well-being, but rather to showcase and amplify her achievements. As we will see, this management strategy of intensifying work pressure as a means to boost performance is a recurring pattern across various stages of startups. Additionally, this openness of employees to voice their discomfort—uncommon in many workplaces—is sometimes portrayed as another “positive” characteristic of the startup environment.

bonds quickly form among small, tightly-knit teams who share daily experiences and collaborate to overcome various challenges. This sense of unity is often reinforced by founders and entrepreneurs, who actively seek to foster collaboration within their teams by framing the startup as a disruptive and innovative force poised to make a meaningful societal impact. While this shared belief in the company's mission undoubtedly plays a role in creating a sense of purpose, it is the collective experience of navigating the extenuating challenges of startup life that often solidifies interpersonal connections among workers.

Shared hardships, such as tackling demanding projects or overcoming workplace uncertainties, tend to bring startup employees closer together. Small, daily actions, such as having side conversations via WhatsApp after a difficult meeting, offering a listening ear, or extending help to a colleague in need, become meaningful gestures of *gift* that reinforce bonds among team members. These acts of support and solidarity are more pronounced than those incited by founders and actually foster both spontaneous and required cooperation, which is necessary for the development of work. They create an environment where workers feel mutually invested in each other's well-being, despite the pressures they face.¹⁴³

However, this sense of unity—functioning as a collective strategy to resist and cope with a stressful work environment—is inherently fragile, persisting primarily while individuals remain within the same company. Once employees leave, they must detach (Gaulejac, 2007) not only from the company's mission but also from their former coworkers, underscoring the transient and conflictual nature of workplace solidarity in startups.

8.1.2 Growth-stage

Once the company achieves “*product-market fit*” and begins to show signs of “*traction*”—such as gaining acceptance from the market—it transitions into the growth stage. Symbolically, the image of a *rocket ship* is often invoked to represent startups at this phase, underscoring the emphasis on rapid progress and forward momentum.

¹⁴³ In addition to collective strategies like camaraderie, workers also employ various individual strategies to manage stress, somatic symptoms, and burnout. These will be explored further in Part Three of this thesis. For now, the focus remains on the collective defensive strategies identified across the different stages of startup development, shedding light on how workers navigate and endure the challenges of these unique work environments.

According to Ries (2011), this stage is marked by a series of strategic advancements. These include expanding marketing and sales efforts, leveraging feedback from early customers to refine the product or service, scaling operations to meet increasing demand, and closely monitoring key performance indicators (KPIs) to evaluate progress. Moreover, startups are expected to streamline operations, implement more sophisticated management practices, and navigate the evolving challenges that accompany accelerated growth.

During this growth phase, lean methodologies, such as those advocated by Ries (2011), are systematically adopted. These methodologies serve a dual purpose: aligning workers and optimizing processes while also ensuring the production of measurable outcomes essential for tracking the company's progress. This structured approach marks the transition from the improvisational, ad-hoc practices of the early stage to a more disciplined, metrics-driven framework necessary for sustaining growth and securing future investment.

At this stage, it is possible to witness the consolidation of the "*lean company*"—an organization where efficiency, adaptability, and rapid iteration become central tenets of management. In other words, the company's leadership prioritizes pragmatism, framing its approach through a discourse of effectiveness and results-oriented decision-making. However, as Gaulejac (2007) emphasizes, management mechanisms are never neutral. In a globalized economy, North American management models—rooted in liberal and meritocratic values—tend to dominate, shaping organizational practices and workplace dynamics. The startup world is no exception, as these values become embedded in its culture, influencing both leadership strategies and employee expectations.

Unlike the early-stage, where adaptation is closely tied to validating the startup's core idea—often under the looming threat of failure—adaptation during the growth stage signifies refinement and optimization. By this point, the company has weathered its most precarious early years. While the risk of failure has not been entirely eliminated, it is significantly reduced. As a result, adaptation shifts focus from survival to improvement, with efforts centered on perfecting processes, scaling efficiently, and solidifying the business model.

The growth phase of a startup is particularly illustrative of the "boom" phenomenon, wherein companies expand their operations rapidly, propelled by venture funding. It is also during this stage that the strain on organizational work

processes becomes most visible, often manifesting as inefficiencies, breakdowns or bursts. As Ricardo aptly noted, during growth phase *“everything breaks down, everything's changing all the time, you know?”* (Ricardo, 42 years old, CEO of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

The constant flux of a startup during growth phase underscores the persistence of change, adaptation, and resilience as core elements of the startup work culture. For some workers, the fast-paced and unpredictable environment becomes even more dynamic and stimulating. Isabel's anecdote vividly captures this sentiment: *“We always joke that there was a time at Unisus when if you went to the bathroom and came back, you'd no longer be sitting in the same place because things changed so quickly [laughter]”* (Isabel, 34 years old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2022). This duality—where growth is both exhilarating and chaotic—highlights the atmosphere of startup culture during its scaling phase.

In terms of organizational dynamics and structure, during the growth stage, a startup experiences rapid scaling, with the workforce typically ranging from 30 to 500 employees. This phase is marked by the adoption of mid-level hierarchical structures to manage increasing complexity. While flexibility remains an important feature of the culture, operations become more systematic, and roles are more clearly defined. The days of wearing multiple hats give way to a degree of specialization, enabling the organization to handle larger workloads more efficiently. As the company expands, managers are appointed, and specialists are brought in to professionalize key functions.

As Crozier and Friedberg (1977) highlight, expertise itself becomes a source of power within the organization. Precisely for this reason, as startups grow, they begin to formalize and document their work processes. This shift reduces reliance on individual experts while simultaneously increasing managerial oversight and control, ensuring that knowledge remains embedded within the organization rather than concentrated in specific individuals.

Regarding departmental structure, growth-stage startups usually establish several core departments:

- A) Product Development: Encompassing project managers, software developers, UX designers, and data analysts, this team focuses on refining existing products, expanding features, and ensuring scalability to meet

growing customer demand. Product roadmaps become more structured, incorporating data-driven decision-making.

- B) Marketing: This department grows to include managers, content creators, graphic designers, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) specialists, social media managers, and video production teams. The focus shifts from brand awareness to measurable lead generation and customer acquisition, often supported by robust analytics tools.
- C) Sales: Teams now include managers, account executives, key account managers, and sales development representatives (SDRs). The sales pipeline becomes more sophisticated and tailored to diverse customer segments.
- D) Customer Success: A pivotal team at this stage, tasked with enhancing customer retention, satisfaction, and upselling opportunities. It acts as the frontline for post-sale interactions, ensuring smooth customer experience.
- E) Human Resources: This department evolves from basic recruitment and onboarding to include employee engagement initiatives, performance management systems, and career development programs.
- F) Finance and Administration: Growing startups require robust financial oversight, often including controllers or Chief Finance Officers (CFOs), to manage budgets, investments, and compliance as the company becomes more regulated and complex.

Founding entrepreneurs remain central figures in the company, often assuming key executive roles such as CEO, CTO, or Chief Marketing Officer (CMO). However, as the company scales, their responsibilities shift from hands-on operational involvement to more strategic functions, such as long-term planning, investor relations, and partnership development. This transition demands that founders adapt their leadership approach, increasingly relying on mid-level managers to oversee daily operations. By delegating these tasks, founders can focus on monitoring key performance indicators, financial metrics, and ensuring alignment with the company's overarching vision. In doing so, they fully step into the role of the *homo economicus*, embodying the rational, profit-driven decision-maker described by Wendy Brown (2019) and Gaulejac (2006). This transformation marks a critical moment in the company's evolution, as leadership becomes less about direct

involvement in production and more about optimizing performance through managerial control.

As one interlocutor expressed, the role of a CEO becomes deeply rooted in strategy, decision-making, and oversight rather than hands-on creation:

The CEO is the guy who puts things together and says, "Do X." It's the guy who looks at the metrics and says, "This metric isn't good. Do you need help?" The CEO understands the market, studies how it's done, knows a lot about strategy, connects things, and puts together spreadsheets to see if those numbers make sense. [...] The CEO is a position. One can be an entrepreneur, create things, and not be the CEO. Because the CEO is a position (Ricardo, 42 years old, CEO of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

The organization of work, while still rooted in the agility and innovation of the early-stage, begins to reflect the need for more structured communication and collaboration processes. Growth-stage startups frequently adopt tools and platforms to manage workflows, track performance metrics, and maintain team alignment across remote work arrangements. It is at this stage that management by numbers and devices (Dujarier, 2015) begins to be implemented more systematically.

Besides, it is also during this phase that “360 feedback meetings”, “one-on-one meetings”, and “personal development programs” begin to be implemented. “360 feedback meetings” involve collecting performance evaluations from multiple sources, such as peers, subordinates, and managers, to provide employees with a holistic view of their strengths and areas for improvement. “One-on-one meetings” are regular, structured conversations between employees and their direct supervisors, designed to address individual concerns, align goals, and provide mentorship. “Personal development programs” are initiatives aimed at fostering employees’ professional growth, often through skill-building workshops, career coaching, or tailored learning plans.

While these practices are framed as tools for growth and self-improvement, they also function as mechanisms of control, subtly disciplining workers to internalize corporate values and align with the company's strategic objectives. By emphasizing continuous feedback and development, these methodologies encourage employees to self-regulate and maintain high performance under the guise of personal growth. In doing so, they reinforce the startup’s productivity-driven culture, often blurring the boundaries between individual aspirations and the company's pursuit of profit. Consequently, these tools serve not only to professionalize the workforce, but also to

ensure compliance with the demands of an increasingly metrics-obsessed and growth-oriented organizational model.

During the research conducted for this thesis, I interviewed seven employees and one CEO, all of whom were employed at growth-stage startups at the time.¹⁴⁴ The companies they represented varied in size, ranging from 30 to 500 employees. Most of these startups had already secured at least one round of venture capital funding, which had enabled them to rapidly expand their workforce. By 2022, three of the participants had recently joined their respective startups; two had been with their companies for up to two years; one had remained at the same company for over three years, and two (with the CEO) had been with their organizations for more than five years.

Salaries at growth-stage startups generally improve compared to the early stage, yet disparities persist. Among this sample, monthly salaries ranged from \$220 to \$2,500. Of the seven employees, five were formally employed under Brazilian labor laws (CLT), one was engaged as an independent contractor, and one occupied an intern position. This distribution reflects a growing tendency for formal employment contracts during the growth phase, although alternative arrangements remain in use.

Remote work was a common practice among participants, with most employees working from home and visiting the office only twice a week or for specific events, such as *“quarterly planning meetings”* and *“team-building”* activities. While hybrid work arrangements align with the flexible work culture often celebrated in startups, since 2023, many tech companies have begun mandating a return to the office for certain employees (Labate, 2024). Notably, software developers remain an exception, as they continue to benefit from the flexibility of remote work. In contrast, workers in sales, marketing, and administrative roles were increasingly required to be physically present in the office on a more systematic basis.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Additionally, many of the interlocutors currently employed in late-stage startups joined their current companies during their expansion phase, having previously followed the accelerated pace of a startup before the pandemic.

¹⁴⁵ This discrepancy, coupled with the fact that software developers typically earn significantly higher salaries than most other startup employees, underscores their privileged position within the tech workforce. Developers are in high demand and harder to retain, which grants them access to enhanced perks and benefits, including remote work flexibility. This stratification within the workplace highlights the uneven distribution of autonomy and privilege in startups, revealing how certain roles are more valued and protected, while others are subject to stricter oversight and fewer benefits. Ultimately, this dynamic not only perpetuates inequalities within the workplace but also reflects broader trends in labor hierarchies within the tech sector.

At this stage, hiring new employees becomes a critical and continuous activity, as the pressure to scale operations rapidly intensifies recruitment efforts. This often leads to fierce competition among startups for the limited pool of qualified talent in the labor market. Therefore, during the early years of accelerated growth, it is not uncommon for startups to onboard dozens of employees each month, creating a constant flow of new personnel. This rapid influx of workers necessitates the establishment of structured, collective training programs, often referred to as “*onboarding processes*”. These programs serve as a strategic tool to integrate new hires into the company’s operations efficiently while fostering alignment with its culture, objectives, and lean management frameworks.

Mirroring the challenges faced by other productive sectors during their early phases of expansion, the startup workforce remained relatively scarce throughout the 2010s. To address this shortage, cultivating a qualified workforce through training in startup culture and on-the-job apprenticeships became a common practice. This approach parallels historical precedents, such as the expansion of textile factories in the 1930s, as documented by José Sergio Leite Lopes (1988). At that time, the scarcity of skilled labor prompted factories to recruit workers from other sectors, notably agriculture, and train them to meet industrial demands. Similarly, startups in their growth phase adopted strategies to shape their workforce to meet the emerging demands of a tech-driven economy. This broader trend helps explain why workers often refer to their companies as “*schools*,” highlighting how they were trained to perform tasks they had never encountered before, not even during their undergraduate years.

In our initial interviews, Letícia and Nathi, both employees of Unisus¹⁴⁶—currently a late-stage startup based in Florianópolis—reflected on their experiences joining the company during its growth phase before the pandemic of COVID-19. Their accounts offer valuable insights into how the “*onboarding*” phase can be crucial not only for learning the new job, but also for shaping the social and emotional relationships established among colleagues within a company during its growth phase.

I'm employee 362. [When I joined Unisus], I didn't just connect with people on my team. I also connected with folks from my onboarding group. When I joined in March 2016, it was the largest group that had joined at the same time up until that point. There were people from marketing, people from all

¹⁴⁶ Fictitious name.

areas—dev, partners, CS, all areas. So we kind of became our own little “college group”. We had two weeks of onboarding and then everyone went to their own area (Nathi, 32 years old, Senior Marketing Analyst of a late-stage startup, 2022).

When I started at the company [in 2018], I'd just moved to Floripa and didn't know anyone [in the city]. But the company had a pretty interesting strategy, which was to do a collective onboarding. So, for two weeks we [the newcomers] had to work on a project together, and everyone was in the same boat, new to the city, looking for an apartment... The atmosphere helped us all connect. In fact, my best friends in Floripa are still the ones I made back then (Letícia, 29 years old, Technical Recruitment for Diversity and Inclusion at a late-stage startup, 2022).

Through the experiences of Nathi and Letícia, we can observe the pivotal role of the “*onboarding*” phase in a growth-stage startup. This period of rapid expansion fosters a distinctive dynamic in which shared experiences of navigating a fast-paced and evolving environment contribute to the strengthening of interpersonal bonds among employees. Consequently, onboarding can also be understood as a *rite of passage* (van Gennep, 1972; Leite Lopes, 1988) that marks the newcomer's entry into the company and their integration into its culture and values.

While Nathi views the startup environment as an educational space—a “*school*” or “*college*”—where newcomers bond while collectively learning to navigate a new phase of their professional lives, Letícia emphasizes the “*onboarding*” process as a crucial connector for employees undergoing similar life transitions, such as relocating to a new city and starting a new job. This perspective underscores how “*onboarding*” not only integrates workers into the company's startup culture, but also fosters camaraderie and collaboration among peers who are adapting to a similar situation—emulating the same kind of connectivity and *gift/counter-gift* (Alter, 2002) that tends to happen during the early stage of a startup.

The ability of a startup to absorb and integrate its workers into its culture from the very beginning is truly remarkable. For Letícia and Nathi, as well as many of my interlocutors, the startup they work for often becomes their primary source of social interaction, providing a network of colleagues and, eventually, friends who share similar values and experiences.¹⁴⁷ These dynamics highlight the profound influence

¹⁴⁷ Even sociologist Flécher (2021), during her participant observation as a startup employee in Paris, France, observed that her social world became deeply intertwined with the startup environment she was immersed in. As for myself, during my period of participant observation at a startup, I worked part-time and remotely, from April 2020 to October 2021, while also attending doctoral courses. As a result, I did not become fully immersed in the startup world during the research. This partial engagement did not go unnoticed by my colleagues, who, through feedback evaluations, often described me as somewhat “distant” from the company. They suggested that I should be more present at extracurricular social events, such as online happy hours, to better socialize with coworkers.

startups wield over the social and personal lives of their workers, cultivating a sense of belonging that often transcends professional boundaries. This sense of integration is not merely encouraged by managers, but also expected by coworkers themselves, reflecting the deep intertwining of work and social identity within startup culture (Shestakofsky, 2024). Moreover, as we will further explore, the demands of the growth phase intensify, leaving workers with limited free time and little psychological energy for activities outside of work. As professional and social spheres become increasingly fused, it is unsurprising that many startup employees find their lives revolving around the workplace and the sociability it facilitates, as illustrated in the following testimony:

I live to work. My friends are from my work. My best friend at work is actually my boss. We've been working together for seven years now... I met my ex-husband there... My life revolves around that. All the people I spend time with either have worked at Unisus or work at Unisus (Nathi, 32 years old, Senior Marketing Analyst of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Such examples underscore the centrality of work not only in structuring startup workers' daily lives, but also in shaping their identities and sociabilities. As Carolyn Chen (2022) observes in her study of Silicon Valley, the contemporary workplace has increasingly become the primary site where highly paid, skilled workers seek belonging, identity, and purpose. Chen argues that, under the conditions of flexible capitalism,

company leaders felt they needed to do more than restructure the financial and professional incentives of work. They needed to transform their organizational cultures to extract the full discretionary effort of their skilled workers—to get employees to invest their whole selves—emotionally, socially, and spiritually—into their work (Chen, 2022, p. 9).

This shift, marked by the managerialist ideology previously discussed, has heightened the significance of work in the lives of skilled professionals, transforming the workplace into a central space for the pursuit of meaning and self-identity. While work has historically facilitated sociability, it was with the advent of modern corporations that management began systematically leveraging workers' social needs and aspirations for meaning to enhance productivity. As Chen observes, companies have recognized that cultivating a sense of community and a “relaxed” work environment is “good for business”—an idea that many startup workers appear to have embraced upon entering the tech industry.

Nevertheless, during my tenure as startup worker from 2012 to 2015, most of my friends at the time were in fact my coworkers.

When I joined the startup, everything was new. The technical work was new, as was the behavioral aspect of work. I left a company that had a dress code, where I had to dress formally, with the skirt no more than three fingers above the knee. If it was shorter than that, I had to go home and change. Then I joined a startup where people worked in socks and slippers! Nobody cared about what anyone was wearing, and nobody cared if I was drinking beer at work. It was a huge cultural shift, but it made me realize that that's what people have to do, that's the [work] culture we have to have, that's what will move people to develop themselves, to be better people, not to be those mechanical people, you know, who go to work and come home and have the same boring routine every day (Ana, 33 years old, Financial Controller of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Ana's testimony reinforces the notion that working at startups is often perceived as an alternative to the traditional corporate world, particularly for individuals like her who have joined startup companies during their growth phase. It is generally during this stage of growth that perks begin to emerge—such as the ability to drink beer while working or share a pizza with colleagues at the end of the day. These perks, which seemingly transform the work environment, are typically funded by companies themselves. But why would companies that, until recently, were struggling to stay afloat choose to allocate their limited resources to perks like food and drinks for employees? To understand this, we must first explore the transformations that take place after a company secures investment.

Regarding financing, growth-stage startups typically secure Series A or Series B funding from venture capital firms, a pivotal milestone that significantly accelerates their growth trajectory. While early-stage startups focus their limited financial resources on validating their product or idea, growth-stage startups leverage the substantial investments they receive to finalize the development of their core products, expand into new markets, and outpace competitors. In this context, new capital contributions often have a direct impact on the company's structure, as the influx of venture capital is typically allocated to hiring new employees, upgrading infrastructure, and investing in advanced technologies, such as analytics platforms and customer relationship management (CRM) systems.

When I asked my interlocutors about the transformations that occur within a startup both before and after securing new funding, many were resolute in stating that the pace of work undergoes a profound and radical shift.

From my understanding, there are two moments that influence the pace of work. One is when the company is raising funds and needs to be very careful with the cashflow to extend the runway. In this scenario, the work

pace slows down. But right after an investment, the company needs to prove itself as quickly as possible because it wasn't just an investment based on [the company's] history—it was based on what the company still has the capacity to do. So it's madness, gunfire and bombshells. It's a direct relationship (Isabel, 34 years old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2022).

By asserting a direct relationship between a new round of investment and the accelerated rhythm of work in a startup, Isabel helps us understand that the influx of capital brings heightened expectations from investors. These investors now demand rapid scalability and measurable returns on their investments. According to Ricardo, this dynamic reflects the “*investor's game*,” which has dominated the tech market for several decades:

The investors' theory is that one in ten of the companies they invest in will pay back the entire fund. They'd love for all the companies to boom, but they know, based on the stats, that's not going to happen. And that's fine—it's just the way they play. The problem is that this game has set the tone for the market for a long time. The idea was: if that's the game they're playing, then it's the game we have to play too. In the 2010s, we saw many companies growing extremely fast, and for a long time, this was sold as the definition of success. But now, in the 2020s, we're realizing that it's okay to grow 30% a year instead of 300%. We have to remember that this is still a successful company and that we don't have to play by their rules. You can grow a company without going crazy (Ricardo, 43 years old, CEO of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

Through his testimony, Ricardo conveyed that while there has been a recent shift in how market success is perceived—perhaps as a way for him to reconcile the fact that his startup did not achieve exponential growth through venture capital—those who accept venture funding must be prepared to fully engage in the “*investor's game*.” As Crozier and Friedberg (1977) aptly put it:

The game is the essential instrument of organized action. The game reconciles freedom and constraint. The player remains free, but must, if he wants to win, adopt a rational strategy according to the nature of the game and respect its rules. This means that he must accept the constraints imposed on him for the advancement of his interests (idem, p. 113).¹⁴⁸

Consequently, for startups that adopt the venture funding model, the transition from early-stage to growth-stage does not alleviate the pressures of a precarious work environment. On the contrary, it intensifies them, as the imperative to “*play the*

¹⁴⁸ Translated freely from the original text: Le jeu c'est l'instrument essentiel de l'action organisée. Le jeu concilie la liberté et la contrainte. Le joueur reste libre, mais doit, s'il veut gagner, adopter une stratégie rationnelle en fonction de la nature du jeu et respecter les règles de celui-ci. Cela veut dire qu'il doit accepter pour l'avancement de ses intérêts les contraintes qui lui sont imposés (Crozier ; Friedberg, 1977, p. 113).

investor's game” becomes unavoidable. In this sense, growth does not equate to stability but rather to a deeper entrenchment in the competitive logic of venture capitalism, where startups operating within this framework find themselves trapped in the high-risk, high-reward cycle of what can be likened to the *casino of capitalism* (Gaulejac, 2007; Comaroff; Comaroff, 2001).

I started at the company at a more relaxed pace, but then we went through the whole process of fundraising and acceleration. After we got the investment, the CEO called a face-to-face meeting of the technology team and presented a PowerPoint with the eight points we should achieve by 2023. And, honestly, if we hit half of those, it would already be a major feat. But, in theory, we're doing everything. [...] The idea is that we have to return the investment, so we inflate the team, hire whoever we want, because we have to make it happen, and then the pace has accelerated a lot. It feels like we've been operating at 120% since January. It's pretty exhausting. The people who went through the first [round of] investment said that the post-investment period is really tough. Some people even left the company to find other opportunities because they didn't want to go through that again. One colleague said: I've already been through this stage, I know what's going to happen, and I don't want to go through it again. He even quit (Franco, 25 years-old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2023, emphasis added).

Franco's testimony illustrates how employees are expected to achieve even higher levels of productivity as the stakes are raised with the injection of venture capital. The notion that the company must deliver a positive “*return on investment*” is transferred directly to its employees, further intensifying their workload and extending the demands of their labor journey.

The relentless pace of change, coupled with heightened performance expectations, often results in considerable stress for employees. While growth-stage startups may offer higher salaries compared to their early-stage counterparts, such “benefit” comes at a cost. Recognizing this, startups increasingly rely on “care” initiatives as tools for both retention and motivation, attempting to mitigate the adverse effects of demanding work conditions. Chen (2022) classifies such “care” initiatives as *corporate maternalism*. According to the author,

corporate maternalism, [is] where companies provide for the personal care of their employees to make them happy, healthy, and (therefore) productive. Tech companies have not disrupted the laws of the market. There still is no such thing as a free lunch, really. Corporate maternalism monetizes the nonproductive parts of life that the busy tech worker otherwise has no time for—eating, exercising, rest, hobbies, spirituality, and friendships—and makes them a part of work. (idem, p. 60, 2022).

Corporate maternalism initiatives are generally conceptualized and implemented by Human Resources or People Management teams, which play a pivotal role in integrating care strategies into the operational framework of companies. During this phase, roles such as Chief Happiness Officer (CHO) also emerge, explicitly tasked with fostering employee happiness and productivity as part of broader organizational strategies for managing workplace dynamics (Cabanas; Illouz, 2022). These roles are not only responsible for promoting a positive work culture, but also for ensuring that well-being initiatives align with organizational objectives, ultimately reinforcing the startup's ability to extract value while maintaining a committed and productive workforce.

From my observations, *corporate maternalism* initiatives in Brazilian startups can be categorized into three main areas: *perks*, *social integration activities*, and *well-being programs*. *Perks* typically involve smaller investments, such as relaxed dress codes, access to video games and pool tables at the office, free lunches or beer during Happy Hours, hybrid work arrangements, and flexible working hours that allow employees to adjust their start and end times. These perks tend to institutionalize leisure (Krepki, 2019) into the workspace, contributing to an extended workday and even masking the intensification of labor under the ethos of “*working hard*” while simultaneously “*playing hard*.”

Social integration activities can range from in-person or virtual Happy Hours to “*team-building*” meetings, collective lunches, and after-work parties, all strategically designed to foster socialization among employees and managers alike. These events not only strengthen interpersonal connections but also cultivate a sense of community among workers. However, this sense of community serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it fosters strong interpersonal bonds and provides workers with a sense of belonging, functioning as a collective coping mechanism to navigate the pressures and uncertainties inherent in the startup environment. On the other hand, it operates as a mechanism for value extraction, contributing to the exploitation of workers and the generation of surplus value (Marx, 2023). This duality underscores the intricate interplay of care and control within contemporary startup cultures, where social relationships are simultaneously tools for support and instruments of extraction.

Lastly, *well-being programs* often include access to psychological support within the company, as well as health and wellness platforms that provide online

therapy, mental health workshops, and well-being evaluation check-ups. These initiatives are designed to address what Human Resources managers perceive as one of the most pressing issues in the tech industry today: burnout. By implementing these programs, startups believe they are taking adequate care of their employees to prevent burnout (Chen, 2022). However, as Chen points out—and as I observed during fieldwork—tech companies often frame burnout as a result of an individual's inability to manage their own well-being. Consequently, they feel compelled to offer solutions such as access to psychologists or online therapy to “*prevent*” the problem. Yet, when questioned about alternative strategies, such as redefining performance metrics or hiring additional employees to reduce workloads, managers typically evade the issue. This response reinforces the notion that the company's primary objective is to generate profit, shifting the responsibility onto workers to develop personal skills and resilience to meet the organization's (and venture investors') demanding goals.¹⁴⁹

As discussed, *corporate maternalism* initiatives are not solely designed to enhance workplace culture; they are strategically crafted to navigate the intense pressures of a fast-paced and ever-changing organizational environment. These initiatives simultaneously contribute to extracting both *absolute* and *relative surplus value* (Marx, 2023). *Absolute surplus value* is achieved by extending working hours, often through perks that encourage employees to spend more time in the office, such as free meals, recreational activities, or social events (Ho, 2009). *Relative surplus value*, on the other hand, is extracted by a series of lean management mechanisms that intensify work. In that case, corporate maternalism tends to mask the intensification of work through a narrative of flexibility and enjoyment, effectively blurring the boundaries between work and leisure.

Startups often frame these initiatives as efforts to retain employees, prevent burnout, and maintain engagement—key factors for managing the escalating demands of the growth phase. However, beneath the surface, these strategies reveal a dual purpose: while they appear to address worker well-being, they are ultimately aligned with the overarching goal of maximizing productivity and sustaining the relentless pace of growth imposed by investors and market competition. The managerialist ideology that once emphasized solely the functionalist and utilitarian aspects of *homo economicus* (Gaulejc, 2007) is no longer sufficient. In today's work

¹⁴⁹ Well-being programs and episodes of burnout will be explored in detail in Part 3 of this thesis.

culture, *homo economicus* must also be happy and healthy to sustain productivity (Cabanas; Illouz, 2022). This shift reflects a deeper integration of well-being into management strategies, not as an end in itself, but as a means to enhance efficiency and performance.

Despite the abundance of perks and integration activities, many startup employees still find themselves in conflict with their managers or colleagues during the growth phase. These conflicts often stem from the constantly shifting processes and objectives within the company. One might expect a certain level of stability in work organization during the growth phase, but this is rarely the reality, as highlighted by Gustavo and Franco:

You've got a structure that's always changing, and it's not always clear what's going on. And then you end up with some confusion in the documentation [of work processes]. Yesterday's info is already out of date by the next day (Gustavo, 33 years-old, Sales Consultant of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

The feeling is that we're being squeezed dry [since venture capital investment]. On top of tight deadlines for delivery, there have also been a lot of problems with indecision when it comes to making decisions. One day we'd define something, and the next day, it'd be totally different. Then, after a week, we'd change it and have to redo everything we'd done. This whole situation is causing a lot of noise and stress (Franco, 25 years old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

Such changes leave workers with the impression that they are constantly engaged in numerous activities. However, any sense of progress dissipates when they find themselves having to redo work that has already been completed. In addition to constant organizational changes, unmet expectations—such as the failure to receive a promised promotion or a disconnect between responsibilities and financial recognition—become significant sources of stress and frustration for workers.

Franco, who in 2023 had been working on the technology team of the same company for one year and four months as a Data Analyst, shared his experience. During his time there, numerous team members joined and left, making him one of the most “senior” employees in terms of tenure and knowledge of the startup’s business context.

I've been with the company for a year and four months now. It's still a short period, but at the same time, a lot is happening, and a lot has changed. I think that's just how it is in the IT world. A lot of people have come and gone in my company, and I've ended up becoming a bit of a reference... Not technically on the technical side, but more on the business knowledge side.

Other people, who were technically more senior than me, were hired, but they didn't have the business context. So I kinda have more of a leadership role, so to speak, but still reporting to my leaders and all that... In a traditional company, you're still in your infancy for about a year and a half, but in the startup world, a lot of things happen like that, especially in the IT area (Franco, 25 years old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

Due to his longer tenure, Franco enjoyed considerable autonomy within his team. Over the year, he trained two new analysts, reported directly to the technical director of the technology team, and was invited to participate in strategic meetings where his input was valued. Activities often attributed to mid-level employees (i.e. to those who already have a solid grasp of their responsibilities but are still in the process of developing greater autonomy and advanced skills). However, despite this apparent recognition, when asked if he received a promotion between 2022 and 2023, he explained that while his role had been redefined, the changes were limited to his job title, with no accompanying salary increase.

They even see me as a mid-level employee, but they don't make me official as a mid-level employee. As much as I deliver, as much as I work directly with the management team, they still see me as a junior, you know? And they pay me as a junior, even though I have responsibilities that are not those of a junior (Franco, 25 years old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

Stories like Franco's—where employees take on responsibilities that extend far beyond the original scope of their roles without receiving appropriate financial compensation—are common in the tech industry. Once again, in such hierarchical relationships between employees and employers, reciprocity of exchange is deferred (Alter, 2022), leaving workers to reap only symbolic rather than economic rewards.

Faced with situations like these, it becomes evident that the primary sources of stress for workers during the growth stage can stem from multiple factors: the relentless pressure for accelerated growth imposed by investors, the constant shifts in processes and objectives that often require employees to redo their tasks, the frustration of unmet salary expectations, and the cumulative burden of work overload. If, during the early stage, stress arose from the absence of clear structures and work prescriptions, in the growth stage, it becomes evident that stress emerges from two key discrepancies. First, there is the gap between *prescribed work* and *real work* (Dejours, 2000), where employees must navigate increasing demands that often diverge from formalized expectations. Second, the imbalance in the *gift/counter-gift*

dynamic becomes even more pronounced, as workers invest significant time, effort, and emotional energy into the company while receiving disproportionately little in return (Alter, 2002). This growing asymmetry reinforces feelings of frustration and exhaustion, further entrenching the precarious nature of startup labor.

At this stage, workers face heightened productivity demands while navigating a persistent *zone of uncertainty* in search of freedom of maneuver (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977). The push for streamlined processes and measurable outcomes clashes with the ever-shifting realities of incomplete workflows, evolving objectives, and continuous adaptation. This tension not only amplifies stress but also exposes the precarious balance between the company's ambitions and the workers' ability to meet these demands within an unstable and high-pressure environment. As a result, employees must constantly adjust, striving to maintain autonomy while operating within increasingly rigid expectations.

Aware of these challenges, most growth-stage startups attempt to implement *corporate maternalism* initiatives, operating under the premise that they are genuinely taking care of their employees. However, as Ricardo's testimony reveals, *corporate maternalism* has inherent limitations when it comes to prioritizing worker well-being over organizational objectives:

My former HR leader sometimes prioritized people over the company's goals, and, honestly, if the company doesn't grow, there's nothing you can do for the people. That was a shift in mindset—it's the company first, then the people, not the other way around. Because if the company thrives, I can hire more people, and then the people thrive too (Ricardo, 43 years old, CEO of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

As Ricardo's perspective demonstrates, these initiatives are ultimately constrained by the *"growth mindset"* of CEOs and the relentless pace of work dictated by investors' ambitions. Without addressing these underlying drivers, so-called "caring" initiatives fail to tackle the root causes of stress, leaving the fundamental startup growth issues unresolved.

At this stage, collective coping and resistance mechanisms do not differ significantly from those adopted by workers during the early phases of a startup. The primary distinction lies in the diminished *"family-like"* atmosphere as the company grows. Instead of feeling connected to the organization as a whole, workers form closer bonds with their immediate teams, where they feel more comfortable expressing frustrations, sharing concerns, and providing mutual support.

We have our “annoyance [whatsapp] group”, which is where we actively collaborate with our [work] annoyance and with our help. So we’re there to listen and to help each other. And people are always helping each other. Everyone encourages therapy, we exchange referrals for psychologists, we want to know if the person is on medication or not. And if so, what they’re taking... So there’s the policy of good companionship and good neighborliness with your colleague next door (Gustavo, 33 years-old, Sales Consultant of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

This sense of camaraderie is vital for workers as they navigate the chaotic, high-pressure environment of a growing startup. When this solidarity weakens or becomes insufficient, employees often seek opportunities elsewhere, driven by the pursuit of better compensation and a more stable, less volatile work environment. However, by this stage, they are not inclined to join more traditional companies, having become accustomed to the flexibility of remote work and the perks typically offered by startup offices. The underlying issue lies in the realization that venture capital, rather than alleviating workplace demands, often exacerbates them. Consequently, although workers may switch companies, they tend to remain within the startup ecosystem, continuing to experience the relentless pace that defines these environments.

8.1.3 Late-stage startups

According to Blank and Dorf (2012), a late-stage startup is a company that has achieved a significant level of maturity and success. These companies typically offer well-established products in the market and are widely recognized by both the public and their customer base. Unlike the growth stage, where operating at a financial loss or “*burning cash*” is often considered normal, late-stage startups are expected to maintain a positive cash flow and demonstrate strong revenue streams.

During this stage, it is also common for founders and investors to actively seek a profitable “*exit*” strategy, such as an “*acquisition*” by a larger company or an “*initial public offering*” (IPO) (Shestakofsky, 2024). The symbolism often associated with late-stage startups is the “*unicorn*”, representing not only significant revenue generation, but also the “*magical*” achievement of reaching such a rare milestone. Considering the high failure rate of startups during the earlier stages of growth, late-stage startups are regarded by experts as rare and noteworthy successes.

In fact, the established presence of late-stage startups in the market has sparked debate among startup specialists about whether these companies, often referred to as scale-ups, should still be classified as startups at all. As discussed in Chapter One, this thesis follows the premise that startups represent not only a stage of business growth, but also a specific “*way of doing things*”, characterized by a meritocratic mindset, under a managerialist ideology, and a culture of continuous innovation. Under this lens, late-stage startups can still be considered startups despite their scale and maturity.

By this stage, late-stage startups have grown significantly, often employing hundreds or even thousands of workers. Their organizational structures are no longer as flexible or informal as in earlier phases; instead, they are more defined and sophisticated, with well-established processes and specialized departments overseeing different aspects of the business. This shift marks a stark contrast to the hands-on, all-encompassing approach of early and growth-stage startups. In the earlier phases, workers often engage in a wide range of tasks, granting them a sense of autonomy and creativity. However, as the company scales, labor processes become fragmented and standardized, reflecting the broader logic of advanced capitalist production. The emphasis on efficiency, predictability, and surplus value extraction imposes rigid structures that not only diminish workers' agency but also transform their roles into narrowly defined functions within a larger corporate machine. This shift is further exemplified by the hierarchical chain of command, which now includes multiple layers—managers, directors, vice presidents, the CEO, and a board of investors. These organizational changes illustrate how the scaling of startups aligns with the broader tendencies of capitalism to subordinate human creativity and autonomy to the relentless imperatives of growth and profit maximization.

Unfortunately, during the research for this thesis, I was unable to secure interviews with any late-stage startup CEOs. At this stage, CEOs tend to be busier and, in some cases, quasi-celebrities within the tech world, making them more difficult to access. However, I conducted interviews with twelve employees who had experience working at late-stage startups. The companies they represented varied in size, ranging from 500 to 1,000 employees, providing valuable insights into the dynamics and challenges of this advanced phase of startup development.

Five out of the twelve participants who worked at late-stage startups had been with their respective companies for over five years. Given the typical two-year turnover rate in the tech industry (Sullivan, 2018), such longevity is notably rare. This data suggests that during the late phase, employee turnover tends to slow down compared to the earlier stages, although it still remains a notable feature of the industry. All participants reported earning salaries that are considered high by Brazilian standards, with most earning over \$2,500 per month and some reaching up to \$6,000 per month. During their time at late-stage companies, all participants held formal employment contracts, offering them greater job security compared to the more precarious conditions of early-stage startups. However, while employment conditions and wages in late-stage companies appear more stable and less precarious, workers remain subject to the volatility of capital cycles and the constant necessity of selling their labor power to sustain themselves (Marx, 2023).

Moreover, despite the increasing pressure for startup workers to return to the office, the majority of employees I interviewed continued to work remotely, typically visiting the office only twice a week or for specific events. For many, remote work has become a highly valued benefit they are unwilling to forfeit (Kercher, 2022). Additionally, since the pandemic, some late-stage startups have begun hiring employees from across the country, making hybrid arrangements a practical necessity for these organizations. Considering that most late-stage startups own their office buildings, these spaces have remained largely empty since the pandemic. Although still operational, they are used sporadically, as many workers no longer see the value in commuting to an office merely to “work alone.” Consequently, it has become common for subteams and departments to independently manage and coordinate when they collaborate in person or not. In this context, face-to-face interactions are not merely work-focused but have evolved into opportunities for colleagues to socialize and strengthen interpersonal connections.

In early- and growth-stage startups, hiring primarily emphasizes assessing a candidate's profile and cultural fit over their technical skills. However, in the late-stage phase, the focus shifts toward recruiting highly specialized professionals. While alignment with the company's core values and culture remains important, the priority lies in hiring individuals who already possess the advanced skills and expertise necessary to excel in their roles. “*Onboarding*” processes in late-stage startups typically mirror those in growth-stage companies. However, the key distinction lies in

the fact that, rather than onboarding large groups of employees simultaneously, hires at this stage are often more strategic and targeted, focusing on specific roles that align with the company's evolving needs and goals.

Given that professionals hired at this stage typically have prior experience with the lean management framework commonly used by startups, “*onboarding*” becomes less of a *rite of passage* (van Gennep, 1972; Leite Lopes, 1988) into the startup world and more of a structured training process. The primary goal is to ensure that new hires gain a comprehensive understanding of the company's specific business model, enabling them to contribute effectively from the outset.

This phase is also marked by strategic acquisitions and mergers, particularly with competing startups. These moves aim to consolidate market positions, reduce competition, and integrate complementary capabilities. When a well-funded late-stage startup acquires a smaller company, the goal is often not only to absorb its technological innovations but also to retain its key talent, such as project managers and software developers, who are critical to ongoing development and growth efforts.

These strategies of continuous expansion align with the principles of *flexible capitalism* (Sennett, 1998) and often undergo ongoing internal restructuring, whether by merging or dismantling teams, developing new products, or seeking to enter new markets.¹⁵⁰ Such restructuring directly impacts the daily organization of workers. Letícia's testimony offers valuable insight into this phenomenon of constant reorganization, demonstrating that, despite their large scale, late-stage companies continue to embody the dynamic and ever-changing nature that is so characteristic of startup culture, actively creating *zones of uncertainty* from time to time (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977).

Everything is changing, but since you don't have all the necessary information, sometimes you go down one path. Then you realize that's not the right path, it must be another one, so you try again and find out that's not it either. And then it feels like you're constantly in motion, always shifting, but it's more because of how ambiguous the environment is—it's a super ambiguous [work] environment. [...] We had a meeting with one of the top directors at the company. And someone asked her how she dealt with all the ambiguity in the company. She said she didn't like to think about the ambiguity, that she preferred to see it from the perspective that people had a lot of room for creativity, because in an environment without rules, people are constantly creating rules... For those at the top of the chain, I get that it's great to encourage people to try new things. But for those who have to meet

¹⁵⁰ Another characteristic of late-stage startups is their pursuit of international markets, often hiring regional managers and customizing their products or services to meet diverse cultural and regulatory demands. Among Brazilian startups, international expansion tends to focus on Latin America, with countries such as Argentina and Colombia being common first steps.

demands, the constant change in processes is terrible, because we waste time and get nowhere, you know? (Leticia, 29 years old, Technical Recruitment for Diversity and Inclusion of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Working as a salesperson in a large startup, Kelly, a 30-year-old Black woman with a background in advertising, vividly recounts how zones of uncertainty directly impacted her work. Throughout 2021, she was reassigned to four different subteams due to directives from management. Although she remained within the sales department, each team change required her to adapt to new colleagues and workflows, illustrating the persistent instability and fluidity characteristic of such environments.

I've changed teams four times in a year—not areas or roles, just subteams. They kept moving me around, saying it was because I got along well with everyone and because I was “strategic”. I was constantly told that I have a very relational profile, that I work well with people, and so on. And, to be honest, I've always been comfortable in any group dynamic, but it definitely took a toll on me. Every time you change teams, you have to figure out how to build rapport with new people and adapt to the rhythm of that particular team, you know? So, that whole year felt like, “Kelly, go here. Kelly, go there.” And yet, despite all the changes, my performance stayed the same (Kelly, 30 years old, Sales Account Executive of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Such frequent changes are made possible because the flexibility of the startup world is also rooted in what Sennett (1998) refers to as the “arcane form of the job,” where workers perform only fragmented parts of a larger task, operating within increasingly specialized subsectors. This structure allows employees to be reallocated across various subteams in response to the company's ongoing restructuring needs.

Despite Kelly's frustrations about having to readjust her work structure four times in a single year, she expressed pride in maintaining consistent performance, demonstrating her “*resilience*” and ability to meet aggressive sales metrics. However, the pressures extended beyond just meeting the quota and adapting to a shifting work environment; they also included intense competition among coworkers and a strong imperative to perform a particular type of masculinity.

In this constant team-switching, there was a time when I worked in a sales team full of men, and I was the only woman. Everyone kept saying, “Oh, Kelly can handle it, she knows how to deal with them.” But these guys acted like they couldn't show any weakness, and I ended up falling into that rhythm too. It really took a toll on me because the pandemic was still going on. Everyone was scared, but these guys acted like everything was fine, like nothing strange was happening. Whether I liked it or not, that created a pretty toxic environment for me. It took me a while to realize it. I thought I

had to be the same way (Kelly, 30 years old, Sales Account Executive of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Based on the camaraderie seen on early-stage startups, one might assume that, by the late stage, companies would have cultivated more employee-friendly work environments. However, this is far from the reality observed. Through Kelly's testimony, we can discern how employees, particularly men, are often expected to project a facade of emotional invulnerability in well established companies. This expectation aligns with traditional notions of masculinity in the tech world, which equate individual worth with dominance, strength, and an unwavering drive to achieve goals at all costs.

Hernan Palermo and Patrícia Ventrìci (2023), in their ethnographic study of tech workers at the Latin American tech giant *Mercado Libre*, also highlight the pervasive imperatives of performing a certain type of masculinity—an expectation placed on both men and women within the workplace. The issue with this dynamic is that such performances often glorify overwork, promoting a “*hustle*” culture where employees are encouraged to “*crush it*” or “*outperform the competition*.” This ethos not only normalizes long hours and relentless productivity but also contributes to a toxic work culture that prioritizes performance over well-being.

In an effort to distance herself from the pervasive display of masculinized performance, Kelly leveraged the flexibility of remote work and completely stopped attending the office, despite her managers' repeated objections. She shared that she was expected to visit the office at least once a month for end-of-month celebrations, during which top-performing salespeople were publicly recognized and rewarded for their achievements. Ironically, it was precisely these events that she actively sought to avoid.

Nowadays, I'm 100% remote. I can go to the office whenever I want, but I have no desire to because now it feels like there's this constant competition for attention—who talks the most, who talks the best, who does this or that. [...] And at the end of the month, it's even worse. They act like kids, shouting and lifting up whoever hit quota. I can't stand it—it's so uncomfortable (Kelly, 30 years old, Sales Account Executive of a late-stage startup, 2022).

What Kelly refers to as a “*competition for attention*” is later described by herself as “*politics*” and framed by other interlocutors as “*required diplomacy*” or “*playing the game*.” While the terminology varies, these expressions consistently point to the power dynamics embedded in late-stage startup environments. As

previously discussed, organizational structures function as a network of interwoven games, each governed by formal and informal rules in which actors must strategically participate (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977). Mastering these “*games*” or adopting a “*diplomatic*” approach enables workers to navigate constant restructuring processes, reposition themselves within the company, and escape sub teams they perceive as detrimental to their well-being.

This is precisely how Kelly managed to transition out of the “male-dominant” sub team to which she had been assigned. She strategically built relationships with other managers, who, in turn, advocated for her by requesting the director to have Kelly join their team. However, such strategic moves, when initiated by workers themselves, often take months to materialize, as they depend not only on managerial approval but also on the intricate dynamics of *gift/counter-gift* among peers (Alter, 2002). In this context, workers must cultivate personal influence, build reciprocal relationships, and leverage workplace friendships to successfully navigate these transitions. This reliance on informal exchanges underscores the latent power structures within late-stage startups, where adaptability, social capital, and strategic networking become critical tools for individual agency. As Crozier and Friedberg (1977) point out, organizational actors operate within a web of interdependent negotiations, where power is exercised not only through formal authority but also through one’s ability to influence and be influenced.

Since I work in HR, we know better how to act in certain situations, especially when it comes to company politics, because we have information that others don’t. For example, there was this situation where I “advised” a friend. He wanted to switch departments and move into a development role, but he needed experience in that area. He came to talk to me, and I told him: You have to let the hiring manager [from the development team] know what you want, because this position isn’t even open, and it won’t open up if you don’t make your intentions clear. And that’s what he did. Later, he got the job and completely changed his career. That’s what I call “knowing how to play the game”. The part I find the most unfair about this whole corporate game is that the more information you have, the better you can play. But the people who really need that information are often the ones who don’t have access to it (Leticia, 29 years old, Technical Recruitment for Diversity and Inclusion of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Moreover, as startups transition into scale-up mode, restructuring processes and intensified operational demands leave little room for experimentation. While some trial-and-error learning persists, employees are increasingly required to align their performance with the heightened growth expectations typical of late-stage

companies. This transition is closely tied to the broader capitalist imperative to streamline operations and maximize efficiency, a process that inherently relies on homogenization and standardization as key drivers for surplus value production (Pirc, 2022). As a result, work processes in late-stage startups often become highly repetitive, sacrificing creativity and autonomy.

With most roles already clearly defined, the level of autonomy in the workplace diminishes significantly. This reinforces the concept of *circumscribed autonomy* (Leite Lopes, 1988; Bernard, 2020), wherein employees must conform to increasingly rigid frameworks of goals and expectations. Depending on the department or area of focus, work activities become less dynamic and more routine, contrasting sharply with the fast-paced and innovative environment of the growth phase. These shifts in work dynamics are exemplified by Luciana's decision to leave a late-stage startup in pursuit of what she perceives as a more stimulating work environment:

I spent a long time at Unisus. I think I was stagnating, you know? What happened was that, when I first joined Unisus [in 2015], I joined a company with nothing ready. But when I left Unisus [in 2020], they had everything ready. I just had to replicate it, you know? And this new startup I joined in 2020 had nothing ready. So I thought, 'Now that I've learned how it's done, I want to do it myself' (Luciana, 35 years old, Sales Representative at a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Ironically, many employees who previously criticized the hectic and intense environment of growth-phase startups find themselves missing the adrenaline fueled by the autonomy involved in developing new work processes. At the late stage, the early promises of creativity often give way to well-known work formulas, with a heightened emphasis on output and accountability.

These shifts can make it increasingly challenging to retain workers who were initially drawn to startups by the allure of flexibility and freedom. It comes as no surprise that during this phase, some startups may offer “equity” opportunities to senior employees as a strategy to retain top talent. Equity acquisition is typically tied to meeting specific achievements or reaching predetermined time “milestones” within the company. Isabel shared that she might be eligible to receive equity from her new employer if she fulfills all the necessary requirements. Drawing on the experience of a friend, she recognized that receiving equity could translate into a substantial financial gain:

There are some benefits that aren't for everyone; they're reserved for specific profiles, like the distribution of shares you can earn based on your project, initiative, or position. I think this is the kind of benefit they only offer to certain people because it's an incredibly attractive form of compensation. It's not a monthly salary or money that goes directly into your account—it's something with a lot of intricacies. But if everything aligns, it can be hugely significant. For instance, a friend of mine worked at E. and had access to this benefit. If she stayed with the company for more than four years, she would fully vest her equity. At one point, the partners bought back some of these shares, and she ended up making half a million reais (Isabel, 35 years old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Therefore, “equity” serves not only as a financial incentive, but also as a powerful tool to encourage loyalty, personal engagement, and long-term commitment from top senior workers. By tying these benefits to tenure and performance, companies aim to ensure that their most valuable employees remain invested in the organization's success—both emotionally and financially.

Another common strategy to retain employees involves offering “clearer pathways” for professional growth and advancement. Just like employees in multinational corporations operating under managerialist dynamics (Gaulejac, 2007; Linhart, 2023), late-stage startup workers are subject to structured performance evaluations on a quarterly or semi-annual basis. Promotions and financial bonuses are typically tied to these assessments, reinforcing the expectation of continuous high performance. This system often fosters a sense of long-term investment of employees in their roles, aligning individual aspirations with the company's broader objectives.

However, as we will explore, this structured evaluation process tends to function more as a mechanism of control, shaping workers' behaviors and reinforcing managerialist imperatives, rather than serving as a “clear pathway” for personal development. As Nathi's experience reveals, these pathways are often less transparent and straightforward than companies claim. Having held various positions within the marketing department since joining her company in 2016, Nathi recounts a series of experiences with promotions that highlight the contradictions and challenges within these processes. Her narrative includes moments of being discouraged from exercising her supposed autonomy under the threat of losing promotional opportunities, receiving recognition only after enduring intense and stressful periods, and ultimately facing frustration at the lack of further advancement in recent years. For instance, Nathi describes a pivotal moment in 2018:

My boss is abusive. Back in 2018, I told him: "I'm not doing what I want, and I'm seeing an opportunity here. Change my position within the team and let me do the job." And he said: "Okay, I can change your position, but then you won't be promoted." [...] I chose to change my position within the team, and I didn't get promoted. [...] But the truth is that I saw an opportunity and I created a new area [within the marketing team] that exists until nowadays (Nathi, 32 years old, Senior Marketing Analyst of a late-stage startup, 2022).

She also reflects on the emotional toll of her eventual promotion in 2021:

When I was finally promoted [in 2021], it was really nice. I got the promotion and a bonus because there's a half-yearly evaluation grade from 1 to 5 that evaluates your performance in terms of delivery and culture. I got a 5 in both. That's why I received the bonus. [...] I was an example of delivery and culture within the entire marketing team, a top performer at Unisus. Man, that's really cool, you know? It's a huge recognition. But it was based on a lot of pain and insecurity (Nathi, 32 years old, Senior Marketing Analyst of a late-stage startup, 2022).

When I spoke to Nathi again in 2023 for a follow-up interview, her frustration with the lack of further promotions was evident. Although she had joined a training program to prepare for a formal coordinator role in 2024, she explained that, in practice, she had already been performing the duties of a coordinator since 2018, when she saw an opportunity to create a new area within the marketing team of her company. Besides, since the beginning of 2023, she was training and leading another team member. Despite this, her contributions had yet to be formally recognized by a title or salary adjustment.

I've made it clear that I'm no longer going to work in this indirect coordination [of the new employee] until my title changes. Because I'm not going to keep doing a job that isn't mine, right? [...] That's very Brazilian. First, you do the job, and then they give you the title and the appropriate salary. In other places, it's like: "You are being promoted, this is your new role, now you can take on those additional responsibilities." Not in Brazil. Here, we start doing more than we are already doing. Only after we've done a lot more, we get promoted (Nathi, 33 years old, Senior Marketing Analyst of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Nathi's testimony underscores the disconnect between the promises of professional growth in late-stage startups and the lived experiences of employees. Moreover, it illustrates how managerialist *innocent violences* (Gaulejac, 2007) are exercised by those in hierarchical positions, who disguise their impositions through opaque power structures. Broken promotion promises, for instance, are justified and legitimized through rational economic arguments, confronting workers with the constant need to perform at ever-higher levels to truly advance in their careers. In

this context, promotions and bonuses, though framed as rewards for exceptional performance, often function as mechanisms of prolonged exploitation—extracting ever more labor while postponing recognition. And even when these rewards do materialize, they frequently come at the cost of excessive workloads, chronic overwork, and relentless pressure to maintain peak performance.

This discrepancy is emblematic of a larger issue within the startup ecosystem, where narratives of meritocracy frequently obscure the underlying power imbalances. These narratives suggest that career progression is transparent and merit-based, when it is contingent upon third-party evaluations and the continuous disciplining of employees to produce ever-greater results. This reinforces the illusion that the growth logic applied to startups can, or should, be mirrored in the development of individual workers, effectively reducing them to units of production rather than acknowledging their complex, multifaceted contributions.

Moreover, in the late-stage phase, a company's objectives become increasingly aligned with the imperatives of capital accumulation, leading to the implementation of cost-cutting measures, including workforce reductions, as a common strategy (Gaulejac, 2007; Ho, 2009). While startups may have experienced a period of “booming” during the growth phase, layoffs in the late-stage introduce the looming fear of market downturns—or “bursts”—in the tech sector. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Brazilian startup ecosystem has been grappling with significant financial constraints since 2022, forcing many companies—particularly those with “*bloated teams*”—to implement drastic workforce reductions.

While startups at various stages have experienced layoffs, late-stage startups have been disproportionately affected. Many Brazilian startups, propelled by substantial venture capital investments in 2020, expanded their teams aggressively to scale operations. However, as venture capital funding began to dry up in 2022, these companies found themselves unable to sustain their enlarged operations. In response, cost-cutting became unavoidable, resulting in mass layoffs, with hundreds of employees being dismissed at once.

Fernanda's experience in 2022 vividly illustrates the unstable nature of this phase. When I spoke with her, she was unemployed, having been laid off just three months after joining a late-stage startup, along with 20% of the company's workforce. Reflecting on her dismissal, she admitted to having been “*naive*” about the warning signs. According to her, from the outset, the company frequently emphasized the

need to “reduce costs”, “reassess” the utilization of certain tools, and “tighten budgets” for future work plans. However, this practice is hardly unique, as it aligns with the pervasive tendencies of managerialist power, which routinely prioritizes cost-efficiency and resource optimization (Gaulejac, 2007; Linhart, 2023).

In the weeks leading up to her dismissal, Fernanda, despite working remotely, sensed a noticeable shift in the company’s environment. Senior leadership, including vice presidents and directors, had become conspicuously absent from general meetings, while discussions among coordinators increasingly centered on efficiency, strategic focus, and a stronger emphasis on numbers. These subtle yet telling changes preceded the eventual layoffs, highlighting the volatility and instability that late-stage startups also impose on their employees.

It was a Tuesday. I was on Slack, chatting with a colleague to ask for some information. I sent her a message, and she replied: ‘I can’t help you right now because I’ve just been fired.’ Then I went to message another colleague on Slack, but I saw that her account had already been deactivated. I grabbed my phone and called her. She answered, crying, because she’d just been fired too. While I was talking to her, the director of my team sent me a WhatsApp message—which was weird because I’d never spoken to him on WhatsApp before. I said, ‘I’ve got a meeting in 10 minutes. Should I cancel it?’ And he replied, ‘Cancel it.’ So I got on a Zoom call with him, and it was clear he was reading from a script. He started with something like, ‘Because of the economic context, the market situation has led us to make some decisions, and as a result, we’re doing layoffs.’ Then he told me I was being let go and started listing off the benefits I’d receive, as well as the ones I wouldn’t... Looking back, we were way too naive. I’d already noticed things weren’t adding up. The company’s numbers were off, people weren’t hitting their quota, and just the week before, they’d mentioned plans to rebudget. The signs were all there—I just didn’t put two and two together, you know? [...] I had just completed my three months at the company a week before. My dismissal was still a cheap one for them. Honestly, it ended up being a good deal for me. In the end, I got to keep the brand-new MacBook they had given me, received a severance package of 50k [reais], plus an extra month’s salary. Later, I found out it wasn’t out of kindness. It was because they laid me off during a period of labor negotiations, so they weren’t allowed to fire people without some extra compensation. That’s why they gave me an extra month’s salary and kept my health insurance for a few more months. Now, if I want to, I can take six months off without needing to work (Fernanda, 30 years old, Product Manager, unemployed, 2022).

Although the dismissal came as a surprise and was conducted online, Fernanda’s long-standing experience with startups and her relatively privileged financial position softened the blow. She recounted the events of her layoff with a mix of detachment and reflection, noting how it all unfolded in a scripted manner. A clear sign of the impersonal and procedural nature of the process. Despite the destabilizing experience, she managed to turn the situation to her advantage. Fernanda’s financial stability, coupled with her single and child-free lifestyle, allowed

her to approach unemployment with composure. She could afford to take up to six months off work, though she secured a new job in less than two.¹⁵¹

Although the layoff did not put her in a financially risky situation, the impersonal nature of her dismissal underscores the precariousness that can accompany employment in even the most innovative and resource-rich startups. In fact, the 2022 layoff was not the first that Fernanda had witnessed. Long before the pandemic and the volatility of the startup venture capital market, she had already experienced the dismissal of 90 coworkers in 2018 by a promising late-stage startup in Florianópolis. According to Fernanda, this event marked a turning point, as it was the first significant layoff announced by a tech company in the city's burgeoning ecosystem. Unlike more recent layoffs, this initial one carried a profound emotional toll on her and her colleagues.

I think things started to go downhill, like a wake-up call for me—and I imagine for a big part of the team—in 2018, when the layoff happened. That was the reality check. [...] I think the issue was that, in that context, everyone was in love with the company, everyone was caught up in this illusion, and then, all of a sudden, it was like a slap in the face, you know? You realize you're just another employee. People felt kind of betrayed, like their trust had been broken (Fernanda, 30 years old, Product Manager, unemployed, 2022).

For Fernanda, the layoff from 2018 was a stark wake-up call and the beginning of a disenchantment process with the company she was working for at that moment. Both she and her colleagues at the time expressed a deep sense of betrayal by the organization. As Gaulejac (2007) points out, a layoff disrupts not only those who are dismissed but also those who “survive” the process. While Fernanda and her immediate team were not directly affected, the dismissal of friends and acquaintances from other departments left a lasting impact. The collective sentiment of disillusionment was amplified by the previously held belief that the company was a secure and progressive workplace.

To realize that she and her coworkers were “*just another employee*” led Fernanda—and other interlocutors who experienced similar situations—to view their work as “*just another job*.” What was once seen as purposeful and enjoyable labor, despite its challenges, began to morph into a means to an end: the necessary pursuit

¹⁵¹ Interestingly, her next role was not with a startup, but with a large corporation building its internal technology team. This transition highlights how the skills and methodologies developed in startups are being highly sought after by more traditional corporate environments that tend to absorb parts of the dismissed startup workforce.

of a wage for survival. However, even as the illusion of “*meaningful work*” faded, workers found themselves unable to openly express this disenchantment to their colleagues or superiors. Confronted with irreconcilable contradictions and the breakdown of the *gift/counter-gift* promises—where engaged workers were supposed to be rewarded in the future (Alter, 2002)—tech workers operating within a neoliberal framework often adopt a cynical approach to their employment.

As Pfeilstetter notes, “cynicism here is an everyday social criticism that may designate subordination, excuse-making, or a challenge to prevailing moralities” (2017, p. 99). This cynicism becomes a coping as well as a resistance mechanism for suppressing contradictions, such as reconciling the narrative of “*this company is like family*” with the reality of mass layoffs or “*my job is meaningful and brings joy to my life*” with the realization that “*this is just a job.*” In doing so, workers reshape their perceptions of the company and adapt their behavior, prioritizing actions aimed at securing their positions and advancing their careers.

Episodes of layoffs, coupled with the ethnographic data presented here, help us understand that the sources of stress among workers in late-stage startups also stem from a combination of factors. These include the constant pressure to meet growth targets, the increasing repetitiveness and diminishing creativity in their tasks, frequent team restructuring, and the need to navigate complex managerial power dynamics within the organization (Gaulejc, 2007). During the late stage, the discrepancy between *prescribed work* and *real work* (Dejours, 2000) becomes further accentuated by the erosion of the startup illusion. By this point, the idealistic narrative that once motivated workers is overshadowed by mounting pressures. Employees face power abuse by superiors and the feel the need to maintain influential relationships to navigate shifting company dynamics. Frustrations also arise from unfulfilled promotion promises and the relentless drive to cut costs, increasing the threat of mass layoffs. Together, these factors create a stressful work environment where employees feel compelled to be constantly vigilant to avoid becoming irrelevant within their organization.

Despite the stressful work environment, many employees choose to remain in their current positions. By this stage, workers have grown accustomed to the company’s perks and attractive salaries. Moreover, they recognize that changing jobs does not necessarily lead to a better work dynamic, as imagined during growth-

phase. At best, changing jobs may provide a temporary attempt to restore the lost boundaries between work and personal life.

Coping strategies among employees remain, yet the frequency of collective acts of solidarity diminishes, signaling a growing sense of isolation. This is due to two main factors: the increasing individualization of workers and instrumentalization of their social relations. Firstly, in late-stage startups, workers are increasingly inclined to adopt individual coping mechanisms rather than relying on camaraderie. With higher salaries, they have greater financial resources to invest in personal well-being strategies—such as therapy, sports, recreational activities, or even substances—further contributing to the shift toward individualism in stress management. Secondly, as the competitive and hierarchical nature of late-stage companies intensifies, employees increasingly turn to leveraging social influence and forming strategic alliances to navigate workplace challenges and advance their careers.

Certainly, dynamics of *gift/counter-gift* persist; without them, the collaboration necessary to sustain daily operations would not take place (Alter, 2002). However, as startups evolve, strategic and economic considerations increasingly overshadow the ideal of working toward a shared mission. In this context, solidarity among coworkers, while still present, often shifts from genuine camaraderie to more calculated, instrumental relationships—where networking and influence become essential tools for career navigation within the organization. This shift is exemplified by Kelly's experience, where the focus on strategic alliances becomes central to navigating the evolving corporate landscape.

I asked a coworker to talk to me because I needed to share with her that I was feeling very alone [in my team]. And she said she felt the same way [...] She's from the direct sales team. I'm on the partner sales team. And then we had this conversation, and it was really nice. We started having one-on-ones a bit more often, and she taught me a lot about how to deal with these pressures from leadership. To learn to throw back at them the pressures they throw at us (Kelly, 31 years old, Sales Account Executive of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Kelly's account illustrates her intentional effort to form an alliance with a colleague from the broader sales department, though outside her immediate team. This strategy allows her to avoid the direct competition that often exists within her team while simultaneously expanding her network of support. Not only does this help her alleviate feelings of isolation, but it also provides her with practical tools to resist the pressures imposed by their shared managers. Her actions underscore the level of

strategic thinking required to navigate the internal dynamics of late-stage startups, where the pressure to perform is relentless.

Additionally, securing promotions that provide higher salaries and greater job security becomes a primary concern for employees. To achieve these goals, they recognize the importance of forming strategic alliances, navigating office politics, and mastering the “*corporate game*” as a means of maneuvering through persistent zones of uncertainty (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977). These alliances, initially formed as networks of mutual support, evolve into essential instruments for gaining influence and positioning oneself advantageously within the company’s increasingly competitive and hierarchical structure.

Finally, at this stage, the idealistic vision of transforming the world through an innovative product or the hope of securing the next round of investment to propel the company forward fades into the background. Instead, the pragmatic need to secure one’s job or leverage a promotion takes precedence.

8.2 PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

By examining the evolution of startup companies across their various stages—early, growth, and late—we observe significant transformations in both organizational structures and the pace of work, particularly under the influence of venture capital and managerialist power dynamics.

In the early stage, startups exhibit an almost artisanal approach to work organization, characterized by hands-on experimentation and a strong emphasis on employee autonomy and ownership, as workers are expected to treat the company as if it were their own. However, as startups transition into the growth and late stages, the division of labor becomes increasingly structured and complex at the organizational level. Concurrently, at the individual level, work becomes more specialized and fragmented, reflecting the broader capitalist imperatives of efficiency and surplus value extraction (Pirc, 2022). In addition, reaching the late stage does not alleviate these pressures; on the contrary, workers remain under constant strain to sustain the company’s growth while minimizing costs. By this point, tasks often become more repetitive and, as workers frequently report, less “*stimulating*.” This growing specialization combined with increased pressure, reduces opportunities for

autonomy and creativity, eroding the sense of purpose that initially attracted many workers and heightening their frustration with work.

Moreover, as the division of tasks becomes increasingly complex, startup companies often implement a series of managerialist tactics and lean methodologies designed to maintain worker alignment and productivity within a shared framework centered on “*scalability*”, “*rapid growth*”, and “*cost reduction*.” However, given the fluid and unpredictable nature of startup environments, it is often challenging for workers to adhere strictly to the prescribed workflows dictated by these methodologies. In practice, the *real work* within growth and late-stage startups is marked by unachievable metrics, intense labor demands, prolonged working hours, and frequent revisions of completed tasks due to shifting company objectives dictated by the board of investors.

If we conceptualize stress as arising from the mismatch between *prescribed* and *real work*, coupled with an imbalance between *high self-investment* and *low reward* (Pirc, 2022)—or the breakdown of *the gift/counter-gift dynamic* (Alter, 2002)—we can trace how both self-investment and stress evolve throughout a company’s development stages. In the early stage, workers are driven by a *moral commitment* to the common good (Gaulejac, 2007) and the belief that they are contributing to a company poised to “*change the world*.” Their efforts are often framed as an “*investment*” in a future financial return, typically expected after the first major round of venture capital funding. At this stage, idealism acts as a powerful motivator, and stress primarily stems from the fear of failure—both for the company and for the individual—creating a high-stakes environment where personal sacrifice is justified by the promise of eventual success.

During the growth phase, however, the idealism that characterizes the early stages begins to diminish as workers are pushed to perform at the pace demanded by venture capitalists and enforced by managers operating within a managerialist framework (Gaulejac, 2007; Linhart, 2023). At this point, the emphasis shifts from “*collective purpose*” to “*operational efficiency*”, with performance metrics and scalability taking precedence over the initial vision of innovation and impact. The once-inspiring narrative of “*changing the world*” is increasingly overshadowed by the pressures of sustained growth, investor expectations, and the relentless pursuit of profitability. While some employees thrive on the excitement and adrenaline of working in a fast-growing company, many others experience exhaustion due to the

relentless work rhythm. Although some workers choose to change jobs during this booming phase, transitioning to another growth-oriented startup often reveals that the unrelenting pace persists, regardless of the perks provided through *corporate maternalism* or the promises of personal and career development.

In the late stage, the chaotic and dynamic work environment of a growing startup gives way to the pressures of operating as a mature company striving to maintain its competitive edge. At this point, workers are no longer primarily driven by the fear of failure but rather by anxieties over job security, potential layoffs, and the frustration of unmet career expectations despite years of self-investment. As internal competition intensifies, employees increasingly rely on strategic alliances with colleagues to secure their positions and navigate the organization's shifting power dynamics. In doing so, they recognize the necessity of accepting and maneuvering within the rules of the game (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977), where professional survival depends as much on political acumen as on performance.

This persistent imbalance between *high self-investment* and *low rewards*, inherent to the startup world, often manifests as what my interlocutors describe as “*frustration*.” Given that managerialist power consistently taps into workers' aspirations, it is unsurprising that the most frequent term used to describe workplace malaise is not fatigue, but “*frustration*.” After all, it is entirely legitimate for workers to seek fulfillment in their roles. However, the breakdown of established expectations—whether in the form of unmet promises, delayed recognition, or career stagnation—leads to the frustration of their desires for both acknowledgment and self-realization. This gap between aspiration and reality becomes a pervasive source of discontent in the workplace.

Over time, this accumulated frustration, compounded by intense demands and high pressure, frequently leads to stress and, eventually, burnout. This dynamic is particularly exacerbated by the internalized belief among workers that if they feel frustrated with their jobs, the fault lies with them. Many have absorbed the narrative that they are not “*developed enough*” or have not given enough of themselves to the company, reinforcing a cycle of self-blame and overinvestment that perpetuates their stress.

Therefore, beyond the structural transformations that occur within a startup, we also observe the profound ways in which workers themselves are reshaped by the company's evolution. Their journey often transitions from initial idealism to

bedazzlement to frustration and, ultimately, to cynicism. Throughout this process, the relentless pursuit of growth forces workers to confront the existential realization of the lack of “*purpose*” on their labor, as their work becomes increasingly fragmented, specialized, and subordinated to the imperatives of profit and scalability.

A minimum level of cynicism, therefore, becomes an essential strategy for navigating the power structures within tech corporations. It allows workers to reconcile their disillusionment while capitalizing on the perks that their flexible schedules, hybrid work arrangements, and above-average salaries afford. These include engaging in lifestyle sports, recreation, therapy, medication, and even recreational drug use, as a means of coping with the alienation and stress inherent in their roles.

Recalling the words of Antunes (2009), in the era of flexible accumulation, the illusion was created, and the utopia was sold, that it would be possible to “*re-enchant*” capitalism or fill its voids with “*meaning*” without altering its structural foundations. Initially, the discourse propagated by startups and their investors sought to convince workers that the startup business model could transform capitalism itself, offering jobs imbued with “*purpose and meaning*.” However, as Antunes highlights, “it is not possible to reconcile waged, fetishized, and estranged labor with (truly) free time,” (2009, p. 173)¹⁵² in which human beings would genuinely be able to engage in entirely new and truly autonomous forms of sociability, and, therefore, meaning. In other words, the notion of “*meaningful work*” within the startup world proves to be as utopian as it is in any other corporation embedded within the capitalist system. Consequently, if startup workers transition from initial enchantment to gradual cynicism, it is because they come to realize that “*meaningful work*” ultimately amounts to little more than “*just a job with perks*.”

9 CHAPTER 4 - HYBRID MODES OF WORK ORGANIZATION

Since the rise of ICTs, both media discourse and popular narratives have often positioned them as a defining feature of contemporary capitalism, capable of restructuring the world of work by altering its spatial and temporal dimensions. This is all true. However, as Sennett (1998) argues, beyond the advent of ICTs, one of the

¹⁵² Translated freely from the original text: Não é possível compatibilizar trabalho assalariado, fetichizado e estranhado com tempo (verdadeiramente) livre (Antunes, 2009, p. 173).

most fundamental characteristics of capitalism over the past 50 years has been its capacity to reorganize the temporalities of life, in particular the temporalities of work.

In this context, *knowledge workers* (Huws, 2009)—in general, highly skilled and well-paid workers whose jobs can be performed using personal computers connected to the internet—appear to be at the forefront of contemporary capitalism. They not only rely heavily on ICTs to structure their work but also experience new temporalities and spatial arrangements that extend beyond traditional office and factory settings, reflecting broader transformations in labor organization and control. Given that startup employees are mostly *knowledge workers* (Huws, 2009), it is essential to interrogate: What does the contemporary social image of a knowledge worker entail? What kinds of work routines are typically associated with them? More importantly, what kind of life does the “*startup knowledge worker*” embody?

To begin addressing these questions, it is important to note that, firstly, startup workers are mostly *office workers* (Huws, 2009) who transitioned to remote work during the pandemic. Although remote work has traditionally been associated with freelancers, the self-employed, and entrepreneurs (Cingolani; Corsani, 2024), it was already present among startup workers—particularly managers and software developers—before the pandemic. However, it was not the dominant mode of work and only became widespread after COVID-19 reached Brazil in March 2020.

Moreover, remote work, as conceptualized here, differs significantly from home-based labor during the early stages of industrialization. As Bruno Durães *et al.* (2021) highlight,

telework, [...] although carried out in the domestic space, has distinct characteristics, as it involves activities specific to digital work. This includes the use of electronic means, computers, smartphones, internet connections, digital platforms, and other tools (idem, p. 950).¹⁵³

Unlike traditional home-based work, which was often manual and piece-rated, contemporary telework is embedded in digital infrastructures, enabling new forms of labor control and productivity monitoring.

When analyzing the regulation of remote work in Brazil, it is essential to consider the *2017 Labor Reform*, which introduced “a menu of flexible and precarious

¹⁵³ Translated freely from the original text: O teletrabalho, do qual tratamos neste texto, embora realizado no espaço doméstico, tem características distintas, tratando-se de atividades próprias do trabalho digital, que envolve o uso de meios eletrônicos, computadores, smartphones, conexão de internet, plataformas digitais e outras (Durães *et al.*, 2021, p. 950).

employment contract options” (Durães *et al.*, 2021, p. 959).¹⁵⁴ This reform significantly reshaped labor relations in Brazil, facilitating more “flexible” employment models while simultaneously eroding worker protections. As Durães *et al.* present:

The specific regulation of teleworking took place with the 2017 Labor Reform (Brazil, 2017), in articles 75-A to 75-E of the CLT. The legislation is laconic and blatantly employer-driven: in line with the rest of the reform, it allows workers to telework by individual agreement, it also refers to the individual agreement to define the distribution of costs for the equipment and services needed to carry out the work and, most seriously, it establishes that teleworkers are excluded from the provisions relating to the control of working hours, which means that they are not entitled to overtime pay for any excesses (2021, p. 960).¹⁵⁵

In practice, none of the startup workers I encountered during fieldwork were entitled to overtime pay, regardless of whether they worked remotely or in the office. Several companies—particularly those that employed informal contractors under “*pejotização*” arrangements (independent contracts)—did not track working hours at all. Others maintained a more formal system of time monitoring, but did so in a flexible and largely symbolic manner. When asked about mechanisms of time regulation, many interlocutors reported that they either did not clock in or, when required to do so, treated the system as performative rather than binding.

Nevertheless, most startup employees welcomed the lack of direct supervision as a gesture of managerial “*trust*”, even if this supposed “*flexibility*” often resulted in longer working hours and increased self-monitoring. In the absence of external regulation, workers were compelled to devise personal strategies to manage their time and output. This shift points to a broader transformation in the organization of labor: from direct managerial control to a regime of responsabilized autonomy, in which workers must internalize expectations of productivity and continuously self-regulate. As such, the startup model exemplifies a post-disciplinary form of governance in which freedom and flexibility are tightly interwoven with new modes of control and self-exploitation.

¹⁵⁴ Translated freely from the original text: um cardápio de opções de contratos de trabalho flexíveis e precários. (Durães *et al.*, 2021, p. 959).

¹⁵⁵ Translated freely from the original: A regulamentação específica do teletrabalho se deu com a Reforma Trabalhista de 2017 (Brasil, 2017), nos artigos 75-A a 75-E da CLT. A legislação é lacônica e tem conteúdo flagrantemente patronal: ao seguir a linha do restante da reforma, permite a condução do trabalhador ao teletrabalho por acordo individual, remete também para o acordo individual a definição da distribuição dos custos com os equipamentos e serviços necessários ao desempenho do trabalho e, mais grave, estabelece que o trabalhador em teletrabalho está excluído das disposições relativas ao controle de jornada, o que significa dizer que ele não tem direito ao recebimento de horas extraordinárias por eventuais excessos (Durães *et al.*, 2021, p. 960).

According to a 2024 survey by Abstartups, 44.8% of Brazilian startup workers operate entirely remotely, while 44.1% follow a hybrid model—a notable increase from 39.7% in 2023. In contrast, only 11% work exclusively in person. These figures underscore the dominance of remote and hybrid work arrangements in the Brazilian startup ecosystem, reflecting a broader transformation in organizational practices. Rather than a temporary adaptation to crisis, this shift suggests the consolidation of a work model centered on flexibility, autonomy, and self-management—principles that, paradoxically, reinforce new modes of labor control.

Ethnographic data collected between 2020 and 2024 further supports this trend. Many startup workers I interviewed were accustomed to traditional office-based routines prior to the pandemic. However, the onset of COVID-19 and the subsequent public health restrictions prompted a widespread shift to remote work. In the following years, employment contracts were restructured to accommodate hybrid arrangements, with some workers continuing to operate primarily from home and others alternating between remote and in-office work. By 2023–2024—approximately two years after the peak of the pandemic—23 participants reported working predominantly from home, six followed a hybrid schedule, and only two worked entirely from their company's office.

These findings suggest that, despite the broader push across industries to return to in-person work, remote and hybrid arrangements have become entrenched in the startup sector. The minimal number of workers who reported a full return to the office underscores the lasting impact of pandemic-era transformations on workplace practices. What was initially a response to an exceptional public health crisis has evolved into a structural feature of labor relations in the technology sector, particularly among Brazilian startups.

Additionally, most late-stage startups employing the participants in this study maintained physical office spaces throughout the pandemic, enabling flexible and hybrid work arrangements in its aftermath. In contrast, some early-stage and growth-stage startups have chosen to forgo physical offices entirely, requiring employees to work exclusively from home or shared spaces such as cafés and coworking hubs. This shift among emerging startups further underscores the institutionalization of remote work within the sector.

9.1 CORPORATE NOMADS

With this data in mind, the next section examines the profile of the knowledge workers in this study through three proposed archetypes: the *9-to-5 corporate worker*, the *digital nomad*, and, most recently, the *corporate nomad*.¹⁵⁶ These archetypes, as categorized by Julian Marx *et al.* (2023), are defined based on how workers relate to five key dimensions of work: control, time, social environment, technology, and space.

Within the five dimensions, the *9-to-5 corporate workers* tend to experience limited control over their work, as organizations exert significant influence over both tasks and work structures. Their schedules are rigidly defined, with working hours typically set from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. in Brazil, in accordance with labor legislation that mandates an eight-hour workday with a one-hour lunch break. In terms of social environment, these workers benefit from employment stability and a degree of social security, including benefits such as healthcare and retirement contributions. Their technological tools are standardized and employer-provided, particularly in relation to work management software that tracks progress and productivity. Lastly, their work is spatially fixed in company-owned office spaces, necessitating daily commutes and, in some cases, residence in high-cost urban centers (Marx *et al.*, 2023).

Digital nomads, by contrast, are primarily freelancers or entrepreneurs who operate under self-organization and self-leadership. Their time management is highly flexible, with no predefined working hours and an ostensible blending of work and leisure. Lacking traditional job security, their professional stability relies on continuous networking and the pursuit of independent contracts. Their technological choices are largely unconstrained, as they are not bound to employer-mandated tools or systems. In terms of space, their work environments are fluid, encompassing coworking spaces, cafés, and short-term rental accommodations (Marx *et al.*, 2023). Digital nomadism is often intertwined with particular lifestyle identities, such as travel, sports, or even parenthood, reinforcing the idea of work as an extension of personal experience. As David Cook (2020) observes, digital nomads frequently articulate a desire for a broader sense of freedom, autonomy, and self-determination. Their primary motivation often stems from the aspiration to escape the constraints of

¹⁵⁶ The latter is particularly relevant, as certain startup workers exhibit characteristics that align with this emerging category.

traditional employment, including rigid “9-to-5 schedules, presenteeism, micromanagement, and the daily commute” (idem, p. 358).

Corporate nomads, in contrast, represent a hybrid model, selectively adopting and rejecting aspects of both the 9-to-5 corporate worker and the digital nomad. As they

[...] are permanent employees working location-independently by leveraging information technology. They differ from digital nomads in that they benefit from a robust social safety net and adhere to core working hours and standardized technology. They differ from 9–5 corporate workers in that they create their lifestyle and work environment according to individual preferences and democratic decisions in concert with superiors and co-workers (Marx *et al.*, 2023, p. 303).

This suggests that, while corporate nomads remain subject to organizational control, they retain a certain degree of autonomy, contingent on core working hours, flexible schedules, and negotiated arrangements with their employers (Marx *et al.*, 2023). Unlike traditional corporate workers, they are not strictly required to work from a company office, which supposedly grants them greater work-life balance by allowing them to choose between working from home or other convenient locations. Moreover, they continue to benefit from a certain level of employment stability while also enjoying some of the perceived advantages of a more flexible and informal work environment.

Corporate nomads can be juxtaposed with the concept of the *waged teleworker*, suggested by Patrick Cingolani and Antonella Corsani (2024), as they represent “new forms of organization of salaried work in the age of digital technologies” (idem, p. 249).¹⁵⁷ However, since most corporate nomads are deterritorialized from their workspaces, they mostly tend to work from home, facing the risk of “the destruction of the private sphere” (Cingolani; Corsani, 2024, p. 255). As a result, they remain subject to significant constraints. As observed by Marx *et al.* (2023), they often experience pressure to remain constantly available to their superiors, leading to extended working hours. Additionally, the lack of a stable work environment can result in distractions or isolation, while the absence of a structured routine places the burden of managing both professional and personal responsibilities on the individual. These factors challenge the notion that corporate

¹⁵⁷ Translated freely from the original text: ‘télésalariat numérique’ pour rendre compte des nouvelles formes d’organisation du travail salarié à l’époque des technologies numériques (Cingolani; Corsani, 2024, p. 249).

nomadism or remote working inherently provides greater work-life balance and autonomy.

Building on both the characteristics and limitations of the corporate nomad figure, it is possible to argue that contemporary startup workers in the post-pandemic landscape experience control, time, social environments, technology, and spatial organization in ways that closely parallel this ideal. The startup worker, in this sense, occupies an intermediary position: while enjoying the relative stability of formal employment, they also embrace many of the values associated with digital nomadism—flexibility, mobility, and autonomy. They often seek to escape rigid 9-to-5 schedules, resist micromanagement, and reject what they perceive as the “*inefficiency of daily commutes*”. In this framework, remote work is widely regarded not only as a marker of personal freedom but also as a source of time optimization and increased productivity—values that are, notably, central to managerialist discourses (Gaulejac, 2007).

Despite their structural proximity to the figure of the corporate nomad—particularly given their contractual obligations and integration into formal organizational hierarchies—many startup workers continue to be inspired by the ethos of digital nomadism. The imagined freedom to work independently of place, schedule, and institutional constraint continues to exert a powerful appeal. For some, especially those who have experienced burnout, this ideal becomes a blueprint for personal transformation. In such cases, leaving formal employment to pursue a fully nomadic lifestyle is framed as a form of liberation—a conscious attempt to escape the contradictions of autonomy under constraint and to reclaim control over one’s labor and life.

9.2 CONTROLLED AUTONOMY

While the archetypes outlined by Marx *et al.* (2023) provide a useful framework for understanding the nuances of contemporary waged knowledge workers, they provide a limited understanding of the new forms of work autonomy that are at the core of salaried work transformations (Bernard, 2020). Recognizing that such transformations are not isolated phenomena but are deeply interconnected with broader shifts in work organization and capital accumulation, we aim to explore how contemporary startup workers balance the dual demands of flexibility and

responsibility in their day-to-day work. By doing so, we seek to gain deeper insights into how they navigate stress and well-being in their professional lives.

Overall, autonomy has always been a central concern. This spans from Taylorist labor management models and *disciplinary power* (Foucault, 1975) to management by objectives and project-based work under flexible capitalism and *managerialist power* (Gaulejac, 2007). As Sophie Bernard (2020) observes, under the Taylorist model, workers sought autonomy *in spite of* the company's work organization methods. "Even if their room for maneuver [was] very limited, they develop[ped] multiple techniques to resist the Taylorian-Fordian organization and to reappropriate their work" (Bernard, 2020, p. 17).¹⁵⁸

Modern work arrangements, on the other hand, through "profit-sharing, target-based bonuses and commission-based pay" (idem, p. 229), increasingly emphasize autonomy *for* the company itself.¹⁵⁹ "From now on, employees [are] in charge of their own careers [and wages], recruited and assessed not on the basis of objective qualifications, but on the basis of personal qualities attached to the individual" (ibidem, p. 19).¹⁶⁰ Although such strategies mitigate the perception of worker subordination and do enhance the level of workers' autonomy, this autonomy remains fundamentally constrained and never absolute. Rather, it is a form of *controlled autonomy* that remains subordinated to the company's imperative to sustain competitiveness in a globalized and ever-evolving market. Thus, "this paradoxical movement of controlled autonomy is reflected in the internalization of control by employees, and in a sense of empowerment aimed at putting employee autonomy at the service of the company's performance" (Bernard, 2020, p. 20).¹⁶¹

In this context, startup workers are particularly relevant because they not only embody what Bernard (2020) describes as the "new spirit of the wage earner"—valuing autonomy and responsibility while internalizing individualistic and meritocratic ideals—but also engage extensively with digital communication technologies and benefit significantly from the spatial and temporal flexibility of work arrangements.

¹⁵⁸ Translated freely from the original text: Même si leurs marges de manœuvre sont très limitées, ils développent ainsi de multiples techniques pour résister à l'entreprise de l'organisation taylorienne-fordienne et pour se réapproprier leur travail (Bernard, 2020, p. 17).

¹⁵⁹ Remuneration strategies are also seen in the technology sector.

¹⁶⁰ Translated freely from the original text: Les salariés seraient dorénavant responsables de leur carrière, recrutés et évalués, non plus en fonction de qualifications objectivées, mais de qualités personnelles attachées à l'individu (Bernard, 2020, p. 19).

¹⁶¹ Translated freely from the original text: Ce mouvement paradoxal d'autonomie contrôlée se traduit par une intériorisation du contrôle par les salariés et une responsabilisation ayant pour objectif de mettre l'autonomie des salariés au service de la performance de l'entreprise (Bernard, 2020, p. 20).

Given that startups frequently operate within the *gray areas of employment* (Bureau *et al.*, 2024), and that “‘the office’ does not need to be a physical place. Instead, it can be a way of relating” (MacDougall, 2022, p. 54), this section examines how startup workers relate to one another and navigate hybrid work arrangements. As we will see, their daily routines often blur the boundaries between work and leisure, as well as professional and domestic responsibilities—an ambiguity that can both enhance flexibility and autonomy while also exacerbating work intensification and eroding well-being.

Moreover, most startup workers with hybrid work contracts alternate between home offices, “anywhere office” practices, and occasional use of their companies’ physical office spaces. While we will analyze each of these modalities separately, it is important to acknowledge that, in the observed startup scenario of Florianópolis, a single startup worker may navigate through all of these modes of work organization at different times.

Besides, despite the perceived dynamism of the technology sector, being an observer of a startup worker is not exactly an exciting task—especially since many were still working remotely when fieldwork was conducted. For those working from home, much of the day is spent alone¹⁶² in front of a computer, immersed in Excel spreadsheets, emails, project management platforms, or lines of software code. The silence is punctuated only by virtual meetings—typically lasting 15 to 30 minutes—with managers, colleagues, or clients.

From an outsider’s perspective, little seems to be happening. Yet for those engaged in the work, attention is constantly shifting between screens, documents, and incoming information. While coding, a colleague might send a Slack message asking for help; while calculating a “*budget*”, a WhatsApp notification from a client demands immediate attention; and from one meeting to the next, there’s sometimes not even enough time for a break. The mental juggling act is invisible to those not directly involved. However, tasks accumulate throughout the day, each competing for urgency, while the “*To Do List*” expands relentlessly.

As we will see, in this kind of setup, the benefits of working from home can sometimes be overshadowed by the demands of an increasingly hectic schedule. At

¹⁶² When in a romantic relationship, there is a strong likelihood that both partners work from home, sharing the same home office, working for different companies. Given that most of my interlocutors do not have children, only a few mentioned the challenge of balancing their workday with parenting responsibilities.

the same time, it is also possible to observe routines that integrate work and leisure throughout the day. Nevertheless, while this context enables workers to perceive greater flexibility and, consequently, a heightened sense of autonomy in managing their routines, it is essential to recognize that this autonomy remains constrained as is the case in any kind of organization (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977). It is a form of controlled autonomy, ultimately subordinated to the demands and constraints of work within a neoliberal capitalist framework and a managerialist setting (Gaulejac, 2007).

9.3 REMOTE WORK

Given that many startup employees were already proficient in digital tools such as Zoom, Slack, and Google Calendar, startups swiftly transitioned to remote work when the COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared in Brazil (Morelix *et al.*, 2020).¹⁶³ Despite startup workers' familiarity with digital tools, integrating work into their homes required them to reorganize their living spaces, often setting up makeshift workstations in bedrooms, living rooms, and kitchens. Besides, beyond the spatial reconfiguration, workers also had to redefine the boundaries of working time (Metzger; Cléach, 2004), as the boundaries between professional and personal life had changed.

As Cook (2020) highlights, one of the greatest challenges digital nomads face is regulating their own work rhythm. When working alone, they must establish their own bureaucratic structure to rationalize their time (Sennett, 1998). In other words, they must develop strong self-discipline to maintain a steady work routine while carving out time for leisure. However, when working in pairs—whether with a life partner or a business partner—their work rhythm tends to be shaped more by their shared routines than by interactions with coworkers who are only virtually present. For startup workers, this dynamic was particularly evident at the beginning of the pandemic. Those who were married or lived with friends had to collectively adjust their work rhythms, renegotiating lunch breaks and setting clearer boundaries to mark the end of the workday. In contrast, those who were single or lived alone were more prone to working long hours without breaks, often requiring stricter self-discipline strategies to prevent work from completely overtaking their daily lives.

¹⁶³ This stands in contrast to other sectors, which first had to adapt to these technologies before implementing remote work (Silvestre *et al.*, 2023; Melo *et al.*, 2024).

When conducting interviews, I had the opportunity to visit a few homes and observe what some of the home-office setups looked like. By then, most workers had managed to better organize their workspaces, often with financial or material support from their companies. Even so, from an ergonomic standpoint, none of these home offices fully met the necessary requirements for a healthy workspace, as we can see below.

Figure 11 – Home office 1



Source: image record made by the author in August 2022.

Figure 12 – Home office 2



Source: image record made by the author in August 2022.

In the first image, a small desk sits by a window but faces directly toward the worker's bed, emphasizing the overlap between rest and labor. In the second image, a worn-out chair is tucked into a cramped corner of the house. Behind it, a glass board covered in children's drawings reveals that the space is shared with young family members.¹⁶⁴

Although these images vividly illustrate the erosion of boundaries between work and personal life, it is important to recognize that, since the pandemic, most startups and their employees have positively embraced remote work. From the perspective of startup entrepreneurs and managers, remote work was positioned as the *"future of work."* They believed their prior familiarity with digital tools made them particularly well-equipped for this transition, expecting it to enhance productivity while also fostering greater work-life balance.

Workers, on the other hand, framed work-life balance in terms of managing personal responsibilities and interests without compromising their full-time employment. For many, remote work was an opportunity to improve their quality of life—whether by moving closer to the beach in Florianópolis, engaging in lifestyle

¹⁶⁴ Both images were lightly edited to remove notebooks and productivity trophies featuring company logos.

sports, or dedicating time to hobbies while still meeting their professional obligations. Additionally, the flexibility of remote work was valued for the autonomy it provided in handling everyday tasks that might otherwise be difficult to accommodate within a traditional office setting, such as scheduling medical appointments, running errands, or picking up children from school, free from the rigid constraints of commuting and fixed office hours.

In that sense, remote work opened up a new *zone of uncertainty* (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977), perceived differently by employers and employees. For workers, it presented the potential for greater freedom, sometimes even the possibility of “cheating” and working fewer hours. For companies, however, it introduced the opportunity to extend working hours and intensify productivity demands. While remote work reduced the direct influence of disciplinary power that traditionally monitors and controls workers’ bodies in an office setting, it also strengthened managerial power by deepening control over workers’ subjectivity—shifting focus from presence to the delivery of pre-defined results and objectives.

Thus, despite the apparent benefits of remote work, the extent to which its flexibility translates into genuine autonomy and well-being remains a subject of critical inquiry. As Durães *et al.* (2021) caution, framing remote work as inherently modern or progressive risks reinforcing market-driven narratives that ultimately serve capitalist interests. Furthermore, as we will see, only a limited number of workers truly experience the benefits of work-life balance. More often than not, startup employees fall into what Heejung Chung (2022) defines as the *flexibility paradox*, in which increased flexibility paradoxically results in greater work demands and a further blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life. Thus, it is essential to critically examine not only the advantages of remote work, but also the new forms of labor control and intensification it has introduced.

Overall, all participants in this study reported that the transition to remote work posed significant challenges during the pandemic. While most expressed relief at being able to continue working under these conditions, they also faced considerable uncertainties regarding job stability and time management. Nathi, for instance, initially acknowledged the ability to work from home as a “*privilege*.”¹⁶⁵ However, she

¹⁶⁵ Throughout the pandemic in Brazil, there was much discussion about remote work as a privilege accessible only to certain segments of the working class, particularly those belonging to the middle classes. In this sense, “the notion of privilege arises in light of the profile of the portion of the working class that can transfer their work to the domestic environment, with the possibility of maintaining their jobs and income” (Durães *et al.*, 2021, p. 951). Translated freely from the original text: A ideia de

also described experiencing persistent feelings of “*guilt*” and an unsettling sense that she was not working enough.

Am I doing anything [at home]? No, I'm not. So why am I not working if I'm not doing anything? It's a really intense form of self-management. [...] It took me a long time to adapt [to remote work], precisely because of this. I kept asking myself: Can I step away from my computer to do the laundry? I forced myself to be ready in front of the computer every day at 9 a.m. But it wasn't like that before—by the time I got to the office, chatted with people... I'd only start working around 10:30 a.m. So during the pandemic, I felt this huge obligation... It took me a while to realize that it's not about the number of hours worked, but about what I deliver (Nathi, 32 years old, Senior Marketing Analyst of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Nathi's testimony offers a lens through which we can analyze remote work within the *gift/counter-gift* dynamic (Alter, 2002). Feeling privileged to continue working from home, she experienced a sense of indebtedness to the company, as if her continued employment were a gift that she must reciprocate through extended working hours. This highlights how the flexibility of remote work can paradoxically reinforce self-imposed overwork, as employees internalize the obligation to “*give back*” by demonstrating unwavering dedication.

Furthermore, Nathi's realization—that work is not about the sheer number of hours logged but rather the results delivered—reflects a broader surveillance dynamic in remote work. Jean-Luc Metzger and Olivier Cléach (2004) had already identified this shift, where traditional forms of direct supervision give way to more subtle, yet pervasive, mechanisms of control. Rather than being directly monitored by their superiors, remote workers are assessed retrospectively, based on their outputs and achievements, reinforcing the expectation of continuous performance and availability. Given that startups are predominantly results-driven organizations, prioritizing rapid growth and expansion, it is unsurprising that many startup workers, like Cristina, found themselves preoccupied with maintaining productivity while working from home.

I'm a workaholic, right? So before the pandemic, my life was all about work, but it didn't really have a set routine. Every day was different. [...] But when the pandemic hit, I had to completely readjust my life. One of the biggest struggles in that first year was figuring out how to be productive at home. Before, I'd be at the office from 8:30 a.m. until around 7 p.m. Then suddenly, with the pandemic, the question became: How do I stay at home and work the same way I used to? For the first six months, I forced myself to sit in front

privilégio se dá em face ao perfil da parcela da classe trabalhadora que pode transferir seu trabalho para o ambiente doméstico, com possibilidade de manutenção de seus empregos e remunerações (Durães *et al.*, 2021, p. 951).

of the computer for all those hours. [...] But by 5 p.m., I was already exhausted, yet I'd think, 'How can I stop working this early?' (Cristina, 32 years old, Marketing Coordinator at a late-stage startup, 2023).

Cristina's testimony is particularly revealing. Her account of working from 8:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. even before the pandemic indicates that the temporal expansion of work into personal life was already normalized within startup culture. Yet the shift to remote work did not reduce this intensity—it simply altered its form. In the early months of the pandemic, Cristina attempted to replicate her office routine at home, treating the home environment as if it were an extension of the workplace. Her self-imposed discipline—forcing herself to remain seated in front of the computer for office-equivalent hours—illustrates the internalization of productivity norms, where being physically present, even in a virtual or domestic space, is equated with legitimate work. The exhaustion she describes by 5 p.m., coupled with her reluctance to “*stop working this early*,” highlights how deeply ingrained the moral imperative to be productive remains, even in the absence of direct managerial oversight.

Letícia's narrative complements and deepens this analysis by underscoring how the spatial reorganization of work under remote conditions collapses physical and symbolic boundaries between labor and rest. As she reflects, the absence of a dress code, commute, or fixed working hours in remote work, rather than fostering the promised work-life balance, has instead intensified work's intrusion into her personal life.

I think for a long time during remote work, my job took over my life—and it still does... Actually, I'm not sure if it invaded my life more than when I worked in person because I think I worked just as much back then. The difference is that work wasn't inside my house. Before, I'd leave my computer at the office; now, everything is here at home, you know? [...] At the start of the pandemic, I was living in a tiny studio apartment. So, everything happened in the same space. That's actually why I moved—I was sleeping in the same space I was working, in the same space I was eating... There was no way to separate anything, and it was really bad. That's why I moved to Morro das Pedras, to a house with two bedrooms, so I could shut the door, disconnect, and actually 'leave' work (Letícia, 29 years old, Technical Recruitment for Diversity and Inclusion at a late-stage startup, 2022).

Letícia's testimony highlights both the overlap between work and personal spaces and the individual strategies she employed to mitigate its effects. Moving to a two-bedroom home near *Morro das Pedras* beach allowed her to physically separate her workspace from the rest of her living environment. Additionally, as she later

explained, relocating closer to the beach was an attempt to establish greater balance in her life and fully capitalize on the flexibility of remote work in a city like Florianópolis. However, as another interlocutor pointed out, being able to go to the beach during work hours or on a lunch break does not necessarily translate to true disconnection from work.

I'm happy [with working from home] because I feel like I can manage my personal and professional life. But one thing I'm not satisfied with is how hard it is to manage my schedule to do things like have a regular workout routine or go to the doctor without stress. I just can't, you know? [...] I might be at the beach, but I'm always checking my phone. If a message comes in, I'll reply, and that means I'm working. So I can't really say how many hours I actually work. Some days, it's 10 hours straight, but other days, it's fewer hours, but more intense (Kelly, 30 years old, Sales Account Executive of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Kelly's testimony reveals that the blurring of work and personal spaces is not the only issue—establishing clear time boundaries is equally challenging. Although she expresses satisfaction with remote work, noting that it allows her to “*better balance her professional and personal life*”, she quickly contradicts herself, acknowledging that setting boundaries to protect personal time remains a significant struggle. After all, a worker under a *flexitime* regime may have control over their work location and, at times, their core hours, but this does not equate to greater control over the work process itself (Sennett, 1998). With the aid of new communication technologies, even during breaks, workers remain reachable, often feeling the pressure to stay available and responsive. This constant accessibility reinforces the managerialist expectation of uninterrupted productivity, subtly eroding the very autonomy that flexible work arrangements promise to provide.

As Chung (2022) points out, workers with autonomy over their schedules, particularly when combined with remote work, are often more prone to working longer hours rather than fewer. During fieldwork, it became evident that those working from home required considerable self-discipline to disconnect from work by 6 p.m., yet many found themselves still working well past 8 p.m., sometimes without even realizing it.

I started using Clockify¹⁶⁶ to track my hours. Like, I hit play when I start working and pause it when I stop for lunch. Because sometimes you think, “Man, I didn’t get anything done this morning,” but then you check the timer,

¹⁶⁶ Clockify is a free time-tracking and productivity software used by individuals and teams to log work hours, monitor project progress, and analyze productivity through reports. It is particularly popular among freelancers, remote workers, and startups for billing and workload management.

and you actually worked three hours, fully focused on something. [...] I try not to go over my eight hours a day. If I get everything done in six hours and I'm already mentally exhausted, I know that staying two more hours won't make me productive, so I know my workday is done. But there are other days that we compensate and end up working more. [...] Near my apartment, there's a gym. So for me, it's like—once I stop working, I go to the gym, and I don't come back to my computer. That's when my workday officially ends. Because this was becoming a big problem for me. For a long time, I'd stop the Clockify timer and think, "Okay, I'm done for the day." But then I'd find myself back at my computer because a quick task popped up—something small that I could just knock out fast. And I'd think, "Why leave it for tomorrow if I can finish it now?" But then half an hour goes by, then 40 minutes, then an hour. And before you know it, it's 10:30 p.m., and you're still looking at work stuff. You know what I mean? I was really struggling to disconnect, and sometimes it's not just about stopping work—it's about stopping the thinking about work. Because next thing you know, you're still mentally stuck in work mode, and you wake up already exhausted. [...] That's why I like going to scheduled gym classes—it forces me to stop working at a set time (Priscila, 32 years old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2022, emphasis added).

While proponents of remote work argue that it facilitates better work-life balance, such a balance should not be assumed as a given. By examining Priscila's approach, it becomes evident that, rather than managers monitoring employees to ensure productivity in a remote setting, it is often the workers themselves who must exercise vigilance to stop working and maintain work-life balance. Therefore, new spatial arrangements and daily routines employed by startup workers can be understood as defensive strategies (Dejours, 2000), adopted to contain the encroachment of professional demands into the private sphere. Such strategies are not merely logistical adjustments; they represent attempts to reclaim agency in a context where the institutional boundaries of work have dissolved. Moreover, we can further understand these behaviors as part of a broader process through which workers, faced with the psychosocial strains of contemporary labor, develop individualized mechanisms to manage stress, preserve their well-being, and mitigate the erosion of temporal and physical boundaries (Loriol, 2021). These strategies are not just reactions to overwork, but responses to deeper structural pressures—including the internalization of performance norms and the weakening of collective forms of regulation.

Indeed, while most interlocutors now express a preference for working from home, they also recall the sociality and tacit solidarities of pre-pandemic office life. In physical office spaces, collective rhythms offered a form of temporal scaffolding: breaks were taken together, creating a shared pace that legitimized pauses and allowed for spontaneous social interactions. As Loriol (2021) emphasizes, such

shared temporalities play a key role in buffering the psychological pressures of work, offering not only moments of rest but also a sense of belonging and mutual recognition. In contrast, remote work tends to isolate workers in their own timeframes, often leading to episodes of hyper-focus where individuals work uninterrupted for hours, forgetting to stretch, hydrate, or even take bathroom breaks.

Crucially, we must avoid attributing this phenomenon to a lack of self-discipline or poor time management—an interpretation that individualizes the problem and aligns with the neoliberal tendency to responsabilize workers for their own suffering. Instead, these patterns reflect broader structural shifts: the dissolution of collective norms, the spatial privatization of work, and the moralization of productivity under conditions of controlled autonomy.

Even when workers actively attempt to structure their schedules, they often find themselves overwhelmed by relentless work demands and an unending stream of meetings—especially those in managerial roles. Lara’s experience highlights this challenge: as a manager, she is expected to be constantly available, leaving little room for breaks or focused work.

My challenge now, within the 9-to-6 workday, is finding ways to take breaks between tasks because I have way too many meetings. [...] Being a manager requires energy, but I also have other responsibilities in the company. If I don't block time in my calendar, I end up with back-to-back meetings and can't even take a bathroom break. After my vacation, I talked to HR about this—I told them I had no time to get water, no time for a bathroom break. My boyfriend was literally the one bringing me water. So I asked HR how they managed to balance things because setting break times in my calendar wasn't working—people would just book meetings over them anyway. So now, what I do is pretend I'm already in a meeting, just so no one schedules anything. I need to catch my breath in the middle of the afternoon (Lara, 32 years-old, New Business Coordinator - Key Account Manager of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Despite Lara efforts to set boundaries—such as blocking resting time on her calendar—these pauses were frequently disregarded. Consequently, she resorted to tactics like pretending to be in a meeting just to carve out “*a moment to breathe*.” The need to employ such strategies left her frustrated, reinforcing the sense that she was personally “*failing*” both at time management and in communicating her needs.

Just like Lara, many interlocutors, rather than recognizing work encroaching up life as a cultural and systemic issue rooted in the demands of startup work culture, perceived their struggles as personal shortcomings. They often attributed difficulties in maintaining balance to a lack of individual efficiency or discipline, believing the

solution lied in refining their time management skills rather than questioning the structural and social conditions that necessitate such intense self-regulation. Therefore, in this context, it becomes evident that, rather than reducing working hours, remote work often results in longer and more intense workdays—an issue that had already been observed among remote workers well before the pandemic (Durães *et al.*, 2021).

As Metzger and Cléach (2004) point out, during remote work, “knowing ‘when to stop work’ becomes a skill in its own right” (p. 9).¹⁶⁷ This skill is not inherent but rather something that workers must consciously develop, particularly within the startup ecosystem, where flexibility is often accompanied by an expectation of heightened availability and productivity. Consequently, all startup workers had to cultivate strategies of self-discipline and boundary-setting to navigate the complexities of the hybrid work model and prevent work from encroaching indefinitely on their personal time.

I had to completely reeducate myself—not to be such a workaholic and to find balance. The pandemic was all about learning my limits, like: Can I take a one- or two-hour lunch break? Then I started working later in the day, doing online yoga in the mornings, and setting clear boundaries for when to stop working. But it was a huge personal learning process (Cristina, 31 years old, Marketing Coordinator at a late-stage startup, 2022).

As we can see, to establish “*clear boundaries*” while working from home, instead of searching for collective strategies, workers adopt various individual strategies, ranging from designating a separate workspace, to incorporating activities such as therapy and yoga sessions in their journeys, to tracking their working hours or scheduling personal commitments at the end of the day to ensure they leave the house. This suggests that the autonomy embedded in startup work remote routines is not merely a benefit enabling workers to accommodate personal needs—it is also a strategic management tool. It raises the question: to whom is flexibility truly granted—workers or employers? By granting employees the freedom to structure their schedules, startups transfer the burden of time management onto the individual. As Chung (2022) argues, contemporary managerial strategies prioritize worker autonomy, not to reduce workloads, but to optimize productivity. Instead of micromanaging daily tasks, companies allow employees to manage their own

¹⁶⁷ Translated freely from the original text: Savoir ‘quand arrêter le travail’ devient une compétence à part entière (Metzger ; Cléach, 2004, p. 9).

agendas and to determine how and when to work, fostering a sense of control that ultimately serves corporate interests.

What is particularly noteworthy is that, over time, “the language and grammar of discipline and productivity [were] not only applied to work tasks” (Cook, 2020, p. 382) but also extended to personal routines aimed at maintaining a disciplined lifestyle. Consequently, startup remote workers not only regulate when to stop working but also impose rigid self-discipline in carving out time for leisure, healthy eating, and exercise. While these activities are sometimes framed as necessary “*screen detox*” moments or “*relaxation breaks*”, they are more often undertaken as a means of restoring energy and sustaining productivity. In this sense, even practices traditionally associated with well-being become subordinated to the overarching imperative of work performance.

9.3.1 Working time autonomy or flexitime?

At first glance, the remote work arrangements adopted by startup workers appear to align with what Chung (2022) defines as *working time autonomy*—the ability of workers to exert greater control over their schedules, allowing them to structure work around personal needs. However, true working time autonomy is not universally available to all startup workers. It is predominantly granted to senior managers and high-ranking leaders in prestigious positions. What most startups have implemented—even prior to the pandemic—is what Chung defines as *flexitime*, a system that permits workers to adjust their start and end times while still adhering to core working hours. This means that major and sporadic adjustments to their schedules are possible, but are subject to negotiation with their superiors.

Isabel is a good example of someone who truly benefits from working time autonomy, as she can adjust her work schedule to fit her personal needs. At 35 years old and a mother of two, Isabel works as a Senior Product Manager at a large startup with over 1000 employees, based in São Paulo. When I first met Isabel in 2022, she was managing a team of sixteen people, which included two tech leaders, twelve software developers, and two product designers. At that time, she was working fully

remotely for her São Paulo-based company while living with her family in Florianópolis.¹⁶⁸

Isabel exemplifies what Danièle Linhart (2023) characterizes as the modern manager—an individual primarily focused on career advancement, operating within an individualistic framework that assumes self-sufficiency and the ability to navigate professional challenges independently. “They demand a degree of autonomy at work, allowing them to juggle domestic, family and leisure commitments. At work, they have strong demands: they want to discover, learn, add to their skills, improve (idem, p. 120).¹⁶⁹

However, this autonomy comes at the expense of adhering to a rigid and meticulously structured schedule, which Isabel herself refers to as a “*timed routine*.” Intrigued by how she managed her daily life, I inquired about her approach. She explained that every aspect of her existence, from personal commitments to professional responsibilities, had to be planned in advance to ensure its execution.

I saw firsthand how true this was when I attempted to schedule an interview with her. Upon contacting her via WhatsApp, she promptly sent me a Calendly¹⁷⁰ link to set up an online appointment. The earliest 45-minute slot available was two weeks away. When we finally spoke, I began the interview by asking her why she relied on a tool like Calendly. She explained that it was her way of imposing “*order*” on her life, ensuring she did not overlook important tasks, such as scheduling a doctor’s appointment.

In my personal life, I have to take my son to school, pick him up, and take him to and from swimming lessons. In the evenings, I usually have other commitments. Then, the next morning, I have to get up early and start all over again. In short, it's a very tight schedule with little room to spare. Everything needs to be planned meticulously. Calendly helps me organize my time. I was struggling to find space for things like doctor's appointments or anything that wasn't pre-scheduled, so that's why I use it. I'm often

¹⁶⁸ When I met her again in 2023, her home-office routine was supplemented by monthly trips to her company's headquarters in São Paulo.

¹⁶⁹ Translated freely from the original text: ils revendiquent une certaine autonomie au travail leur permettant des jongler avec les contraintes domestiques, familiales et leurs loisirs. Au travail, ils ont des exigences fortes : ils veulent découvrir, apprendre, compléter leurs compétences, s'améliorer (Linhart, 2023, p. 120).

¹⁷⁰ Calendly is a free online appointment scheduling software. Users create an account on Calendly and integrate it with their existing calendars (such as Google Calendar, Outlook, or iCloud). The user sets up customizable event types (e.g., 15-minute meeting, 30-minute consultation, 1-hour interview). Once event types are set up, users receive a unique scheduling link (e.g., calendly.com/username). Recipients can use this link to choose a time for the meeting based on the available slots. Once the meeting is scheduled, Calendly sends confirmation emails to both parties and automatically adds the event to the user's integrated calendar. It also updates availability, so no other meetings can be booked during that time. Additionally, reminders can be set to notify participants before the meeting.

planning three weeks in advance, you know? It's quite complicated (Isabel, 35-year-old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2022).

As we can see, her strategy of using scheduling apps to plan ahead is an effort to prevent her personal life from being overshadowed by work demands—something that many remote workers grapple with. As Cook notes, those who work from home “may appear to reject the traditional office with its impositions, but other bureaucracies and forms of labor quickly emerge” (2020, p. 362). Observing Isabel's approach to time management, we can assert that corporate nomad startup workers must also rely on extensive self-discipline strategies to delineate boundaries between work and personal life, striving to maintain the work-life balance they were promised. By structuring her day in this way, Isabel ensures time for family responsibilities, such as picking up her son from school and taking him to swimming lessons in the afternoon. At the same time, she effectively turns herself into “a small time and methods’ office, constantly applying Taylorian principles to herself in order to organize her own work” (Linhart, 2023, p. 126).¹⁷¹

It was only when I asked Isabel about her work routine that the necessity for such tight time management became fully clear. The primary reason she had to plan so far ahead was the sheer volume of online meetings she was required to attend as a Senior Product Manager—meetings that often consumed the majority of her workday.

Working remotely is all about meetings. I'd say 80%, sometimes up to 90%, of my time is spent in one-on-one meetings, giving feedback, and following up on my team's progress. Then, there are group meetings, which are mostly focused on problem-solving. The rest of my time is spent working on documents, preparing materials, conducting analysis, and so on (Isabel, 35-year-old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2022).

During fieldwork, it became evident that tech workers highly value a company's flexibility. They often believe that greater flexibility and autonomy at work will provide them with more freedom to organize their lives, leading to a better work-life balance and, ultimately, greater self-fulfillment. However, in many cases, this idealized notion of flexibility results in feelings of anxiety, as workers find themselves under constant pressure to perform at increasingly higher levels.

¹⁷¹ Translated freely from the original text: en petit bureau des temps et méthodes pour s'appliquer constamment à lui-même les principes tayloriens afin d'organiser son propre travail (Linhart, 2023, p. 126).

As we are able to see through the case of Isabel, the so-called “*freedom*” at work is not without its constraints, since autonomy is often paired with emerging forms of systematic control that workers must adhere to. By having more control over her schedule, Isabel gains the flexibility to fit personal activities into her day. However, this also means she may often find herself working longer hours to compensate for the time spent “*off*.”

It is crucial to also emphasize that this form of “*freedom*” does not seek to escape capitalism or the demands of work, but rather to better organize people’s lives around them—a phenomenon exacerbated by the shift to working from home. Even so, this often means never truly being able to disconnect from work. Specially when, the same technology and flexibility that enable people to work from home are also the mechanisms that extend the workday and suppress the possibility of truly free or autonomous time (Antunes, 2015). Instead of pushing for a reduction in working hours, people now adopt strategies to become *optimal selves*, focused on controlling time and maximizing productivity (Lupu; Rokka, 2021).

Besides, as Isabel’s case illustrates, these new forms of systematic control are not confined to the workplace or solely tied to performance metrics. In fact, this control has already permeated her personal life, compelling her to structure her private life with the same level of organization she applies to her work. This is a logic she has already internalized and associates with her ability to be “*productive*.”

I really believe that, especially in tech companies, it’s not about the hours you work. It’s the productivity, it’s the focus that you put into it that brings results. There are days when I work just six hours. But of course, there are times when that’s not enough, and I have to work longer. I always try to maintain that balance. So if one day I work less, the next day I compensate by working more (Isabel, 35-year-old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Isabel also explained to me that, in order to avoid frustration when she is unable to “*do everything*,” she adopted a system of setting weekly objectives. Instead of trying to tackle an overwhelming number of tasks, she creates a list of three main priorities for each week. Interestingly, she uses this approach for both her professional and personal life, combining them into a single list. This means there are not two separate sets of goals—one for work and one for personal life—but rather a unified list that outlines her key focus points for the week. She shared that this

technique has helped her manage the constant struggle against time, reconcile her various demands, and temper her expectations with reality.

You'll never have time to do everything, or everything will never turn out exactly as you planned. So, to avoid feeling frustrated when things didn't go as expected, I started setting goals. In my company, we typically have quarterly objectives. I began breaking these down into smaller periods—monthly and even weekly objectives. I also share this with my team: my objective for the week is X. Then, if I reach the end of the week having met that goal, I don't feel so frustrated about not completing my giant checklist (Isabel, 35-year-old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2022).

During the interview, Isabel was quick to emphasize her appreciation for the flexibility that remote work provides. However, a closer look at her account of daily life reveals that, despite this flexibility, she constantly struggles to fit everything into her weekly schedule. When asked how she manages to maintain some sense of balance while preserving this flexibility, she explains that she relies heavily on a carefully organized agenda and various forms of systematic control. From time management strategies and weekly goal setting to scheduling tools like Calendly, Isabel meticulously structures her routine. Paradoxically, the very flexibility she cherishes is dependent on these self-imposed structured systems of control, underscoring the inherent tension between freedom and structure.

Jonathan Crary further explains these structured systems of control, noting that:

By the 1990s, a thoroughgoing transformation of vertical integration had taken place, exemplified most familiarly by the innovations of Microsoft, Google, and others, even though some remnants of older hierarchical structures persisted alongside newer, more flexible and capillary models of implementation and control. Within this emerging context, technological consumption coincides with and becomes indistinguishable from strategies and effects of power (idem, 2013, location 503).

As technological processes expand and diversify, individuals find themselves increasingly enmeshed in 24/7 routines, while the pace of technological consumption requires constant self-administration. The “illusion of choice and autonomy,” as Crary points out, is one of the key foundations of this global system of self-regulation (2013, location 554), directly impacting the rhythms and practices of people's daily lives.

Moreover, working time autonomy and flexibility tend to reflect the existing hierarchies and disparities among startup workers. While many have embraced the dominant capitalist narrative equating remote work with improved work-life balance,

not all employees experience true working time autonomy. In practice, most encounter what Chung (2022) defines as *flexitime*:

Flexitime enables workers to alternate the starting and ending times of work [...] The biggest difference between flexitime and working time autonomy is that some constraints still remain in flexitime; for example, adhering to core hours (for example 10am to 2pm) or a defined number of hours workers can work in a week (for example 37 hours per week) (Chung, 2022, p. 20).

Although startup workers often claim to benefit from a more flexible schedule when working remotely, the routines of the majority of them tend to follow a relatively rigid structure. Fabricio, a 26-year-old software developer who lives with his parents, explains that he prefers to maintain a stable work routine as a way to manage his anxiety. For him, consistency in working hours, physical activity, and a healthy diet are essential.

I wake up, usually take a shower or grab something to eat, and then I sit down at the computer to work. The earlier I start working, the earlier I finish. But the time I start can vary a bit. Sometimes I log in around 7:30 a.m. or 8 a.m. Since I start pretty early, I end up taking a two-hour break around lunchtime to go to the gym. So I hit the gym, have lunch, come back to work, and then around 5 p.m. or 6 p.m., I stop working. After that, I either study [something about programming] or have some leisure time [watching series or playing video games]. It's still an adjustment, but I'm trying to structure my routine like this (Fabricio, 26 years old, software developer of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

Priscila's routine follows a similar pattern, though as someone who lives alone and does not rely on the domestic labor of others, she integrates household chores into her midday break.

The startup scene is already unstable enough, so I need to have a routine. Especially because it's really easy to mix home and work in a home-office setup if you start working at a different time every day. That's why I like to wake up at the same time every day. [...] I try not to start working after 8:30 a.m. I feel like when I start working after 8:30, I'm not as productive. Plus, I have to stop at 12 p.m. for lunch. After lunch, I wash the dishes, and if I have a little extra time, I'll sweep the house just to have another moment to disconnect and tidy up a bit, because I like to keep the house organized. Organized house, organized mind. [...] But yeah, that's during the lunch break, not between calls or meetings. [...] Then I work until it's time to go to the gym (Priscila, 33 years old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2023).

These accounts illustrate how, in practice, flexibility is often reduced to minor adjustments—such as an extended lunch break—negotiated with managers and carefully structured to prevent work from extending beyond 6 p.m. Rather than

embodying true autonomy or a departure from the rigid 9-to-5 structure, remote work among startup employees blends self-imposed routines with technological strategies to delineate boundaries between work, leisure, and domestic labor. This reinforces Cook's argument that "work routines and the need for structure are not so easily evaded" (2020, p. 372). Instead of fostering a more integrated routine that balances work, leisure, and well-being, what emerges among startup workers is a standardized remote work structure that, despite its perceived flexibility, demands significant effort to maintain boundaries between work and personal life. Without such deliberate separation, leisure time risks being entirely eroded, as well as workers' well-being.

9.4 THE ANYWHERE OFFICE

Despite the difficulties in maintaining clear boundaries between work and personal life, as well as the challenge of setting time constraints, most interlocutors in this study still prefer working from home over enduring a daily commute. The advantages of remote work become especially evident when workers chose to work from a café or when traveling to another city to visit family or for tourism. In such cases, they engaged in what is known in the tech world as the "*anywhere office*" (Monitchele, 2023)—the idea that *knowledge workers* equipped with a laptop and an internet connection can perform their tasks from virtually any location.

Taking advantage of the hybrid model's flexibility, they relocate their work environment, sometimes working alone in a café surrounded by other remote workers, other times alongside a colleague or friend. Underlying the "*anywhere office*" is the idea that work can be integrated into leisure, allowing workers to enjoy scenic views and a "*change of scenery*" while remaining productive. According to the "*startupper*" narrative and the aspirational dream of living on the island of Florianópolis, this represents the ideal scenario for achieving work-life balance. However, as it was possible to perceive from fieldwork, the "*anywhere office*" is only used by workers on rare occasions, mostly serving as a means to partially escape the isolation of working from home alone.

For people who already have good social skills and get along well with others, remote work works just fine. But for those who are more introverted, I think it can become a dangerous habit because it isolates you more and more. You end up working almost entirely through digital interactions and

lose that sense of social connection (Gustavo, 33 years-old, Sales Consultant of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Occasionally, I had the opportunity to join my interlocutors in these settings, particularly in the *Lagoa da Conceição* neighborhood of Florianópolis, a scenic area known for its cafés, restaurants, and proximity to nature. Since I lived in this neighborhood during my fieldwork, I would occasionally receive spontaneous messages from some of them: *“I’m at the café this afternoon—want to meet up?”* On such occasions, I would choose administrative tasks that allowed me to work alongside them, bringing my laptop to send emails or complete paperwork. These work sessions followed a fluid rhythm, alternating between coffee sips, casual conversation between us, and several small calls from them with coworkers or clients. On these rare occasions, I was able to observe what a more fluid and flexible workday looked like for them and how remote work could, in some instances, foster a better work-life balance. However, as mentioned earlier, these moments were exceptions rather than the norm, occurring only a few times throughout the year.

I met Kevin, a Product Manager and Software Developer, one afternoon at a café in *Lagoa*. The café he had chosen was an open, tranquil space surrounded by greenery, offering free Wi-Fi—an ideal setting for remote work. Upon my arrival, around 2 p.m., I quickly noticed that Kevin was not the only one working; most of the other tables were also occupied by remote workers. As I arrived, I asked if he had already ordered anything to eat or drink, to which he replied no. Curious about the café’s policy, I asked, *“Are they okay with people working without making a purchase?”* He shrugged and replied, *“Oh, they have to be, right?”*—suggesting that commercial establishments should accommodate the growing *“anywhere office”* culture of knowledge workers.

When I asked about his tasks for the afternoon, he explained, *“A little bit of coding and bug fixing, but since I’m a Product Manager now, most of the coding is handled by my team. I just need to be available in case they run into issues.”* (Kevin, 34 years old, Product Manager at a growth-stage startup, 2023). Over the course of the afternoon, he took three short calls, each lasting no more than 20 minutes. His tone during these conversations was friendly, calm, and supportive—often congratulating his colleagues on their efforts. Since I had known Kevin for quite some time, we spent long stretches of the afternoon discussing our personal lives. Observing his work on that day, it did not seem that his routine was hectic or

stressful. In fact, it seemed he was capable of enjoying the perks of working from anywhere. By the time we wrapped up around 5 p.m., neither of us felt particularly productive. However, as Kevin pointed out, he had intentionally chosen to work from a café that day because he knew his workload would be lighter—on busier days, he preferred to stay home, where he could focus with fewer distractions.

Considering that productivity is a central aspect of the startup lifestyle; that working from cafés can often be distracting and frustrating due to noise and crowds; and that remote workers must actively reconstruct their own work environments (Cook, 2020), it becomes clear why the *“anywhere office”* approach remains more of an ideal than a widespread practice. The need for a structured and controlled workspace, free from excessive interruptions, often outweighs the appeal of mobility, leading most startup workers to favor more at-home stable and predictable work settings.

On another occasion, I had the opportunity to work alongside Kelly at the same café. As a salesperson, her workday was structured differently from Kevin’s. Much of her time was spent sending emails, responding to messages, and making calls. Although she occasionally paused to chat with me, she remained attentive to her screen, frequently checking for incoming messages. Her work rhythm seemed a bit more intense. At one point, during one of our conversational breaks, she suddenly interrupted to celebrate receiving a positive response from a client. Giggling, she exclaimed, *“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I was really looking forward to closing this deal!”* (Kelly, 32 years old, Sales Account Executive of a late-stage startup, 2023). Her excitement was palpable, revealing just how much she cared about her work and the emotional investment she placed in it.

Observing and working alongside Kevin and Kelly provided insight into how the *“anywhere office”* concept is adopted by startup workers across different roles. Both a software developer and a salesperson appeared to enjoy the same flexibility, seamlessly integrating work with informal conversations—whether with a friend or, in this case, with a researcher. The fact that both chose to work from a café on a relatively calm day in their schedules suggests that their work routines are adaptable, fluctuating in response to varying demands.

This highlights how, despite the often hectic nature of their work, moments of pause and reprieve are also embedded within the startup workweek. Without questioning the overall productivity of startup workers—who indeed tend to work

extensively—these experiences led me to consider whether there is an implicit need for them to portray their routines as perpetually hectic and intense, even if their workdays include moments of real flexibility. Emphasizing their stress may serve as a mechanism to reinforce and validate, within their collective, the perception that they are truly engaged in work—even in a remote setting.

Such a mechanism—demonstrating stress about work as a way to prove one's effort—is not unknown. As Lorient points out (2012), workers and managers in other industries have also exhibited similar behaviors, using busyness and stress as signals of dedication and commitment.

[A]mong managers, the fate of those recognized as stressed is ambiguous. To a certain extent, being stressed is seen as a sign of hard work. For a long time, some managers valued “good stress”. But if stress is perceived as a symptom of a lack of ability to achieve objectives or of insufficient competence, the risk of losing one's job or being put on the back burner becomes significant (Lorient, 2012, p. 120-121).¹⁷²

However, as noted by Lorient, being overstressed can jeopardize workers' job security or delay promotions. According to one of my interlocutors, for example, she believed her promotion was postponed due to her manager's perception of her overall well-being after she was diagnosed with burnout. In this context, while showing signs of stress may signal one's investment in their work, adopting an occasional “*anywhere office*” approach can also serve as a way to demonstrate the ability to balance work with personal well-being. As both Kevin and Kelly emphasized, their decision to work from cafés was not solely about enjoying the flexibility of working from anywhere; it also acted as a strategy to mitigate the isolation of remote work while actively managing their mental health and well-being.

As a result, we can observe that beyond the need to exhibit a certain level of stress to signal commitment to one's job, the new imperative of work-life balance also demands that workers display a degree of relaxation—demonstrating their ability to manage time effectively in the name of productivity. In this context, the “*anywhere office*” approach emerges as the perfect strategy to embody this paradox, allowing

¹⁷² Translated freely from the original text: [P]armi les cadres, le destin de ceux qui sont reconnus comme stressés est ambigu. Jusqu'à un certain point, être stressé est vu comme le signe d'un travail important. Longtemps, certains managers ont valorisé le « bon stress ». Mais si le stress est perçu comme le symptôme d'un manque de capacités à atteindre les objectifs ou d'une compétence insuffisante, le risque de perdre son emploi ou d'être mis au placard devient important (Lorient, 2012, p. 120-121).

employees to showcase both dedication and autonomy while reinforcing the expectation of seamless work integration into daily life.

9.4.1 Anywhere, anytime

While this section, so far, explored an “*anywhere office*” approach within Florianópolis, other interlocutors described experiences of negotiating temporary leaves with their employers to live abroad while continuing to work for their companies. Lara, for instance, had just returned from Dublin when I first met her, after spending seven months studying English while still employed at a startup based in Florianópolis.

One of the great advantages of working in tech companies—not all of them, of course, but those with this mindset—is that you can work from wherever you want. During the pandemic, it was just me and my cats at home. I had a lot of time to think and figure some things out, and I realized I wanted to travel and see more places. [...] The first opportunity that came up was to go to Australia, but the time zone difference made that impossible. It's not like I'm crazy about Ireland or anything. That's not it, but I had three months to plan, and I needed to go to a country that didn't require a visa and where English was spoken because I wanted to study English. [...] In the mornings, I took advantage of the 4-hour time difference [between Ireland and Brazil], which allowed me to study in the mornings and then work from 1 p.m. to 10 p.m. at night. And that was Monday through Friday. It was pretty intense, but it was really cool (Lara, 32 years-old, New Business Coordinator - Key Account Manager of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Her experience highlights how remote work, when permitted, can enable professionals to temporarily relocate abroad, merging career commitments with personal development. However, it also reveals the practical constraints involved—such as time zone differences and workload intensity—which raise important questions about the actual feasibility and sustainability of such arrangements. Moreover, later in the interview, Lara also mentioned the financial strain of earning in Brazilian reais while covering expenses in euros, underscoring an additional layer of complexity in her experience.

Among scholars studying corporate nomadism, a well-known cliché describes workers leaving expensive cities in the Global North to settle in Asian or Latin American cities with lower living costs (Cook, 2020). This widely recognized pattern stands in contrast to the attempts of Brazilian tech workers to pursue a similar strategy by relocating to more affordable cities outside Central Europe. However, due

to the devaluation of the Brazilian currency, even for well-paid startup workers, this inversion does not yield the same advantages. This raises a critical question: Who can actually become a corporate nomad? In reality, only those with sufficient financial resources or a strong support network can sustain such a lifestyle, challenging the notion that *any* knowledge worker can seamlessly work from anywhere.

Lara was not the only startup worker who leveraged remote work to experience temporary relocation abroad. Franco had a similar experience in 2023 when he spent three months in Croatia while continuing to work for a Brazilian startup. His case further illustrates how, despite the discourse of borderless work, access to true mobility remains deeply unequal.

At the time, my boss said, 'Go ahead, use a time bank so you can work less and all that.' And they were really chill about it, super flexible, you know? So I worked from 1 p.m. to 10 p.m., and sometimes if I wanted to go out, like, say, at 7 p.m. or 8 p.m. to have dinner, I'd leave and then make up the hours later. [...] At first, it wasn't too tiring because I had the whole morning free, right? So I'd go out a lot. And then I got used to it, but after a while, I got tired because I kept working those hours, and it always went late. But since I was in the mindset of taking advantage of the opportunity I had, I kind of tried to push that aside, you know? But it's definitely not ideal to work from 1 p.m. to 10 p.m. After I came back to Brazil, I even found it strange. Nowadays, when I get home, I have free time [at night], and I feel a bit lost, not knowing what to do (Franco, 25 years old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

Although both Lara and Franco valued their experiences abroad, they also acknowledged the exhausting nature of the arrangement. Their accounts challenge the market-driven narrative of the “*anywhere office*” as a seamlessly flexible model, exposing its practical limitations—particularly those imposed by time zone differences, currency exchange rates, and financial constraints. Even though they deliberately chose relatively affordable European cities, both encountered the financial challenge of earning in Brazilian reais while covering expenses in euros. Reinforcing how, despite the promise of location-independent work, structural economic disparities continue to shape who can truly take advantage of remote work opportunities.

Nevertheless, the most thought-provoking aspect of their experiences was the contrast they observed in work cultures. Both Lara and Franco noted how, in Brazil, startup workers tend to work significantly longer hours, leaving little room for personal pursuits. Franco remarked that living and working abroad reshaped his life perspective, as he was struck by how people maintained hobbies and engaged in

conversations that extended beyond work and professional identities. This exposure led him to reflect on the possibility of routines with greater balance and clearer work-life boundaries, as well as the expansion of his identity beyond the purely professional sphere. Lara, on the other hand, was surprised by what she perceived as the “*slower*” pace of life in Ireland. “*They respect time; it’s very different,*” she observed. Despite the initial cultural shock, she appreciated the realization that “*there’s more to the world*” than her job in Florianópolis.

In this sense, although the “*anywhere office*” presents concrete limitations that hinder true flexibility—given that startup workers are not digital nomads but rather corporate nomads constrained by *flexitime* negotiated within organizational boundaries—it nonetheless serves as an opening for some workers to reassess their routines and perspectives on life and work. Whether by living abroad for a period or simply seeking workspaces closer to nature within Florianópolis, these experiences create opportunities for reimagining work beyond its conventional structures.

9.5 THE STARTUP OFFICE

Before the pandemic, startup offices were often portrayed as vibrant, playful, and dynamic environments, characterized by bright decor and recreational elements such as video games, pool tables, and even slides connecting different floors (Kozorg, 2021; Palermo; Ventrici, 2022; Shestakofsky, 2024). These spaces embodied an ethos of creativity and informality, reinforcing the idea of work as an enjoyable and immersive experience.

However, as previously discussed, my fieldwork in 2022 and 2023 revealed a stark contrast: once lively and bustling, startup offices had become largely empty as remote work emerged as the dominant mode of operation. Nevertheless, as pandemic restrictions eased in 2022, workers whose companies maintained office spaces gradually began returning to in-person work. Some were required by management to be present three times a week, while others coordinated with their sub teams to meet in the office once a week or once a month.

In relation to in-person and hybrid work, I identified three distinct groups of workers. The first and largest group consists of those who live and work in Florianópolis and enjoy going to the office once a week, seeing it as an opportunity for social engagement with coworkers. The second group comprises those who,

during the pandemic, anticipated that remote work would persist and took jobs at companies headquartered elsewhere while continuing to reside in Florianópolis. However, once the pandemic eased, they became required to travel once a month for in-person meetings with their teams. Lastly, the third and smallest group includes those who prefer to work exclusively from the office, seeing it as a means to establish clear boundaries between work and leisure.

Cristina, for instance, belongs to the first group and enjoys going to the office once a week, even though she perceives herself as less productive in that environment. According to her, the office presents more distractions, such as the chance to reconnect with coworkers she has not seen in a while. For her, office days are primarily opportunities to engage socially and strengthen relationships with colleagues, rather than focusing on deep, uninterrupted work.

On a rare occasion, I had the opportunity to visit two startup offices, facilitated by my interlocutors, who granted me access to the buildings. One particularly revealing visit was to Cristina's company, a late-stage startup in Florianópolis. The company's office still bore the architectural markers of the pre-pandemic startup culture: a multi-story building equipped with a rooftop, small cafeterias on each floor, lounge areas with beanbags, and designated relaxation rooms. Yet, despite these features designed to foster social interaction and creative collaboration, the space felt eerily vacant—a striking reflection of how startup work routines had shifted.

Arriving at the building around 10 a.m., I happened to take the elevator with a member of the cleaning staff. She appeared rushed and, upon entering the reception area, immediately apologized to her supervisor for being *late*, explaining that her bus had broken down. This moment underscored a fundamental asymmetry in workplace flexibility: "Flexible time scheduling is more a benefit granted to favored workers [...] than a labor right; it is a benefit distributed unequally and strictly rationed" (Sennett, 1998, p. 48).

While tech employees in startups often enjoy adjustable schedules and remote work arrangements, lower-wage workers—such as those in cleaning and security roles—remain bound to rigid schedules (Chen, 2022), with little to no access to the perks that *knowledge workers* in the tech sector take for granted, reinforcing the structural hierarchies of the technology sector.

At the reception desk, I informed an employee that I had a meeting with Cristina. I was directed to complete a brief digital form at the entrance, selecting the

“*visitor*” option. Almost immediately, a “*non-disclosure agreement*” (NDA) appeared on the tablet screen, outlining strict confidentiality terms. The agreement explicitly prohibited me from sharing any sensitive or strategic information—related to the business model of the company—that I might overhear while in the company’s halls or meeting rooms, reinforcing the secrecy that often surrounds startup operations. After signing in, I received a name tag and an access card to pass through the turnstiles. Moments later, Cristina was notified of my arrival and soon came to greet me at reception. With a warm welcome, she led me to the seventh floor, where she worked alongside the marketing team.

Although she primarily works from home, she comes into the office once a week for team meetings. According to her, these in-person interactions are essential for quickly resolving issues that would otherwise require lengthy back-and-forth exchanges over messages and emails. Before the pandemic, she—like the rest of the employees—worked in the office daily. Now, the hallways of the seven-floor building felt noticeably emptier.

While Cristina and her seven coworkers gathered in a glass-walled meeting room, brainstorming and outlining marketing strategies for the company, she set me up in a nearby open workspace filled with “*rotating workstations*.” This workspace was surrounded by several similar glass-walled meeting rooms, creating a sense of transparency while maintaining functional separation. At its center there were five large tables, each equipped with six workstations. The stations remained spaced about a meter apart, still reflecting pandemic-era guidelines. Each included a monitor, keyboard, mouse, and ergonomic supports for feet and wrists.

Signs indicated that all equipment was available for use but had to remain in place, as others might need it the following day. Personal belongings were not to be left behind. The system was designed for flexibility: Employees brought their company-issued laptops and worked at any available station, yet they were unable to personalize their workspace. In this sense, the office functioned more like a coworking space exclusively for company employees—one where individuals could work independently in the open area or book a meeting room for team collaboration.

Despite the more than 30 available workstations in this particular section, only six or seven employees were using them. Later, while searching for a bathroom, I passed by approximately 200 empty workstations on the seventh floor alone. Aside from the occasional murmur of conversations, the office was quiet and subdued—a

stark contrast to the bustling, lively atmosphere that once characterized tech workplaces before the pandemic. As the morning progressed, more employees trickled in, choosing workstations and settling in with their headphones on, working in near silence. The environment remained still and uneventful throughout the morning.

Around noon, Cristina invited me to join her and two colleagues for lunch. The break was both a pause and an extension of the workday. We carpooled to what they called “*a restaurant with a view*”—an affordable spot overlooking *Santo Antônio*’s bay that had become part of their weekly routine when working in the office.

Their conversation during the drive was casual and filled with camaraderie, touching on weekend plans and family obligations, yet continually circling back to work. Even at the restaurant, they kept checking their phones, responding to work messages on WhatsApp, and reminding each other of pending tasks. The line between work and leisure remained blurred, leaving little room for an actual break.

After finishing the meal, we took a few moments to stand by the bay, appreciating the clear skies and blue waters, while they smoked a cigarette. Amidst ongoing work discussions, Cristina reflected on how fortunate she felt to live in such a beautiful city and to have the opportunity to enjoy it, even if only during brief moments of respite—highlighting her effort to maintain a balance between work and leisure while staying connected to nature.

Before returning to the office, we made a brief stop at the supermarket, where Cristina picked up a bag of chocolates for the team, calling it “*a shared craving*.” By the time we arrived back on the seventh floor, it was nearly 2 p.m. While from an outsider’s perspective, it might have seemed like a leisurely two-hour lunch break, in reality, work remained ever-present, seamlessly woven into their conversations and interactions.

Back at the office, Cristina and her colleagues returned to their meeting room, where the table was scattered with apples, notebooks, laptops, coffee cups, water bottles, and now an enormous bag of chocolates. Before settling back into the workstation Cristina had assigned to me, I took the opportunity to grab a coffee at the cafeteria. It was then that I noticed a subtle shift in the office environment—spaces that had been nearly empty in the morning were now slightly more active. The surrounding glass-walled meeting rooms were occupied by small groups of employees engaged in discussions or by sales representatives making calls.

Gradually, more coworkers arrived—some in pairs, sitting together to work, while others entered alone, greeting familiar faces with remarks like, *“Haven’t seen you here in a while! Are you coming in every week?”* Overhearing snippets of conversation, I gathered that some had been asked to come in by their managers, while others had chosen to escape the isolation of remote work—though the hassles of traffic and the cost of eating out made frequent office visits less appealing. *“Better to come in just twice a week, preferably in the afternoon, to avoid traffic,”* one employee commented to another.

Despite a few curious glances, no one questioned my presence. With over 900 employees—many of whom worked remotely—it was not unusual to encounter unfamiliar faces. I could have easily been mistaken for a new hire who had joined the company during the pandemic. In other words, while the office remains a space for sociability, the atomization of work has reached a point where a stranger in the office can be mistaken for an unrecognized colleague.

The second group of startup workers—those who transitioned to tech jobs at companies headquartered in other cities, such as São Paulo, during the pandemic—were later required to work on-site at least once a month. On these occasions, they typically spend one week in São Paulo and the remaining three weeks in Florianópolis. Isabel, whose remote work routine we have previously explored, is among these workers.

When I first interviewed Isabel in 2022, she was highly meticulous about managing her schedule to *“enjoy”* the flexibility of balancing professional and personal commitments. However, when I met with her again in 2023, several significant changes had taken place, most notably her shift to a hybrid work model. Although she remained at the same company, she had a new requirement: Spending at least one week per month in São Paulo, while continuing to reside with her family in Florianópolis.¹⁷³ As a result, by 2023, she described her life as being split between two distinct routines—one structured around working from home and another shaped by her time in São Paulo.

My one week in São Paulo is chaos. First of all, because of the flight times. It's either very early in the morning, midday or late afternoon. Second,

¹⁷³ The distance between São Paulo and Florianópolis is approximately 691 kilometers, which translates to a 12-hour journey by road or a 1-hour flight. According to the interlocutors in this study, companies typically cover the cost of transportation and accommodation when employees travel to São Paulo. In fact, withholding this support has been perceived as a strategy used by companies to phase out hybrid work, signaling a shift towards a full return to in-person work.

because in the office we have little control over food and schedules. And since I only go once a month, that's when we have happy hours with the team. So the week I'm in São Paulo is a week of lost routines, I don't eat well, I can't exercise well (Isabel, 36-year-old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Despite acknowledging that being physically present at the office helps her build stronger and more amicable relationships with her colleagues, Isabel shares how she “*loses control*” over her schedule during her time in São Paulo. All of her meticulous planning is set aside, and the one week she spends in São Paulo each month seems to allow work to completely overshadow her personal life. Not only is she unable to dedicate time to her family, but she also loses control over her healthy habits, allowing us to also perceive the limits of *corporate maternalism*.

When I asked if her colleagues experience hybrid work in the same way, she explained that hybrid work remains a controversial issue within the company. Senior managers generally enjoy the privilege of working remotely, while regular employees based in São Paulo are required to be at the office more frequently. In her unit, Isabel is the only one living outside the city, which heightens her fear of distancing herself from her team and pushes her to practice even greater self-discipline to engage with colleagues both online and in person.

I'm the only person who's not in São Paulo, and this team stopped working remotely after the pandemic, so everyone still goes to the office, even if they have a hybrid system. I'm even a little afraid that if I don't go for at least a week, I'll end up distancing myself from the team (Isabel, 36-year-old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Only after this revelation did it become clear that she is not formally required—either by policy or contract—to be in the office every month. Although her employment follows a hybrid model, the fear of becoming too detached from her team compels her to voluntarily impose monthly trips to São Paulo. Isabel's case illustrates the limitations of hybrid and remote work when not implemented uniformly within a company. This dynamic reflects a form of disciplinary power that is not explicitly prescriptive but rather suggestive (Foucault, 1975). In other words, out of concern that her absence might weaken her sense of belonging within the team, Isabel preemptively disciplines herself to maintain physical presence, even in the absence of a formal mandate.

In contrast, Franco, who had a negative experience with remote work during the pandemic in Florianópolis, exemplifies the third group. Since 2022, despite not

being required to do so, he prefers working from the office, as it provides clearer boundaries between his personal and professional life while also fostering a renewed sense of collective work.

Man, I go every day. Like, at some point, I might work remotely again¹⁷⁴, but honestly, I'm kind of fed up with it, so I go in every day. The office is just 17 minutes away by bike from my house, so it's right around the corner, you know? I always go there to break that whole mixing-home-and-work thing. [...] At home, you always end up staying a little longer to finish something, and before you know it, it's just a little more, a little more, you know? But at the office, you see people getting up to leave, you see everyone getting ready to go. So you already know that's it for the day. The team itself starts slowing down too, you know? I think, in practice, you end up working way more remotely than at the office. I didn't have many distractions, you know? So it was really stressful, and you don't talk to anyone. You have to figure everything out on your own (Franco, 24 years old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Franco's experience underscores that not all startup workers view remote work favorably. For some, the office serves as an external regulator of work time, reinforcing boundaries that remote work tends to blur. Without the clear demarcations provided by a physical workspace—such as set working hours and shared daily rhythms—remote workers often struggle to compartmentalize professional and personal life. In this sense, his case suggests that the return to in-person work is, for certain individuals, not merely a logistical shift but an attempt to restore both structure and routine while also reclaiming the social dimensions of work to counteract the isolating effects of remote labor.

After all, work, as a social activity, is inherently collaborative and relational. While new communication technologies facilitate these dimensions of remote work by enabling constant connectivity and virtual exchanges, they do not replicate the depth of cooperation, spontaneous interactions, and collective problem-solving that occur when workers share a physical space. Kevin, for example, recalled that during the pandemic, his eight-person team kept a voice channel on Discord open throughout the day to mitigate feelings of isolation. However, as pandemic restrictions eased, the use of such tools gradually diminished—highlighting the ephemeral nature of these digital workarounds. This shift confirms that the physical office still provides a setting where informal conversations, mentorship, and knowledge-sharing happen organically, strengthening professional ties and fostering a sense of belonging. Consequently, the gradual return to in-person work—whether fully or partially—is

¹⁷⁴ As he did once again, in 2023, during his three-month stay in Croatia.

often framed as a necessity for rebuilding workplace social bonds, which can erode in the absence of regular face-to-face interactions. Although these ties may include tensions, particularly due to the competitive nature of certain organizational cultures, the collective and solidaristic aspects of work tend to be much more pronounced in an in-person setting than in a remote one.

9.6 PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have explored how startup workers navigate a hybrid identity, merging the ideals of freedom associated with digital nomadism with the relative stability of corporate employment. In this sense, the social image of the startup knowledge worker aligns with what Marx *et al.* (2023) define as the *corporate nomad*—a figure situated between autonomy and control, flexibility and organizational embeddedness. While most startup workers are no longer subject to the rigid disciplinary rules characteristic of Fordist labor, they still operate within a framework of core working hours and self-imposed regulatory mechanisms. What appears to be flexibility is, in fact, what Bernard (2020) and others describe as *controlled autonomy* (Leite Lopes, 1988; Gaulejac, 2007; Linhart, 2023): a mode of management in which the responsibility for organizing time and ensuring productivity is transferred onto the worker.

This redistribution of control is reinforced by the startup ethos, which celebrates freedom, mobility, and self-fulfillment. Yet, when workers internalize these ideals, they often recreate disciplinary structures under the guise of personal choice. Rather than escaping bureaucratic constraint, they adopt personalized schedules and routines that mirror organizational demands. As such, flexibility becomes a strategic management tool—one that simultaneously grants and limits autonomy, and raises the question: to whom is flexibility really granted—workers or employers?

Within this structure, the imperative to maintain a work-life balance becomes yet another ideal to be fulfilled—a benchmark of success that is paradoxically undermined by the very conditions that claim to support it. As Chung (2022) argues, remote workers often end up working longer and more intensely, not less. This paradox is echoed in workers' testimonies, which describe routines in which professional obligations infiltrate all aspects of daily life. To protect their time and well-being, workers must develop strict systems of self-discipline and spatial

separation. Yet this self-management, far from empowering, becomes another vector of control.

The resulting tension generates not only fatigue, but also “*guilt*”. Workers often blame themselves for failing to use their time “*efficiently*” enough to earn rest—especially when the time saved from commuting is simply reabsorbed by work. These experiences reveal how the discourse of balance obscures the structural contradictions of the flexible workplace. The more autonomy a worker possesses, especially in managerial or high-responsibility roles, the more they tend to work. Autonomy, in this context, becomes indistinguishable from self-imposed surveillance and emotional investment in performance.

Therefore, we have explored the ambivalence of remote work and its impact on well-being. Although remote work remains the most prevalent mode of labor among startup workers and is often framed as a path to greater freedom, the long-term effects are more ambiguous. While many do report short-term benefits such as comfort and personalized routines, these advantages are counterbalanced by risks of social isolation, fragmented schedules, and the erosion of collective rhythms that previously helped demarcate the boundaries between work and personal life. As we have seen, workers frequently adopt defensive spatial and temporal strategies to cope with this encroachment—such as moving into larger homes or establishing routines to artificially “*leave*” work at the end of the day.

Yet these strategies are highly individualized and cannot fully compensate for the loss of informal social interactions, spontaneous collaboration, and mentorship opportunities that emerge in shared physical spaces. Over time, this can lead to diminished well-being and increased emotional strain, particularly for workers already subjectively and affectively engaged in their jobs. As Chung and colleagues note, organizations continue to exert control—albeit through more diffuse, psychological means—by embedding the demand for productivity within the illusion of freedom. In this light, remote work should not be idealized. While it may initially appear to expand workers’ autonomy, it often reproduces—and at times intensifies—the contradictions of contemporary labor.

10 CHAPTER 5 - STARTUP WORKERS

Up to this point, we have examined how startup work environments operate through their managerial practices, growth imperatives, investment logics, and hybrid modes of work organization. Our objective has been to demonstrate the social conditions that make burnout intelligible not as an isolated pathology, but as a cultural and contextually situated phenomenon. Nevertheless, burnout manifests in the individual bodies of workers—bodies that are embedded in, and also influenced by, broader organizational structures. With this in mind, our analysis now turns toward a closer examination of the social profiles of startup workers: What are their typical class backgrounds? What aspirations do they carry into these environments? How are these aspirations mobilized by companies, and what happens when they are overpowered?

Therefore, having outlined the structural and ideological transformations within startups, this chapter shifts its focus to the workers themselves and the behavioral patterns that emerged during fieldwork. We begin by exploring Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) policies in the tech industry, critically interrogating how these initiatives intersect with class dynamics, the emergence of *affinity-based work collectives*, and the notable absence of strong union representation in the sector. Building on this foundation, we then draw on the analytical frameworks of Robert Merton (1968) and Howard Becker (1998) to develop a typology of four behavioral patterns observed in the field. These will be illustrated through the use of “*personas*” (Pruitt; Adlin, 2006), in order to better capture the broader logics of subject formation and career trajectories shaped by the startup ecosystem.

However, before we move on, to fully grasp these dynamics it is first necessary to situate startups within the broader socio-economic transformations of contemporary capitalism and examine how the *disciplinary mechanisms* of neoliberalism (Foucault, 2017) have contributed to the production of *neoliberal subjects* (Dardot; Laval, 2013). As we have previously discussed, the transition from Fordism to financial capitalism, which began in the 1970s, initiated profound socio-political and economic transformations. Harvey (1992) conceptualizes this shift as a move toward flexible accumulation, characterized by the fragmentation of stable employment, the globalization of production, and an intensified reliance on financial markets. However, as Dardot and Laval (2013) argue, these economic changes were

not merely structural; they also reshaped the very logic of capitalism by introducing new disciplinary mechanisms and behavioral norms.

The financial market has thus been constructed as a disciplining agent for all the enterprise's personnel, from the director to the basic wage-earner. All of them are to be subject to the principle of *accountability* – that is, the need to 'account for oneself' and be evaluated in accordance with the results obtained (Dardot; Laval, 2013, p. 201).

In this new paradigm, corporate governance increasingly aligned with the imperatives of financialization, prioritizing short-term shareholder value over long-term productive investment. Sennett (1998) further critiques this shift, highlighting how the erosion of stable, long-term employment fosters a culture of insecurity and adaptability, compelling individuals to internalize the logic of flexibility at the cost of professional stability and personal well-being. Thus, the transition to financial capitalism and neoliberalism was not simply an economic reconfiguration but a profound transformation in the organization of work and subjectivity, as also demonstrated by Gaulejac (2007) through his analysis of managerialist ideology.

These transformations have led to profound consequences, including the individualization of workers, the erosion of collective structures, and the intensification of competition. In this context, individuals are increasingly expected to take full responsibility for managing their own precarity, both in its objective and subjective dimensions (Linhart, 2023). According to Linhart (2023), these shifts were largely driven by the implementation of *flexitime*, performance-based remuneration, and continuous performance evaluations—mechanisms that reinforced a logic of self-discipline, hyper-performance, and perpetual self-assessment. This aligns with what Dardot and Laval (2013) describe as the production of the *neoliberal subject*, an individual conditioned to internalize market imperatives, seeing themselves as an enterprise to be optimized rather than a worker to be protected.

Startups, in this regard, not only extend but intensify these neoliberal transformations. Developed within the speculative framework of venture capitalism, they foster a culture of insecurity, adaptability, and self-surveillance, in which workers must continuously prove their worth under unstable conditions. More than just adapting to uncertainty, startup workers are compelled to embrace it as an opportunity.

Meanwhile, startup companies frequently claim that by granting workers greater flexibility, they are adopting a more “*human-centered management*”

approach. However, Linhart's (2023) critique of the *sur-humanization of work* challenges this notion, arguing that this so-called "*humanization*" is, in fact, a process that intensifies workers' demands rather than alleviating them. Rather than merely ensuring productivity, post-Taylorist management compels workers to invest their emotional, intellectual, and personal selves into labor. Unlike Taylorist management, which sought to rationalize work by reducing the worker to a purely functional role, contemporary management strategies demand total personal engagement, further eroding the boundaries between professional and private life. The expectation is no longer just to complete tasks but to internalize work as an identity, continually pushing the limits of endurance, flexibility, and self-investment.

It is no surprise, then, to assert that since the 2010s startups are among the enterprises that actively incite, shape, and reinforce the emergence of neoliberal subjects. By embedding hyper-competition, self-discipline, and *emotional labor* (Illouz, 2007) as fundamental aspects of contemporary work, they normalize an intensified form of self-exploitation, where success is contingent on one's ability to over-perform, over-adapt, and over-identify with work itself. In the following sections, we will examine how these dynamics manifest both in the D&I policies implemented by companies and in the patterns of behavior that emerge among startup workers.

10.1 DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND CLASS STRUGGLES

Overall, the profile of a typical startup worker in Brazil is relatively homogeneous: predominantly cisgender male, white, aged between 20 and 40, holding a higher education degree, mostly originating from the upper-middle classes. This bias is particularly evident among the technological teams of startups, as highlighted by Isabel, who made history as the first female software developer at a growth-stage startup in 2015, when she entered the startup world.

This is still a sector dominated by cis white men... But that's the reality I've known since college. My computer science class started with 40 people, and out of those, only 3 were women. In the end, only 25 people graduated, and out of those, only 2 were women (Isabel, 34 years old, Senior Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Nevertheless, the establishment of D&I policies in the Brazilian startup ecosystem has led to the gradual diversification of the workforce. Some interlocutors are pleased to work in what they consider a "*diverse and inclusive environment*".

The team is really diverse in every way, including gender. We have Black people, lesbian women, trans people... and it's great, even for the people inside the company. One of the managers is a bit more conservative, but he's learning from our conversations. He might not fully accept it in his personal life, but you can tell he's open to talking and listening to what we have to say. So overall, I think it's a very open environment (Isis, 31 years old, Social Media Specialist of an early-stage startup, 2022).

As Isis points out, nowadays, it is more common to find women, Black individuals, people with disabilities, and transgender individuals among startup employees.¹⁷⁵ Still, dominant social and demographic patterns continue to shape recruitment practices, and leadership positions across the industry remain largely aligned with traditional stereotypes. Although no statistical data was formally collected, field observations suggest that women hired in the tech sector are frequently directed toward areas such as Human Resources, Customer Success, and Marketing—functions historically associated with care, communication, and emotional labor. These roles, often labeled as *soft* (Castro, 2018), are symbolically and materially undervalued, both in terms of prestige and remuneration. Men, by contrast, continue to be predominantly allocated to strategic and technical roles—such as management (e.g., CEOs and directors) and Software Development or Data Analysis—functions socially constructed as *hard* (Castro, 2018), and linked to rationality, objectivity, and leadership, traits still culturally and predominantly attributed to men.

According to the latest national mapping report by Abstartups (2024), the demographic composition of startup founders in Brazil remains predominantly male, white, and heterosexual. In terms of gender, 79.3% of startup founders identify as cisgender men, 19.2% as cisgender women, and only 0.4% as transgender men or non-binary individuals. Regarding racial identity, 70.5% of founders are white, 23.6% identify as Black or brown, 2.1% as Asian or indigenous, while 3.8% opted not to disclose their racial background. With respect to sexual orientation, 91.6% of founders identify as heterosexual. The report further indicates that the average age of startup founders is 40 years old.

¹⁷⁵ This contrasts with my personal experience when I joined the startup workforce in Florianópolis in 2014 as the first white woman in an early-stage startup with 18 employees. At that time, there were no Black or LGBTQ+ individuals in the company. The prevailing masculine ethos was reinforced by intense competition, as well as misogynistic and homophobic jokes shared among most of my coworkers and superiors (Rodrigues, 2023).

Although the Abstartups report (2024) does not directly assess the socioeconomic background of startup founders, their educational attainment offers insight into their class positioning. The data reveals that 32.1% of founders hold a higher education degree, while 40.2% have pursued postgraduate specializations. This suggests that startup founders largely originate from more affluent social strata with greater access to education.

In terms of workforce diversity, data from Abstartups (2024) reveals a stark decline in representation as startups scale. In early-stage startups with 11 to 20 employees, women represent 7.1% of the workforce. This percentage drops significantly to 0.2% in growth-stage startups (201–500 employees), and in late-stage startups (over 501 employees), there is no statistically significant data available regarding the presence of women. A similar pattern emerges for Black and brown individuals: in early-stage startups, they account for 4.6% of employees, while in growth and late-stage startups, their presence is statistically negligible. These figures suggest that diversity is more visible in the initial phases of startup development, whereas more mature and structurally consolidated startups tend to reproduce the dominant profile of white, heterosexual men in their workforce.

Despite these disparities, 51% of startups surveyed in 2024 claimed to prioritize diversity as a key value. However, 59% reported not implementing any targeted recruitment or selection processes to foster a more inclusive workforce. Among companies that implement D&I policies, the rigor and structure of these initiatives vary according to the company's stage of maturity. In early- and growth-stage startups, diversity efforts are often shaped by the personal values and priorities of workers and HR recruiters. In these cases, D&I policies are frequently approached as a means of fostering social change, with hiring decisions reflecting individual commitments rather than institutionalized strategies.

I never wanted to work in HR, but I always thought that if I were to work in the corporate world, I'd want to focus on issues like diversity and mental health within a company. [...] Then, when I discovered the tech world, I realized it's a space where you can actually do something cool. In the tech world, we can drive real social change (Camila, 25 years-old, People Manager of an early-stage startup, 2022).

In contrast, late-stage startups tend to adopt more structured and formalized D&I policies, as these initiatives become integral to the company's social branding. In such cases, organizations often engage D&I consultants to guide internal processes,

or they establish dedicated positions focused on diversity recruitment. When these roles are present, companies typically set annual hiring targets and implement systematic reviews to assess progress and ensure alignment with broader corporate objectives.

Today, I work in recruiting for diversity and inclusion. So yes, there's a strategy, there are goals. We aim to reach 2025 with a certain percentage of our workforce being, for example, 50% women, a specific percentage of Black employees, a certain percentage of transgender employees, and so on. Every year, we track our progress to see where we stand, to ensure that we hit those targets by 2025 (Leticia, 29 years old, Technical Recruitment for Diversity and Inclusion of a late-stage startup, 2022).

However, as highlighted in the Abstartups report (2024), not all startups actively implement D&I hiring policies. Some companies claim that, while they would like to prioritize diversity, the relentless pace of growth and the urgent need to recruit candidates with specific skill sets take precedent. As a result, they argue that these constraints prevent them from fully engaging in D&I initiatives.

I remember when we reached 78 people in the company, we had committees. There was a diversity committee that discussed various, sometimes controversial, topics. The committee wasn't meant to turn into an action plan—it was more about creating a space for discussion and raising awareness. There was one meeting about racism and how there were very few Black people in the company. After that, the team wanted to run a recruitment process specifically to bring in more Black candidates. At that point, I had to put on my CEO hat and say, 'I 100% agree with you. I support this and approve it if we execute it, but I need to align your perspective with the reality of what this means. I'm personally on board, but let's see if you are too. Hiring people is hard, right? No matter the pool of candidates. If we niche it down even further, for whatever reason, it's going to lengthen the hiring process. If we lengthen the process, we reduce the output we deliver in that period. If we reduce the output, the end-of-year results will be different. If the results are lower, your salary increase will probably be delayed by a year. Are you okay with that?' That's the chain of consequences. Could it be different? Sure. But there needs to be room for it. Right now, the company needs to grow first to create that space. To address social issues, the company needs a certain level of stability and resources (Ricardo, 43 years old, CEO of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

Ricardo's testimony vividly illustrates that, in most cases, the push for a more inclusive and diverse work environment originates from employees rather than leadership. However, company executives, particularly at the C-level, often fail to fully support these initiatives. If we understand employee-driven demands for D&I policies as an attempt to introduce democratic principles within corporate structures (Linhart, 2023), the obstacles these efforts face become evident, as the power

dynamic between workers and leadership remains heavily skewed in favor of the latter.

To obscure this imbalance, Ricardo shifts responsibility back onto employees, arguing that the challenges of recruiting under D&I policies create staffing shortages that could negatively impact company performance. By framing diversity efforts as a potential risk to business success—ultimately affecting wages and promotions—he subtly discourages meaningful action while maintaining the appearance of concern.

This case provides a valuable opportunity to examine how the *dramatization of domination* (Leite Lopes, 1988) manifests in startups. Unlike in traditional factories, where the Fordist model still prevails and authority figures must visibly assert their control through direct forms of dominance, startups operate under a different logic—one that relies on the subtle performance of authority rather than its overt display. Instead of reinforcing hierarchical power through explicit commands, CEOs and leaders in startups engage in a dramatization that creates the illusion of flattened hierarchies. By ostensibly delegating decision-making responsibilities to employees, they present themselves as approachable and egalitarian figures, reinforcing the idea that power is distributed rather than concentrated.

However, as Gaulejac (2007) identifies in managerialist organizations, this decentralization is largely performative, constituting a form of *opaque power* that obscures the persistence of hierarchical control. While employees are granted autonomy in certain operational aspects, the fundamental rules, strategic direction, and overarching decisions remain firmly in the hands of leadership. In this way, startups maintain traditional power dynamics while disguising them under the rhetoric of flexibility, empowerment, and participatory management—ultimately ensuring that authority remains intact, albeit in a more concealed and indirect form.

Moreover, as the CEO of a growth-stage startup, Ricardo reinforces the notion that a company must reach a “*certain level of market stability*” before assuming social responsibility. By implying that D&I policies are more appropriate for late-stage startups, he presents diversity efforts as a privilege of established companies rather than a fundamental organizational commitment. This perspective not only delays structural change but also contradicts the idealized image of the tech industry as a force for “*social transformation*” and the notion of the company as a “*democratic*”

workplace—a myth often used to obscure the persistence of hierarchical power structures.¹⁷⁶

However, when did the diversity and inclusion agenda first emerge within the Brazilian startup sector? According to one of my interlocutors, who is currently a D&I consultant and advocate, D&I policies began to be actively debated and implemented by Brazilian startups around 2017. By 2018, the discussion around diversity and inclusion had gained significant traction within the Brazilian startup ecosystem. Various stakeholders—including startups, accelerators, venture capital firms, and industry associations—began formally implementing D&I policies. These initiatives were largely motivated by a combination of growing social awareness, pressure from employees and consumers, and the narrative that diverse teams foster greater innovation and more effective decision-making. Formal tracking of these initiatives by industry associations, such as Abstartups, began in 2020.

The topic of diversity and inclusion has been on the international market's radar since 2010, but it didn't really take off in Brazil until around 2017. [...] It's clear that trends from abroad find their way here because Brazilian companies aren't really into domestic trends. They look outside the country for examples because those markets tend to be more agile in adapting to these issues... Also, there's a sort of colonialist mindset at play, like, "They're good there, so let's just copy what they're doing here" (Vitor, 34 years old, D&I Consultant and former Human Resources at a late-stage startup, 2023).

Vitor's perspective illustrates the broader alignment of Brazilian startups with international agendas, particularly those set by USA technology firms. In this context, numerous Brazilian startups have adopted corporate-led initiatives promoting D&I, mirroring the strategies of their counterparts in Silicon Valley.

Based on Fraser's work (2020), we can see how this trend aligns with the broader framework of *progressive neoliberalism*, in which diversity and inclusion initiatives are mostly embraced as a business asset rather than a means of dismantling underlying structures of economic inequality. Within this model, some startups actively promote the recruitment of women, Black individuals, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIAPN+ professionals, yet these efforts often remain disconnected from deeper socioeconomic issues such as class mobility, wealth redistribution, and labor rights. As a result, while these initiatives contribute to greater

¹⁷⁶ Here, we have examined how these forms of *opaque power* operate through the performative enactment of D&I policies. As we will see, however, these managerial strategies also play a direct role in shaping entrepreneurial mental health initiatives that promise to diagnose and prevent burnout among startup workers.

representation within the workforce, they do not necessarily disrupt the existing hierarchies that sustain structural inequalities in the tech industry.

This is particularly evident in the findings of the Abstartups 2024 report, which reveals that among startups actively recruiting new employees, 43.4% reported being unable to fill all open positions due to a *“lack of candidates who met the full skill requirements.”* Additionally, among the startups that dismissed employees in 2024, 44.8% cited *“cultural incompatibility or a misalignment of values”* with the company as the primary reason for termination.

According to Vitor, *“cultural incompatibility”* or *“lack of alignment”* does not necessarily indicate that an individual was incapable of performing within the company. Rather, it often reflects differences in background and professional trajectory. Founders and recruiters, who typically favor candidates with profiles similar to their own, may inadvertently exclude those with divergent experiences or perspectives.

The tech and startup environment has long been shaped by those who participated in Junior Companies, AIESEC, international exchange programs... For a long time, it was sustained from that perspective. And there are still companies that continue to operate this way. Why? Because the evaluation of what constitutes a coherent work profile, or one that aligns culturally, is a profile that is similar to mine. This is where a really important discussion about diversity and inclusion begins.

Let's talk about hiring processes—recruitment is one of the key pillars in creating diverse and inclusive workplaces. One of the first things I ask companies is: how does your recruitment process work? What criteria do you use to evaluate candidates?

And then they usually say, “Oh, we're looking for resilience.”

So I push back: How do you define resilience? Is it studying abroad and learning to live on your own? Or is it being a person with a disability navigating the job market? (Vitor, 34 years old, D&I Consultant and former Human Resources at a late-stage startup, 2023).

Vitor highlights that while D&I policies are crucial, they will only drive meaningful social change if corporations redefine their own standards of what constitutes a *“good worker.”* Additionally, as Letícia points out, hierarchy persists even among employees working in diversity and inclusion roles, as diversity within companies decreases beyond a certain organizational level. One key barrier to advancement is language: the inability to speak English often limits career growth, disproportionately affecting employees from less privileged backgrounds.

When you start moving up in the company, most of the top-level employees aren't even from Brazil anymore.¹⁷⁷ So if you can't communicate in English, you're going to fall behind. No one tells you this outright, but if you join without speaking English, you won't advance in the company. And if the company claims to be inclusive, it should rethink this whole system—but the truth is, they're not really willing to change certain things (Letícia, 29 years old, Technical Recruitment for Diversity and Inclusion at a late-stage startup, 2022).

These insights reveal how deeply ingrained cultural norms and educational credentials continue to shape hiring and promotion decisions in the tech industry. They also raise critical questions about the true extent of inclusivity in these companies, particularly when it comes to integrating individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

While the industry has undoubtedly made progress in diversifying its workforce, one fundamental aspect remains largely unchanged: the majority of startup employees continue to belong to Brazil's middle classes and are engaged in intellectual labor. This persistence underscores the deep-rooted influence of socioeconomic stratification within the tech sector, even as efforts to promote inclusivity gradually reshape its demographic composition.

When referring to the Brazilian middle classes, we are not solely addressing economic stratification, but also the socio-anthropological dimensions that shape individuals' self-identification with the middle classes (Salata, 2015). According to a study done by *Tendências Consultoria* in 2024, from a strictly economic perspective, Brazil's social stratification is typically categorized as follows:

Table 13 – Brazilian class stratification

Class	Percentage of households by income bracket	Income bracket
A	4.3%	Earnings exceeding US\$ 5,000
B	14.8%	Earnings between US\$ 1,620 and US\$ 4,999
C	31%	Earnings between US\$ 680 and US\$ 1,619
D/E	49.9%	Earnings up to US\$ 679

Source: elaborated by the author based on the study from *Tendências Consultoria* (Poder360, 2025).

By cross-referencing broader Brazilian class stratification with the salary ranges of our sample, we find that among the 30 interlocutors in this study, one

¹⁷⁷ Because Letícia works for a late-stage startup that was acquired by an international corporation, the top levels of the company are expected to deal with managers from abroad.

belongs to class A, sixteen to class B, eleven to class C, and two to class D. From an economic standpoint, this distribution indicates that the majority of startup workers in our study are situated within the upper middle class, predominantly class B, with a significant representation from the middle segment of class C.

However, if we were to consider salary ranges in isolation, four individuals would be classified within class D. Notably, two of these individuals come from class B families and receive financial support from their relatives while earning lower wages due to being in a career transition. The other two, by contrast, are entry-level employees at an early-stage startup—one a transgender woman and the other a Black woman—who lack comparable economic safety nets.

This stark contrast underscores two key realities. First, financial safety nets play a decisive role in determining who can afford to enter and navigate a career transition into the tech industry, allowing some individuals to accept lower wages temporarily while they gain experience. Second, those occupying the lowest positions within the startup hierarchy are disproportionately individuals from historically marginalized groups. This reflects broader patterns of social stratification within the sector, revealing how structural inequalities persist even in an industry that often portrays itself as meritocratic and inclusive.

I think the more privileged someone is within a social structure, the easier it is for them to succeed in a startup. They don't have to juggle anything else. But the more diversity markers come into play—whether it's social issues, family responsibilities, or financial dependence—the harder it gets. The gap widens, and things become way more complicated. [...] Someone who comes from a highly privileged background plays this game much more easily, obviously, because they don't have anything else to worry about (Kelly, 30 years old, Sales Account Executive of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Given the relentless pace of growth and the high demands characteristic of startup environments, Kelly's observation underscores a critical point: those most likely to succeed are often individuals who possess the social and cultural capital required to navigate this ecosystem. In this sense, success is not solely the result of personal effort or merit, but is deeply rooted in structural privileges that afford certain individuals a greater capacity to “*play the corporate game*.” Conversely, we can suppose that those who tend to experience higher levels of stress and burnout are often individuals who struggle to fully adapt to the dominant startup ethos—most notably, women, Black individuals, and members of lower-income classes.

As André Salata (2015) argues, middle-class identification in Brazil extends beyond income levels, encompassing a broader set of cultural and social markers that shape professional trajectories and access to opportunities.

In Brazil, the perception of belonging to the middle class is largely associated with maintaining a stable standard of living, obtaining a university degree, earning a high income, and having access to leisure and entertainment. As we have seen, these characteristics rarely align with the profile of the ‘average’ Brazilian. Instead, this image is much closer to that of the more affluent segment of society, classified as ‘AB’ (Salata, 2015, p. 21).¹⁷⁸

Therefore, when we assert that startup workers originate from the Brazilian upper classes, we refer not only to their economic background but also to their shared educational and cultural experiences. These individuals typically have access to higher education, proficiency in a second language (most commonly English), international experience, and access to consumer goods.¹⁷⁹

In the early 2010s, most Brazilian startups relied on mobilizing workers’ passions, recruiting young people who had recently graduated from university and who largely came from relatively privileged social backgrounds—a pattern also observed by Leroux (2015) among employees at Decathlon France. However, beyond this recruitment strategy, it is important to highlight that the emerging startup workforce itself often viewed the tech sector as a way to preserve the social status into which they were born, while also pursuing high-income positions and work perceived as having “*purpose and meaning*.”

However, as the startup ecosystem matured and D&I policies were introduced, it also became a vehicle for upward social mobility. Despite these advancements, leadership roles—such as managerial and executive positions—as well as high-prestige technical roles, particularly in software development, remain predominantly occupied by white individuals, primarily men, but also women, from class B backgrounds. In contrast, entry-level positions in areas that do not require specialized degrees, such as Customer Success or Sales, have absorbed Black,

¹⁷⁸ Translated freely from the original text: No Brasil, a imagem do que é fazer parte da classe média envolve, em grande medida, possuir um padrão de vida estável, ter feito universidade, ter renda alta, ter acesso a lazer e diversão etc. Como vimos, essas são características que dificilmente se encaixam no perfil do brasileiro “mediano”; ao contrário, trata-se de uma imagem que é muito mais próxima da camada mais abastada, de perfil “AB” (Salata, 2015, p. 21).

¹⁷⁹ When D&I employees lack essential skills, such as proficiency in English, startup managers strongly encourage them to prioritize personal development by acquiring these competencies. Specifically, learning English is often emphasized as a critical skill to be integrated into their professional growth plans.

transgender, and lower-income workers. This dynamic not only reinforces the persistence of class stratification within the startup ecosystem but also reflects broader patterns of racial and gender inequality that characterize Brazil's labor market (Salata, 2020; Santos, 2023). It prompts a critical examination of who is better positioned to “*navigate*” these labor ecosystems and, conversely, who remains most vulnerable to psychosocial risks.

10.1.1 Affinity groups and social engagement?

In the previous section, we saw that one of the interlocutors, Ricardo, mentioned the presence of “*diversity committees*” within his company—informal spaces for discussion aimed at addressing various aspects of the company's work environment. Several other interlocutors in this study also referred to similar initiatives, sometimes describing them as “*spontaneous affinity groups*,” emphasizing that participation in these groups is voluntary.¹⁸⁰

At first, the existence of such groups seemed to suggest a potential avenue for workers to collectively organize and address shared concerns. However, as we will see, *affinity groups* differ significantly from traditional labor collectives or movements, particularly in their structure, objectives, and capacity for effecting systemic change.

Overall, affinity groups or diversity committees are formed to address work environment issues that arise in relation to the unique identities of their members. As Fernanda details below, these groups can vary based on different identity markers. In the startup where she worked, for example, there were groups for women, Black individuals, mothers, and the LGBTQIA+ community. Some interlocutors see these groups as a valuable source of community, particularly for women, who use them to connect with others who share similar backgrounds or experiences. Given that the tech industry remains predominantly associated with heterosexual white men, diversity committees play a crucial role in providing underrepresented groups with a sense of belonging and support.

The ‘diversity cells’ are made up of people who work together and share common interests. They look for the cells for support and to think of actions the company could take to improve. At Unisus, we had groups for women,

¹⁸⁰ Given that workers are not compensated for their involvement in diversity groups and that most engage in these activities outside of regular business hours, it can be argued that their participation is, in fact, voluntary.

people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, mothers, and many others. [...] The people in these groups are like 'owners' of the group. But they need the HR team's support to approve and carry out the proposed actions (Fernanda, 30 years old, Product Manager, unemployed, 2022).

Our goal is to bring education and culture to the rest of the company. We have a bi-weekly meeting for the committee and a presentation on the last Friday of every month [for the company]. In the last presentation, we talked about trans and non-binary people. It's amazing because these conversations help us learn so much. We've had workshops on accessibility for blind people, for example, which made us think, is our website prepared to accommodate these people? [...] The committee's purpose is precisely that—to identify where we can improve and what we can do to change (Elisa, 31 years old, Customer Success of an early-stage startup, 2023).

Although participation in most of these groups is indeed voluntary, they are integrated within the company and overseen by HR professionals or C-level managers, depending on the organization's size. Elisa, for example, illustrates how the startup she works for has institutionalized the initial self-organized affinity group. Currently, at her company, diversity groups not only discuss pressing issues among themselves but also disseminate their insights to other coworkers, with the aim of improving both the overall work environment and the inclusivity of the company's products. These objectives stand in stark contrast to workers' collectives in other sectors or from previous decades, which primarily organized themselves to resist the exploitation, aggression, and humiliation imposed by their employers (Linhart, 1978; Linhart, 2023).

Whereas past work collectives often had to operate clandestinely to challenge the structures of domination embedded in the organization of labor itself (Linhart, 2023), affinity groups of startup environments function within the framework of the companies they seek to influence. Rather than resisting managerial authority, these groups ultimately channel workers' efforts into improving internal organizational processes, aligning their activism with the company's broader objectives rather than confronting systemic power dynamics.

By institutionalizing these groups, startups not only align with their employees' desire to foster a work environment that promotes social change, but also position themselves as progressive and inclusive organizations, who promote a “*humanizing management*”. This strategy not only supports workers' aspirations for a more impactful workplace but also reinforces the narrative of creating a workplace driven by purpose, values, and meaningful change.

For the D&I consultant, Vitor, affinity groups represent a modernization of people management practices, even serving as a tool for talent retention within companies.

No company is going to survive the modernization of people management practices if it doesn't understand the role of diversity and inclusion as a foundation for the sustainability of its own business model. [...] D&I is about my identity in the workplace. At Unisus, we had two to three times higher talent retention among employees with some kind of diversity marker. Why? Because the work was deeply tailored to foster a sense of belonging. The groups within the company were strong, well-established, and created spaces for connection, support, and safety. There was a real concern for mental health and well-being—psychological safety was built both at a general level and within each specific pillar. Our strategy operated across multiple layers of people management, making a deep and widespread impact throughout the company (Vitor, 34 years old, D&I Consultant and former Human Resources at a late-stage startup, 2023).

His perspective highlights how workers' aspirations for social transformation and a more equitable society are absorbed by D&I policies—particularly through the promotion of affinity groups—and repurposed into a management strategy. Rather than existing solely as spaces for advocacy, these groups become mechanisms that align with the company's sustainability model, reinforcing its corporate objectives.

If we consider that collectives have historically played a crucial role in exposing suffering within work environments—where, as Linhart argues, “the essential question is not so much who suffers and how, but where the suffering comes from and why” (2023, p. 104)¹⁸¹—it becomes evident that framing D&I solely as a matter of “*workers' identity in the workplace*” risks erasing the broader class struggle that has historically united workers across diverse backgrounds. By individualizing both belonging and suffering, this approach shifts the analytical focus away from collective labor dynamics and structural inequalities, emphasizing instead personal identity and individual recognition. As a result, it undermines the potential for solidarity-based resistance and dilutes the collective power necessary to challenge the systemic roots of workplace suffering.

Certainly, discussions within diversity committees play a relevant role in addressing workplace harassment, increasing visibility for underrepresented groups, and fostering a sense of well-being among employees. However, these groups often remain confined within the ideological and operational boundaries of managerialist discourse (Gaulejac, 2007). When that happens, work collectives shaped through

¹⁸¹ Translated freely from the original text: la question essentielle n'est pas tant qui souffre et comment, mais d'où provient la souffrance et pourquoi (Linhart, 2023, p. 104).

management-led reforms or teamwork initiatives inspired by corporate culture risk being stripped of their transformative potential. While they may encourage dialogue and inclusion, they rarely challenge core issues such as labor intensification, long working hours, or wage inequality. Thus, it is important to ask: What do these affinity groups reveal, and what do they obscure? When viewed through a critical lens, their role appears less as agents of structural transformation and more as mechanisms for institutional reform that ultimately reinforce the prevailing status quo.

I think the closest thing to a [union organization] today are the affinity groups for underrepresented employees. To me, these are the most politically organized groups within a company. [...] But the problem is, these groups don't see people as workers, which leads to a lot of internal conflict. When I was part of the company's women's collective, I was there to challenge the system, but most of the others just wanted to work alongside it. The thing is, that doesn't really help—because no matter how much you try to play along, we're still going to get screwed over. And that's the big dilemma with these groups. Since they exist within the corporate world, you can't go too far or openly oppose the system. You have to play the game (Leticia, 29 years old, Technical Recruitment for Diversity and Inclusion at a late-stage startup, 2022).

By critically emphasizing the necessity of “*playing the game*,” Leticia exposes the fundamental contradictions of affinity groups. Rather than uniting workers under a shared labor identity, these groups compartmentalize them based on specific identity markers. In doing so, the institutionalization of affinity groups illustrates how progressive neoliberalism co-opts and neutralizes spaces that historically functioned as sites of resistance, repurposing them as tools for corporate governance and public relations. By integrating worker concerns into company-led initiatives, these groups create the illusion of inclusivity and progress while preempting more radical forms of collective action. This process does not merely limit the scope of worker mobilization; it actively reshapes it, redirecting energies that might have fueled labor organizing into bureaucratic mechanisms that ultimately serve the company's interests.

As a result, affinity groups, despite their surface-level advocacy, remain structurally confined within corporate frameworks. They offer workers a space to voice concerns, but only within parameters that do not fundamentally challenge the capitalist logic of the workplace. Thus, rather than evolving into platforms for genuine social emancipation, they operate as controlled outlets that dissipate collective worker power, ensuring that resistance is managed rather than mobilized. The same applies to the integration of harassment reporting mechanisms and in-house

psychological support services¹⁸²—both of which, while important, are ultimately embedded within the company’s own framework of control.

10.1.2 Are there unions in the tech world?

When I asked interlocutors in this study whether they participated in any labor unions or collective worker organizations, their responses were consistently negative or, at most, referenced the affinity groups discussed above. This apparent absence of union engagement within startups led me to actively seek out individuals involved in union activities in the tech sector, as none had emerged organically within my sample.

To deepen my understanding of collective organization—or the lack thereof—among startup workers, I conducted interviews with a local union leader and two former tech workers who had been employed in Florianópolis between 2016 and 2019 but had since left both the city and the local tech ecosystem. While these interviews also explored the daily work experiences of these individuals, their primary objective was to investigate any instances of worker-led organizing efforts in Florianópolis.

According to the local union leader, the *Union of Employees in Data Processing Companies of Santa Catarina* (SINDPDSC) was established in 1986, coinciding with the emergence of the first public data processing companies in the region. However, despite its historical presence, the union struggled to adapt to the rapid expansion of the startup ecosystem in Florianópolis and the broader state of Santa Catarina after 2010. As a result, while the city has positioned itself as a hub for technological innovation, traditional forms of labor organization have failed to keep pace with these transformations, leaving startup workers largely disconnected from collective structures.

As an attempt to reorganize workers and push back against the bureaucratization and alignment of unions with employer interests, an independent movement called *Infoproletários* emerged in 2017.

Inspired by the international California-based group Tech Workers Coalition, the *Infoproletários* group was founded by programmer Raphael Coelho. Established in January 2017, the collective aim[ed] to advocate for the labor demands of the IT sector without relying on traditional unions, which they felt

¹⁸² These issues will be explored in greater depth in Part 3.

did not represent their interests. Defining itself as “leftist” and “revolutionary,” the group includ[ed] members from political parties, anarchists, and other political orientations. Operating nationally, the movement ha[d] representatives in various cities, such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Recife, Florianópolis, and Porto Alegre (Moreno, 2021, p. 44).¹⁸³

According to my interlocutors, the meetings in Florianópolis took place online and were an attempt to join forces with the organizing efforts already underway in São Paulo. However, the group never grew beyond ten people. They collaborated primarily between 2017 and 2019, when the movement’s main focuses were the deterioration of workers’ mental health and the high rates of turnover and layoffs. Among their activities were study groups, reading sessions of *The Capital*, and the creation of materials to distribute to other workers within the tech industry.¹⁸⁴

However, actions such as leafleting or grassroots engagement among tech workers always proved to be a challenge.

They’ve got pretty sophisticated methods to keep unions out of tech companies. It’s something that’s been refined by companies internationally since the 1970s. Things like flexible hours, flexible pay, profit-sharing... they’re all ways to block union organizing. It’s deliberate (Gilberto, 37 years old, Software developer released for union activities at SINDPDSC, 2022).

The biggest challenge at the beginning was figuring out how to bring up topics that IT workers would actually care about, you know? To grab their attention. That was a huge issue because, in this field, people don’t really care about collective action. They’d rather negotiate directly with the boss and that’s it (Thiago, 28 years old, Data Specialist of a tech company from São Paulo, 2022).

As someone with a strong awareness of workers’ rights, working inside a capitalist company, I can tell you it’s not easy. It’s a bit frustrating at times, but I feel like I’m contributing to grassroots work. [...] When it comes to raising awareness among IT workers, I think we’re still way behind. I can’t speak for every company, but in all the ones I’ve worked at, people just don’t have a sense of their rights. For example, why is our meal allowance so low? No one ever questions it. Everyone complains, but no one mobilizes, no one organizes. So, I try to plant little seeds and give people some tips. But what I see most often is: ‘I’m unhappy, my resume is good, so I’ll quit and go to

¹⁸³ Translated freely from the original text: Inspirado no grupo internacional californiano Tech Workers Coalition (Coalizão de Trabalhadores de Tecnologia), o grupo Infoproletários foi fundado pelo programador Raphael Coelho. Criado em janeiro de 2017, o coletivo tem por finalidade defender as demandas trabalhistas do setor de TI, sem depender dos sindicatos, pelo qual não se sentem representados. Definindo-se como de “esquerda” e “revolucionário”, o grupo abriga militantes de partidos, anarquistas e dentre outras vertentes políticas. De atuação nacional, o movimento apresenta representantes de diversas cidades, como São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Recife, Florianópolis e Porto Alegre (Moreno, 2021, p. 44).

¹⁸⁴ As documented by Moreno (2021), the *Infoproletários* group maintained a significant presence in São Paulo during the 2020 pandemic, actively working to support and raise awareness among technology workers. However, upon seeking further information about the group in 2025, I discovered that their website is no longer operational. This suggests that the group has likely been recently dissolved, marking the end of its organized activities.

another company' (Aline, 33 years-old, UX Writer of a tech company from São Paulo, 2022).

Mobilizing IT workers toward unionization has been perceived as particularly challenging by those who have attempted it. Notably, the overall rate of unionization among Brazilian workers has been steadily declining over the past decade, reaching its lowest levels in recent years. In 2012, approximately 19.1% of employees were affiliated with labor unions. However, by 2019, this rate had fallen to 14.4%, and continued its downward trajectory to 9.2% in 2022. By 2023, only 8.4% of the 100.7 million employed persons were union members, totaling 8.4 million individuals (Cabral; Nery, 2024).

This decline can be attributed to a combination of structural and cultural factors, primarily linked to the progressive dismantling of work collectives. The increasing prevalence of informal employment, characterized by a lack of formal contracts and job security, has significantly contributed to reduced union membership. Additionally, labor reforms implemented in 2017 weakened unions by making union contributions voluntary, thereby diminishing their financial resources and bargaining power. Furthermore, the rise of individualistic work cultures has led to a fragmentation of worker solidarity, making collective organization more challenging. These factors collectively underscore the complexities involved in unionizing IT workers and reflect broader trends affecting labor movements across Brazil.

As Linhart (2023) points out, the erosion of work collectives has accelerated alongside the growing individualization and intensification of competition among workers. The strategies used to weaken solidarity among employees are diverse, ranging from the implementation of flexible work schedules—designed to prevent workers from developing consistent routines together—to the introduction of performance evaluation systems and performance-based pay structures (Bernard, 2020). Startups have been no exception, actively incorporating these practices while simultaneously fostering an illusion of individual empowerment. By promoting a culture in which employees perceive themselves as “*independent negotiators*” rather than members of a collective workforce.

Among the key hypotheses explaining the low rate of unionization in the technology sector, we identify the following factors: A) The very notion of “workers” is hollowed out within this sector. Whether due to the terminology employed—startup companies consistently refer to their employees as “*collaborators*” rather than

workers—or the communication strategies they adopt, many knowledge workers in startups do not perceive themselves as part of the working class. B) The sector is characterized by highly heterogeneous employment contracts and salary structures, making it difficult to unify workers under a shared labor identity or collective demands (Moreno, 2021). C) A significant portion of the workforce operates remotely, further complicating efforts to organize collective actions and establish solidarity among employees. D) When mobilization does occur, it is often channeled through *affinity groups*. However, instead of fostering independent worker-led organizing, these agendas are absorbed by the company itself, institutionalized, and managed internally, ensuring that they never escape corporate control. E) Finally, the widespread implementation of individualized performance evaluation systems within startups not only intensifies competition among employees but also undermines the collaboration necessary for carrying out daily tasks.¹⁸⁵

Nevertheless, the absence of unions in the tech sector should not be interpreted as a lack of critical awareness among workers. As Leroux (2015) observes in her analysis of Decathlon’s managerial model—which in many respects parallels the practices adopted by startups—“the robustness of the [managerial] model does not lie in the fact that it escapes criticism, but in the fact that it resists it by managing to marginalize or repel it” (2015, p. 2013).¹⁸⁶ Those most deeply embedded in startup culture are often driven by a passion for their work. In the name of this passion and the pursuit of career advancement, critique tends to take a reformist rather than oppositional form—seeking to “*improve*” rather than fundamentally challenge the system. In contrast, those who attempt to resist or question startup culture more radically are typically located at its margins: workers who have already exited the sector, or who have become disillusioned and disengaged as a result of accumulated frustration.

10.1.2.1 *Individualized performance evaluation systems*

Startup workers themselves frequently recognize the decline of workplace collectives, particularly in environments where collaboration is crucial for completing

¹⁸⁵ This last point is particularly crucial and will be examined in greater depth in the following.

¹⁸⁶ Translates freely from the original text: la robustesse du modèle ne tient pas au fait qu’il échappe à la critique, mais qu’il y résiste en parvenant à marginaliser ou à repousser celle-ci (Leroux, 2015, p. 2013).

tasks. When asked about how and why they experienced a lack of cooperation among colleagues, many participants in this study pointed directly to the “*Performance Evaluation System*” adopted by their company. Several admitted that they hesitate to ask for or offer help, fearing that collaboration could slow them down and negatively impact their ranking in the company’s performance metrics.

They are intensely focused on tracking your performance. For example, if you’re a UX designer, they monitor how many hours it takes you to complete a task in order to calculate an average. Then, they compare your time with how long a senior UX designer would take to complete a similar task and tell you whether you are performing above or below that benchmark. There’s an entire system of calculations to measure not only your efficiency, but also how passionate and engaged you appear to be in your work. Every month, your manager evaluates you using these metrics.

[And how do they measure all of this?]

There’s a questionnaire where you evaluate yourself. It consists of a series of questions with a response scale—never, always, eventually, most of the time. Each answer is assigned a numerical score, and based on your responses, they determine whether you are classified as a high or low performer. The goal is to assess whether you are exceeding expectations or falling behind. At the end of each questionnaire, there’s always a section asking you to rank your coworkers: Are they in the top 10%? The top 20%? The top 50%? Or in the bottom group? Based on all these calculations, the company creates an internal ranking that determines your performance level. This ranking is only accessible to top managers. Then, during one-on-one meetings with your manager, you are informed whether you fall into the low, medium, or high-performance category. If you are performing above expectations, you receive a raise. If you’re underperforming, in an ideal scenario, managers will speak with you, try to understand what’s going on, and work with you to improve. But if your performance doesn’t improve, you’re fired (Diego, 30 years-old, Senior UX Designer of a late-stage startup, 2023).

This form of evaluation, reported consistently across interviews, underscores how startups have refined and intensified performance management systems. Each evaluation assigns employees a score and determines their ranking within the company, reinforcing a culture of individualism. While only managers have full access to these rankings, employees are informed whether they are meeting, exceeding, or falling below expectations. Those who underperform are placed on performance improvement plans, subjected to heightened scrutiny, and, if they fail to meet expectations within a set timeframe, ultimately dismissed.

Fernanda recounts the moment she was labeled an underperformer and was required to construct her own recovery plan to avoid dismissal:

Our performance evaluations worked like this: Every 6 months, we’d set objectives and action plans. ‘Plan A’ ran January to June, with a mid-term check in March. Then ‘Plan B’ from July to December, reviewed in September. If you scored below expectations, you got flagged and had to

draft a recovery plan [...] It was during one of these mid-cycle reviews that my new manager at the time gave me negative feedback. I was shocked and fucking furious—this had never happened to me before. After that feedback, we drafted an action plan with my Q2 objectives for 'recovery'—essentially my survival checklist. From then on, I became a little machine. My entire workday revolved around hitting those exact targets. I didn't deviate one fucking inch. Not when I was under this pressure-cooker threat of 'improve or get fired.' It was horrific—the same period I nearly burned out. Second half of 2020. Locked down during the pandemic. With shit management and shit work routines, doing tasks that meant nothing to me personally. Just going through the motions. I'd completely lost my spark—zero motivation left (Fernanda, 30 years old, Product Manager, unemployed, 2022).

Fernanda's account illustrates how individualized performance management systems in startups often foster environments governed less by collective engagement than by personal survival. Rather than encouraging collaboration or mutual support, these frameworks institutionalize internal competition and reinforce a widespread perception among employees that they are hindered from performing their work effectively (Loriol, 2021). This is largely because workers feel compelled to prioritize tasks that will enhance their scores in performance evaluation systems, rather than those that may be more meaningful or beneficial to the team as a whole.

In contrast to traditional labor contexts—such as those examined by Burawoy (1979), where informal mechanisms of resistance allowed factory workers to collectively negotiate the rhythm and significance of their labor—startups tend to suppress such possibilities. Performance assessments in these environments are rigid, quantitatively driven, and highly individualized, offering minimal space for contextual interpretation or dialogical feedback. Under this model, failing to meet predefined targets is not treated as an opportunity for collective problem-solving or organizational learning, but rather as a personal shortcoming subject to disciplinary action. Within this regime, workers are pressured to internalize managerial expectations and to engage in constant self-monitoring, all under the looming threat of dismissal.

Given these challenges, it is unsurprising that organizing IT workers remains an uphill battle. The deeply individualistic work culture—reinforced by performance metrics, competitive ranking systems, and the constant push for self-optimization—demands innovative strategies to cultivate class consciousness and foster collective power within an environment specifically designed to suppress both. Although most startup workers do not articulate their suffering through the language of alienation or exploitation—a framework that could potentially lead to resistance and collective

mobilization—this absence of politicized discourse does not mean that all forms of collective coping are foreclosed (Loriol, 2015). As we will explore in Chapter Seven, within the *gray zones of employment* (Bureau *et al.*, 2024), workers continue to craft informal practices of mutual support and shared understanding—often expressed through ironic humor, quiet alliances, and the cultivation of small solidarities nets.

10.2 TYPES OF BEHAVIOR WITHIN THE STARTUP ECOSYSTEM OF FLORIANÓPOLIS

Thus far, we have examined the sociodemographic composition of the startup workforce in Florianópolis—particularly through the lenses of gender, race, and class—and analyzed how these structural dimensions shape, constrain, or enable workers' engagement in collective labor initiatives. Our findings suggest that such engagement tends to be limited to *affinity groups* formed by individuals who deviate from the normative archetype of the cisgender, white, upper-class male startup worker. While these groups offer important spaces of solidarity and mutual support, broader participation in unions or worker-led movements remains rare and fragmented, reflecting both organizational constraints and the individualized ethos of the sector.

Building on this, the following section shifts focus from socio-demographic characteristics of the startup workforce to the behavioral patterns through which startup workers navigate their environments. Specifically, we explore how these workers relate to the dominant cultural ethos of startup labor: whether they embrace, negotiate, or resist it—and with what implications for their well-being. In doing so, we seek to understand the subjective dimensions of suffering and adaptation within a work culture that presents itself as meritocratic, dynamic, and purpose-driven.

During fieldwork, participants frequently asked why some individuals experience burnout while others do not. Embedded within this question was an implicit inquiry into what certain people do—or fail to do—that might lead them either toward burnout or toward achieving a supposed state of work-life balance. While this is a valid and thought-provoking line of questioning, it also presents significant analytical risks. Chief among them is the tendency to individualize the phenomenon, framing burnout as a consequence of personal resilience, emotional vulnerability, or particular lifestyle choices. Such interpretations risk obscuring the cultural and

organizational dimensions that shape the experience of burnout within contemporary labor regimes.

To resist this reductionism, this chapter introduces a typology of behavioral orientations inspired by Merton's (1968) framework of adaptation, which explores how individuals respond to dominant cultural goals—which are encapsulated in the startup ethos—and the institutionalized means of achieving them.

As discussed in Chapter One, conforming to the startup ethos means internalizing slogans like *“love what you do”* and *“work hard, play hard,”* treating work as both a path to self-actualization and an identity project. It entails seeing one's labor not merely as a job, but as a personal mission, with the company positioned as an extension of the self—something to nurture, defend, and even sacrifice for. Yet, as fieldwork demonstrates, no worker fully conforms to this ideal. Their relationship to the startup ethos is always partial, ambivalent, and subject to negotiation.

In this light, we will develop a typology of behavioral orientations, treating them as dynamic, context-dependent responses to the cultural and organizational pressures embedded in startup work. These patterns of behavior are shaped by how workers' tend to position within the organization, their personal values, and their interpretations of what it means to succeed or survive in this environment. Ultimately, these patterns will help us understand why some workers are more exposed than others to the psychosocial risks of having a burnout or not.

To make sense of these patterned behaviors, we will also draw on the notion of *“personas”*, as conceptualized by Pruitt and Adlin (2006). Originally developed within the field of user-centered design, personas are fictional yet research-based representations of user types, constructed to synthesize and communicate insights about recurring behaviors, needs, and motivations. This method is commonly used by startup workers themselves to envision ideal clients or product users. By appropriating this methodological tool and redirecting it inward—toward the startup workers themselves—we can illustrate how individual trajectories are shaped by collective conditions. Although the *“personas”* that will be presented are not real individuals, they reflect some of the shared tensions, contradictions, and coping strategies that emerge in response to the startup ethos.

Through this approach, we move beyond the dominant narrative that frames burnout as a failure of time management or emotional regulation. Instead, we seek to uncover the social fabric and relational dynamics that shape workers' experience of

distress, exhaustion, and disillusionment. By engaging with “*personas*” as illustrations of situated patterns of behavior and not as essential categories, we open a window into the moral economy of startup work and the everyday negotiations through which subjects strive to remain committed—or to break away.

10.2.1 True believers and non-believers

We begin constructing our typology of behavioral patterns by drawing on Chen’s (2022) analysis of tech worker subjectivities in Silicon Valley. In her ethnographic study of the region’s work culture, Chen identifies two dominant orientations toward the startup ethos: *true believers*—those who internalize and embody the entrepreneurial mission of disruption, innovation and success—and *non-believers*—those who participate in the system but remain disengaged from its moral promises. While this binary is analytically productive, the present fieldwork suggests that the lived experience of startup workers cannot be fully captured by the axis of belief alone. Workers’ level of engagement with their job is not merely a matter of whether one believes in the company’s mission and success or not, but also of how one navigates the social terrain of startup work: how individuals negotiate power relations, workplace norms, and the moral economy of ambition and performance.

In this sense, the more relevant question becomes not just “do they believe?”, but “how much are they willing to play the game?”, as many of interlocutors themselves put it. “*Playing the game*” entails a pragmatic, and at times cynical, engagement with the norms of overwork, self-optimization, and performative enthusiasm that characterize startup cultures. It involves strategic positioning—knowing when to conform, when to push back, and when to disengage. This orientation allows us to complicate the believer/non-believer binary by considering not only internal conviction, but also relational and performative dimensions of participation.

During research with Brazilian startup workers, I observed how different patterns of behavior evolve in practice, producing more complex and nuanced subject positions. To theorize this emergence more precisely, we draw on Merton’s (1968) typology of adaptations to cultural goals and institutional means, as well as Becker’s (1998) work on deviant careers and social labeling. These frameworks provide complementary lenses for analyzing how individuals respond to the dominant

cultural imperatives of startup work—namely, the ideology of work as a calling, the valorization of innovation, and the imperative of self-actualization through professional achievement.

On one hand, Merton's model outlines five modes of adaptation: *conformity*, where individuals accept both the socially endorsed goals and the institutionalized means to achieve them; *innovation*, where the goals are embraced, but the conventional means are rejected or reinterpreted; *ritualism*, characterized by adherence to institutional norms despite a rejection or loss of investment in the broader goals; *retreatism*, in which both goals and means are abandoned; and *rebellion*, where individuals reject existing goals and means and actively seek to replace them with new ones. These categories help us identify distinct patterns of response to the startup ethos, which demands not only productivity but moral engagement and affective investment in the workplace.

On another hand, Becker's contributions shift the emphasis from static classifications to *dynamic trajectories*. Rather than seeing deviance as a fixed identity, Becker conceptualizes it as something produced and negotiated through social interactions, labeling processes, and shifting participation in institutional roles. From this perspective, non-conformity is not merely about rejection but about movement—how individuals transition across roles, recalibrate their positions, and are defined (or define themselves) in relation to workplace norms.

Taken together, these frameworks allow us to move beyond a simple believer/non-believer binary, offering a more nuanced understanding of how startup workers negotiate their relationship to the dominant culture. Based on my fieldwork, I propose four emergent behavioral patterns among startup workers:

Overly Commitment: This pattern of behavior is characterized by the full internalization of both the cultural ideal of purpose-through-work and the demands of startup labor—embracing the startup grind, long hours, and the ethos of hustle. It typically manifests in the early stages of professional trajectories, before disillusionment accumulates or deviance from dominant norms emerges.

Neoliberal Reformism: While largely conforming to institutional expectations, this pattern of behavior displays a modest critical edge. It maintains belief in the overarching goals of the tech sector—such as the notion of technology as a force for good—while advocating for reform through ethics, sustainability, and inclusion.

Although it may momentarily engage with critique, the underlying impulse remains one of re-integration within the system rather than its transformation.

Cynicism: This behavioral pattern involves compliance with organizational norms, but with emotional and ideological detachment. Often shaped by experiences of distress, it reflects a disenchanting stance toward the aspirational narratives of tech work. While some who exhibit this pattern persist through routine or necessity, others frame their continued participation in purely instrumental terms. Frequently emerging from former “true believers,” this pattern is marked by irony, sarcasm, or affective disengagement.

Resigned Criticism: Defined by a rejection of both the normative goals and operational logics of the startup model, this pattern substitutes them with alternative value systems centered on community, anti-capitalist ethics, and solidarity. Yet, in the absence of collective organization, it often remains isolated. Despite its critical stance, this pattern continues to operate within the very system it critiques, shaped by economic pragmatism and unresolved ambivalence.

Framework 4 – Emergent types of behavior among startup workers

Belief Status	Behavioral Type	Mertonian Adaptation	Beckerian Lens	Core Orientation
True Believer	Overly Commitment	Conformity	Normative identity, no deviance yet	Total identification with startup mission
True Believer	Neoliberal Reformism	Innovation / Conformity	Trajectory includes critique, partial re-entry	Faith in tech, tempered by neoliberal reformist aims
Non-Believer	Cynicism	Ritualism / Retreatism	Deviant career post significant distress	Disillusioned, stays for money and lifestyle
Non-Believer	Resigned Criticism	Rebellion	Outsider identity, ethical disengagement	Critical, aware, remains by necessity not by belief

Source: elaborated by the author.

These behavioral types should not be understood as fixed identities, but rather as situational and fluid responses to the shifting interplay between personal aspirations, workplace demands, and organizational structures. They reflect how

individuals navigate and negotiate their position within the startup ecosystem under conditions of precarity, moral ambiguity, and affective intensity. In the sections that follow, we examine each type more closely, drawing connections to Chen's (2011) typology of orientations, which offers a valuable lens for understanding how workers relate to the management strategies that govern their labor.

10.2.2 Overly Commitment and Neoliberal Reformism

According to Chen (2022), true believers approach their work with religious-like devotion, perceiving it as a higher calling that provides both purpose and identity: "True believers tend to be the young, single [...] who are also the majority of the tech workforce. [...] They] are unencumbered and have few competing obligations. They are ready and willing converts to the religion of work" (ibid., p. 43-45).

In early-stage startups, where the risk of failure is exceptionally high, true believers must embrace the improbable as achievable, a "*mindset*" seen as essential to justify the immense personal investment required in ventures with a 90% failure rate. Without such belief, it would be difficult to rationalize the dedication of one's time, energy, and identity to such uncertain enterprises.

In my own fieldwork, I encountered similar figures, who could also be described as dreamers or achievers—individuals who fully commit to their company's mission, convinced that their efforts will not only drive innovation and success but also enable them to "*change the world*" and attain personal fulfillment. For these individuals, success is deeply tied to the ideals promoted by Silicon Valley's startup ethos.

In the Brazilian startup ecosystem, this pattern of behavior remains largely consistent across all stages of startup development, albeit with context-specific nuances. To better capture these differences, I have identified two distinct patterns: Overly Commitment and Neoliberal Reformism. These distinctions help articulate varying degrees of ideological alignment and professional investment among Brazilian startup workers—shaped by their socio-economic contexts, career trajectories, and levels of exposure to the industry.

The Overly Commitment pattern is most often associated with behaviors characterized by high levels of self-investment in work and a willingness to dedicate as much time as necessary to "*make it happen*." Much like Chen's true believers, this

pattern reflects a prioritization of work over personal obligations, frequently observed among those in the early stages of their tech careers. With few external attachments and a strong belief in meritocracy, Overly Commitment expresses the notion that professional achievement is the primary path to self-realization. Engagement with the startup world here is not merely pragmatic—it is existential. The startup is imagined as a site of freedom, autonomy, and personal growth. Drawing on Merton's typology of adaptation, this pattern exemplifies conformity: it entails full endorsement of both the cultural goals and the institutionalized means promoted by startup culture.

Closely related is the Neoliberal Reformism pattern, which shares much of Overly Commitment's enthusiasm but diverges in key respects. Typically emerging after nearly a decade of involvement in the startup ecosystem, Neoliberal Reformism arises in response to the lived experience of cycles of boom, bust, and rebranding. This temporal distance allows for the development of a more critical perspective. Yet, instead of abandoning the startup ideal, this pattern maintains faith in the potential of tech and entrepreneurship to act as drivers of social change. The distress experienced through exposure to contradictions within the ecosystem leads not to disengagement, but to reformist aspirations—an effort to build more ethical, sustainable, or inclusive organizations from within. Less individualistic than Overly Commitment, Neoliberal Reformism is marked by a socially conscious investment in work. According to Merton's framework, this pattern aligns with innovation: a commitment to cultural goals, but through alternative means. In Becker's terms, it may be viewed as normative deviance—a temporary divergence from dominant norms with the aim of eventual reintegration on revised terms.

10.2.3 Cynicism and Resigned Criticism

According to Chen (2022), non-believers, on the other hand, maintain a more detached and pragmatic relationship with work, often recognizing its exploitative dimensions. They tend to be slightly older and more likely to have families or social networks that extend beyond the workplace: "This makes 'non-believers' less likely both to identify with the company, and to stake their sense of meaning and purpose in work. In short, work alone does not define them" (Chen, 2022, pp. 43–45).

For Chen, non-believers are individuals whose sense of self is not wholly subsumed by their professional lives. Unlike true believers, who find deep personal

fulfillment in their jobs and view work as a calling, non-believers tend to distribute identity across multiple spheres—civic, familial, religious, or cultural—which allows them to resist the totalizing grip of startup culture. However, as she notes, such workers are a minority within the tech sector, where the dominant expectation is that one should derive not just financial stability but also purpose and self-realization from one's job.

In the Brazilian context, I also encountered non-believers, but their behavior of detachment from work more often emerged as the result of accumulated disappointment and growing disillusionment than as a preexisting condition. Rather than maintaining external sources of meaning from the outset, many of the workers who fall into the pattern of the non-believers I spoke with, had initially embraced the startup ethos. Their later detachment was not born of indifference but of a gradual erosion of hope. In this sense, non-belief frequently took the form of ex-belief: a fallout from early optimism rather than a refusal of it. Although they were significantly outnumbered, I identified two distinct patterns of behavior of non-believers in my fieldwork: Cynicism and the Resigned Criticism.

The Cynicism pattern, which constitutes the majority of non-believing behaviors, frequently emerges as a transformation of Overly Commitment following a moment of rupture—burnout, layoffs, or repeated exposure to high-pressure cycles of overwork. Whether associated with individuals who are single or have families, the defining characteristic of this pattern is a long tenure within the startup ecosystem, punctuated by cycles of enthusiasm and disillusionment. Over time, belief in the possibility of meaningful work gives way to a sense of betrayal. Yet, in the absence of collective ties or a broader political consciousness, such crises are interpreted not as systemic failures to be confronted, but as personal disappointments.

This results in a distinct form of affective withdrawal: disillusioned yet compliant, frustrated but functional. In this pattern, work becomes primarily instrumental—justified not by conviction but by consumption: “I work so I can spend.” Drawing from Merton's typology, Cynicism can be interpreted as ritualism (the continuation of routines without belief in cultural goals) or retreatism (withdrawal from meaning altogether). Becker might describe this trajectory as a deviant career, in which identity is reshaped through repeated cycles of belief, collapse, and ironic detachment.

In contrast, the Resigned Criticism pattern is far less common, but no less significant. It stands as an ideological counterpart to Neoliberal Reformism. While both are marked by an awareness of broader social and structural issues, Resigned Criticism extends its critique beyond reformist commitments to ethics and inclusion. Rather than seeking change from within, this pattern rejects both the goals and the means of startup labor, grounding its values in community, solidarity, and anti-capitalist ethics.

Crucially, unlike Cynicism, Resigned Criticism is not characterized by disillusionment. This is because there was never full ideological investment to begin with. Ties to communities beyond the workplace are maintained not only for emotional balance but as a deliberate strategy of resistance against total professional absorption. Yet, due to its marginality and lack of collective infrastructure, this pattern often results in political and emotional isolation. It exposes the ideological limits of the startup ecosystem: critique is possible, but sustained resistance is difficult. In Becker's framework, Resigned Criticism aligns with the figure of the outsider—whose values deviate markedly from dominant norms. From Merton's perspective, it resonates with rebellion—the rejection of both cultural goals and institutionalized means, coupled with a search for alternatives. However, the difficulty in enacting these alternatives renders the pattern one of resignation as much as critique, trapped within a system in which it no longer believes.

These two non-believer patterns underscore the fragility of ideological commitment in the startup world. While Cynicism demonstrates how belief may curdle into resignation, Resigned Criticism reveals the costs of maintaining ideological integrity in a context that rewards conformity and punishes dissent. These patterns of behavior also highlight the temporal dimension of workplace subjectivities: belief and disbelief are not static categories, but evolving orientations shaped by personal history, structural dynamics, and collective absence.

10.2.4 Dimensional comparison of the four patterns

This revised typology allowed us to move beyond a static binary of belief and non-belief, offering instead a dynamic understanding of how workers may position themselves within the moral and affective landscape of startup labor. By drawing on Merton's model of cultural adaptation and Becker's analysis of identity formation and

deviance over time, we were able to apprehend these orientations not as fixed identities but as evolving patterns of behavior shaped by personal experience, shifting organizational dynamics, and broader ideological struggles. Belief, under this framework, is not a stable behavior but a process: what begins as earnest commitment may unravel into disillusionment or cynicism, while moments of critique may emerge even among those who appear to conform.

The four patterns of behavior proposed here—Overly Commitment, Neoliberal Reformism, Cynicism, and Resigned Criticism—thus serve not as rigid categories but as heuristic devices that help us trace the varied and ambivalent ways in which workers navigate the contradictions of startup work. Each pattern captures a different response to the central tension of tech labor: the dissonance between the ideological promise of meaningful, self-actualizing work and the material reality of precarious, intensified, and extractive labor conditions. While these behaviors differ in their modes of coping, critique, and engagement, they are all situated within a moral economy that relentlessly demands belief, emotional investment, and self-sacrifice—only to frequently betray those very investments through layoffs, poor management, or shifting company missions.

Seen from this angle, burnout is no longer reducible to an individual's inability to manage time, energy, or emotional boundaries. Rather, it emerges as a procedural dynamic, highly influenced by the systemic contradictions inherent in tech capitalism—where purpose-driven narratives are instrumentalized to legitimize overwork, and where recognition and belonging are unevenly distributed. These patterns of behavior, then, not only allows us to envision different coping strategies or ideological positions, but also expose the fault lines in the startup ethos itself. They reveal how belief can be weaponized, how critique is often individualized rather than collectivized, and how moral dissonance—rather than detachment—can be a primary source of suffering.

For now, let us remain with a dimensional comparison of the four patterns of behavior, in which we schematize their foundational belief, motivational logic, degree of systemic awareness, dominant action strategies, and tendencies toward individualism or collectivism. This comparative framework will serve as a conceptual anchor for Chapter Seven, where we return to these patterns to explore how they can evolve to experiences of wellbeing and suffering in the everyday realities of startup work.

Framework 5 – Dimensional comparison of the four patterns of behavior

Dimension	Overly Commitment	Neoliberal Reformism	Cynicism	Resigned Criticism
Foundational Belief	“Total” belief	Belief with critical nuance	Disillusioned	Critical from the start
Motivational Logic	Purpose, success	Purpose plus social good	Survival, consumption	Ethical tension, critique
Systemic Awareness	Low	Medium–High	Medium	High
Action Strategy	Overwork, full investment	Reform from within	Detachment, compensation	Quiet resistance, endurance
Individualism vs. Collectivism	Strongly individualist	Mixed orientation	Highly individualist	Collectivist ethics

Source: elaborated by the author.

10.2.5 Personas

Building on the typology of behavioral orientations outlined above, the following analysis presents a series of composite “*personas*” that illustrate distinct sociodemographic characteristics and professional trajectories within the startup ecosystem. These “*personas*” are not fixed identities, but heuristic devices designed to help visualize recurring patterns in how workers relate to their jobs. We begin by tracing how each “*persona*” enters the startup sector,¹⁸⁷ highlighting the varied educational and professional pathways that lead individuals into this field. We then examine their relationship to work—whether it is perceived as a source of purpose and fulfillment or approached more instrumentally as a means to an end. Particular attention is given to their encounters with hierarchy and power, exploring how they navigate authority and organizational structures within startups. The analysis also considers their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their adaptation to remote work, as well as their practices of leisure and strategies for achieving work-

¹⁸⁷ Given that this is a relatively nascent sector with no established standardized educational trajectory—except, to a limited extent, for software developers—individuals working in startups often originate from a wide array of academic and professional disciplines. These include, but are not limited to, economics, business administration, journalism, and engineering. At different stages of their professional journeys, many of these individuals diverge from their initial undergraduate specializations and perceive the startup ecosystem as an alternative pathway into the labor market.

life balance. Finally, we address their views on well-being in the workplace and the individual tactics they employ to manage stress and discomfort.

To illustrate the category of true believers, I introduce two “*personas*”: Alice, who tends to follow the pattern of Overly Commitment and for whom work serves as the central pillar of her identity and primary source of fulfillment; and Gabriel, who exhibits a pattern of Neoliberal Reformism, despite recognizing flaws within the startup ecosystem. He maintains that entrepreneurial endeavors are the most effective means of driving social change. As for the non-believers, I present two additional “*personas*”: Pedro, whose disenchantment with the industry stems from a profound sense of frustration and betrayal—leading him to adopt Cynicism, and a self-interested, sometimes even narcissistic, approach to work and life; and Bruna, who shows signs of Resigned Criticism, as she tends to see through the startup narrative of enchantment but, lacking a broader collective to ground her critique, struggles to articulate meaningful resistance to the system of work intensification and exploitation.

Through these imagined yet ethnographically grounded narratives, we will explore how these “*personas*” tend to navigate their professional environments and respond to the evolving realities of startup life. Moreover, we aim to perceive the variety of responses workers develop in relation to the moral, emotional, and practical demands of startup labor.

Once again, it is important to emphasize that these “*personas*” do not represent static or mutually exclusive categories. Rather, they capture dynamic orientations that workers may move between over time. Many participants demonstrated fluidity in their patterns of behavior, shifting between Overly Commitment and Cynicism as they progressed in their careers. This particularly salient transition was often prompted by prolonged exposure to the structural conditions of startup labor—what Linhart (2023) refers to as *subjective precarity*—including intense workloads, unstable contracts, and disillusionment with the moral narratives of innovation and purpose. These transitions also underscore how professional identity in the startup world is not only shaped by individual aspirations but also continually reconfigured by the lived contradictions of work. By analyzing these trajectories, we aim to shed light on how contemporary work cultures organize, constrain, and enable different forms of subjectivity and engagement in the world of tech labor.

10.2.5.1 Overly Commitment

Alice, a 24-year-old white, middle-class woman, entered the Florianópolis startup ecosystem in 2019, fresh from completing a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration at a university in a small inland city. Eager to pursue opportunities in what she saw as a dynamic and innovative field, Alice was drawn to the tech sector despite having no direct experience in it. Her background included several voluntary internships and an exchange program in London, where she worked as an administrative assistant intern. While she found administrative work repetitive and bureaucratic, she often advocated that the international experience helped her develop adaptability and resilience—skills she believed would serve her well in the startup world. These experiences, though not tech-related, provided her with a foundation of transferable skills that she hoped would open doors in the industry. Moreover, her fluency in English and international experience mirrored the characteristics of many startup founders, giving her a sense of alignment with the industry's values.

After navigating multiple rounds of online interviews and business case assessments, Alice secured a position as a Customer Success Assistant at a growth-stage startup. She felt deeply grateful for the opportunity, viewing it as a space for learning and professional growth. Although she initially had little understanding of the role, the company reassured her that they had selected her for her potential and “*soft skills*”, promising to train her from the ground up. This validation reinforced her sense of belonging, and she embraced the role as her gateway into the startup industry—a chance to specialize in the rapidly growing field of customer success.

Moving to Florianópolis had long been a dream for Alice, who envisioned a lifestyle combining professional growth with the city's renowned quality of life. However, upon arriving, she found herself with few personal connections. Coincidentally, the startup she joined was undergoing rapid expansion, with dozens of new hires relocating to the city at the same time. She quickly bonded with a coworker in a similar situation—new to the city, new to the company, and navigating the onboarding process while searching for housing. They decided to rent an apartment together in *Itacorubi*, a neighborhood strategically located near SC-401, the so-called *Innovation Route*, where most startup offices, including hers, were

concentrated. While the area was not as close to the beach as Alice had hoped, it offered practical advantages for her daily commute.

The company operated as a B2B SaaS provider in the Health Tech sector, offering software designed to monitor employee well-being for client organizations. As a Customer Success Assistant, Alice's primary responsibility was client "*onboarding*" and support, ensuring that new clients successfully integrated the software into their systems. This required continuous follow-ups, troubleshooting, and personalized guidance to help clients navigate the platform effectively. Her role was crucial to reinforcing the company's commitment to customer retention and satisfaction, as well as ensuring that the software delivered on its promise of improving workplace well-being.

Since this was her first job in a startup, Alice had to quickly adapt not only to the company's product and services but also to its work rhythms and organizational structure. Beyond her core responsibilities, she had to navigate internal performance-tracking systems, including "*Pulse Surveys*" to assess her emotional state and "*360° Feedback*" tools for evaluating herself and her peers. The constant monitoring and evaluation added an extra layer of pressure, requiring her to excel in her role while engaging in continuous self-assessment and peer feedback as part of her professional development.

Despite the overwhelming volume of new information and skills she had to acquire, Alice approached her role with unwavering enthusiasm and determination. She found fulfillment in the belief that her work contributed to enhancing the productivity and well-being of other professionals. Beyond her professional dedication, she thrived in the company's dynamic and social work environment. Quite soon, her coworkers became her closest friends. They spent long hours at the office together, attended company Happy Hours, and explored the island's beaches and nightlife on weekends. Her work routine was demanding and unpredictable—she arrived early at the office and rarely knew when she would leave—but she embraced the intensity with optimism, believing that every effort brought her closer to personal and professional fulfillment.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Brazil in 2020, Alice initially felt a profound sense of loss. She deeply valued the in-person work environment and the daily interactions with her colleagues, which had been a significant source of motivation and connection. Forced to adapt abruptly to remote work, she reconfigured her small

bedroom to create a functional workspace. However, the transition blurred the boundaries between her professional and personal life. Even before the pandemic, her routine had been heavily dictated by her job, leaving her largely unaware of her own limits. Now, working from home, she often felt “*guilty*” when stepping away from her computer, as if any moment not spent working was a lapse in productivity.

The pandemic also brought a growing sense of uncertainty. Having been with the company for only a year, Alice felt increasingly anxious about its stability and the security of her position, particularly as the economic landscape grew more unpredictable. Her concerns intensified when her line manager was replaced by a new supervisor with a far more demanding leadership style. The new manager closely monitored Alice’s performance, frequently reviewing her metrics and output. In response, Alice redoubled her efforts, striving to maintain consistently high productivity levels to prove her value and secure her position. However, as expectations continued to rise, she soon found herself overwhelmed, drained by the relentless pressure to meet ever-increasing demands.

After six months of remote work, Alice and her roommate/coworker received a new contract from the company, informing them that all employees would transition to a hybrid work model. This shift made them realize they would no longer need to be in the office as frequently, giving them greater flexibility in deciding where to live. Recognizing that their current apartment no longer met their needs—particularly in terms of dedicated workspace—they decided to relocate to a larger home in *Rio Tavares*, a neighborhood closer to the beach. This move fulfilled Alice’s initial vision of living by the coast while maintaining her career in the startup ecosystem.

It was during this period that Alice began to actively seek greater work-life balance. Exhausted by the demands of her supervisor and her self-imposed routine of relentless work, she started taking short walks along the beach in the late afternoons. These walks became a deliberate strategy to improve her time management and regain a sense of control over her schedule. However, despite these efforts, she often overlooked the connection between her demanding workload and the anxiety and persistent headaches she frequently experienced. Rather than attributing these symptoms to work-related stress, she internalized them as personal failings—a perceived inability to manage her time and emotions effectively.

In an attempt to mitigate stress and sustain productivity, Alice also began participating in company-sponsored webinars introduced during the pandemic, which

were designed to help employees identify and prevent burnout symptoms. As part of this initiative, she incorporated morning meditation sessions into her daily routine, convinced that these practices would enhance her focus and efficiency throughout the workday. Additionally, she started online therapy to address her growing stress and anxiety. Despite these measures, Alice continued to firmly believe that maintaining high levels of dedication and productivity would ultimately alleviate her anxiety, as she directly linked her well-being to her job performance.

For Alice, personal fulfillment and professional success were inextricably intertwined. Work was not merely a source of stress, but also the primary avenue through which she sought balance, self-worth, and a sense of accomplishment. This perspective, while driving her dedication, also highlighted the tension between her professional aspirations and the toll it took on her well-being. Her story underscores the challenges faced by many young professionals in the startup world, where the pursuit of success often comes at the cost of personal health and balance.

10.2.5.2 *Neoliberal Reformism*

Gabriel, a 35-year-old white man, lives with his wife and their three-year-old child in a spacious apartment in *Campeche*, a coastal neighborhood in Florianópolis. Born and raised in the city, Gabriel entered the tech industry at an early age, securing a job as a software developer even before completing his undergraduate degree. At the time, basic coding skills were enough to land a job in a field hungry for talent. Today, he holds the position of Senior Project Manager at a prominent startup, a role he takes pride in, attributing his success to years of dedication to honing both his technical expertise and soft skills. Like others who fall into the pattern of neoliberal reformism, Gabriel occupies a hierarchical position that grants him both prestige and greater autonomy at work. This enables him not only to exert control over his work environment, but also to maintain the belief that he has genuine power to improve the tech industry.

Gabriel's journey to this point was not without challenges. Before establishing himself in the startup ecosystem, he spent several years working at software houses.¹⁸⁸ Initially enthusiastic about coding, he soon found the environment at these

¹⁸⁸ A software house is a company specialized in developing, designing, and maintaining software solutions for clients across various industries. They work closely with clients to understand their specific needs and deliver tailored solutions that address business challenges.

larger firms stifling and rigid. Strict technical frameworks left little room for creativity or innovation, rendering his tasks repetitive and uninspiring over time. This growing frustration led him to question conventional approaches to software development and team management. He became convinced that work could—and should—be structured differently, advocating for models that grant workers greater freedom, creativity, and agency.

His search for alternatives led him to the emerging startup movement, which, by the 2010s, was reshaping the global tech industry. Inspired by the ethos of Silicon Valley startups—agility, flexibility, and a culture of innovation—Gabriel saw this as more than a career shift; it was a reimagining of how work should be structured. For him, software development was not just a profession but a creative pursuit, a means of building entirely *“new worlds.”* His passion extended beyond his job, as he frequently engaged in coding-related side projects, treating software as both a tool for problem-solving and an avenue for personal expression.

When the startup ecosystem in Florianópolis began to emerge, Gabriel positioned himself as one of its early adopters, securing a role as one of the first developers at a startup that would later become a prominent player in the local tech scene. This opportunity allowed him to immerse himself in an environment that aligned with his aspirations for creativity and autonomy. He actively participated in *“developer meetups”* and *“networking events”*, exchanging best practices and engaging in discussions on *“agile methodologies”*—a cornerstone of modern software development. For Gabriel, the startup world represented the flexibility and creative autonomy he had long sought but found lacking in traditional software houses.

Gabriel’s professional trajectory set him apart from the stereotypical image of a “geek” software developer. Unlike many of his peers, who preferred solitary work, Gabriel was recognized for his strong social skills, which enabled him to collaborate across teams and bridge the gap between technical requirements and business objectives. These abilities, combined with his technical expertise, gradually positioned him as a natural leader within development teams. Over time, he transitioned into a leadership role, where he could not only oversee technical execution but also foster a culture of collaboration and innovation.

Today, Gabriel works at a B2B SaaS company that provides payment automation solutions for high-demand e-commerce businesses. His focus lies in

translating business needs into actionable software solutions while enhancing team performance, efficiency, and output. For Gabriel, leadership is not just about meeting deliverables; it is about creating an environment where developers feel empowered to take initiative, share ideas, and refine their skills. He firmly believes that as a Senior Project Manager, he has the opportunity to foster a more balanced and “*human-centered*” work environment. His management approach prioritizes flexibility and trust, encouraging team members to take ownership of their schedules and responsibilities. He often reminds his team that they are free to take an afternoon off if needed, as long as they deliver high-quality projects on time.

Gabriel enjoys a high degree of autonomy in managing his working hours, a flexibility he actively leverages to balance professional responsibilities with personal priorities, particularly his family and his passion for surfing. He often remarks that starting his day in the ocean allows him to feel he has already “*seized the day*,” enabling him to approach work with greater focus and reduced stress. The birth of his child reinforced his commitment to a structured daily routine, one that accommodates both personal and professional responsibilities without compromising either. His day typically begins at 5 a.m., allowing him to surf or exercise, before returning home by 8 a.m. to have breakfast with his family and help his child prepare for school. By 10 a.m., he is at his computer, ready to lead the online daily standup meeting with his team. For Gabriel, the boundaries between work and personal life are clearly defined and firmly maintained, even within the context of remote work. Having been accustomed to remote work long before the pandemic, his routine remained largely unchanged during the crisis. His primary challenge was ensuring his team felt secure and productive under unprecedented circumstances.

However, Gabriel’s “relaxed” approach to work does not mean his schedule is undemanding. Passionate about technology and its transformative potential, he volunteers in local social initiatives that promote coding education in underprivileged communities across Florianópolis. He believes that the demand for software developers will continue to grow and that children and teenagers from marginalized backgrounds should have access to programming opportunities. For him, digital literacy is not only a technical skill, but also a gateway to economic mobility and participation in an industry that remains largely inaccessible to certain social groups. He dedicates time twice a week to teaching programming through online courses tailored to teenagers from these communities.

His engagement in these initiatives has deepened his awareness of the structural inequalities that shape access to technology, particularly regarding gender and racial disparities. This awareness has led him to become an advocate for D&I policies within his company, where he actively pushes for more equitable hiring practices and inclusive workplace dynamics. For Gabriel, the challenges of the tech industry are not insurmountable flaws but systemic inefficiencies—problems that, like any complex software issue, can be addressed through continuous refinement, innovation, and the deliberate implementation of more inclusive practices.

To Gabriel, both his professional role and his technical and leadership skills serve as tools for fostering social change. His advocacy and volunteer work reflect a critical engagement with the sector, yet it is one rooted in reform rather than radical transformation. Unlike those who seek to dismantle the capitalist structures that underpin the tech industry, Gabriel approaches these challenges with the mindset of a software engineer—identifying flaws, proposing solutions, and working to optimize the system from within, much like the iterative process of refining a software program.

10.2.5.3 *Cynicism*

Pedro, a 38-year-old white man, has spent the past decade working as a salesman, though his professional journey began in journalism. After earning a bachelor's degree in the field, drawn by his love for storytelling, he worked at local newspapers for a few years before realizing that traditional journalism offered neither the financial stability nor the career growth he desired. Seeking a way to combine his persuasive communication skills with his ambition for financial success, Pedro eventually found his way into the tech industry. When he discovered the sales sector within startups, he saw it as the perfect intersection of his talents and aspirations.

Pedro entered the startup world a few years before the pandemic, and the transition to remote work posed no challenge for him. In fact, he often claims that working from the quiet of his home enhances his productivity. Valuing independence and efficiency, he structures his workflow to maximize performance while embracing the bohemian lifestyle of Florianópolis. He lives in the city center, where the nightlife thrives, sharing an apartment with his boyfriend and their two cats. For Pedro, this balance between professional ambition and personal pleasure is essential.

In the early years of his startup career, Pedro was fully invested in his work. The fast-paced, competitive nature of sales was exhilarating, and he saw his job as more than just a means to earn a living—it was a space for personal growth and fulfillment. He immersed himself in books about *“inside sales”*, a methodology widely used in startups that emphasized building relationships with clients rather than relying on transactional pitches. Selling SaaS products required a deep understanding of system integration processes, and Pedro took pride in refining his persuasion skills to navigate these complex sales cycles. He was not just selling a product; he was *“selling a vision”*—one he genuinely believed in. The thrill of surpassing quotas, securing end-of-month bonuses, and competing with colleagues kept him motivated. Recognition for his achievements reinforced his sense of purpose, and he embraced the high-energy, fast-paced environment with enthusiasm.

However, Pedro’s relationship with work changed profoundly after he was laid off during one of the first major rounds of layoffs in the Florianópolis startup ecosystem. The experience left a deep mark on him—not just financially, but existentially. Startups often pride themselves on long, meticulous hiring processes that assess not only technical skills but also cultural fit, emphasizing the supposed *“uniqueness”* of each candidate. Pedro had bought into this narrative, believing that his dedication and performance set him apart. Being dismissed alongside a hundred others shattered that illusion. In that moment, he ceased to feel like a valued individual and instead saw himself as just another replaceable employee—a number in a spreadsheet, easily discarded when the company needed to cut costs. The abruptness of the layoff, combined with the impersonal nature of the process—done through a standard online meeting—exposed the fragility of the meritocratic ideals he had once embraced.

Since then, Pedro’s perspective on work has shifted dramatically. He no longer views professional success as a sign of personal worth but as a transactional exchange—one in which loyalty belongs not to a company’s mission or values, but to whoever offers the best salary and benefits. In the past three years, he has changed jobs twice, always seeking better compensation, improved perks, and a work environment that respects his autonomy. Unlike in the past, when he took pride in deeply understanding the products he sold, he no longer cares about what he is selling. What matters now is that his manager does not micromanage him and that

the company provides solid benefits, such as a comprehensive health plan and generous food vouchers.

Pedro firmly believes that switching jobs every two years is a smart strategy—not only does it keep him engaged by forcing him to master a new product, but it also helps him maintain strict boundaries between work and personal life. From his experience, the longer one stays in a company, the more those lines blur, and he has no interest in letting work interfere with his free time in the way it used to. He often says that his priorities have changed: work is no longer an end in itself but a means to sustain the lifestyle he values—one defined by freedom, pleasure, and consumption. To him, “*enjoying life*” means having the financial stability to afford whatever he desires: the latest PlayStation, front-row tickets to concerts, fine wine, recreational drugs, lively parties, and an annual international trip. His relationship with money is pragmatic—he earns to spend, viewing consumption as both a reward for his labor and a measure of personal success.

This shift in mindset has also affected his work habits. In his early years, he would routinely stay late, sacrifice weekends, and push himself to close deals at any cost. Now, he refuses to let work extend beyond his designated hours. He trusts that whatever needs to be done can wait until tomorrow. After all, he works to live—not the other way around.

What is particularly striking, however, is that Pedro is fully aware that he could excel in his career if he chose to, yet he deliberately holds himself back. He frequently critiques work processes he believes could be optimized, pointing out inefficiencies and suggesting improvements, but without the same enthusiasm he once had. Despite being offered the position of Sales Manager, he has repeatedly declined, unwilling to reinvest himself in what was once his passion. He fears that immersing himself too deeply in work again would leave him vulnerable to the same frustration and disappointment he experienced before. To protect himself, he maintains a calculated detachment, engaging just enough to perform well but never allowing himself to become too invested.

Outwardly, Pedro adopts an attitude of indifference toward work, but the disillusionment has taken a toll on him. Losing his sense of purpose has left a lingering void, one that he struggles to fill. Since his first layoff, he has developed chronic insomnia, a condition that led him to seek medical help. Now, he relies on antidepressants to regulate his mood and help him sleep at night, and on Ritalin

during the day when he struggles to focus at work. Even with these measures, he still grapples with a pervasive sense of emptiness. In an attempt to counteract it, he turns to consumption and entertainment, seeking solace in material pleasures—yet the fulfillment they provide is fleeting.

Pedro's story reflects the disillusionment of many workers in the startup ecosystem, where the promise of meaningful work and personal growth often clashes with the realities of corporate imperatives and economic instability. His journey from passionate believer to pragmatic cynicism underscores the tension between ambition and self-preservation in an industry that demands both.

10.2.5.4 *Resigned Criticism*

Bruna, a 29-year-old Black woman, lives in Florianópolis with her boyfriend, who also works in a startup. The couple resides in *Porto da Lagoa*, a neighborhood known for its proximity to nature and outdoor lifestyle. Originally from São Paulo and with a background in psychology, Bruna currently works in the Human Resources department of a growth-stage startup based in her hometown. Although she never envisioned a career in HR, the opportunity presented itself upon her graduation, offering a more structured routine compared to the unpredictable nature of clinical psychology, which she initially considered pursuing.

It was only after the pandemic and the widespread adoption of remote work by her company that Bruna and her boyfriend seriously considered leaving São Paulo. Having spent months confined in a small apartment in the high-pressure environment of the megalopolis, they longed for a place where they could cultivate a better work-life balance and “*reconnect with nature*”. In 2021, taking advantage of their newfound flexibility, they moved to Florianópolis, seeking a slower pace of life that would allow them to establish healthier routines.

Bruna's decision to relocate was also driven by personal well-being. The stress of the pandemic had taken a toll on her mental health, leading to frequent episodes of anxiety and significant weight gain. She saw the move not just as a geographic change, but as an opportunity to rebuild healthier habits alongside her partner. Soon after settling in, they both bought bicycles and began exploring the island's scenic trails. As restrictions eased, they discovered and joined local cycling groups they had found online. What started as a simple way to stay active gradually

evolved into a core aspect of their lifestyle—a source of well-being, community, and social connection in their new city. For Bruna, who always felt compelled to “*wear a mask*” around her coworkers, projecting an image that did not fully reflect her true self, building a community of friends entirely separate from her professional life was a relief.

Although Bruna longs to find meaning and fulfillment in her work, she has never fully been able to achieve it. Early in her career, she believed that by working in HR and advocating for D&I policies, she could contribute to fostering social change within the labor market—making it more equitable and less dominated by white men. She became actively involved in the company’s D&I sub team, spearheading initiatives to promote a diverse and inclusive workplace by implementing policies to combat discrimination and encourage representation. One of her key efforts was supporting the creation of diversity committees focused specifically on racial issues within the company.

Along with other coworkers, she helped organize a reading group where they explored works by authors such as bell hooks and Angela Davis. These readings provided her with a stronger theoretical foundation to articulate her critique of the systemic inequalities she witnessed in the workplace. Inspired by these discussions, she became increasingly committed to pushing for structural changes in the company’s hiring and promotion policies. However, she quickly found herself in conflict with her manager. From Bruna’s perspective, the company was not doing enough. Although more Black professionals were being hired, she saw how limited their career advancement opportunities remained. The company had no substantial development programs tailored to employees from historically underrepresented backgrounds, making it clear that hiring alone was not enough to dismantle ingrained inequalities.

After several years of struggling within the D&I space, frequently clashing with leadership over the depth and effectiveness of the initiatives, Bruna came to a sobering realization: while D&I policies were helpful and necessary, they were also constrained by the company’s broader capitalist imperatives. She grew exhausted by the constant battles and, following a period of heightened anxiety, decided it was time to shift her focus to a different area. Leveraging her internal network and professional connections, she managed to transition to another sub team within the HR department. She now works in People Analytics, where she gathers and

analyzes data on workforce trends, including turnover rates, productivity, and employee satisfaction—a role that, for her, feels like just a job, devoid of the social engagement that once motivated her. While she appreciates the technical aspects of her work, she no longer expects it to align with her broader ideals of social change.

Over the years, Bruna has come to accept that meaningful social change within corporate structures is often constrained by capitalist imperatives, leading to more frustration than fulfillment. While she remains deeply engaged with social issues, she has chosen to separate that commitment from her professional life, channeling her energy into personal growth and leisure activities that provide her with a sense of balance and relief. To this end, she continues cycling with her group of friends and her boyfriend every weekend, embracing it not just as a hobby but as a way to maintain her well-being.

Moreover, Bruna remains politically engaged in her own way, closely following national politics and supporting candidates she believes in during elections. She also dedicates time to critical readings in her personal time, deepening her understanding of social inequalities and systemic barriers. However, her involvement does not extend much further than that. Since she works for a company based in São Paulo but lives in Florianópolis, she is physically distanced from any potential social or labor movements among her coworkers. Even if such movements existed, she doubts she would be aware of them, as labor organizing within the tech sector remains minimal—if not entirely nonexistent.

Despite developing strategies to maintain a more balanced lifestyle, Bruna still faces daily struggles, aware that her work no longer fosters meaningful social engagement. At one point, she contemplated leaving the startup sector to pursue a master's degree, with the intention of potentially transitioning into clinical psychology. She hoped that this shift would allow her to rediscover a sense of personal fulfillment that she felt was missing in her current career path. However, as the primary financial supporter of her mother—and having grown accustomed to a high salary that ensures both her own and her family's financial stability—she felt uncertain about making such a drastic shift. Ultimately, she resigned herself to her job, prioritizing economic security and the material comforts her income provides.

Bruna's story reflects the tension many professionals face between their desire for meaningful work and the realities of economic necessity. Her journey from passionate advocate to pragmatic realist underscores the challenges of pursuing

social change within corporate structures, as well as the personal compromises often required to navigate the demands of modern work and life.

10.3 PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this chapter, we have sought to develop a more detailed understanding of who the workers in the Brazilian startup sector are. This investigation is crucial within the broader scope of this thesis, as it enables us to identify the social profiles most vulnerable to the psychosocial stressors that may lead to burnout. By examining the sociodemographic and behavioral patterns of startup employees, we hope to have uncovered the uneven distribution of exposure to workplace risks and the differentiated capacities for coping or resistance.

We began by analyzing sociodemographic data produced by the startup sector itself. This data reveals a predominant worker profile: male, white, relatively young, highly educated, digitally literate, and often fluent in English. Such individuals generally belong to Brazil's middle classes and tend to embody the "ideal" startup worker—flexible, autonomous, and seemingly unencumbered by structural constraints, thus positioned to fully embrace the demands of startup culture.

At the same time, we explored how the discourse and implementation of D&I initiatives—aimed at increasing the representation of women, Black and brown individuals, LGBTQIA+ people, and people with disabilities—have gained traction within the sector, often through the advocacy of workers themselves. However, a closer look at these initiatives and the *affinity groups* that arise from them reveals important contradictions. While D&I policies have helped diversify the workforce, the startup sector continues to reproduce longstanding inequalities rooted in Brazil's racialized and gendered labor market. White men continue to occupy the most prestigious and better-paid roles, including leadership and technical positions, while women and racialized individuals are disproportionately directed toward lower-paid, lower-status roles—often associated with care, communication, or support functions. These dynamics suggest that although the sector appears more inclusive on the surface, it continues to privilege those who most closely resemble the idealized figure of the startup worker. Consequently, individuals who do not conform to this norm—especially women and Black professionals—may face heightened psychosocial risks,

as they must not only perform their jobs but also continuously prove their worth within a meritocratic system that remains structurally biased.

Beyond these sociodemographic dimensions, we also examined behavioral patterns observed among startup workers. Our ethnographic research identified four distinct orientations: Overly Commitment, Neoliberal Reformism, Cynicism, and Resigned Criticism. While many workers tend to align with the first two, embracing or attempting to reform startup ideals from within, others adopt more critical or detached postures. These typologies of dynamic behavior offer valuable tools for analyzing how different modes of engagement with startup culture correlate with experiences of stress, overwork, and eventual burnout. In Chapter Seven, we will return to these patterns to investigate how particular orientations toward work may render individuals more or less vulnerable to burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Therefore, in broad terms, if the ideal worker under the Fordist model of production was expected to construct a stable life—raising a family, purchasing a home in a working-class neighborhood, and consuming the goods produced by the very factory in which they labored (Gramsci, 2020)—the ideal startup worker is imagined quite differently. As we were able to analyze, today's model worker is hyper-flexible, unencumbered by long-term commitments, and ostensibly “free” to fully dedicate themselves to the demands of entrepreneurial labor. This worker is conceived as a global citizen: progressive in outlook, digitally fluent, and able to work from anywhere with a stable internet connection. In this context, flexibility is no longer framed as a benefit, but rather as a structural imperative—one that enables startups to extract maximum productivity while circumventing traditional labor protections and long-term obligations.

This ideological shift reflects a broader transition from Fordist accumulation regimes to flexible capitalism, in which the boundaries between work and life dissolve, and employees are expected to be permanently available, adaptable, and self-regulating. Flexibility, then, becomes a double-edged sword—promising autonomy while reinforcing precariousness and amplifying vulnerability to overwork and burnout.

Given this structural context, it is perhaps unsurprising that collective organization within the startup sector remains weak, if not altogether absent. With few mechanisms for solidarity or unionization, workers are left to navigate their grievances in isolation or to see their collective mechanisms be threatened by

individualized and competitive work cultures. This culture not only fragments workplace relations but also fosters a broader environment in which systemic issues persist unchallenged and workers' suffering remains depoliticized.

As this chapter concludes the second part of this thesis, it lays the groundwork for the final part, in which we turn our focus to the lived experiences of burnout among startup workers. We will examine how the dissonance between the industry's seductive promises—of meaningful work, personal growth, and career success—and its relentless pressures produces profound affective and psychological consequences. This tension, rooted in the gap between ideals and lived realities, highlights the urgent need to rethink both the organization of startup labor and the conditions under which workers might reassert their collective agency and pursue more sustainable forms of work and life.

11 THIRD INTERLUDE - "TO LOVE WHAT YOU DO IS TO BE TWO STEPS AWAY FROM BURNOUT"

It was a Sunday afternoon in 2021, and I was at a barbecue at a friend's house when I first heard someone speak openly about burnout. I did not know Denise. She was my friend's new neighbor, recently arrived in the city, invited to join us in the hope that socializing might ease her transition. During the usual round of small talk—the kind that begins with “*So, what do you do?*”—I mentioned I was just starting a PhD thesis on burnout among tech workers. She stopped, looked at me for a moment, and said, “*That happened to me.*” And just like that, the conversation shifted. What began as polite chitchat opened into something deeper, more intimate, as she began to unravel the thread of her life story.

Denise was originally from Curitiba, where she had worked as a Senior Tech Project Manager at a large, traditional tech company. Her résumé, I would later find out, was impeccable—filled with promotions, certifications, and the polished marks of a high-performance career. But beneath that gleam, something had begun to fray.

She told me about the day everything cracked. It started in the middle of a particularly tense meeting. The pressure had been building for months, maybe years, she said, but this time her body betrayed her. She recalled the eerie sensation of floating outside herself, watching from a distance as her body continued to perform—speaking, nodding, gesturing—like an actor playing a part. Then, a blank. The next thing she remembered was being on the floor, her coworkers gathered around her, concerned and confused.

She did not offer many more details, and I did not press. There was a kind of fragility around the memory, as if naming it too precisely might bring it back. But she did tell me that this episode had marked the end of one life and the beginning of another. Not long after, she quit her job and left behind the cold, gray familiarity of Curitiba for the promise of warmth and reinvention in Florianópolis—the so-called *Magic Island*, where the sea breeze was said to be curative and life could, in theory, move at a gentler pace.

Thanks to her impressive credentials, she quickly landed another high-paying role at a well-regarded tech firm. This time, it was part of the island's vibrant startup ecosystem, and Denise had arrived full of hope. She believed this new environment—more relaxed, more modern—might offer a healthier kind of ambition. Maybe here,

she thought, managers would understand boundaries. Maybe work-life balance was not just a myth.

And so, she rebuilt. She rented a house in *Rio Tavares*, just beside my friend's place, and furnished it from scratch. But one year later, she was selling everything at a garage sale, and that's when I saw her again. The ocean had not been enough. The meetings were still endless, the expectations relentless. She liked her job, she said—it was not that—but something in her refused to settle. There was a restlessness rising in her chest, an urgency to keep moving, to stretch the edges of what her life could become. So, with her new boyfriend, she made a decision: they would become *corporate nomads*.

It was 2022, and remote work was still in full bloom. Her company agreed to let her work from abroad for a year, and she set off, laptop in tow, traveling across Latin America and Europe—where time zones allowed her to stay tethered to the office while wandering ever farther from it. But distance has a way of shifting perspectives. After a year on the road, Denise decided not to return. By late 2023, she resigned. No farewell party, no LinkedIn post—just a quiet exit into a new kind of search. On her Instagram account, she spoke of needing a “*sabbatical year*”, of “*finding her soul*”. Asia was next. India. Silent retreats. Yoga school immersions.

At some point, I lost track of her. Her digital presence faded. Updates only once or twice a year. No Stories. She had gone mostly offline, embracing a minimalist way of living in the hopes to find meaning outside of work.

Of all the stories I would go on to hear about stress and burnout, Denise's remained the most acute—the one that marked a more drastic rupture, a sharp turn in the arc of a life. By the time I met her, the worst had already passed. The collapse had happened some time before, and she was already in the midst of rebuilding, searching for healing and reinvention, as if charting a course back to herself.

Kelly, on the other hand, was in a different place when I met her in 2022. She had never experienced what she would classify as a “*true burnout*” episode—not in the clinical, dramatic sense. And yet, she spoke of the same longing: to leave behind the concrete sprawl of São Paulo, the rigid and hierarchical world of traditional advertising and marketing agencies, and to begin anew in Florianópolis. The island, with its sunlit pace and promises of balance, had also drawn her in with the lure of tech companies that advertised themselves as playful, horizontal, and attuned to the real needs of their workers.

In our first conversation, Kelly told me about her move to the island in 2019, and how landing a job at *Unisus* had felt like the realization of a long-held dream. She spoke openly about the trials of remote work during the pandemic—the steep learning curve, the pervasive sense of isolation, the strange flatness of Zoom calls that had replaced the casual warmth of hallway encounters. Still, by 2022, as restrictions eased and life began to flow again, she described, with a kind of radiant energy, the “*work hard, play hard*” rhythm she had come to embrace. It was as if the city had given her back not only her work routine, but her joy: the beaches, the bars, the lightness of being in a place where work and pleasure seemed to coexist—at least for a while.

The day we met, we truly connected. What started as an interview in a café around four in the afternoon drifted effortlessly into the evening, ending at a wine bar around nine. Before we parted, we promised to meet again—not just for the sake of research, but for friendship, for laughter, for those unguarded conversations that do not need a recorder. And we did, a few times, until I had to go to Paris for my cotutelle period. For a while, distance and time zones made it difficult to stay in touch. But when I was back in Brazil later in 2023, we finally met again—and I was able to see that something had changed. Profoundly.

Kelly had always been high-energy, intense, the kind of person who wore stress like a second skin and called it ambition. To her, pressure was normal—expected, even. Part of the “*sales’ game*.” But when I saw her again at the end of 2023, she was no longer just stressed. She was depleted. She spoke of back-to-back panic attacks, of a creeping sense of doom, of lying awake at night convinced she might die at any moment. I was stunned. What had happened? How could her condition have deteriorated so quickly, in just one year? The shift was stark, and unsettling.

That was when she told me about the first time she had a panic attack, sometime around March 2023. As a sales representative, she was occasionally invited to travel and give lectures on behalf of the company, promoting the benefits of the service they offered. At first, she loved it—the thrill of new cities, the recognition, the chance to represent her firm on a national stage. Traveling across Brazil felt like a reward, an adventure layered on top of her success. But gradually, what had started as an occasional perk—once, maybe twice every few months—began to blur into the demands of daily life. The trips multiplied. They compounded with mounting

internal pressures, deadlines, and targets, leaving her overstretched and increasingly worn thin.

On one of these trips, she had just finished a lecture in Recife and was mingling with business partners when a woman—another Black woman, like her—approached her with a sharpness that cut through the evening’s polite buzz. The woman questioned her decision to work for a company she viewed as racist and misogynistic. The words landed heavily.

Kelly had spoken to me before, back in 2022, about her discomfort with certain aspects of the company’s culture. She disliked going into the office at the end of the month, when the sales team would gather for celebratory drinks—a ritual drenched in bravado and male dominance. She had called it “*unfair*,” had gestured toward a feeling of not quite belonging. But she had never used the words “*racist*” or “*misogynist*.” That night in Recife, the contradiction came into focus, stark and personal. She loved her work, or at least the version of it she had fought to carve out. But now, someone had put into words what she had only sensed. And she could not unhear it.

Later that night, alone in her hotel room, the confrontation replayed in her mind. Sleep refused to come. What began as insomnia spiraled into panic. Suddenly, her body felt foreign. Her throat was tight. Her limbs tingled. She became convinced she was having an allergic reaction—an anaphylactic shock. Being allergic to shrimp, she feared she had been unknowingly exposed, maybe through cross-contamination. Her thoughts raced. Her breathing quickened. She fled the room in the middle of the night, searching desperately for help at the hotel reception.

At the front desk, a night-shift attendant—a man she would later describe to me as a kind of angel—looked at her calmly and asked, “*Did you have a stressful day?*” She nodded, breathless. “*Take a deep breath*,” he said. “*You’re not swollen. You’re not dying. You’re having a panic attack. My wife has them too. I’ve seen this before.*”

He stayed with her for hours, walking through the hallways, gently talking her back down to earth. And slowly, the terror vanished. She did not forget his presence—that quiet, grounding kindness from a stranger in the middle of the night. As she told me this story, there was a shared sadness between us about what she was going through. She said she had wanted to reach out earlier, to tell me, but had been afraid—afraid that talking about it might somehow summon another attack.

Recife, she said, had only been the beginning. What followed was a string of sleepless nights and more panic attacks, each one creeping in without warning. When she returned home, she knew something had to change. She threw herself into healing with the same dedication she once reserved for her deadlines. She started seeing her therapist twice a week and began taking Bach flower remedies to soothe her nerves. She finally committed to exercise, trying to make it to the gym three times a week after work. She also took up journaling—scribbling down her thoughts, trying to catch the currents of her own emotions before they swept her away.

But the panic attacks did not stop. Often, she would miss the gym, unable to detach from work or even notice the passing of time. She told her direct manager she was not well, and that her therapist had recommended she take a step back. She withdrew from the travel assignment that had once thrilled her and was granted a fifteen-day medical leave. Those two weeks, she said, were strange and disorienting. At first, she did not know what to do with herself. The structure she had lived by had collapsed. But little by little, she began to feel the fog lift. She rested. She breathed.

Still, when she returned to work, the panic returned too—lurking beneath the surface, waiting for the next opening. That was when her therapist suggested she consult a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist recommended medication—Citalopram. At first, she resisted. She hated the idea, she told me. She was terrified it would flatten her emotions, make her feel dull or numb. But when the attacks began to erode her ability to live a normal life, she relented. She agreed to take the lowest possible dose, just enough to steady the ground beneath her feet.

That was around the time we reconnected. She had decided to go on record, to tell me her story formally, when she felt she had reached a place of relative stability. *“I’m not healed,”* she said. *“But I can talk about it now.”*

I told her to keep me posted, to reach out if she ever needed anything. A few months later, in early 2024, she messaged me with an invitation to lunch. There was a lightness in her tone, a spark I had not heard in a while. She said she had exciting news to share.

Over a quiet meal in the sun, she told me that after six years at *Unisus*, she had finally made the decision to leave. It had not come easily. For a long time, she had believed there was no better company to work for in Florianópolis. She had been proud to be there. But pride had slowly given way to exhaustion, and the hope of

recovery had been swallowed by cycles of relapse. Since our last conversation, she had had to take medical leave more than once. Each time she returned to work, it was not support that awaited her, but subtle reprimands wrapped in sarcasm—comments from her direct manager like, “*So, are you finally ready to work for real now?*” Delivered with a smile, the words stung all the more for their casual cruelty, thinly veiled as workplace banter.

Those words, sharp and dismissive, had left deep marks. Something in her broke. She no longer held affection for the place she once called her professional home. Quietly, she began looking elsewhere.

That was when she stumbled upon a job opening at a major tech firm based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was not her dream role, not exactly—she had always imagined herself as a true *digital nomad*, working independently, choosing her own clients and destinations. This position, she said, would make her more of a *corporate nomad*, tethered to a company, albeit with international freedom. Still, the possibility thrilled her. It was not perfect, but it was movement. It was escape.

She was still in the thick of the selection process when we met—an ordeal that stretched over four months. But already, she was allowing herself to imagine. To hope. To begin again.

And eventually, the answer came: she got the job. When I saw her next, she was in the process of selling everything she owned. Her apartment was half-empty, the rooms echoing with possibility. She packed what she could into suitcases and left behind the rest. Buenos Aires was waiting, and with it, a fresh chapter—one she hoped might finally bring her the balance she had been chasing for so long. A life without panic attacks.

Unlike Denise and Kelly, who chose to leave their jobs and make drastic changes in pursuit of healing, Nathi stayed. She was one of the few I met who endured burnout—and remained at the same company. It was Nathi who once told me, between a drag or two, that “*to love what you do is to be two steps away from burnout.*”

Despite the long hours, the loneliness, the constant anxiety of not being able to keep up, Nathi admits that her work—and the company itself—are her life. Her husband, her closest friends, even her therapist’s name had first come to her through work connections. She joined the startup in its early, chaotic days, when everything still felt possible, and watched it transform: through rounds of venture capital,

aggressive expansion, layoffs, restructurings, and eventually, a high-profile acquisition by a global tech giant. She witnessed the departure of the founders, the growing formalization of processes, the loss of certain values—and yet, she stayed. Her fingerprints are everywhere: in the team she helped build, the processes she developed, the results she helped deliver. This history, this sense of authorship, anchors her.

Nathi went through two episodes of burnout, first in 2020 and again in 2021. She told me she sometimes wonders how she made it through. And yet, when asked if she would consider working elsewhere, her answer is unwavering: she cannot imagine herself anywhere else. To stay, she mobilizes every tool at her disposal—therapy, yoga, meditation, medication, surfing lessons, and, above all, the emotional lifeline of her colleagues. Her best friend, also a teammate, is the person she credits with getting her through the worst moments. *“If it weren’t for her,”* she once said, *“I truly don’t know what I would’ve done.”*

Listening to these three women—Denise, Kelly, and Nathi—was like hearing variations on the same song, each in a different key. Their paths diverged in meaningful ways, and yet they echoed one another with uncanny resonance. Denise’s story was perhaps the most dramatic in its arc: a spectacular rupture followed by a geographical and existential reorientation, as if only by moving continents and renouncing everything she had built could she begin to breathe again. Kelly’s journey was less abrupt but no less significant—a slow unraveling that led to repeated medical leaves, panic attacks, and eventually, the bittersweet decision to leave a company she had once idealized. Her departure was painful, but it also carried a note of hope, a belief that a new context might offer the balance she had been denied.

And then there was Nathi, who stayed. Nathi, who never stopped believing that it was possible to rebuild herself without having to walk away. Her attachment to the company, to the people she had grown with, ran deep—too deep, perhaps, to sever without losing something essential. She endured burnout not once but twice, and still she remained, shoring up her mental health with rituals and relationships that made survival possible. There was something profoundly moving in her resilience, but also something quietly troubling. Her story asked a different kind of question—not what it means to leave, but what it costs to stay.

Together, their narratives sketch out the contours of a broader dilemma: when work becomes not just a livelihood but a source of identity, belonging, and meaning, how does one know when to let go—and what does it mean to hold on? Their choices reflect different strategies for enduring a system that often asks too much. Whether in flight or in persistence, each woman carried within her the weight of trying to make life livable under conditions that repeatedly threatened to overwhelm it.

12 PART III - HEALTH, WELLNESS AND BURNOUT

Up to this point, this thesis has examined what startups are, how they are embedded within global innovation hubs, and the specific innovation ecosystem in which this research is situated (Part 1). We have also explored the organizational methods and managerial models employed by these companies, analyzing how such practices shape work rhythms and impact the well-being of their employees (Part 2). In the third and final part of the thesis, we shift our focus to the consequences of these management models, with particular attention to their effects on workers' mental and physical health.

Chapter Six begins by situating the phenomenon of burnout within the academic literature and the legal framework that defines and regulates it in Brazil. From there, we explore how the startup sector—through companies, institutions, and influencers—constructs and circulates narratives about mental health. We examine how these narratives frame burnout as both *“a crisis and an opportunity”*, allowing companies to market solutions that promise to *“diagnose”* and *“prevent”* its occurrence. This analysis considers the types of products and preventative mechanisms promoted, as well as how workers engage with or respond to these interventions.

In Chapter Seven, we turn to workers' individual narratives of psychological distress, seeking to understand what it means, in their own terms, to say they are *“going through burnout.”* Through their professional trajectories, we observe that workers use multiple terms—*“burnout, stress, anxiety, near burnout”*—to name their suffering, each pointing to tensions, contradictions, and morally and emotionally complex experiences in the workplace. This chapter also examines the strategies—both individual and collective—that workers develop to navigate, mitigate, or resist the forms of suffering they encounter at work.

This section draws primarily on 55 interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024 with 30 research participants, while also incorporating insights from startup reports on mental health and a review of both academic and gray literature on burnout. Our overarching aim is to demonstrate that burnout should not be understood as an individual failure or isolated event, but rather as a cyclical and processual phenomenon. It emerges from systemic dynamics that are deeply embedded in the organizational and cultural fabric of startup labor.

13 CHAPTER 6 - BURNOUT: THE PRODUCTION OF WORKFORCE FATIGUE

Discomfort at work has always been a persistent feature of labor in the society of alienation (Antunes, 2009). However, across different historical periods and management models, this discomfort has manifested under various names and symptomatic expressions, reflecting the evolving socio-economic conditions and labor structures of each era (Dunker, 2020).

In the 1980s, workplace malaise was frequently conceptualized as *nervous disease*, a term that encapsulated a broad range of psychological and physiological ailments attributed to the anxieties of labor (Duarte, 1988). In the 1990s and 2000s, the dominant discourse shifted toward *stress*, a category that became central to understanding workplace suffering under increasingly flexible and precarious employment regimes (Clot, 2010; Dejours, 2000; Lorient, 2021; Pirc, 2022; Velázquez, 2019). More recently, however, there has been a marked rise in the diagnosis and recognition of *depression* (Gaulejac, 2007; Corbanezi, 2021; Dunker, 2021; Ehrenberg, 2010) and *burnout* (Lorient, 2000; Trigo *et al.*, 2007; Tamayo, 2009; Vieira; Russo, 2019)—both of which are now prevalent in discussions surrounding mental health in the workplace.

Certainly, from a clinical and medical perspective, each of these conditions possesses its own distinct diagnostic criteria, etiology, and treatment considerations. They are not interchangeable, nor should they be reduced to mere synonyms. However, a strictly biomedical perspective fails to account for the broader social and economic structures, disputes, and regimes of subjectivation that shape the emergence and proliferation of these conditions. While medical and neuroscientific studies tend to frame these ailments in terms of individual dysfunctions—“problems of the brain” (Rose, 2019), hormonal imbalances, neurochemical deficiencies, or genetic predispositions—a socio-anthropological analysis reveals that they are also deeply embedded within the broader structures of malaise in contemporary civilization. In this sense, they serve as critical indicators of the contradictions and pressures inherent in contemporary labor regimes, particularly in societies that value the individual, prioritize economic efficiency, constant productivity, and self-optimization.

Therefore, by continuing the analysis of the social transformations that have unfolded in past decades, we now turn to particularly those transformations affecting

the modes of subjectivation. In other words, if the Fordist mode of production was characterized by *disciplinary power* over workers' bodies (Foucault, 1975), then the corresponding mode of subjectivation—structured within a Freudian libidinal matrix—was primarily anchored in the repression of desires (Safatle, 2020; Dunker, 2020; Neves *et al.*, 2020). However, under the regime of flexible accumulation, *managerialist power* (Gaulejac, 2007) no longer operates primarily through bodily discipline but instead exerts control over the worker's psyche, demanding not just their labor but also their emotional and libidinal investment. In this context, neoliberal modes of subjectivation no longer focus solely on repression. They also extend to a narcissistic exaltation of desires (Brown, 2019), wherein individuals are placed in a perpetual cycle of self-optimization and alignment with the company's objectives. Performance is no longer merely a measure of productivity; it is intrinsically linked to enjoyment (*jouissance*), or more precisely, to the imperative of *surplus-enjoyment* (*plus-de-jouir*), as theorized by Dardot and Laval (2013). In light of these transformations, the dynamics of psychological suffering—as well as the ways in which it is identified, discussed, and addressed—have also undergone significant change.

Given that we live under a neoliberal regime—one in which individuals are increasingly required to manage and evaluate their lives with the same metrics, strategies, and performance indicators as businesses—it becomes clear that workplace suffering is not merely an incidental byproduct of labor but an integral feature of modern economic systems. As Vladimir Safatle (2020) astutely observes:

The neoliberal way of life has discovered that it is possible to extract more production and more *jouissance* from suffering itself. Finding the best use for suffering in labor—extracting the maximum exhaustion with the minimum legal risk, the maximum engagement in the project with the minimum reciprocal loyalty from the company—becomes the spontaneous rule of a life in which every relationship must present a balance sheet and a metric (Safatle, 2020, p. 12-13).¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Translated freely from the original text: a forma de vida neoliberal descobriu que se pode extrair mais produção e mais gozo do próprio sofrimento. Encontrar o melhor aproveitamento do sofrimento no trabalho, extraíndo o máximo de cansaço com o mínimo de risco jurídico, o máximo de engajamento no projeto com o mínimo de fidelização recíproca da empresa, torna-se regra espontânea de uma vida na qual cada relação deve apresentar um balanço e uma métrica (Safatle, 2020, p. 12-13).

This dynamic illustrates how workplace distress is not simply an issue of individual failure or maladaptation, but rather a structural condition embedded in a social-historical context. Currently, workers are expected to endlessly push their limits, internalizing responsibility for their own suffering, all while companies seek to optimize their labor forces for maximum efficiency with minimal liability. Within this context, Safatle (2020) invites us to critically reflect on the performative force of neoliberalism—its ability not only to structure economic systems but also to shape subjectivities (Foucault, 2010), desires, and even the very ways in which suffering is produced, experienced, and narrated. Under this framework, psychic distress does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it is molded by the dominant discourses and socio-economic imperatives of each historical moment. If, as Safatle suggests, each era prescribes the language through which suffering is expressed, then it is crucial to interrogate why, since the 2020s, the term *burnout* has become one of the predominant ways of articulating workplace distress among startup workers.

This raises a series of critical questions: What does the term burnout reveal, and what does it obscure? How is it diagnosed, and what internal or external factors are attributed to its emergence? To what extent does it serve to individualize broader labor issues, shifting responsibility from structural conditions onto the worker? These are the questions that will guide our analysis in this and the following chapter.

Our particular focus remains on understanding how burnout has become acutely visible within the tech sector—a domain where neoliberal logics of overperformance, self-optimization, and boundless commitment appear to be especially pervasive. Within this sector, the imperative of *surplus-enjoyment* (Dardot; Laval, 2013) seems to take precedence, reinforcing a paradoxical dynamic in which the pursuit of self-fulfillment is often linked to exhaustion.

13.1 CONCEPTUALIZING BURNOUT

The concept of burnout first emerged in the United States during the 1970s, when psychologist Herbert J. Freudenberger coined the term to describe a severe form of exhaustion observed among staff working in recovery clinics for drug addicts. Initially, the term referred specifically to healthcare workers who volunteered in the first Free Clinics, which began in San Francisco in 1967 and later expanded to other cities, including New York.

According to Zorzanelli *et al.* (2016), Free Clinics were private, nonprofit organizations that provided basic healthcare services to uninsured patients in the USA. These services were typically delivered by volunteer physicians, either free of charge or at a minimal cost. Moreover, these clinics emerged amid the sociocultural upheavals of the late 1960s, and their volunteers saw their work not merely as social service, but as a challenge to the traditional medical model and a means of driving community change (Fontes, 2020).

Due to their deep emotional investment and long working hours, many of these workers—including Freudenberger himself—began experiencing severe emotional exhaustion, to the point where they struggled to rest and recover. The condition was described as akin to “a house burning out from within”—a vivid metaphor capturing the internal depletion of energy and motivation despite an outward appearance of functionality (Kirouac, 2019).

The 1960s were marked by the rise of the counterculture, the intensification of social activism, and also a greater governmental focus on public service and the fight against poverty. All this led the care professions to a greater concern with issues of citizenship and individual freedom, and to greater *professional idealism*. In the 1970s, a *strong frustration* followed in these professional circles, due to the *non-fulfillment of the libertarian ideals* valued at the time. At the same time, this was also a time when institutions in general (and the medical institution in particular) were challenged. This fact, coupled with important changes in the care professions (from an emphasis on vocation to the bureaucratization/‘technical’ management of professional activity), eventually lead to a *loss of social prestige and disenchantment with the profession*. Burnout is said to have appeared in this context of intense turmoil, among professionals in the so-called Free Clinics, as a kind of reaction to this *frustration* (Zorzanelli *et al.*, 2016, p. 84, emphasis added).¹⁹⁰

As we will explore in depth, the early manifestations of burnout were rooted in profound psychosocial tensions—*frustration, the non-fulfillment of libertarian ideals, loss of social prestige, and disenchantment*. These factors shaped the experiences of care workers in the 1970s and, today, similarly appear in the narratives of tech

¹⁹⁰ Translated freely from the original text: Os anos 1960 são marcados pelo surgimento da contracultura, pela intensificação do ativismo social, e, também, por um maior foco governamental no serviço público e no combate à pobreza. Tudo isso levou as profissões de cuidado a uma maior preocupação com questões de cidadania e liberdade individual, e a um maior idealismo profissional. Na década de 1970, segue-se uma forte frustração nesses meios profissionais, devido à não-concretização dos ideais libertários então valorizados. Ao mesmo tempo, este também é um momento de contestação das instituições em geral (e da instituição médica em particular). Esse fato, associado a importantes mudanças nas profissões de cuidado (da ênfase na vocação para a burocratização/gestão ‘técnica’ da atividade profissional), acabará levando à perda de prestígio social e ao desencantamento com a profissão. O burnout teria aparecido em meio a esse contexto de intensa ebulição, entre profissionais das chamadas freeclinics, como uma espécie de reação a essa frustração (Zorzanelli *et al.*, 2016, p. 84).

workers in the 2020s. However, before analyzing these dynamics within the tech sector, it is essential to acknowledge that although burnout was first identified in the 1970s, it only gained widespread recognition as a measurable phenomenon following the development of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI) in 1980.

The MBI, created by Christina Maslach and Susan Jackson, introduced the first standardized framework for assessing burnout across three core dimensions: Emotional exhaustion; depersonalization (also referred to by some scholars as cynicism and disengagement); and reduced personal fulfillment (Vieira; Russo, 2019).

Though the MBI remains contested among some scholars—particularly for its individual-focused approach and potential to medicalize a structurally driven condition—its establishment as a diagnostic scale enabled researchers to conduct epidemiological studies on burnout syndrome. This, in turn, paved the way for a more systematic and quantifiable understanding of its prevalence, underlying causes, and broader societal impact (Vieira; Russo, 2019). Therefore, in the past decades, the understanding of burnout evolved from a subjective distress to a recognized syndrome with societal and economic implications.

Nevertheless, despite its widespread recognition, burnout remains difficult to define as a distinct medical condition, with its classification both fluid and contested. Conceptually, it is closely tied to stress and frequently compared to depression. Indeed, burnout can emerge from chronic, exacerbated stress and, in some cases, lead to depression. However, as Zorzanelli *et al.* (2016) highlight, it differs from stress in that it is not a temporary reaction to external pressures but a prolonged, cumulative process. While stress manifests as an acute response to specific challenges, burnout stems from prolonged exposure to demanding work conditions—compounded by restricted coping mechanisms for distress—culminating in emotional, physical, and cognitive exhaustion. Similarly, burnout differs from depression in its etiology: whereas depression can arise from various aspects of life, such as personal relationships or social alienation, burnout is intrinsically tied to the work environment.

Moreover, much like stress, which has evolved into a diffuse and ubiquitous term, the concept of burnout has expanded—particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic—to circulate in public discourse as a broad and often ambiguous category. In this context, if stress functions as an intermediary between somatic and

psychological experiences (Zorzanelli *et al.*, 2016) and is commonly used to describe everyday disturbances, burnout has emerged as a distinct psychosomatic category. Operating at the intersection of psychic and social dimensions, it specifically denotes the distress and disruptions experienced in contemporary workplaces.

Thus, given that its etiology is rooted in both social and psychological factors, burnout can be considered a psychosocial diagnosis by some (Zorzanelli *et al.*, 2016). However, this very characteristic also exposes burnout to the persistent risk of being framed as an individual moral failing, where the sufferer is deemed entirely responsible for their condition. Such an individualizing perspective not only obscures the structural and organizational factors—along with the disputes, mediations, and power relations embedded in social representations—that contribute to burnout but also reinforces neoliberal ideals of self-management. In this framework, workers are expected to internalize the blame for their suffering, treating exhaustion as a personal shortcoming rather than questioning the broader systemic forces in play that help shape and sustain workplace distress.

To move beyond moralizing, biological, or purely psychological explanations, scholars such as Lorient (2019) argue for understanding burnout and stress as *socially constructed and historically situated phenomena*. Rather than a fixed or solely individual emotional state, burnout should be seen as a dynamic process—one that may escalate into more severe forms of psychic distress, such as depression, depending on the presence or absence of coping resources. These resources can be individual (such as medication, professional retraining, or a redefinition of personal aspirations) or collective (such as access to institutional support, redistribution of workload, or solidaristic networks). Crucially, the evolution of burnout is shaped by context. In neoliberal work regimes—particularly within startups and the tech industry—organizational environments tend to intensify constraints (through precarity, constant competition, and performance pressure) while simultaneously dismantling the collective forms of support that could mediate their effects. High turnover, youthful and transient workforces, weak unions, and the normalization of telework all undermine possibilities for stable collective coping, shifting the burden of adaptation onto the individual. Thus, to understand contemporary burnout, we must attend not only to subjective suffering but also to the structural erosion of collective buffers that once allowed workers to navigate workplace demands with greater resilience.

Laurie Kirouac also proposes viewing burnout as a *transient mental illness*—that is, “as a form of pathology that is inseparable from the social, cultural and normative changes that a given society is experiencing at a given time” (2019, p. 184). Following Ian Hacking’s framework, she argues that the emergence and eventual decline of transient mental disorders are linked to the convergence of specific social and cultural conditions. Therefore, for a disorder to be recognized and sustained within a society, it must: Align with the prevailing medical taxonomy of its time, fitting within existing diagnostic frameworks; Resonate with cultural polarities, meaning it must reflect and reinforce societal distinctions between desirable and undesirable traits or behaviors; Be observable and measurable, allowing for empirical study and clinical assessment; Offer individuals a form of escape or symbolic release from excessively high social expectations (Hacking, 1998). Within this framework, burnout can be understood as more than a mere psychological affliction; it is a *historically situated phenomenon* that embodies the tensions of contemporary work culture.

Moreover, from a Marxist perspective, it is particularly noteworthy that *exhaustion* stands as the defining characteristic of burnout, especially when considered in light of Marx’s observations on labor depletion. As Marx (2023) noted, “just as in urban industry, in modern agriculture, the increase in productive force and the greater mobilization of labor are obtained through the devastation and *exhaustion* of the labor force itself” (idem, p. 573, emphasis added). While Marx, in this passage, was specifically referring to the modern agriculture sector, his broader argument highlights the exhaustion of the general labor force as an intrinsic feature of the capitalist production process. When we extend this analysis to contemporary labor conditions—marked by the flexible accumulation model and the managerialist framework—it becomes evident that burnout is not merely an individual pathology, but a *cultural and socio-historical construct* of relentless work environments driven for productivity. In this sense, burnout can be understood as a disease of the current neoliberal capitalist system, one that continuously depletes its own sources of value—its workforce—just as it depletes natural resources in the pursuit of profit.

These distinctions reinforce the argument that poor working conditions—whether objectively measurable or subjectively experienced—are central to the development of burnout. Structural determinants such as excessive workloads, extended working hours, lack of autonomy, the erosion of workplace solidarity,

hierarchical conflicts, job insecurity, and mass layoffs all play a significant role in triggering and aggravating the syndrome. However, the relationship between organizational structures and individual suffering is not linear or uniform. It is partially mediated by the availability of individual and especially collective coping resources, by shared social representations of stress and success, and by the configuration of local power dynamics and professional relationships. In increasingly precarious, flexible, and competitive work environments, these mediations become strained, intensifying the risk of exhaustion while reinforcing the neoliberal imperative that workers be solely responsible for managing their own mental and emotional well-being.

Therefore, from the perspectives discussed above, we can conclude that burnout does not arise solely as a biological or psychological condition, but rather as *a historically constructed and culturally situated phenomenon*. It is shaped not only by shifting labor structures, societal expectations, and collective anxieties, but also by the dynamic ways in which individuals and groups interpret, negotiate, and respond to these pressures. The syndrome's development is mediated by social representations of work and success, the availability of collective and individual coping mechanisms, and the dynamics of power and solidarity within specific organizational contexts. Nevertheless, despite variations in its definition over time, one argument remains consistent—from Freudenberger to later theorists: the *over-commitment to work as a primary source of personal fulfillment, when coupled with a lack of recognition and heightened individualization among workers*, progressively leads to fatigue, disappointment, disillusionment, and ultimately, *exhaustion*.

13.1.1 Burnout from Brazilian labor law perspective

Although burnout syndrome has been included in the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD-10) since 1990—and Brazilian legislation has recognized it as a work-related condition since 1999—it was only in January 2022 that the World Health Organization (WHO) reclassified burnout from a “mental health and psychiatric condition” to an “occupational phenomenon” (ANAMT, 2021). This shift had significant implications for Brazilian labor laws, particularly after the Ministry of Health issued Ordinance GM/MS No. 1,999 on November 27, 2023, which updated the List of Work-Related Diseases. Under this new regulation, burnout

syndrome (*Esgotamento Profissional*) was officially included among *Occupational Risk Factors and Associated Work-Related Illnesses*.¹⁹¹

Despite this recognition, burnout is still not explicitly listed as an occupational disease under the *Occupational Health Medical Control Program* (PCMSO) regulated by the Regulatory Standard n. 7 (NR-7).¹⁹² However, its legal classification as a *work-related injury* represents a crucial shift: rather than being framed as an individual psychological vulnerability, burnout is now understood as a consequence of workplace conditions. This distinction allows affected employees to seek workplace injury compensation, provided they can substantiate their diagnosis with medical evidence. More broadly, this legal recognition reinforces the psychosocial nature of burnout, aligning with global efforts to frame occupational health as a structural rather than purely individual issue.¹⁹³

The 1988 Brazilian Constitution already guarantees every citizen the right to health, including the right to a safe and healthy work environment. However, until recently, these principles lacked concrete enforcement mechanisms when it came to mental health protection. A significant regulatory milestone was the revision of Regulatory Standard n. 1 (NR-1), which introduced specific guidelines for the management of psychosocial risks in the workplace. Initially scheduled to take effect in May 2025, the revised NR-1 aimed to strengthen employer obligations and increase accountability.

Under these reforms, companies would be legally required to prevent moral and sexual harassment, toxic work environments, excessive pressure and unattainable goals, exhausting work hours, and the absence of emotional support and recognition. They would also be obligated to ensure healthy working conditions

¹⁹¹ Available at: <https://www.in.gov.br/en/web/dou/-/portaria-gm/ms-n-1.999-de-27-de-novembro-de-2023-526629116> Retrieved on: Mar. 27, 2025.

¹⁹² Available at: <https://www.gov.br/trabalho-e-emprego/pt-br/aceso-a-informacao/participacao-social/conselhos-e-orgaos-colegiados/comissao-tripartite-partitaria-permanente/normas-regulamentadora/normas-regulamentadoras-vigentes/norma-regulamentadora-no-7-nr-7> Retrieved on: Mar. 27, 2025.

¹⁹³ Despite the apparent progress made on this issue, it is important to remain attentive to how the proposed changes unfold, since “even when the social and even collective dimensions of suffering—perceived as a psychosocial problem—are acknowledged, the modes of treatment and actions proposed [by bodies such as the WHO] remain permeated by an individualistic and universalist understanding of suffering and illness, in which disorders and diagnostic classifications are treated as invariant” (Maluf, 2024, p. 12). Translated freely from the original text: Mesmo reconhecendo as dimensões sociais e mesmo coletivas do sofrimento apreendido como problema psicossocial, os modos de tratamento e ações propostas ainda são permeados pela apreensão individualista e universalista do sofrimento e da doença, em que os transtornos e classificações diagnósticas aparecem como invariantes (Maluf, 2024, p. 12).

and provide mental health support such as counseling and stress management programs.

These changes were expected to introduce a new level of legal liability, shifting the burden of responsibility from workers to employers. Courts would be empowered to hold companies accountable for failing to address these issues, reinforcing a preventive and systemic approach to mental health rather than relying solely on reactive measures. Furthermore, psychosocial risk assessments would become a mandatory element of *Occupational Health and Safety* (OHS) programs, thereby expanding workplace safety standards to include psychological well-being.

Nevertheless, one month before the revised NR-1 was due to take effect, its implementation was postponed until 2026. The decision came after intense pressure from business and industry groups, who argued that more time was needed for adaptation. This postponement reveals the persistent imbalance of power in labor regulation, where corporate interests continue to carry greater political weight than the rights and well-being of workers.

These legal and classificatory attempts of changes coincide with a surge in alarming mental health statistics in Brazil, widely reported by national media since 2020. Headlines emphasize that “*Brazil has the most anxious population in the world*” (G1, 2023), “*Brazil has the most depressed population in Latin America*” (BBC News, 2023), and “*Brazil is the second country with the most diagnosed cases of burnout*” (Estado de Minas, 2023). More recently, reports describe the country as facing a “*mental health crisis*” (G1, 2025).

While these conditions are often linked to broader socio-political factors—such as economic instability, widening inequality, structural racism, and persistent violence—recent data highlights an additional workplace-specific dimension: the sharp increase in medical leave requests due to mental health issues. According to the Ministry of Social Security, in 2024 alone, there were 3.5 million requests for sick leave through the INSS, with 472,000 of these directly related to mental health conditions. This represents a 68% increase from 2023, when 283,000 benefits were granted for mental health reasons—a record-breaking surge over the last decade (Casemiro; Moura, 2025).

However, these figures represent only the tip of the iceberg, as they exclusively track formal workers accessing INSS benefits. This limitation is particularly significant given Brazil's informal employment rate of nearly 40%—a

category that also includes many startup workers employed as independent contracts (*pejotização*). Furthermore, widespread underreporting of workplace accidents persists. According to experts at the Ministry of Labor, approximately 80% of work-related mental health disorders likely go unreported in Brazil.¹⁹⁴

Although a study by the *International Stress Management Association* (ISMA) estimates that around 30% of Brazilian workers suffer from burnout syndrome—placing Brazil second in the global ranking, behind only Japan (Jornal da USP, 2023)—the term itself does not appear in official mental health-related absence data from the Ministry of Social Security. Instead, burnout is often embedded within other categories such as anxiety (which, since 2021, has surpassed depressive episodes in frequency), depression, recurrent depression, bipolar disorder, reaction to severe stress, schizophrenia, alcoholism, cocaine addiction, and psychosis.

Even though precise statistics on burnout cases remain elusive, the increasing number of labor lawsuits suggests that the syndrome is gaining traction as a legally and medically recognized concern. Many Brazilian labor courts already acknowledge burnout as an occupational illness when there is clear evidence linking it to excessive workloads, harassment, or toxic work environments. A search for “burnout syndrome” on the *JusBrasil* platform reveals more than 8,000 legal cases filed over the past three years,¹⁹⁵ involving claims for moral damages and the recognition of burnout as a work-related injury. While this figure remains proportionally small given the size of the Brazilian workforce, it nonetheless signals a shift in legal discourse and the gradual consolidation of burnout as a legitimate labor issue. Importantly, some of these rulings have already set legal precedents, opening pathways for future claims and expanding the horizon of institutional accountability.

However, despite these judicial advances, the broader regulatory landscape remains uncertain. The recent postponement of the revised NR-1—which was expected to establish clear employer obligations around psychosocial risks—reflects the persistent power of corporate lobbying to delay or dilute labor protections. This deferral not only reveals the fragility of institutional efforts to address workplace mental health but also underscores the political obstacles to transforming legal recognition into enforceable rights. As long as regulatory reforms remain stalled, meaningful accountability for work-induced suffering will continue to depend on

¹⁹⁴ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0Dj4p35YxU> Retrived on Mar. 28, 2025.

¹⁹⁵ Available at: <https://www.jusbrasil.com.br/busca?q=+s%C3%ADndrome+de+burnout+> Retrieved on: Mar. 27, 2025.

individual litigation rather than systemic change—highlighting the importance of sustained scrutiny and pressure from civil society and legal actors alike.

13.2 BURNOUT AS A GROWING CONCERN IN TECH

Given the absence of comprehensive statistical data on burnout among Brazilian workers, accurately assessing its prevalence in the country's tech sector becomes even more challenging. However, despite this lack of precise figures, various sources—ranging from news articles on technology websites to online webinars, corporate event lectures, and even internal market studies conducted by startups—offer insights into how the sector perceives and addresses burnout.

On a global scale, since the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread adoption of remote work by technology companies, burnout has become a recurring topic across startup ecosystems. Studies conducted by tech companies themselves to assess the pandemic's impact on software developers began surfacing in 2020. One such study reported that 83% of developers were experiencing burnout, citing factors such as excessive workload, ineffective management processes, and unclear goals (ALI, 2021). However, alongside increased symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, research also pointed to a rise in productivity and longer working hours during the pandemic (Oracle, 2020). At the time, these market reports identified the pandemic as the primary source of distress and urged companies to prioritize employee well-being to prevent burnout and potential resignations. After all, losing a trained professional could negatively impact a company's productivity.

In Brazil, the scenario was no different. Shortly after the pandemic was declared, a surge of webinars and live discussions emerged within startup ecosystems, reflecting the sector's agility in responding to organizational disruption. At first, employers' primary concern was not workers' well-being per se, but rather the challenge of maintaining engagement and productivity in the face of physical distance. The dominant question was managerial: how to adapt and sustain corporate rituals and team interactions within a remote work infrastructure? These discussions initially revolved around digital tools, leadership styles, and strategies for fostering cohesion in virtual environments.

Only a few months later—once a perceptible decline in productivity became evident—did mental health enter the managerial agenda in a more substantive way.

At that point, the question shifted: *“how to identify and prevent burnout?”* This transition is telling as it reflects a broader economic pattern in which worker distress is only acknowledged once it threatens organizational efficiency. As international reports on burnout circulated and gained visibility, Brazilian health tech startups quickly recognized an opportunity—not only to address the issue discursively but to reframe it as a market gap, a solvable problem within the logic of innovation.

For Health Tech startups, understanding mental health at work and burnout was not merely about diagnosing workplace issues; it was also about creating business opportunities. This explains why studies¹⁹⁶ were being conducted—not necessarily to advance scientific knowledge, but because HR and Health Tech startups needed data to support their sales pitches. As we will explore further, their goal was to market new platforms that promised a more *“human”* HR management, *“democratized”*¹⁹⁷ access to online therapy, or even real-time monitoring and *“diagnosis”* of employees’ mental health conditions.

Among the studies published by Health Techs, a discernible pattern emerges. First, these reports emphasize the importance of addressing workers’ mental health, often framing the issue through an economic lens. Statements such as *“approximately 12 billion workdays are lost each year due to depression and anxiety, resulting in a global economic cost of nearly US\$1 trillion”* (ZenKlub, 2022) or *“by 2030, psychological disorders are projected to cost the global economy US\$6 trillion”* (Field Notebook, 27 Jan. 2023) serve to justify corporate investment in mental health initiatives.¹⁹⁸

Next, these reports reinforce global statistics that position Brazil among the most affected nations, citing figures such as *“Brazil is the most anxious country in the world, the second most stressed, and the fifth in depression”* (Field Notebook 27 Jan.

¹⁹⁶ Most of the data presented in the following sections comes from fieldwork observations. For this reason, I cannot vouch for the reliability of statistics produced by these companies, as their methodological procedures are rarely disclosed. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, the primary concern in some cases is not the accuracy of the data itself, but rather the narrative it constructs—and how that narrative shapes perceptions, behaviors, and business strategies within the startup ecosystem. With this in mind, I present some of the key statistics on mental health in startups, not only to examine the extent of the problem but also to understand what these numbers compel people and organizations to do.

¹⁹⁷ It is important to emphasize that when startups claim to be *“democratizing”* a service, what they are actually doing is expanding the market—making services cheaper through the use of ICTs.

¹⁹⁸ However, this instrumental approach to mental health is neither new nor unique to the technology sector. A similar framing was already evident in the World Health Organization’s 2001 report *Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope*, which largely justified the implementation of mental health prevention strategies in terms of their potential to reduce the economic “burden” of conditions such as depression (Rose, 2019; Neves *et al.*, 2020).

2023). Only after establishing this broader context do the reports—published annually since 2021 by various Health Techs—present their own findings on the prevalence of anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout. Typically, these figures are derived from data collected within each company’s customer base.

Some of the reported statistics include: “32% of Brazilians exhibit moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety” and “31% present severe symptoms of depression” (ZenKlub, 2022). “64% of workers report experiencing frequent stress,” despite “87% claiming to be passionate about their jobs” (Field Notebook 27 Jan. 2023). “53.5% of HR professionals know colleagues who have been laid off due to burnout” (Flash, 2023). While undeniably alarming, they must be interpreted critically. These numbers, often disseminated by startups themselves, do not merely reflect individual suffering—they construct a narrative of crisis within Brazil’s startup ecosystem, a crisis that demands immediate and technical intervention.

As Nikolas Rose (2019) argues, numbers are not neutral representations of reality. Rather, they are political instruments

assembled to be used in arguments, to make arguments, to try to settle arguments, sometimes in an attempt to depoliticize a disagreement by turning it into a technical question, more often to politicize something that has, in someone’s eyes, not got the attention it deserves (idem, p. 38–39).

In the context of Brazilian startups, these statistics serve a dual function: they simultaneously raise awareness of a collective problem—burnout—while also positioning specific actors, particularly Health Tech startups, as the key to its solution.

These companies, often responsible for producing and disseminating the data, are not passive observers of a crisis but active participants in shaping its meaning. Through white papers, webinars, and summits, they articulate, what they consider, a *managerial* problem—mental health in the workplace—that can be addressed through innovation, monitoring, and platform-based interventions. In doing so, they mobilize companies to invest in their services, promising both “*diagnosis and prevention*” of what is now framed as a major economic “burden.” In this sense, health tech startups advocates function as *moral entrepreneurs* (Becker, 1966):

Not in the sense of crusading for public and political action to address a form of deviant conduct that outrages their own moral principles, but in the sense of seeking to highlight a wrong or an injustice to a group of persons that should create moral outrage, and demanding that those in authority direct

their attention, their policies and their funds to try to rectify it (Rose, 2019, p 39).

Thus, we can observe how through reports on mental health, health tech startups seek to elicit concern—not to condemn burnout as immoral, but to demand organizational investment in its management, thus aligning ethical imperatives with market solutions.

Nevertheless, as Rose (2019) reminds us, “to say that numbers are political, and are mobilized in the service of moral [or economic] objectives, is not to say that they are untrue” (p. 39). While the accuracy or methodology behind mental health statistics reported by startups may not always be transparent or verifiable, such data nonetheless reveals important trends within the world of startups. These figures should be understood not only as representations of a psychological state, but as part of a broader discursive strategy—one that both reflects and shapes the moral and managerial logics of contemporary capitalism.

A case in point is the *Emotional Health Overview of HR* report, conducted in 2023 by the Brazilian startup Flash, based on responses from over 700 human resources professionals. The findings offer a glimpse into how stress is distributed even among those responsible for managing organizational well-being. According to the report, “9 out of 10 HR professionals feel overwhelmed; 28% of those in management positions experience daily pressure”; and 46.3% report working beyond standard hours, with an average of 10-hour workdays. These data points are not just indicators of individual exhaustion; they expose how burnout is embedded even among those responsible for managing organizational well-being. Yet, rather than prompting a structural critique, such findings are often folded back into a call for more emotional self-regulation and managerial efficiency.

Similarly, the *Mental Health and Well-Being of Brazilian Workers* report—published in 2023 by the Brazilian startup Zenklub in partnership with psychometricians from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro—analyzed responses from over 20,000 workers across multiple industries. The study created a comparative index to measure various mental health challenges across 12 different sectors. It found that: On average, 58.8% of Brazilian workers feel exhausted at work, while among technology workers, this figure is slightly lower at 53.3%. 47% of workers across all industries report constantly worrying about work, even outside working hours. Among technology professionals, this percentage stands at 42.7%.

A more recent survey conducted by Strides Tech Community (2024)—a network of technology and data leaders—focused specifically on startup managers, technology consultants, and e-commerce executives. The findings revealed that: *“The highest proportion of tech leaders experiencing burnout was recorded in startups (38.46%).”* And that

94.1% of startup and scale-up founders reported experiencing at least one adverse mental health condition during their careers, with anxiety being the most frequent (85.6%), followed by burnout (37%), depression (21%), and panic attacks (22%) (Gomes, 2024).

While it is crucial to approach these statistics critically—especially considering the proprietary methodologies and commercial interests behind such reports—we cannot disregard the insights they provide into how burnout is problematized within Brazil’s startup ecosystem. These numbers do not merely reflect individual suffering; they also serve to construct a narrative of organizational crisis that calls for immediate intervention.

13.2.1 Health tech startups

Since the onset of the pandemic, burnout has become an increasingly urgent issue in the tech sector, particularly within Brazil’s startup ecosystem. As previously discussed, statistical reports—often commissioned or produced by the startups themselves—have played a crucial role in shaping a narrative of managerial crisis. Significantly, the publication of such data is frequently followed by a proliferation of new products and services launched by the same Health Tech startups responsible for the reports, creating a cyclical relationship between problem generation and solution offering.

These solutions typically take the form of digital platforms marketed as tools for addressing mental health concerns within professional environments. Broadly, they fall into two dominant business models. The first is B2B (business-to-business), in which startups offer platforms designed to help companies diagnose, monitor, and “*care for*” their employees’ mental health—typically through a managerial lens focused on enhancing productivity and minimizing absenteeism. The second is B2C (business-to-consumer), where individuals are targeted directly with tools for self-

regulation, including meditation apps, stress-tracking wearables, and AI-powered mental health coaching services.

Although they differ in target audience, both models share a common conceptual foundation: mental health is reframed not as a collective right or structural issue, but as an individual resource to be optimized in accordance with market imperatives. Particularly relevant to our study is the B2B model, given that the primary clients of these Health Tech companies are often other startups—especially human resources departments within high-growth firms.

In recent years, startup HR managers have increasingly turned to digital platforms that claim to track and quantify employees' emotional states in real time. These technologies, often celebrated as innovative solutions for promoting well-being, operate through diagnostic systems that encourage workers to regularly log and assess their emotional conditions. Yet this process, rather than initiating deeper institutional reflection, tends to reinforce a depoliticized and hyper-individualized understanding of mental suffering. Cultural behaviors and structural stressors intrinsic to startup cultures—such as long hours, job precarity, and relentless growth demands—are sidelined, while emotional strain is reclassified as a personal metric to be self-managed.

Within this framework, workers are not only encouraged but tacitly obligated to:

A) *Cultivate emotional self-regulation* as a means to better withstand workplace pressure, thus reframing stress as a matter of personal resilience rather than a symptom of organizational dysfunction.

B) *Seek therapy and other psychological supports* as instruments of self-optimization, rather than as responses to structural inequities or collective forms of distress.

It is important to emphasize that this logic is not confined to startup culture, nor is it entirely new. As Antonio Neves *et al.* (2020) reminds us, psychiatric knowledge has long been intertwined with capitalist enterprise, particularly through its historical links with the pharmaceutical industry, which has shaped both diagnostic categories and treatment models via strategic marketing and drug development. However, the terrain of commodification has widened: “Currently, psychological suffering and psychiatric knowledge are becoming a domain whose economic exploitation is also

viable for other industries” (idem, p. 157).¹⁹⁹ In this broader context, we see a deepening of what Eva Illouz (2007) calls the *commodification of mental health*, now driven not only by pharmaceuticals but by a digital economy that instrumentalizes care through data and design.

This expansion is reflected in a shifting paradigm of workplace well-being, in which care is increasingly governed by measurement and surveillance. As Neves *et al.* (2020) observe, the digital health movement tends to equate the need for care with the imperative to measure it. This aligns seamlessly with startup culture, where the dominant ethos maintains that “*what is not measured is not evaluated.*” Mental health, under these conditions, becomes legible only when it is rendered into “*data*”.

Consequently, conditions such as anxiety, depression, and—most notably—burnout are rarely interpreted as dynamic processes or consequences of exploitative labor conditions. Instead, they are reframed as interruptions to productivity. Interventions are legitimated less by their therapeutic or ethical value than by their capacity to reduce sick leave, sustain engagement, and preserve workflow continuity. One must then ask: do these platforms genuinely serve the well-being of workers—or do they operate as managerial tools for regulatory compliance and productivity assurance?

The responsiveness of Brazil’s health tech market to changing labor policies over the past five years illustrates this tension. During the early pandemic lockdowns, many of these startups positioned themselves as platforms offering online therapy, capitalizing on heightened public concern with mental health. After the WHO formally recognized burnout as a work-related illness in 2022, the field saw a wave of specialized services aimed at corporate burnout prevention. More recently, with the upcoming implementation of the 2025 Brazilian NR-1 regulations—which will formally classify burnout among *Occupational Risk Factors and Associated Work-Related Illnesses*—these companies have pivoted once again, now positioning themselves as key players in helping businesses comply with legal requirements by offering workplace mental health solutions.

Ultimately, while Health Tech startups frame their investments in well-being platforms and remote therapy as gestures of corporate responsibility, the burden of care continues to fall squarely on individual workers. They are expected to monitor

¹⁹⁹ Translated freely from the original text: Atualmente, o sofrimento psíquico e o saber psiquiátrico passam a ser um domínio cuja exploração econômica é viável também para outras indústrias (Neves *et al.*, 2020, p. 157).

themselves, regulate their emotions, and seek personal improvement, all while navigating work environments whose structural harms remain largely unaddressed. In this context, the discourse of care becomes a strategic device—one that reconfigures mental health not as a site for collective transformation, but as an instrument of managerial governance cloaked in therapeutic language.

13.2.2 How can a Health Tech startup “*diagnose*” burnout?

In the previous section, we examined the expansion of Health Tech startups, particularly since the onset of the pandemic, and demonstrated how many of these companies design digital solutions that are primarily marketed to other businesses. One of the main selling points for these platforms is the promise of early “*diagnosis*”—the ability to detect signs of psychological distress or lack of psychological safety before burnout occurs. It is this notion of “*diagnosis*” that we will now interrogate.

Paraphrasing Rose in *Is There Really an Epidemic of Mental Disorder?* (2019), we must ask whether we are truly experiencing an epidemic of burnout—or, rather, an epidemic of diagnoses of mental disorders. As Rose explains, diagnosis performs more than a descriptive function: it enables a shared vocabulary between doctor and patient, and legitimizes certain experiences as illnesses. But it also plays several other important roles in contemporary societies. For example,

a diagnosis is a condition of eligibility of an individual for treatment—if you have no diagnosis of pathology, there is no case for treating you; [...] for those who are employed, a diagnosis is a condition of legitimate absence from work; [...] and] for those who are unemployed, a diagnosis may be a condition for access to welfare payments (Rose, 2019, p. 73).

In other words, diagnosis is *performative*—it *does* things.

For the doctor, this enables the patient’s history to be organized into a narrative, which provides a shape for the past and an orientation to the future—it is performative. For the patient, who may be experiencing symptoms that are often diffuse and transient, who may be struggling with behaviors that can be seen as merely personal inadequacies, diagnosis reframes these troubles into an illness (Rose, 2019, p. 74).

Importantly, when Rose discusses psychiatric diagnoses, he is referring to those made by licensed professionals through clinical evaluation—diagnoses grounded in biomedical protocols and institutionalized expertise. These differ

significantly from the kinds of “*diagnoses*” generated by digital health tech platforms. Yet, both tend to adhere to the same *symptom-diagnosis-treatment model*—a framework that, as Sônia Maluf (2024) argues, is limited by its failure to recognize the social and collective dimensions of suffering. This model tends to individualize distress, treating it as a personal malfunction to be addressed through biomedical or psychiatric technologies, even when the underlying causes are embedded in shared cultural and organizational conditions.

In this sense, the “*diagnostic mechanisms*” deployed by tech platforms appropriate the symptom-diagnosis-treatment framework in their own way—typically relying on self-administered questionnaires that claim to quantify stress symptoms. Behind these tools, however, lies the logic of positive psychology and the moral economy of self-realization (Cabanas; Illouz, 2022). Since the mid-20th century, as Illouz (2007) demonstrates, the ideal of self-realization has been culturally redefined as both the condition and the metric of psychological health. Within this paradigm, the psychologically healthy individual is one who has actualized their inner potential—while those who fail to do so are cast as emotionally lacking, dysfunctional, or in need of intervention.

But how does one *know* whether they have fulfilled this *ideal* of self-realization? As Illouz argues, this ideal is structured like a horizon—always receding, never fully attainable.²⁰⁰ It is precisely this gap between aspiration and impossibility that gives rise to an ever-expanding array of diagnostic categories and therapeutic solutions. “The ideal of health or self-realization defines *a contrario* a wide variety of dysfunctions,” she writes. “In other words, emotionally unhealthy behaviors are deduced from an implicit reference to and comparison with the model and ideal of the ‘fully self-realized life’” (Illouz, 2007, p. 55). Under this framework, workers who are not constantly “*motivated, fulfilled, or purpose-driven*” are reframed as emotionally deficient. Their suffering is not politicized—it is pathologized.

So, even though the diagnostic models used by Health Tech startups differ significantly from formal psychiatric diagnosis, they too are performative—and warrant scrutiny. The more people are “*diagnosed*” as being “*at risk of burnout*”, the more these companies can usher employees into a therapeutic narrative centered on self-help, emotional management, and personal responsibility.

²⁰⁰ While the ideal of self-realization remains perpetually out of reach, it has also become normalized among startup workers that achieving 100% optimal performance in individualized evaluation systems is equally unattainable.

Startups, as this ethnography has shown, provide fertile ground for the proliferation of this narrative. It emerges in the motivational language of managers, in mood-tracking dashboards, and in the personal storytelling of founders and startup influencers, who portray personal growth and emotional resilience as forms of moral capital. Positivity and emotional attunement become tacit conditions of employability—internalized obligations to “*feel good*” in the face of exhaustion.

The problem with these narratives is that they obscure the inherently conflictual nature of work environments. When a worker reports feeling stressed or anxious, the standard response is not to interrogate structural or relational causes of suffering, but to focus on modulating the emotional response. As Neves *et al.* (2020) argue, the conflictive dimension of suffering is shifted to a need for adaptive improvement, reinforcing both the individualization and psychologization of workplace stress.

Rather than addressing the conditions that give rise to distress—precarity, overwork, unrealistic performance expectations, lack of collective coping mechanisms—suffering is reframed as a personal deficit to be managed through self-regulation, resilience, or therapy. This displacement exemplifies what Illouz (2007) calls the *psychologization of suffering*, where *emotional management* becomes a key requirement for professional advancement. In this framework, the ideal worker is not only technically proficient but also emotionally intelligent, self-aware, and endlessly adaptable. Neoliberal labor regimes, then, do not merely demand productivity—they demand affective compliance and self-mastery, reinforcing a culture of self-discipline and self-surveillance.

In the context of intensifying competition and precarity—especially in startup environments—the cultivation of “*emotional intelligence*” becomes a necessary survival strategy. Workers must learn to “*manage*” their emotions to avoid appearing unfit or unstable. Thus, when a platform offers the promise of “*diagnosing burnout risk*” in advance, it appeals not only to companies but also to workers themselves.

Cristina, a marketing coordinator at a late-stage startup, illustrates these dynamics clearly. Positioned in middle management, she is simultaneously subject to oversight from her superiors and responsible for overseeing the performance and well-being of her team. This dual role places her under constant emotional strain. She admits to being deeply afraid of “*failing*,” of “*freaking out*,” or eventually “*suffering from burnout*.” Having witnessed several colleagues and subordinates experience

burnout—each case manifesting in unique, sometimes unpredictable ways—Cristina confesses to fearing that she might also burn out “*without realizing it*”. This uncertainty intensifies her anxiety and fuels the feeling that emotional breakdown could occur at any moment, imperceptibly.

In response to this fear, Cristina relies both on the company’s tools and “*playbook*” for avoiding burnout, and on a set of personal strategies she has developed to maintain emotional balance and vigilantly monitor her own moods. This self-surveillance becomes even more important in a context where burnout is not simply seen as a health condition, but as potential evidence of personal failure—a failure to properly manage one’s emotions.

For workers like Cristina, the burden of emotional regulation is compounded by their intermediary position in the organizational hierarchy, which often involves mediating between conflicting demands from above and below. Given how difficult and ambiguous emotional self-regulation can be, these platforms present themselves as helpful aids, offering structured methods for identifying, assessing, and managing one’s own emotional state. Thus, when we examine the managerial-diagnostic-framing of burnout, it becomes evident that it encourages workers to intensify their self-surveillance, placing the burden of emotional regulation and self-care squarely on the individual in order to prevent burnout.

13.2.3 Burnout from startup influencers’ perspective

As seen above, startup reports largely interpret and present burnout as an economic problem—one that threatens “*productivity*”, increases the risk of “*quiet quitting*”,²⁰¹ and may ultimately result in “*talent loss*”. Therefore, burnout becomes something to be managed with the help of digital platforms and management strategies. Notably, the proposed solutions always involve doing *more*—more engagement strategies, more wellness programs, more monitoring of employees’ mental health. However, they rarely advocate for doing *less*—less workload, fewer demands, or reduced pressure.

²⁰¹ Quiet Quitting is a phenomenon that gained attention after the pandemic, referring to employees disengaging from work and no longer meeting the above-and-beyond expectations set by companies. Instead of overextending themselves, workers choose to strictly adhere to their job descriptions—rejecting unpaid overtime, extra responsibilities, and the pressure to constantly exceed expectations (CNN, 2023).

This pattern became particularly evident in my observations at various technology conferences where worker mental health was discussed.²⁰² While there was broad acknowledgment that high performance expectations and constant change contribute to stress and anxiety, none of the proposed solutions involved addressing the root cause—the very demands that create these conditions. As I observed in multiple lectures at technology conferences, startup entrepreneurs and influencers frequently resort to both the biologization and individualization of stress and burnout in their discourses. These reframing positions the phenomena as individual physiological or psychological challenges rather than structural or organizational problems, reflecting broader neoliberal patterns in the treatment of mental health issues.

Regarding biologization, speakers at startup events often claimed that stress is the result of a “*hormonal imbalance*”—specifically, an excess of cortisol—which should be counteracted by increasing dopamine and serotonin levels. While it is true that chronic stress and physiological symptoms are interconnected (Vieira; Russo, 2019), this framing reverses the causality of the phenomenon. As Mark Fisher (2020) states, “it is obvious that every mental illness has a neurological instance, but that says nothing about its cause” (p. 67) or the social aspects of it. In other words, it is not that individuals experience stress *because* their hormones are unbalanced; rather, hormonal imbalances emerge as a *consequence* of prolonged exposure to stress. By positioning burnout as a mere issue of biochemical regulation, this perspective depoliticizes the problem, reducing it to a question of individual bodily management rather than structural work conditions. In this view, the solution lies in correcting the supposed chemical imbalance through what is, in essence, a form of “*hormonal mathematics*.” Since work itself is acknowledged as the trigger for elevated cortisol levels, workers are presented with a “menu” of strategies to “counteract” its effects:

²⁰² In 2022, burnout and mental health were recurring topics across the various technology events I attended. Large conferences with broader themes related to the startup ecosystem typically allocated some sessions to these issues and featured stands showcasing health tech solutions. However, over time, interest in the topic declined. By the 2023 and 2024 events I attended, discussions on mental health had become noticeably scarce in more general conferences. Gradually, the topic became confined to specialized events, primarily organized by health tech companies with a direct economic interest in promoting the debate on workers' mental well-being.

A) “*Seek a job that aligns with one’s life purpose,*” reinforcing the notion that dissatisfaction is a matter of personal misalignment rather than a reflection of broader systemic contradictions.

B) “*Engage in dopamine-boosting activities*”, such as physical exercise or leisure pursuits, to counteract work-induced stress, thus shifting the responsibility for well-being onto individual behavioral choices.

C) “*Practice mindfulness before work*” as a means of increasing emotional resilience, effectively training workers to better tolerate the pressures imposed upon them rather than questioning these pressures themselves.

D) “*Take supplements and vitamin complexes*”²⁰³ marketed as cortisol modulators, further reinforcing the idea that burnout can be mitigated through biochemical self-optimization.

In addition to individualizing the problem and holding individuals responsible for managing their own stress, the logic underpinning the “*solutions*” presented above can be examined through the lens of biological psychiatry—a branch of psychiatry that seeks to locate biological markers for psychological phenomena. As Neves *et al.* (2020) highlight, within the psychiatric community, there is a reasonable hypothesis that certain psychiatric conditions may have a biological basis, depending on their clinical symptoms. However, the issue arises when both the scientific community and society at large begin to operate under the assumption that mental disorders are primarily biological in nature. This perspective leads to the erasure of historical, sociological, and relational factors that shape psychic suffering. Consequently, biological explanations become instrumentalized to obscure the social mediations of mental distress, reinforcing an individualized and decontextualized understanding of suffering. In this framework, as Neves *et al.* (2020) argue, “the subject [...] begins to be understood as autonomous in relation to the historical and social context that surrounds him” (p. 133).²⁰⁴

Furthermore, this phenomenon leads both medicine and psychiatry to emancipate themselves from the traditional *health/disease paradigm*, giving rise to what Neves *et al.* (2020) identify as the emergence of an *enhancement culture*. They define enhancement as “the maximization of the potential of human functions to

²⁰³ Products with names like *Brain Focus*, *Good Mood*, *Blue Calm*, and *Happy Day* flood the online wellness market with promises of instant relief.

²⁰⁴ Translated freely from the original text: o sujeito [...] passa a ser entendido como autônomo em relação ao contexto histórico e social que o circunda (Neves *et al.*, 2020, p. 133).

better satisfy social demands, whether they are aesthetic, work-related or sporting” (idem, p. 132).²⁰⁵ Within this framework, individuals are not merely expected to address deficiencies in their well-being; rather, they are encouraged to optimize their cognitive and physiological capacities in alignment with neoliberal imperatives of high performance and self-improvement. This includes increasing focus and concentration, enhancing memory, and maximizing productivity—attributes that are not only valorized but increasingly seen as necessary for survival in competitive labor markets.

By framing burnout primarily as a biochemical imbalance rather than as a consequence of exploitative work conditions, this perspective abstracts suffering from its socio-economic and organizational determinants. As Neves *et al.* (2020) argue, “psychic suffering is equalized as a biological deficit disconnected from the social environment” (p. 144).²⁰⁶ In other words, psychic suffering is flattened into a biological deficit, detached from the broader social and economic context in which it emerges. This reductionist framing effectively obscures structural issues such as overwork and the relentless pursuit of unattainable productivity standards. Instead, an individualized discourse centered on self-regulation and self-optimization takes precedence—often materializing in practices like mindfulness, as seen in the case analyzed earlier, or in the moralizing injunction to seek employment that aligns with one’s “*life purpose*.”

The widespread consumption of vitamin supplements to regulate cortisol levels or the strategic use of physical activity to stimulate endorphins further exemplifies the logic of *enhancement* (Ehrenberg, 2010). Here, individuals are not merely managing stress; they are actively engaging in a form of psychic self-engineering, striving to become the “*best version*” of themselves—healthier, more energetic, and more creative. This imperative to self-enhance is deeply embedded in the ethos of neoliberalism, which demands that individuals continuously refine and upgrade themselves in response to external pressures, much like a company optimizing its processes to remain competitive in the market (Dardot; Laval, 2013).

Within this context, it is unsurprising that “depression presents itself as an illness of responsibility” (Ehrenberg, 2010, p. 4), in which individuals, overburdened

²⁰⁵ Translated freely from the original text: [Enhancement] seria a maximização de potencialidades das funções humanas para uma melhor satisfação das demandas sociais, sejam elas de cunho estético, laboral ou esportivo (Neves *et al.*, 2020, p. 132).

²⁰⁶ Translated freely from the original text: O sofrimento psíquico é equalizado como um déficit biológico desvinculado do entorno social (Neves *et al.*, 2020, p. 144).

by the imperative of high performance, ultimately experience *failure* (Dunker, 2020). Depression, in this sense, is not merely a psychological condition but a symptom of a broader socio-economic structure that places relentless demands on individuals to take full responsibility for their success, productivity, and self-optimization. When these expectations become unmanageable, *failure* is internalized as a personal deficiency rather than recognized as a structural issue.

By contrast, burnout can be understood as the pathology of the overly commitment—the affliction of those who, having fully embraced the ideology of overachievement, initially manage to sustain extreme levels of dedication but eventually reach a threshold of exhaustion. It arises from an excessive investment in work, wherein individuals push themselves beyond their physical and psychological limits until they can no longer sustain the required pace. Thus, while workers are urged to continuously exceed their own limits, the very logic that demands their unwavering commitment is also what drives them to collapse.

13.3 ENTREPRENEURIAL STRATEGIES TO AVOID BURNOUT

Having examined how the biologization of psychiatry and the logic of continuous enhancement shape startup entrepreneurs' and influencers' perceptions of burnout, we now turn to another crucial dimension of this dynamic: the management of stress through various regulation tactics. This approach represents the most prevalent strategy for addressing stress and burnout within startup environments, reflecting a broader emphasis on individual adaptation rather than structural transformation.

A striking example emerged during a panel discussion among senior managers at the Mental Health Conference in 2023. An HR manager from a late-stage startup openly admitted that his startup's late-phase was characterized by immense pressure and continuous change, factors that were known to generate worker anxiety. However, when detailing the company's preventive measures to "*manage*" the issue, the solutions proposed reflected a familiar pattern:

A) "*Implementing time management training*" to help remote workers structure their schedules more efficiently.

B) “*Increasing feedback sessions between employees and managers*”, ostensibly to foster open communication and provide workers with a space to express concerns.

C) “*Deploying a diagnostic system*” that utilized a quantitative questionnaire to track the seasonality of anxiety peaks within different sub teams. The aim was to identify *when* employees were most stressed, rather than addressing *why* such stress was endemic.

While stress is widely acknowledged as an inherent byproduct of the high-growth startup model, organizational interventions remain largely confined within a managerial framework aimed at monitoring, predicting, and regulating stress—rather than confronting or transforming the organizational conditions that generate it. By framing distress as a matter of individual resilience or managerial oversight, startups depoliticize suffering and obscure the systemic forms of structural violence embedded in their workplace dynamics. This individualized framing reinforces a fundamental contradiction: despite widespread corporate discourse around care and well-being, the primary objective of organizational strategies is not to reduce stress itself, but to optimize workers’ capacity to endure it. In other words, what is being cultivated is not the elimination of burnout conditions, but the enhancement of workers’ ability to function within them.

Once the problem of burnout is ostensibly “*recognized*” by organizations, a critical question emerges: what kinds of management strategies are actually implemented to “*prevent*” it? As discussed in Chapter Three, the prevailing responses tend to follow the logic of *corporate maternalism* (Chen, 2022), in which companies frame themselves as empathetic and nurturing employers without fundamentally altering exploitative labor regimes. Within Brazilian startups, these initiatives typically fall into three interconnected domains: *perks* (such as flexible hours, video game rooms, or relaxed dress codes), *social integration activities* (such as Happy Hours, “*team-building*” exercises, or internal celebrations), and formal *well-being programs* aimed at addressing mental health more directly. Among these, *well-being programs* have emerged as the most prominent institutional response to the burnout discourse and will be the focus of the next section.

Health and well-being programs, along with diversity and inclusion policies, are typically implemented by the human resources departments of startups. The structure and reach of these programs vary significantly depending on the company’s

stage of development. While early-stage startups tend to operate with minimal HR infrastructure and often lack formalized benefits, growth- and late-stage startups are more likely to offer structured and diverse well-being initiatives. In general, health and well-being programs are layered on top of mandatory labor benefits guaranteed by the Brazilian CLT regime, as well as more traditional benefits commonly found in medium and large companies.

In Brazil, workers hired under the CLT regime are entitled to a set of legal guarantees, including the 13th salary, paid vacation with an additional one-third salary bonus, the FGTS, overtime pay (although this is frequently disregarded in the startup context and rarely contested in labor courts), transportation vouchers, maternity and paternity leave, advance notice for termination, sickness benefits, social security, unemployment insurance, and leave due to workplace accidents or occupational illness (Senado Federal, 2017).

In addition to these mandatory provisions, traditional corporate benefits—though not legally required—are widely adopted in Brazil's formal job market, especially among medium and large companies. These benefits typically include private health insurance, meal and food vouchers (among the most common), and, in some cases, dental insurance or life insurance. Startups in more advanced growth phases tend to follow this model, offering a combination of traditional and legally mandated benefits to attract and retain talent.

Health and well-being programs are often framed as progressive workplace policies, but function largely as complements to these more conventional benefit packages. The specific offerings vary from company to company, reflecting both corporate strategy and budgetary constraints. Among the well-being-related benefits cited by workers interviewed for this research are: extended paternity leave (beyond the CLT's five-day minimum, with some companies offering up to fifteen days), home-office assistance (a financial allowance for setting up a remote workspace), therapy vouchers (subsidies for mental health services), gym passes (access to partner fitness centers), cultural vouchers (to purchase books, attend events or visit museums), education vouchers (covering courses, MBAs, or professional certifications), and, in rare cases, reduced work hours (such as a 4.5-day workweek). These benefits are marketed as signs of a *“humanized workplace culture”*, yet, as we will see, they also reveal the limitations of individualized solutions to systemic labor precarity and emotional distress.

As mentioned before, many early-stage startups operating under lean business models rely heavily on the hiring of professionals as independent contractors (*pejotização*), who are excluded from the protections of the CLT and are not entitled to traditional labor benefits. The absence of basic social security provisions—such as paid vacation, sick leave, and unemployment insurance—inevitably takes a toll on workers' well-being. Rest, for independent contract workers, becomes a conditional and collective decision, dictated not by individual need, but by the company's operational rhythms. However, the lack of formal rights does not mean that these companies entirely neglect the question of worker well-being. In practice, the provision of health and wellness initiatives often depends more on the personal commitment of HR managers than on a systematic or institutionalized policy on the part of the organization. In some cases, HR professionals—often trained in psychology—take it upon themselves to design and deliver mental health-oriented programming, including internal talks about emotional regulation and partnerships with Health Tech companies offering online therapy services.

Priscila, an independent contractor working at an early-stage startup, is acutely aware of how the *PJ* regime impacts her mental health and work-life balance. She shared how exhausting it can be to lack the right to schedule time off according to her own needs. Instead, rest is limited to moments when the company collectively decides to pause operations.

How can we talk about time off as PJ? (independent contractors). [sigh] So we have 3 weeks of vacation—between Christmas/New Year's and the second week of January. That's standard. The whole team stops during that period. 1) Because, Jesus, we need a break by year's end, and 2) Sales are dead then anyway. The market cools off during the holidays. Like, late December through early Quarter 1, companies aren't spending yet, you know? So if we're not selling, it makes sense to pause as a team. Besides that, this year we secured an extra week of vacation to take whenever works for you. [...] Honestly, the most exhausting part of these last two years was going from January to December without a real break. The only pauses were holidays, so... (Priscila, 32 years old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2023).

Despite the structural limitations of her employment relationship, Priscila expressed appreciation for the efforts of her company's HR professional, whom she referred to as the “*people person*”, to build a more humane work environment. Her support, however, appeared to be directed more at the individual effort of a colleague than at the company's structural response to burnout.

She's our people person, her whole role is about fostering well-being. She's always open to conversations and partners with therapists, yoga instructors... I love when she brings in new initiatives like that. I'm always one of the first to participate because I know how hard she works to try different things for us, you know? [...] I'm really into meditation-focused activities. Sometimes that's exactly what we need, just those 15 minutes to remember to breathe. It can make all the difference (Priscila, 32 years old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2023).

This appreciation, however, coexists with a degree of irony and skepticism. Priscila also described how she and her colleagues had to collectively advocate for the implementation of a benefits platform, which includes access to therapy, nutritionists, legal consultations, and telemedicine services. While she acknowledged the value of these services, she also emphasized their limitations when deployed as standalone solutions to chronic overwork and mental strain.

We scored this benefits platform that covers therapy, legal and accounting consultations, plus telemedicine. You can see nutritionists, various specialists—it's actually good. This was a benefit we fought for, and it's still available today. So it's like... Here's your burnout, but hey—we'll throw in the therapy too (Priscila, 32 years old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2023, emphasis added).

Through Priscila's reflections we can see how, on the one hand, workers appreciate small gestures of care, especially when they are mediated through empathetic HR professionals. On the other hand, these initiatives remain embedded in a broader labor arrangement that systematically denies workers basic rights and meaningful rest. In this sense, well-being programs in early-stage startups tend to oscillate between symbolic gestures and fragmented interventions—insufficient to address the deeper organizational conditions that drive exhaustion and burnout.

As previously discussed in Chapter Three, as startups transition from early to growth and late-stage phases, there is a notable shift toward formalizing labor relations and expanding employee benefits. In this context, the implementation of CLT-regime contracts and the provision of traditional benefits become more widespread, functioning not only as legal obligations but also as mechanisms for attracting and retaining talent. These benefits are increasingly accompanied by institutionalized well-being programs that go beyond the individual initiative of a single HR professional. Instead, they are integrated into the company's broader organizational strategy and aligned with the logic of *corporate maternalism*.

Unlike the more improvised or informal initiatives observed in early-stage startups, these structured programs rely heavily on the use of “*objectives, metrics,*

and key performance indicators” to demonstrate their efficacy. In practice, this means that health and well-being initiatives are continually monitored to track employee participation: companies collect data on how many workers attend workshops, access therapy services, or make use of benefits such as gym memberships. The goal is not simply to offer support, but to “*quantify the reach and impact*” of these programs, often in service of corporate goals around performance, retention, and culture.

Additionally, these programs are supported by regular diagnostic tools, such as “*Pulse Surveys*”, which aim to monitor employee satisfaction, emotional climate, and engagement levels. The underlying assumption—shared by people managers and HR tech platforms—is that happier workers are more productive and less likely to disengage or “*churn*” (Cabanais; Illouz, 2022). As a result, emotional states like “*happiness*”, “*motivation*”, and “*belonging*” are rendered measurable and actionable, allowing people managers to infer the company’s overall productivity potential through the emotional pulse of its workforce (Rodrigues, 2024).

Vitor, a former HR manager at a late-stage startup, recalls how he and his team made extensive use of people management software with “*People Analytics*” tools during his tenure from 2020 to 2022. These platforms enabled the monitoring of a wide array of indicators related to workers’ health, behavior, and emotional states. In practice, “*People Analytics*” operates as a data-driven approach to human resources management, with a focus on quantifiable metrics such as presenteeism (when employees are physically present but unable to fully engage with their tasks, often due to physical or mental distress), absenteeism, excessive reliance on health plans, and leaves associated with burnout diagnoses. Other metrics considered by Vitor’s team included high employee turnover, growing disengagement, and measurable declines in productivity. The collection and analysis of such data were part of a broader effort to predict and mitigate organizational risk, while maintaining a healthy and performant workforce—at least as defined by the parameters of managerial efficiency.

Complementing these metrics were “*Pulse Surveys*”, also known as organizational climate assessments, which aimed to monitor the emotional and relational climate of the company. These short-form diagnostic tools were distributed on a weekly basis and included questions designed to capture employees’ subjective experiences of the workplace. Generally answered on a Likert scale from one to five,

the surveys sought to measure perceived psychological safety, the quality of interpersonal relationships with managers and colleagues, work-life balance, and overall satisfaction with the work environment (Rodrigues, 2024). Some examples of questions include:

Do you feel comfortable giving your honest opinion to your manager? Do you feel you belong in this team? Do you feel respected and valued for your work? Are you able to disconnect from work during your time off? How would you rate your stress level this week? (Questions taken from a corporate blog on human resources).

According to Vitor, the implementation of “*Pulse Surveys*” emerged from a structural necessity within large-scale operations. In organizations with 500, 600, or even over 1,000 employees, he explained, it becomes logistically unfeasible to conduct regular “*one-on-one*” check-ins. Consequently, “*mood surveys*” and “*climate assessments*” are seen as essential tools for maintaining a basic form of dialogue with the workforce. As he described, these mechanisms allowed the HR team to establish indirect yet consistent feedback loops through which they could monitor the emotional and psychological well-being of employees.

We implemented the Pulse methodology to gauge team morale and psychological safety. [...] But we heavily relied on our leadership network—those direct bridges to employees—to establish communication channels that could help us identify and address stress or depression before they escalated. Our focus was understanding: How are people really doing? What are they feeling? This is how we approach People Analytics in HR, right? The more tools we build to connect with data that validates or challenges our hypotheses, the better we can target our efforts—and crucially prove why this work matters. When we ran our first Pulse Survey on psychological safety, the results were alarmingly low. We panicked—but that panic was essential. It forced us to confront the urgent need to address this issue head-on (Vitor, 34 years old, D&I Consultant and former Human Resources Manager of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Vitor’s account reveals the dual function of “*People Analytics*” and “*Pulse Surveys*” within startup HR practice. On the one hand, these tools are framed as caring interventions—methods to detect signs of burnout or psychological distress before they become crises. On the other hand, they serve as managerial instruments of measurement, prediction, and justification. The emotional states of workers are translated into quantifiable data points, which can then be used to legitimize further HR interventions, budget allocations, or strategic decisions. What begins as a concern for psychological safety is gradually reabsorbed into a logic of performance

optimization and metric-driven governance. In this way, well-being becomes both the object and the tool of managerial control.

Although Vitor is a strong proponent of *“People Analytics”* and acknowledges the importance of assessment tools in identifying patterns of suffering and disengagement, he also recognizes a critical limitation in how these tools are often deployed. For him, the problem is not with the methodology itself, but with the managerial obsession that can form around the data it generates. When companies begin to prioritize metrics over the lived experiences they are meant to reflect, the original goal—fostering employee well-being—can become distorted or even lost.

I deeply believe in these [assessment] tools—they’re crucial. But some companies get so addicted to the metrics that they forget why we measure this stuff in the first place. It’s the addiction to data, the addiction to seeing. It becomes this compulsive cycle: ‘Ooh, I want this number to improve... and look, it did! My work’s going great!’ Meanwhile, everyone’s actually miserable. But hey, the dashboard looks good! That’s not the point, though. The point is people (Vitor, 34 years old, D&I Consultant and former Human Resources Manager of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Vitor’s narrative illuminates the contradictions and tensions at the core of startup managerial rationality as it confronts the burnout crisis. As a former HR manager and current D&I consultant, Vitor occupies a strategic and reflexive position within the startup ecosystem. He is both a practitioner and a critical observer of the tools and logics through which startups attempt to manage worker mental health. His account reveals how *“People Analytics”*—a central component of growth- and late-stage startup governance—operates simultaneously as a technology of care and a technology of control.

On one hand, he describes how instruments such as *“Pulse Surveys”* can surface widespread psychological distress and prompt institutional responses. On the other, he critiques the fetishization of data, which transforms emotional life into a set of metrics that must *“look good,”* regardless of whether workers are genuinely feeling better. His remark—*“everyone’s actually miserable, but hey, the dashboard looks good”*—captures the cynical disjuncture between managerial appearances and lived experience. It reflects how the quantification of affect can detach HR practices from the human realities they are ostensibly designed to address. The push for measurable improvements—whether in psychological safety scores, employee engagement levels, or absenteeism rates—can become an end in itself, obscuring deeper structural problems and persistent emotional suffering. As Vitor notes, while

the dashboard may appear healthy, the individuals behind the numbers may be silently struggling.

In this light, Vitor's case exemplifies the dual recognition of burnout as both a legitimate threat to productivity and a managerial opportunity to instrumentalize care. *Corporate maternalism*, though framed as empathetic and inclusive, also serves as a mechanism for governing affect, productivity, and dissent through data-driven techniques. Vitor's ambivalence further reveals that those tasked with administering care infrastructures are not immune to the very burnout dynamics they seek to mitigate. His commitment to care is sincere, yet his testimony underscores how even well-meaning HR professionals are embedded in organizational systems that privilege optimization over transformation.

In the startup economy, the imperative to prevent burnout exists in uneasy tension with the very structural conditions that continue to reproduce it. Within the framework of neoliberal rationality, the figure of the *homo economicus*—the self-managing individual who governs his life as if it were a business—provides the ideological backdrop for practices such as “Pulse Surveys” and “People Analytics dashboards”. These tools are not surprising in this context; they reflect startups' deep alignment with broader neoliberal logics of self-optimization and performative transparency.

What is noteworthy, however, is how this paradigm has evolved. Whereas the *homo economicus* of classical neoliberal thought was to be rationalized mathematically, with emotions cast as inefficiencies to be eliminated (Foucault, 2010; Dardot; Laval, 2013), contemporary configurations of subjectivity now position emotions as central data points to be monitored and acted upon. According to the managerial rationale, happiness, well-being, and psychological safety are no longer merely desirable byproducts of good leadership—they are instrumentalized as productivity tools. As Cabanas and Illouz (2022) argue, the emotional life of the worker becomes an object of governance, with positive affect framed as a condition for optimal performance. Thus, what was once considered irrelevant or even disruptive—emotion—is now seen as a vital input in the quest to manage human capital more efficiently.

With that being the case, it is not surprising to observe the growing adoption of in-house psychologists by both tech startups and more traditional companies. In addition to offering online therapy platforms through partnerships with Health Tech

firms, some startups now embed mental health professionals directly into the workplace. These professionals are meant to support—or rather, manage—employees experiencing psychological distress. While often framed as progressive and indicative of a caring corporate culture, this practice is better understood as a continuation of a much older managerial logic.

As Illouz (2007) points out, the management of the self within the workplace has been a persistent problem since the early days of industrialization. “From the beginning of the twentieth century, experimental psychologists were solicited by managers to find solutions to the problem of discipline and productivity inside the corporation” (p. 17). Since then, psychology has served not merely as a therapeutic tool but as a managerial technique, mobilized to neutralize class antagonisms, reorganize interpersonal dynamics, and ultimately increase profitability. At the same time, the appeal of psychological discourse to workers should not be underestimated. As Illouz notes,

the language of psychology was attractive because it had the appearance of being more democratic, for it now made good leadership depend on personality and on the capacity to understand others rather than on innate privilege and social standing (2007, p. 22).

Psychology thus emerged as a language of legitimacy and humanization, even as it continued to serve the imperatives of capital. From this perspective, the incorporation of psychologists into startups is not a novel development, but rather a contemporary iteration of a longstanding effort to depoliticize workplace suffering. It represents an attempt to manage discontent in non-confrontational terms, converting structural sources of distress into individual pathologies requiring therapeutic adjustment. This arrangement remains embedded in a managerial logic that seeks to *alleviate* symptoms without interrogating their systemic roots. The role of the company psychologist, therefore, is not to question the conditions under which suffering emerges, but to help individuals adapt to them—restoring workers to a state of functionality without challenging the organization of labor itself (Rodrigues, 2024).

Letícia, herself a trained psychologist working in HR recruitment, offered one of the few critical perspectives on this practice:

The professional herself is wonderful—I’ve spoken with her twice. But her role in an organization... There’s a very fine line between giving you psychological tools because you’re genuinely struggling as an individual, and enforcing the company’s agenda in that situation. People who’ve talked to

her say they leave feeling relieved, which is good on one level—they feel heard, the tension eases, they get some breathing room. But the downside is that she detaches the problem and shifts it to the individual. She makes you think: What can you change in your daily routine to fit into this system more healthily? (Leticia, 29 years old, Technical Recruitment for Diversity and Inclusion at a late-stage startup, 2022, emphasis added).

In a very similar way to what happens with *affinity groups*, which we discussed in Chapter Five, by bringing the psychologist into the company, the possibility of the individual confronting the problems that emerge from the management of the company itself is minimized. Thus, the role of the professional psychologist within the company emerges as an escape valve whose purpose is to “alleviate” suffering, manage it and, above all, restore the individuals to their productive capacities. However, as we can see in the excerpt from the interview above, the contextual reasons why the worker is suffering are disconnected from the individual suffering. Instead of helping the individual to understand his or her discomfort, the conversation with the company psychologist gives the individual back the responsibility for acting on the situation.

Leticia’s account echoes earlier ethnographic narratives, such as Priscila’s observation that while the HR manager’s well-being initiatives were generous and well-intentioned, they were ultimately insufficient to counteract the exhaustion generated. In both cases, well-being is framed as a personal responsibility, often administered through a caring intermediary who acts as both support and soft enforcer of corporate norms.

This pattern is consistent with the broader logic we have identified within startups, in which care is deployed not to transform the conditions of labor, but to sustain them. Rather than naming the organization of work as the source of harm, well-being programs often redirect suffering inward, urging workers to adapt their bodies and minds to inhospitable environments where collective coping strategies to deal with suffering are constantly strangled.

13.3.1 What startup workers have to say about burnout preventive measures

As we have seen, startup companies and their leadership tend to frame burnout through a managerialist lens—emphasizing individual responsibility, performance optimization, and emotional self-regulation over structural change. This

approach aligns closely with the broader neoliberal rationality discussed throughout this thesis, in which the worker is rendered as a self-governing, affectively resilient subject responsible for managing their own well-being. However, to fully understand the moral economy of burnout prevention, it is crucial to also examine how startup workers themselves interpret and respond to these wellness initiatives.

Broadly speaking, most workers express support for such measures, particularly those who fall into a Neoliberal Reformism pattern of behavior—when one does not reject the startup model outright, but instead believe in improving it from within. For workers within this pattern of behavior, burnout is framed as a manageable risk: “*awareness*” is seen as the first step, followed by “*self-knowledge*” and corporate wellness interventions as tools for resilience. These perspectives reinforce the individualized framing of distress, while also exposing some of its tensions. However, even among the most reform-minded employees, there is recognition that “*awareness*” alone is insufficient and that the structural pressures embedded in startup work—particularly aggressive metrics and unrealistic productivity goals—remain untouched.

Lara, for example, advocates for mental health awareness and supports the use of therapy platforms, which she sees as essential tools for early intervention. At the same time, she points to the disjuncture between these tools and the organizational conditions that continue to produce distress:

People need to wake up to this—so many still don't even know what burnout is. If they realized it could happen to them too... I think that alone could change everything. [...] At our company, we have Zenklub as a benefit. I push my team hard to use it. Of course, some still cling to that stigma—like therapy's only for when you're 'broken' or 'crazy.' The mental health education gap is real. [...] But beyond that we also need healthier relationships with targets. Unrealistic goals aren't just demoralizing—if they're truly unattainable, the whole company strategy needs to change (Lara, 32 years-old, New Business Coordinator - Key Account Manager of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Here, we see how Lara's account illustrates the double bind of the startup worker: called upon to care for herself emotionally, but within a system that simultaneously undermines that care through unsustainable labor demands. Priscila—whose trajectory has already illustrated the contradictions of burnout discourse in earlier sections—reinforces this dynamic. Her experience reveals how companies benefit symbolically from offering mental health programs while refusing to confront the conditions that make those programs necessary. In a particularly poignant

moment, she recounts how burnout was both acknowledged and denied in the same breath by her manager:

One of my crying fits was because my manager was talking about a company where an employee had burnout and the company paid for the person's therapy, saying that they took care of their employees and didn't neglect themselves. And my manager was criticizing this because he said that he looked at us beforehand, so that we wouldn't get burnout. But he said this while I was having burnout. I turned off the computer and started crying. I'm in front of them. How can they not see this? At times like this I think, I need a new persona for myself, I need the persona that turns on the microphone and says look at me, I'm crying on camera, in front of you, can't you see that I'm having burnout? You're not avoiding burnout! It's happening, you just aren't seeing it, but it's happening. But I'm not that persona yet, I can't tell them (Priscila, 32 years-old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2023).

Her story underscores a core contradiction in the startup moral economy: while care is increasingly institutionalized, it is also depersonalized, depoliticized, and rendered actionable only when workers conform to a legible narrative of distress. As Priscila's narrative suggests, there are thresholds of visibility that determine whether workplace suffering is recognized, and workers are expected to manage not only their emotional states but also their communicability—that is, how distress is expressed, framed, and rendered legible within the moral and affective economies of the company.

In startup contexts, this communicability is increasingly operationalized through “*People Analytics*” tools such as “*Pulse Surveys*”, which aim to extract affective data, translate it into performance metrics, and feed it back into managerial decision-making. These instruments exemplify a form of affective governance, in which emotions are not only seen as relevant but are actively targeted, managed, and responsabilized as a means of optimizing productivity.

When survey results indicate problems—such as low levels of work-life balance—managers often invite employees into participatory “*solutioning*” sessions to brainstorm actions for improvement. Letícia recounts one such experience in which she was asked to collectively problem-solve her own exhaustion:

In satisfaction surveys, questions about work-life balance always ended up directed at the Talent Acquisition team. And there's a habit on my team of gathering people to reflect collectively on problems—in other words, getting employees to think through the company's issues. So, in one team meeting, they presented the survey results on psychological safety and work-life balance. Then they organized a Zoom session, splitting us into small groups to brainstorm actions to improve those areas. People started suggesting things like blocking off time on calendars, not scheduling meetings during

certain hours... Okay, but you know... in moments like that, I always feel like a fish swimming against the current. So I said: 'I don't know how the rest of you feel, but for me, blocking time on my calendar doesn't solve the feeling that I have no time for my life. It's not a matter of not having enough space in my schedule—that's not what makes me feel like I lack work-life balance. I can "fit" everything in, sure, but there's no mental space...' And then people got uncomfortable, because there was no clear solution. And people struggle with that—struggle with the lack of an answer—because it's painful to sit with that absence. I get the impression that we're always trying to treat the symptoms, not the root cause. These actions might offer some relief, but they don't actually solve the problem. And then it feels like we're left without a legitimate justification for saying we 'don't have time.' Like—'What do you mean you don't have time if you don't have any meetings on Friday?' (Letícia, 30 years old, Talent Acquisition at a late-stage startup, 2023).

Letícia's discomfort points to the contradictions of emotional labor under neoliberalism. In this case, the expectation is not only that she feels better, but also that she contributes to the managerial solution to her own exhaustion. Drawing on Dardot and Laval's (2009) notion of the *entrepreneurial self*, we can understand this dynamic as part of a broader rationality in which the worker is positioned as both the source of value and the site of self-regulation. Wendy Brown (2015) similarly argues that neoliberalism extends market logic into all spheres of life, producing subjects who are expected to continuously optimize themselves, even in their suffering. Emotional distress becomes a *project* to be managed—through therapy, mindfulness apps, time-blocking techniques—but never politicized or structurally addressed.

Letícia's intervention—aligned with the Resigned Criticism pattern of behavior—pushes back against this grammar. Her refusal to frame her exhaustion as a *"meeting's scheduling problem"* reveals the limits of neoliberal workplace reform. The discomfort she evokes in her peers stems not just from her critique, but from her articulation of a truth that lacks managerial resolution: that burnout is not an individual failure to manage time, but the cumulative effect of organizational demands that leave no mental or emotional room for life outside work.

As discussed above, startups often position themselves as proactive agents in identifying and mitigating stressors before burnout occurs. Yet, as we have seen, this monitoring tends to focus on individual-level factors and, paradoxically, contributes to the very crisis it seeks to prevent. By evaluating workers primarily through the lens of their potential for peak performance, companies participate in a shift that detaches psychological suffering from the traditional *health/disease paradigm* and rearticulates it within a *performance/pathology matrix* (Neves *et al.*, 2020).

But what happens when a psychiatric diagnosis is actually made, and what are the implications of that diagnosis? As Rose (2019) reminds us, “psychiatric diagnoses may generate stigma” (p. 75). At the same time, it may legitimize an employee’s need for medical leave, compel institutional accountability, or form the basis for legal claims and compensation. In this sense, it is not uncommon for psychiatric diagnoses of burnout to surface within organizational contexts, though they are not always formally recognized or openly discussed.

This affective tension becomes even clearer in Letícia’s reflections on the silencing of burnout within her company. Despite widespread suffering and multiple psychiatric leaves on her team, the term “burnout” is never publicly acknowledged. Instead, its presence circulates informally, through WhatsApp conversations and whispered confidences—what we might call an underground affective archive that resists the sanitized narratives of corporate wellness:

It’s not something that’s been said, but a good part of my team has already been put on medical leave due to burnout, with a psychiatric report and all. And it’s something that we only know is happening through hallway conversations. Because no one talks about it. The information that reaches us is that the person ‘took a vacation’ (Letícia, 30 years old, Talent Acquisition at a late-stage startup, 2023).

This disavowal of suffering reveals the ideological function of wellness programs: not to transform the conditions of labor, but to contain their consequences. Workers are rendered individually responsible for navigating exhaustion, while the work organization that produces it remains untouched. Emotional labor here is not only about service, empathy, or care—it is about the internalization of managerial rationality, where even distress must be molded into productive, communicable, and non-disruptive forms.

Letícia’s case thus reveals a key contradiction in the startup imaginary: while organizations increasingly foreground “*mental health*” and “*psychological safety*,” these commitments often operate within a narrow managerial frame that instrumentalizes well-being as a productivity tool. What is foreclosed, in this process, is any recognition of suffering as a signal of deeper cultural antagonisms—antagonisms that cannot be resolved through “*calendar hacks*” or “*therapy benefits*” alone.

13.4 PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this chapter, our analysis has focused on how the startup sector institutionalizes and operationalizes new modes of diagnosing and managing worker distress. As we transition to the next chapter, in which we delve into individual and collective experiences of burnout, it is important to remember a critical insight we have developed in the second part of this thesis: the so-called “*startup way of doing things*” is far less disruptive than it purports to be. Rather than representing a break from conventional management paradigms, its practices are rooted in longstanding neoliberal imperatives—ones that prioritize flexibility, innovation, and personal responsibility while offloading risk and structural precarity onto the individual.

As we have previously discussed, startups do not merely adopt neoliberal logics—they help refine and intensify them. Their management strategies are shaped not only by economic rationality but also by a broader prescriptive system (Safatle, 2020) that dictates how workers should feel, behave, and care for themselves. Neoliberalism, in this sense, operates not only through markets and metrics, but also through moods, affects, and moral vocabularies. It defines the emotional tenor of work while narrowing the legitimate forms of response to suffering. As such, burnout is rarely treated as a dynamic, context-dependent condition shaped by power relations, organizational pressures, and the erosion of collective coping structures. Instead, emotional exhaustion is recast as a failure of individual regulation—an internal dysfunction to be corrected through self-monitoring, productivity hacks, or therapeutic tools. In the startup and tech sectors, where turnover is high, unionization is weak, and work is often remote, the very conditions that might allow for shared resistance or mutual care are systematically dismantled. This reinforces a cycle in which suffering is personalized, and organizational contradictions remain depoliticized.

What appears novel in this process is the grammatical shift through which suffering is articulated and made intelligible. Burnout, a term that first emerged in the 1970s, only gained traction in the 2020s as part of a broader reclassification of mental health in the workplace. It was during this period that the WHO redefined burnout as a phenomenon directly tied to work, and that Brazilian labor reforms began requiring companies to assess psychosocial risks. These developments signaled not just recognition, but the institutional formalization of a new way of

speaking about suffering—one that translates complex social and organizational dynamics into individual psychological metrics.

Although the above-mentioned transformations are not exclusive to the tech sector, we were able to see how startups have been playing a key role in accelerating this transformation. They are not merely participants in the discourse of “*mental health crisis*” at work—they are also producers of it. Whether by developing diagnostic tools, integrating mental health platforms, or promoting wellness narratives, Health Tech startups position themselves as “*the solution*” to burnout, without recognizing their own role in producing burnout among their work force. In a way, these companies become laboratories for the normalization of affective governance, where passion is incited in the name of performance, and emotional intelligence becomes a requirement for employability.

In this way, the tech sector provides a preview of possible futures: one in which mental health discourse is increasingly co-opted by managerialism, where legal protections risk becoming symbolic, and where the promise of care masks the deeper extraction of emotional labor.

As we move to the next chapter, we shift the lens from organizational discourse to lived experiences. We turn to the narratives of the workers themselves: their fears, their coping strategies, their ambivalence toward diagnostic tools, and their efforts—sometimes individual, sometimes collective—to resist. This move from macro to micro is not a departure from the political, but a continuation of it. Following Fisher’s provocation (2020), we continue the task of *repoliticizing mental health*—not as a therapeutic problem to be solved, but as a processual contradiction to be confronted. As we will see, burnout, in this light, is not a temporary imbalance or a lack of emotional competence. It is the psychic fallout of a system that demands ever more from bodies, minds, and souls, while offering less and less space for life beyond work.

14 CHAPTER 7 - WHAT DO STARTUP WORKERS MEAN BY BURNOUT

From a psychosocial perspective, we now understand burnout not simply as an individual response to stress, but as a historically constructed and culturally situated phenomenon—one shaped by evolving labor regimes, shifting expectations, and transformations in the organization of work. As we have seen in the literature, burnout tends to emerge when workers who are deeply committed to their jobs experience a persistent lack of recognition, which in turn leads to disillusionment, emotional depletion, and a gradual erosion of meaning. At the same time, we have observed how tech entrepreneurs and startup managers often frame burnout through an economic lens—as a productivity issue to be diagnosed and managed in order to preserve performance and growth.

Within startup ecosystems, however, burnout does not only circulate as a managerial or medicalized category—it also emerges as an emic concept, invoked by workers themselves to name and give meaning to their own suffering. It becomes a vernacular diagnosis, a way to articulate the tensions, contradictions, and breakdowns that stem from everyday life at work. For this reason, it is essential to ask: what does burnout mean to workers? How do they describe, interpret, and navigate this experience in their own terms?

Crucially, any analysis of burnout within the startup world must be understood in relation to a broader affective economy of passion, productivity, and exploitation. As discussed in Chapter One, startup cultures actively cultivate what Lorient and Leroux (2015) describe as *passionate work*, often promoted through a managerial discourse of “*do what you love*.” Within this framework, labor is not framed as a burdensome necessity but as a path to personal development and personal fulfillment. Workers are not simply employees—they are expected to be emotionally invested, intrinsically motivated, and wholly dedicated to their work as an extension of their identity and source of happiness.

As we were able to explore in Chapters Four and Five, this affective framing tends to blur the boundaries between work and self, reinforcing a vision of labor as the primary site of meaning-making in contemporary life. By appealing to workers’ aspirations and emotional investments, managers are able to deepen engagement and drive productivity—yet at a cost. As we have seen throughout this thesis, *passion at work* is not a purely spontaneous expression of individual desire, but the

result of broader neoliberal dynamics in which individuals are continuously encouraged to optimize, perform, and “excel” across all domains of life. In this sense, passion itself becomes a disciplinary tool, deeply entangled with mechanisms of control and self-exploitation.

As discussed in Chapter Six, this imperative to excel—when taken to its limits—cannot always lead to flourishing, but also to exhaustion. The very qualities that are celebrated in startup culture (dedication, enthusiasm, limitless drive) become liabilities when the demands exceed what is sustainable. As one interlocutor, Nathi, aptly remarked: “*to love what you do is to be two steps away from burnout.*” Her insight captures the ambivalence at the heart of *passionate work*, where emotional investment intensifies both fulfillment and vulnerability.

Moreover, the ideal of *passionate work* within startup culture is inseparable from the relentless pursuit of productivity. Demonstrating passion often means embracing intensity—willingly investing long hours, emotional energy, and personal identity into work as a means of proving one’s commitment. In this context, self-realization is not opposed to high performance, but rather becomes dependent on it. The promise of fulfillment is tethered to meeting tight deadlines, embracing constant acceleration, and remaining perpetually available. Passion, in other words, becomes a metric of productivity, and productivity a measure of personal worth.

In the sections that follow, we will explore how startup workers navigate this complex terrain—how they make sense of their suffering, how they negotiate the blurred boundaries between personal aspiration and organizational demand, and how burnout becomes both a lived reality and a discursive framework. It is through this lens that the contradictions of contemporary labor come into sharp relief: where love for work coexists with exhaustion, and where the language of passion masks the cultural conditions that produce chronic overwork and emotional depletion.

If, following Ian Hacking’s (1995) formulation, traumatic experiences are understood as “psychological blows, wounds to the spirit” (p. 183), then episodes of burnout—particularly when marked by deep emotional and physical exhaustion—can be interpreted as a form of trauma. This framing invites a critical question: how does one ethically investigate the intersection of passion and suffering at work without inadvertently provoking further distress or anxiety? With this concern in mind, I adopted a cautious and open-ended interview methodology, privileging broad, reflective questions over direct inquiries. Rather than asking participants if they had

experienced burnout explicitly, I encouraged them to recall whether they had undergone particularly stressful episodes at work, how they felt during those periods, and how they responded or coped.

However, as Hacking (1999) reminds us, retrospective interpretation is a complex process. He draws attention to “the phenomenon of retrospectively seeing events as abusive which were not directly and consciously experienced as such at the time” (p. 161). This insight is crucial for understanding how workers might come to reclassify past experiences under the rubric of burnout only in hindsight, especially as cultural awareness around mental health evolves. In this sense, the act of narrating these experiences is not simply a recounting of the past, but a reworking of memory shaped by current interpretive frameworks—what Hacking would call a *looping effect*, in which the classification of conditions like burnout feeds back into how individuals experience and understand themselves.²⁰⁷

Far from producing uniform or easily classifiable narratives, the interviews revealed a fluid and heterogeneous repertoire of symptoms, self-descriptions, and diagnostic categories. Participants drew on a wide range of frameworks to make sense of their suffering, depending on their personal trajectories, emotional states, and evolving understandings of mental health. These frameworks ranged from somatic expressions—such as chronic fatigue, insomnia, or headaches—to formal psychological diagnoses like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety, stress, and burnout. Crucially, these categorizations were not static. They shifted over time, shaped by broader cultural discourses, the evolving language of mental health, personal reflection, and changing work and life circumstances.

Some interlocutors who, in the first round of interviews conducted in 2022, did not describe themselves as anxious or overworked later reinterpreted past experiences through a different lens—expressing feelings of emotional exhaustion, disillusionment, or burnout in 2023. This reclassification often emerged alongside growing awareness of mental health narratives circulating in the workplace or through exposure to therapeutic discourses. Conversely, others who were undergoing psychiatric or psychological treatment for burnout in 2022 reported improved well-being a year later, following changes such as shifting jobs,

²⁰⁷ Importantly, this dynamic also points to the risks inherent in such interviews. For some, the act of recounting emotionally taxing experiences may constitute a form of re-experiencing trauma. This may help explain why three interlocutors chose not to respond to follow-up communications in the subsequent year. Their silence was, in itself, meaningful—potentially signaling a refusal to re-engage with distressing memories.

renegotiating work-life boundaries, or adopting new coping strategies. These temporal shifts highlight how mental health classifications function not only as descriptive tools but also as interpretive resources—used by individuals to navigate, reframe, and sometimes reconfigure their relationship to work and selfhood.

Given the importance of the temporal dimension in shaping and interpreting mental suffering, a longitudinal approach proved essential for understanding stress and burnout not as isolated or static events, but as evolving and dynamic processes. As Santelli (2019) argues, following individuals over time reveals how their experiences are continually shaped at the intersection of micro-level (individual and familial), meso-level (organizational and relational), and macro-level (socioeconomic and political) forces. The life course trajectory approach made visible this complex entanglement by illuminating the dialectical relationship between individual agency and structural constraint. It helped to understand burnout beyond a purely psychological or structural account, offering instead a multidimensional framework through which to grasp how people come to interpret, endure, and reframe their suffering.

In this sense, life course analysis helped us to perceive subjectivity and mental suffering as historically embedded and socially produced. Moreover, by attending to the temporalities and transitions that shape people's narratives, we gain insight into how the meanings of burnout, stress, or resilience are formed, questioned, and transformed over time. This chapter, therefore, seeks not only to document individual stories but to situate them within a broader constellation of forces—emotional, institutional, economic, and cultural—that shape how suffering at work is lived and made intelligible.

14.1 HOW STARTUP EMPLOYEES COLLECTIVELY PERCEIVE AND DEFINE STRESS

Before we analyze particular cases, it is essential to consider how startup employees collectively perceive and define stress—a perception that ultimately shapes individual experiences of burnout. As Lorient (2019) argues, different professional groups develop distinct collective understandings of what constitutes stress in their work environments. For instance, within a hospital setting, nurses may perceive dealing with violent patients as significantly more stressful than caring for

patients with severe illnesses—not necessarily because the former is objectively more demanding, but because they were not trained to handle such situations, whereas managing critical illnesses falls within their professional expertise.

Applying this perspective to the startup environment, it becomes evident that stress is socially constructed within the expectations and norms of the sector. Startup employees are expected to exhibit autonomy, creativity, productivity, and resilience—qualities that define not only their professional success but also their perceived legitimacy within the ecosystem. Consequently, they tend to experience the greatest stress when forced to redo their work due to abrupt strategic shifts imposed by upper management, or when they feel threatened by the possibility of being laid off—an event that not only puts their job at risk but also signals that their work and effort may have been undervalued. Unlike the routine demands of daily tasks, abrupt changes in the work environment often come with extremely tight deadlines, exacerbating the sense of wasted effort, lost productivity, diminished autonomy, and stifled creativity. In such scenarios, the only expectation that remains intact is resilience—which, rather than signifying an ability to adapt meaningfully, often translates into unquestioning compliance with imposed directives.

Certainly, the specific sources of stress vary across different professional groups within startups. Sales professionals, for example, frequently cite the pressure to meet monthly sales targets as their primary stressor. Customer Success teams report that handling post-sale client issues generates significant strain. HR professionals highlight internal conflicts within the company as a major source of stress, while Support teams emphasize the difficulty of being on-call to resolve system outages. Meanwhile, Software Developers express stress over the immense responsibility of ensuring that platforms remain operational at all times.

Crucially, however, these stressors are not anomalous or unexpected; rather, they are deeply embedded in the normative expectations of each role. They represent the anticipated forms of pressure that accompany the specialized functions within a startup structure—what other researchers (Cru, 2014; Roche, 2016) refer to as *occupational risks*. These are risks that workers accept as meaningful and necessary to the proper execution of their roles, much like the exposure to violence that may be accepted by a police officer tasked with arresting a dangerous suspect. Such risks are often internalized and legitimized within the professional identity of the worker, insofar as they align with the perceived logic and value of the work itself.

What emerges as more telling—and more structurally significant—is the form of stress that cuts across all professional categories: the continuous demand to adapt to abrupt, top-down strategic shifts dictated by management and investors. Unlike occupational risks that are embedded in the task itself, this kind of strain stems not from the content of the work but from its unstable and often incoherent organization. These are constraints that, to borrow from Roche's distinction, are not necessary to the task's accomplishment and thus are less tolerated by workers, as they appear arbitrary, avoidable, and senseless within their own professional conceptions.

This form of stress reflects a mode of organizational life in which workers must constantly recalibrate their focus, abandon projects midstream, or “pivot” toward new priorities without sufficient context or support. It generates a distinct kind of psychological strain: not from the work itself, but from the demand to “play along” with a corporate logic driven by market imperatives, investor expectations, and an ethos of perpetual reinvention. In this sense, the stress experienced by startup workers is not only occupational—it is existential, rooted in a structural requirement for flexibility that often undermines autonomy, coherence, and long-term professional development.

This dynamic positions startup workers in a manner similar to consultants (Loriol, 2019), who often perceive their work as more stressful than that of traditional employees due to the demand for constant adaptability, strategic thinking, and performance under uncertainty. In the case of startups, workers often differentiate themselves from employees in more established, “traditional” corporate settings, which they view as rigid, bureaucratic, and lacking in innovation. This differentiation is particularly pronounced among those startup workers who fall into an Overly Commitment pattern of behavior, and who see themselves as embodying a new work ethic—one that rejects the passive status of the conventional wage earner (Dardot; Laval, 2013). They often take pride in the belief that their work extends beyond the mere execution of tasks; they view themselves as actively shaping not only the product but also the very structure, culture, and identity of the company—which they perceive as superior, more flexible, and more advanced than that of conventional firms.

People who work at startups are braver. Like my mom says, ‘A job isn’t anyone’s permanent home,’ you know? Today you’re here, tomorrow you could be somewhere else. But in traditional companies, you don’t see that—people join expecting to build their entire career there, even if it’s an

environment that doesn't challenge them at all. Startups aren't like that. Every single day, I'm learning something new—even if I don't think I need to. Because when PDI meetings roll around at the start of the quarter, HR sits you down and asks, 'So, what do you think you need to improve?' And by then, you've already gotten your performance review, with feedback from your peers and your manager. So you already have visibility—even if it doesn't come from you—on where you need to grow (Mônica, 26 years-old, Community Assistant of an early-stage startup, 2022).

In this sense, startups tend to present themselves not just as workplaces but as sites of continuous reinvention—spaces where workers perceive their labor as more meaningful and forward-thinking compared to the rigid hierarchies of traditional firms. Within this framework, a certain level of stress is not only expected but actively valorized, serving as a marker of professional dedication and distinction—workers are stressed because they are deeply invested in the startups they are building. As a result, stress becomes a competitive metric, compelling individuals to distinguish themselves through their capacity to endure it in pursuit of a greater cause. Those who demonstrate greater resilience—what Lorient (2019) terms as *better copers*—are perceived as more capable, while those who struggle risk being seen as unfit for the fast-paced, high-pressure world of startups.

As a consequence, when this form of group identification induces the desire to achieve high work standards and to see high levels of work demands as both stimulating and normal, individuals may engage in overwork or may be stressed as a consequence of not feeling “good enough” (Lorient, 2019, p. 11).

However, in other instances, it is not necessarily the workload itself but rather the experience of isolation, the absence of collective support, or the failure to cultivate a genuine sense of belonging that engenders distress. These affective conditions—often overlooked by managerial approaches to well-being—can become significant sources of psychological strain. Letícia's account provides a compelling illustration of this dynamic. Based in Florianópolis but employed by a São Paulo-based startup, she frequently travels to the company's headquarters for in-person meetings and social gatherings. Yet rather than alleviating her stress, these encounters have sometimes exacerbated it—particularly when interpersonal disconnection intersects with broader pressures at work.

Letícia recounts an episode that occurred during a high-stress period in late 2022, when a convergence of emotional, social, and professional tensions culminated in a moment of acute withdrawal:

Working in-office triggered me in really bad ways—like I was stuck on a team I didn't belong to. I realized something was off during the World Cup [of 2022]. Everyone was making plans to watch the game at a bar together, and I just... disappeared. Left for my hotel crying, didn't tell anyone. I couldn't stand being in that building a second longer. And there was more... that same week, I had to present my project's details in English—a project I was leading—and my head was already a mess. To make it worse, the colleague I used to confide in about this stuff had just been laid off. So there I was, realizing the cruel irony: I felt more alone in the office than I ever did working by myself at home (Letícia, 30 years old, Talent Acquisition of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Letícia's experience underscores how the workplace can generate a sense of alienation not only through its demands but through its social atmosphere—or lack thereof. Even ostensibly convivial moments, like informal gatherings to watch a sports match, can become alienating when the worker's emotional state is out of sync with collective expectations. Her retreat from the social scene is not simply an individual reaction; it reveals a deeper contradiction between the corporate ideal of a cohesive, celebratory team culture and the lived realities of workers navigating stress, subjective precarity, and feelings of isolation. The recent dismissal of her closest colleague compounds this perception, highlighting how layoffs—common in startup environments—can fracture informal networks of emotional support, intensifying the affective burden on those who remain.

Moreover, Letícia's reflection problematizes dominant narratives that equate in-person interaction with greater connection or well-being. In her case, the office is not a space of belonging but a site of estrangement—a setting where the physical presence of others amplifies, rather than mitigates, her sense of disconnection. This tension aligns with broader critiques of emotional labor under neoliberalism, in which workers are expected not only to perform but to “*feel at home*” within the company, even when structural conditions—geographic dispersion, job insecurity, managerial cultures—undermine any sustainable sense of community.

14.2 INDIVIDUAL VARIATIONS ON STRESS PERCEPTION

Overall, episodes of stress and burnout were frequently articulated through the body. Rather than immediately invoking psychological language or diagnostic labels, many workers framed their distress in somatic terms—describing persistent headaches, insomnia, gastrointestinal discomfort, and significant fluctuations in

weight. These symptoms, though disruptive, were often seen as manageable and therefore not necessarily indicative of a medical problem. They were interpreted as signals of a body under strain, yet still within the perceived bounds of professional endurance.

I was always nauseous—I could barely eat lunch, and when I did, it wasn't proper nourishment. I was dealing with migraines and constant tonsillitis. When I got home, I was supposed to relax, but all I wanted to do was order delivery: pasta, burgers... junk food. I gained almost 14 kilos, and I'm only 1.7 meters tall. But now that I've changed jobs, I'm finally down to 77kg (Gustavo, 33 years-old, Sales Consultant of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

In more acute cases, however, the body no longer functioned as a container for stress, but instead became the site of its breakdown. Interlocutors recounted experiences of panic attacks, uncontrollable crying, skin eruptions, and episodes of tachycardia—physiological responses that signaled a deeper, more systemic unraveling of the self.

I couldn't sleep. I'd wake up at night with anxiety—full-blown panic attacks, my heart racing—and then spend the whole next day completely wrecked. Like, I couldn't even change out of my pajamas. Just cried nonstop. I was in full burnout (Fernanda, 30 years old, Product Manager, unemployed, 2022).

These embodied expressions of suffering resonate with a growing body of research that frames burnout as not merely a psychological condition, but a complex psychosomatic phenomenon with profound consequences for individual health and social life. As Zorzanelli *et al.* (2016) argue, burnout has been associated with a range of physical health risks—including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and musculoskeletal disorders—while often coexisting with clinical depression. The toll of burnout, in this view, is both deeply personal and structurally mediated, reflecting the ways in which work-induced suffering is absorbed, managed, and ultimately lived through the body.

Importantly, these experiences were not always articulated through diagnostic language from the outset. Instead, workers often described their distress along an informal continuum—ranging from “normal” or expected stress to more debilitating forms of suffering. This continuum was shaped by both cultural discourses around resilience and productivity, and by the internalized norms of startup culture, which tend to valorize exhaustion as evidence of commitment. At one end of this spectrum, stress was framed as a necessary byproduct of meaningful work, something to be endured and even embraced. At the other end, when symptoms escalated or could

no longer be rationalized, they were reclassified—sometimes retroactively—as signs of burnout. This scalar logic reveals how workers negotiate the thresholds of tolerable discomfort, and how suffering becomes legible, and legitimate, only under certain conditions.

Given the transient and dynamic nature of workplace stress, I present below a classification framework that seeks to map how, in broad terms, the individuals in this study reference their experiences of suffering at work. This classification does not aim to impose fixed or retrospective diagnoses onto my interlocutors; rather, its purpose is threefold. First, it provides a lens through which readers can observe the fluidity with which individuals navigate different terminologies and conceptualizations of their own workplace distress. Second, it highlights how the term burnout is increasingly absorbed into common sense, often applied in ways that extend beyond its clinical definition. Finally, it underscores the extent to which many individuals experiencing workplace distress do not receive adequate attention or intervention, particularly in more acute cases where professional care and structural changes might be necessary but remain absent.

Table 14 – Conceptualizations of emic workplace distress

Conceptualizations of emic workplace distress	Number of individuals
Self-reports no significant stress response predisposition	5
Self-reports both anxious tendencies and heightened stress responsiveness	2
Self-reports both ADHD diagnosis and proneness to stress responses	3
Self-reports a propensity for heightened stress reactivity	4
Self-reports having nearly approached a state of burnout	7
Self-reports having reached a state of burnout that was not clinically verified	6
Received a clinical diagnosis of burnout from a physician but opted not to take medical leave	2
Received a clinical diagnosis of burnout and subsequently utilized medical leave	1

Source: elaborated by the author.

As illustrated in the table above, out of 30 interlocutors, only *five did not report experiencing significant levels of work-related stress*. In their narratives, these individuals either framed their jobs as mere means of financial sustenance—

disconnected from deeper personal investment—or described having a level of autonomy that genuinely allowed them to structure work around their lives, rather than the other way around.

Among the 30 interlocutors in this study, Eduardo exhibited the lowest levels of work-related stress. While one might attribute this primarily to personality traits, his low stress levels were also deeply intertwined with his material conditions. As a Senior Software Developer at a well-established startup, he enjoyed remote work, a competitive salary, and significant autonomy over his schedule. This flexibility allowed him to integrate leisure—specifically, radical sports—into his daily routine, enabling what he considered “*a more balanced lifestyle*.” Unlike many of his peers, Eduardo’s ability to organize his work around his life, rather than the other way around, played a crucial role in mitigating stress. Reflecting on his approach to work, Eduardo shared:

One day I saw a quote that said: Do you work to live, or do you live to work? And that made me question myself. I realized that I only need to work to live. I don't need to work to be the most dedicated person. I need to have a life that makes sense. [...] There have been times in my life when I was 100% focused on work, work, work. Not anymore—now I need balance. I need to dedicate some hours to myself and some hours to my job. So I wake up early and go do my thing [mountain biking]. Because I want to wake up and do the most enjoyable part of my day first. I want to be at peace—I don't want to be tired, I don't want to be stressed from my day. I want to be fully present and enjoy my moment, and only after that do I go to work. And when I do work, I rarely get stressed, because I'm already so at peace. So hey, people can say whatever they want—I've bombed down a trail in the middle of the woods at 40 km/h. If that didn't kill me, work sure as hell won't (Eduardo, 31 years-old, Senior Software Developer of a late-stage, startup, 2022).

Eduardo’s narrative highlights how access to financial stability, reduced work hours (he reports working between five and six hours per day), real work autonomy, and a structured approach to personal well-being can serve as protective factors against burnout. His perspective contrasts sharply with those of other interlocutors, whose experiences of workplace distress were often compounded by precarious conditions, rigid work structures, or an inability to establish clear boundaries between work and personal life.

Notably, other two participants did not employ the categories of stress or burnout to articulate their workplace suffering. Instead, they *explicitly identified their distress as chronic anxiety*, for which both were undergoing pharmacological treatment. Fabrício’s case demonstrates how acute anxiety can arise from the

confluence of structural, personal, and socio-historical factors. As an entry-level software developer, the isolation of remote work during the pandemic—coupled with insufficient institutional support—exacerbated his uncertainty and self-doubt, ultimately contributing to chronic anxiety.

I'm a very practical person. I like knowing exactly what my role is—I take my tasks and execute them neatly. But when the [project] scope is too open-ended, I don't really know what to do or how to do it. And that used to give me a lot of anxiety because I didn't have a technical reference person to discuss the project with. So I was stuck in this situation with no real technical support, no one to help me figure things out. [...] I started having a lot of anxiety symptoms after the pandemic because I couldn't adjust back to 'normal.' Work triggered a lot of it—first, I had to learn to deal with remote work, then there were a lot of frustrations along the way, you know, with the company, the way things were being done, just... a bunch of stuff that ended up feeding my anxiety. And then, in the middle of the pandemic, I got married... and later separated. So yeah, my life has had a lot of ups and downs (Fabrício, 25 years-old, Entry-level Software Developer of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

His narrative reveals how excessive autonomy and social isolation intersected with post-pandemic reintegration struggles and personal upheaval, illustrating how structural work conditions and life events can amplify psychological distress. Fabrício's experience critiques the purported benefits of remote work autonomy, particularly in startup cultures, highlighting its potential to foster isolation and insecurity among early-career professionals deprived of mentorship. His experience suggests that autonomy, when not accompanied by adequate guidance and structure, can shift from being an empowering aspect of work to a source of anxiety.

Additionally, out of the 30 interlocutors, three individuals explicitly linked their experiences of stress and anxiety at work to their ADHD diagnosis, identifying it as the primary factor affecting their productivity and concentration. They described how difficulties with attention regulation and executive functioning led to increased workplace distress, particularly in high-demand environments where self-management was crucial. To mitigate these challenges, all three emphasized the importance of maintaining a structured routine, using organizational tools such as planners and digital reminders to track tasks, and setting alarms to sustain focus during work activities.

Furthermore, two of these individuals reported using Ritalin selectively during moments of crisis—episodes they described as mental loops characterized by persistent overthinking and mounting anxiety triggered by an inability to complete

tasks. This strategic use of medication underscores the way ADHD is managed within professional contexts, not merely as a clinical condition but as an obstacle to productivity that requires active intervention. Their experiences highlight how the self-discipline expected in startup and tech work environments can disproportionately impact neurodivergent workers, compelling them to adopt both behavioral and pharmaceutical strategies to align with normative productivity expectations.

I found out I had ADHD when I was a kid, but back then nobody really paid much attention to it, so I only started treatment as an adult, you know? It was a year-long process with my therapist—only after a full year did we finally get the official diagnosis. My ADHD is moderate to severe, and it really affects my memory... like, my memory is pretty bad. [...] I sought treatment because I just couldn't get things done—my lack of focus was holding me back. There are weeks when you just can't concentrate on what you need to do, when you start forgetting everything, or when you try to do something and just... can't. It's like you're constantly fighting with yourself in your head—you want to do something, but your body won't move, won't react, won't execute. You freeze, trapped in this mental loop, and it lasts for weeks. That's why I take meds to get back on track, plus supplements, which help a ton (Diego, 30 years-old, UX Designer of an early-stage startup, 2022).

Four other participants used the term *stress to describe their episodic workplace struggles*, framing it as an intermittent and largely manageable aspect of their professional lives. Unlike those who identified with more clinically recognized conditions such as burnout or anxiety, these individuals did not perceive stress as fundamentally impairing their ability to perform their tasks. However, they acknowledged its physiological toll, particularly in the form of heightened fatigue and decreased energy levels on especially demanding days. Their narratives suggest that, for some workers, stress is normalized as an inherent feature of professional life—an expected but temporary state that does not necessarily warrant medicalization or intervention.

Some days, I get home completely drained. Actually, there's this tech lead I work with who used to be a construction worker, and even he says that sometimes he gets home just as exhausted as he did back then. Of course, a keyboard is way lighter than a shovel, and the exhaustion isn't physical. But man, mentally, I get so worn out sometimes that when it comes to working out, I do it out of sheer stubbornness—just because I know it's important for my health. So yeah, I exercise, but with zero motivation, zero enjoyment—it's purely out of necessity, you know? After sitting in a chair all day, you gotta stretch at least a little (Franco, 24 years-old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Moreover, sixteen out of 30 interlocutors used the term burnout to describe their experiences of work-related suffering. However, not all of them had undergone

medical evaluation. Eight participants reported feeling as though they were *approaching a state of burnout* during particularly intense work periods. They recognized early physical symptoms of stress and proactively sought coping mechanisms to prevent reaching a full-blown state of burnout. Lara, for instance, drew from both personal observation and lived experience to make sense of her symptoms. Having previously lived with someone diagnosed with burnout, she described recognizing similar warning signs in herself:

You can't shut it off. Weekend hits, and the only thing you can talk or think about is the company—its problems, your endless to-do list. It bleeds into everything. I fought so much because of this. At one point, my partner straight-up said: 'No. We're not discussing this during dinner anymore.' You start realizing it's poisoning every other part of your life. Then Sunday night rolls around, and that mix of dread and anxiety kicks in because tomorrow's work again. Your heart races, you're buzzing with stress, and you don't even notice. For the longest time, you just think... this is normal (Lara, 32 years-old, New Business Coordinator - Key Account Manager of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

While Lara described her near-burnout as an inability to mentally disengage from work—an intrusion of work concerns into personal time—Luciana framed her experience in terms of a gradual depletion of energy and disengagement from leisure activities. Like Lara, she became aware of her condition through observing colleagues, using their experiences as a mirror to better interpret her own symptoms:

I almost burned out. Well, not full burnout, but I was completely drained, totally wiped out. I'd always been super active, but suddenly I couldn't... I couldn't even leave the house. Any free time I had, I just wanted to sleep, wanted to stay in. And this was coming from someone who'd always been full of energy. [...] I think I knew when to hit the brakes - I got close [to burnout], but I recognized when to stop. I saw others who did burn out - people close to me - and I've always been curious by nature. I'd ask them: 'What does it feel like? How did it start? How do you even know?' You know? And then I started looking at myself differently, started checking in with what was happening to me (Luciana, 35 years old, Sales Representative at a growth-stage startup, 2022).

In contrast to Lara's cognitive overload and Luciana's physical exhaustion, Priscila identified her distress primarily through disruptions to her ability to execute basic work routines. Her realization did not emerge from peer comparison but was facilitated through therapeutic dialogue:

The simple act of opening my laptop and looking at my daily plan became something I just couldn't do, you know? Like, that basic thing of getting organized? I couldn't manage it. Then I realized it was more serious than I'd thought—not just some passing anxiety. [...] My therapist kept asking me:

'Are you sure this is where you want to be? Are you sure you shouldn't look for other opportunities? Do you really feel valued?' Those questions stuck with me (Priscila, 32 years-old, Community Manager of an early-stage startup, 2023).

These accounts underscore how the experience of “*approaching burnout*” is often self-assessed and constructed through a mix of embodied sensations, social comparisons, and therapeutic encounters. They reveal that the term burnout, even in the absence of clinical confirmation, is increasingly used as a common-sense category to articulate the boundaries of what individuals perceive as tolerable or healthy within contemporary work regimes. Rather than invalidating these self-perceptions, such narratives offer insight into the affective and relational dimensions through which suffering at work is rendered legible.

Another five interlocutors *claimed to have experienced burnout* at some point in their professional trajectories, which led them either to change jobs or to take an extended leave of absence in an effort to recover. While some were engaged in psychological therapy, none sought psychiatric assistance, and as a result, none received an official clinical diagnosis. Their accounts, however, underscore how subjective experiences of burnout can prompt significant life changes and reflections, even in the absence of formal medical validation.

Gustavo's narrative exemplifies a case of burnout intertwined with hedonistic escapism and a deep sense of dissociation. His experience occurred in 2019, during a period of high earnings, which he describes as being marked by compulsive spending on parties, substances, food, and unprescribed use of Ritalin. At the time, he was not in therapy and only began to recover after resigning from his position and starting psychological treatment. For him, burnout was not simply physical or emotional exhaustion—it was existential disorientation.

It was completely dissociative—I didn't even recognize myself as the person I thought I was. The most obvious signs were the anxiety attacks, the constant nervousness, how much harder I was leaning on substances just to find some meaning in it all, you know? Realizing how much the job was draining me because I was entirely driven by hitting targets. I was pulling in an account executive's salary—like, 13 to 15K [reais] a month. But the money didn't even matter. I was making a lot of money, but I wasn't eating right. Wasn't sleeping. I was just living for the weekends. Even at work, I'd get my hands on Ritalin without a prescription just to perform better and crush my numbers. I don't have ADHD—I was taking it anyway to turn myself into a little customer-service robot. So when I realized I was burning out, what really hit me was asking myself: How far am I willing to go to be 'productive,' when I know damn well what I'm doing goes against everything

I believe in? (Gustavo, 33 years-old, Sales Consultant of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

In contrast, Fernando's experience of burnout stemmed not from a loss of meaning but from the oscillation between periods of intense productivity and subsequent crashes. As a software developer, he described how the unpredictable pace of work triggered cycles of hyperfocus followed by depletion. Burnout, for him, manifested as the inability to sustain the high levels of performance he imposed on himself.

To me, burnout in software development is about how unpredictable the workload is. Some weeks, I've got two tasks to deliver—easy. I can work chill, take breaks to sweep the house, come back, no stress. Then out of nowhere: five urgent tasks due the same day, and it's like, 'Figure it out.' What happens to me under that pressure? I go into insane hyperfocus. I perform scarily well. Like this week—I did more in two days than all of last week combined. Grinded nonstop, delivered everything clean, perfect, on time. But then? Crash. I need weeks to recover, working slower, lazier, just... off. I know I'm finally better when my productivity matches what I expect from myself again. But during burnout I feel like I can't deliver on the demands I expect of myself (Fernando, 22 years-old, Software Developer of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Ricardo, the CEO of a growth-stage startup, also reported experiencing burnout in 2019. Uniquely positioned as the founder of his own company, he took a vacation and began therapy, yet he attributes his burnout not to workload or external pressures, but to his perceived personal shortcomings. For him, the emotional collapse was rooted in his struggle to adapt to the changing dynamics of leadership as the company scaled.

The burnout hit me because I didn't know how to handle the business. I couldn't adapt to scaling the team. I was managing 15 people—leading everyone. Then suddenly in 2019, it was 45 people with other leaders running their own missions. I felt incompetent, stuck in the same old mindset while needing to rebuild myself overnight... and failing. So the burnout was more about me—my inability to adapt—than the work itself. The workload hadn't even changed. Looking back, I think it had been creeping up for a while. But I'll never forget that Tuesday morning: I woke up crying. Stood in the shower sobbing. Couldn't face the office. That had never happened before. So that day, I called the team and said: 'I'm not coming.' Didn't work. Canceled meetings. But I cooked, went grocery shopping, hit the gym—and by evening, I actually felt okay. That's when I realized: I'd stopped looking after myself (Ricardo, 42 years old, CEO of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

These narratives highlight the multiplicity of meanings attached to burnout, revealing how it can be interpreted as the consequence of personal misalignment, psychological overload, or structural imbalance. While lacking a medical diagnosis,

these self-identified cases illuminate how individuals narrativize suffering in order to regain a sense of agency and coherence. Importantly, they point to the porous boundary between personal accountability and organizational pressures, as individuals struggle to interpret whether burnout stems from external conditions or internal failures.

Only three participants *actively sought medical help after experiencing severe stress and subsequently received a clinical diagnosis of burnout*. Despite the severity of their condition, only one was granted formal medical leave and ultimately resigned from the company. The other two remained employed at the same organizations where their experiences of burnout had first emerged, but continued working under medication. As their narratives reveal, their strong emotional attachment to their work made the idea of fully disengaging through official leave almost unthinkable. Instead, they opted for brief periods of rest, reductions in workload, and prescription medication to manage their symptoms before returning to their daily routines. These cases illustrate how the moral weight of professional responsibility and emotional investment in the workplace often outweighs the legitimacy of clinical diagnosis, shaping how individuals negotiate recovery.

Nathi, for example, explicitly states her love for both her role and the company she works for. She recalls experiencing her first episode of burnout in 2020, which she initially treated with alternative methods such as homeopathy, meditation, yoga, and vacation. However, without formal intervention, her symptoms returned more intensely in 2021, prompting her to seek psychiatric treatment and begin using medication.

The 2021 burnout was the aftermath of an untreated 2020, you know? Burnout isn't like the flu—you can't just pop a pill and call it a day. So 2021 was really the progression of something that had been building. But in 2020, my triggers were: one, being given responsibility I wasn't ready for, and two, having zero clarity on what actually needed to be done. I was handed a role I didn't think I could handle—my boss had left the company, and suddenly I was alone in the department, completely out of my depth. Then add the pandemic on top, people literally dying, and I was just... overloaded. Expected to build a project from scratch, do all the research... My brain was full. No more space left. And then—snap. The breaking point was realizing: I don't think I can do what you're asking me to do. 2021 was the same story, except this time I needed medication.

Back in 2020, I talked to my manager and 'stepped back.' I say 'stepped back' loosely—my ex-husband used to say, 'You didn't step back from shit. You stopped working. That's not the same thing.' Because a real leave of absence is official, documented. Mine wasn't. I'd check emails in the morning, then do nothing all afternoon. My mom came to stay, so I'd take her

out or just lie around at home. I'd think I was fine, then open my laptop and—bam—panic attack. [...] Eventually, I took actual vacation.

I started psychiatric treatment in May 2021. But here's the thing about meds: depending on the treatment, it's rough, man. I fell into a hole—like, a literal hellhole—and didn't crawl out until October 2021. Worst year of my life. Then came the bipolar type 2 diagnosis. Took forever to balance the antidepressants with mood stabilizers... Until we got it right? Midnight panic attacks, waking up gasping, crying all day. Full-blown depression. I was in it. Rock bottom (Nathi, 32 years old, Senior Marketing Analyst of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Ana's experience echoes with similar emotional conflicts. Despite also receiving medical care, including both psychological and psychiatric treatment, she resisted the idea of taking formal medical leave. For her, the mere thought of disengaging from work aggravated her psychological distress, as it conflicted with her professional identity and sense of commitment.

In 2021, I had burnout. I was under medical care for a long time. I didn't take a leave from work—I couldn't. Just the thought of taking leave made my psychological state worse. So I had extensive therapy with both a psychologist and psychiatrist. At the time, my direct manager recommended a really good psychiatrist. [...] I'd never taken any medication before, but suddenly I was on three strong chemical meds every morning just to survive through it all (Ana, 33 years old, Financial Controller of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Ana traces the origin of her burnout to a period of intense financial and emotional pressure during a funding round, when she was responsible for overseeing the due diligence process. The turning point, however, came when she had to directly advise layoffs.

We were in the middle of a major funding round. During these periods, we go through due diligence—when audit teams come in and start scrutinizing everything we're doing. That's when my anxiety attacks became more frequent. And it started affecting my personal life too. I remember thinking: I love what I do so much. I love working here—what's happening to me? What's going on? This pressure didn't appear overnight, you know? I'd been ignoring the signs, taking on more and more responsibilities. Then came two defining moments.

The first was January 2021, when the company did its first layoff. I was the one who had to provide the numbers. I had to say: 'We need to let this many people go.' I spent days working until 11pm, going through every name with executives, hearing them say: 'This guy has to go.' 'Oh, this guy's wife just had a baby, but what can we do?' And I just... bottled it up, thinking: 'I need to be strong. This is terrible for those affected, but it's also awful for the company.' We weren't even in bad financial shape—we'd just made a strategic mistake, period. That was clear. But seeing everyone suffer while I had to get the numbers exactly right... I was dealing with people's lives here. People losing jobs. New fathers wondering how they'll provide. The team

debating whether to extend their health insurance for another year. It was horrible. But I knew I had to be strong in that moment, so I held it together.

Then six months later, we resumed investment rounds. That triggered me hard. Like, fuck—we're raising money right after laying people off? That realization hit me like an emotional sledgehammer. From then on, every planning session, every decision, every analysis became a trigger. All I could think was: 'I can't make a mistake.' This pressure of not being allowed to fail consumed me. I became almost paranoid, terrified I might hurt people—and what if they found out? Would they come after me? But the truth was, my decisions weren't about the people. It was pure financial strategy. I was just doing my job (Ana, 33 years old, Financial Controller of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Ana's account exposes how burnout is often experienced not merely as exhaustion or psychological overload, but as a moral and affective contradiction. Workers like Ana find themselves caught between the ethical imperative to care and the structural necessity to perform, especially when their actions—however strategic or rationalized—have direct consequences on others' livelihoods. In this context, “*just doing my job*” becomes both a defense mechanism and a site of emotional rupture, a phrase that simultaneously absolves and accuses. Her distress, reignited by the incongruity of renewed investments so soon after layoffs, reveals how startup cycles of hypergrowth and contraction destabilize not only organizational continuity but the very sense of ethical coherence that workers try to maintain.

Ultimately, such testimonies underscore that burnout in startups is not simply a breakdown of the body or mind—it is a breakdown of meaning, trust, and emotional coherence. It is shaped by organizational volatility, but also by the impossible demands placed on workers to be both emotionally resilient and strategically detached, to care deeply and yet remain unaffected. It is within this moral contradiction that burnout takes root—not only as pathology, but as a deeply felt symptom of contemporary labor's unresolved tensions.

It is important to underscore that this discussion does not seek to undermine or discredit the self-perceptions of the workers who described themselves as burned out. On the contrary, their narratives illuminate how burnout has become a vernacular of suffering—a socially and emotionally resonant category through which individuals attempt to make sense of their distress within the complex moral terrain of contemporary work. Rather than treating burnout as a strictly clinical condition, these accounts reveal how the term functions as a flexible and affectively charged label that captures a range of embodied, psychological, and ethical experiences.

Yet, what also emerges from these narratives is the ambivalence with which workers approach the question of resistance. While many recognize the organizational and socio-economic conditions that contribute to their distress, they often refrain from articulating collective responses. Instead, their reflections are deeply entangled with personal ethics, values, and emotions, making the path toward collective action more tenuous. This tension—between structural critique and personal responsibility—helps explain why therapeutic approaches often appear more accessible or legitimate. In contexts where collective ties are weak or fragmented, therapy becomes a privileged mode of coping precisely because it aligns with individualized frameworks of meaning, self-care, and moral accountability.

At the same time, the fact that only three out of the sixteen individuals who identified with burnout had received a formal medical diagnosis suggests a persistent gap between lived experience and institutional recognition. This disconnect raises critical questions about the potential underdiagnosis of burnout, but also about the broader limitations of medical frameworks in capturing the full scope of what workers endure. Ultimately, what is at stake is not only whether burnout is “real,” but how its articulation allows individuals to voice suffering that is often invisible, morally complex, and entangled in the contradictions of organizational life.

14.3 DEALING WITH BURNOUT

In Chapter Six, we examined how entrepreneurs, influencers, and companies within the startup sector have responded to burnout through a variety of initiatives—including motivational rhetoric, the publication of wellness reports, the development of mental health platforms, and the corporate adoption of such services, all aimed at preserving worker productivity. While often framed as expressions of corporate care, these strategies primarily operate by individualizing, psychologizing, and biologizing mental health struggles. In doing so, they obscure the organizational roots of suffering, which are intimately tied to the intensification of labor, the erosion of traditional workplace protections, the lack of recognition, and breaking of illusions.

In this section, the focus shifts to workers themselves, exploring how they attempt to prevent and cope with burnout—whether through informal routines, diagnostic strategies, or therapeutic interventions. Notably, most workers only feel compelled to act once physical or emotional symptoms become too acute to ignore.

In many cases, they begin actively seeking wellbeing only when they are on the verge of burnout—not because they were consciously neglecting earlier signs like insomnia or headaches, but rather because, as Letícia explains, they have a hard time recognizing that it was they who were suffering in the first place.

I always thought [burnout] was something that happened to other people. I believed I could look at my workload and effort and just... know when to stop. That if I got too tired, I'd notice. Then came my near-burnout. I couldn't even comprehend what was happening to me (Letícia, 30 years old, Talent Acquisition of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Yet even when a “*burnout almost happens*”, the coping mechanisms workers adopt tend to reinforce dominant psychologizing logics and self-disciplinary narratives. Although most of them are able to situate their distress within the broader context of startup labor—characterized by changes in labor organization, excessive demands, or conflictual relations with direct managers—many internalize the belief that they have failed to draw proper boundaries or to manage their own stress “correctly.” Generally, it is at such moments that some adopt a self-care discourse to cope with stress.

One thing about well-being that's new for me are tiny daily acts of self-care. Sports have always been my escape valve, but now I'm trying to focus on the little things, you know? Like getting up more during the day, drinking more water, and when I can't cook, at least choosing something decent to eat—not just junk. Super small everyday stuff. Or even letting myself get my nails done, something I'd never allow myself to do before because I couldn't stop working (Fernanda, 31 years old, Product Manager of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Nevertheless, well-being is frequently reframed not as a goal in itself, but as a prerequisite for enhanced productivity, thus reinforcing rather than disrupting neoliberal work imperatives. Even among startup workers, beneath the cultural valorization of productivity in startup environments lies a pervasive ethic of self-optimization. To “*be your best self*” is to constantly optimize—through lifestyle sports, therapy, healthy eating, proper sleep hygiene, and mindfulness routines (Ehrenberg, 2010). But when the demands of work extend well beyond standard hours, how can one realistically achieve all that is deemed necessary for well-being and, by extension, for becoming a better, more productive worker?

This is where the logic of self-discipline takes hold. Mastery over time, energy, and attention becomes not only a professional ideal but a moral one—necessary to succeed at work and to enjoy life outside of it. When that self-discipline fails, as it

inevitably does under pressure, other tools are mobilized: supplements and psychoactive drugs to sustain energy and focus; online therapy sessions to help manage emotions and prevent burnout from spiraling into collapse. These practices reflect what some scholars have described as the *therapeutic turn* of neoliberal governance (Illouz, 2007), in which care for the self becomes both a personal obligation and a performance requirement.

Certainly, collective forms of solidarity at work continue to play a role in mitigating workplace suffering. However, as we have discussed in Chapter Five, such solidarities are increasingly fragile—undermined by the isolating dynamics of remote work and intensified by competitive performance evaluation systems that reward individual outcomes over collective effort. While moments of connection and mutual support do persist, they are often informal, diffuse, and easily disrupted by layoffs or internal restructuring. As a result, this chapter focuses primarily on individualized coping strategies, which emerged as the most prevalent mode of navigating distress during fieldwork. Through these narratives, we gain insight into the complex moral and emotional negotiations workers undertake as they struggle to sustain themselves within a high-growth, high-pressure environment—one that demands not only labor but the continual optimization of the self.

14.3.1 Leisure, lifestyle sports and physical activity

In an effort to maintain some control over their well-being and to ward off burnout, workers often turn to leisure activities and lifestyle sports. However, the integration of these activities into their routines is never immediate or intuitive. Cristina, for instance, only came to recognize the extent to which work had taken over her life during the COVID-19 pandemic—when she found herself estranged from the hobbies she once relied on to decompress.

It was during the pandemic that I realized my entire day revolved around work. Now I know I love surfing, yoga, working out—but before there was zero time for myself. Well, more like zero priority for myself. I had no activities to disconnect from work. [...] The pandemic's also when I started reading again. And here's the thing: I'd always been a reader—any book, anytime—until I joined that company. Then? Stopped cold. During lockdown, I picked it back up, but in phases. First, only technical stuff: 'I'll read about marketing, politics.' Pleasure reading got shelved. Last year, I finally returned to novels—so good, I need that. Now I'm trying to balance it so leisure reading doesn't take over everything. But I've accepted it: I have to read. I need a book in my hands. It's non-negotiable, this thing I

discovered... Rediscovered! Maybe it's my version of meditation—how I unplug and just vanish into a story (Cristina, 32 years old, Marketing Coordinator at a late-stage startup, 2023).

Cristina's account illustrates how her path back to leisure was mediated by a logic of productivity. Her initial return to reading was shaped by utilitarian motives—selecting texts related to work, politics, or personal development—before she gradually allowed herself to read purely for pleasure. This ambivalence is emblematic of a broader pattern observed among several interlocutors: even practices meant for relaxation are frequently filtered through a lens of self-optimization. Only after a sustained process of reengagement does Cristina come to see reading as something essential and non-negotiable in her life—a space of affective refuge and self-reconnection, akin to meditation.

Like Cristina, many workers also cited practices such as yoga, surfing, or fitness routines as part of their efforts to manage stress. These activities are especially popular in Florianópolis, a city frequently branded as the *Brazilian Capital of Quality of Life*. In this context, lifestyle sports are often more than just hobbies: they are central to a narrative of geographic privilege and aspirational living, reflecting the symbolic and material value of living close to the sea. However, beyond this romanticized image, these practices also emerge as crucial strategies for regulating work and well-being, as well as reconfiguring the meaning of life and labor. For workers disillusioned by the unfulfilled promise that work would provide purpose, lifestyle sports offer an alternative form of fulfillment—one that helps reframe self-worth beyond professional success.

Letícia, who often struggles with the intense competitiveness of her work environment, found in canoeing not only a way to unwind and reconnect with nature, but also an opportunity to engage in a non-competitive form of cooperation. The sport became a structured escape that helped her both to mark the end of the workday and to reclaim time for herself.

Now I'm into canoeing. I'd spent ages trying to find a sport I actually liked—never really clicked with anything. Tried volleyball, but it didn't stick. Then I took a canoeing lesson and felt something I can't even explain... It's a team sport, but not competitive—more like a 'we're-all-in-this-together' vibe. Finally, I have an escape in my life. Plus, it's a scheduled activity—the other day I showed up late, and the canoe had already left. So having a set time forces me to stop working. No excuses (Letícia, 30 years old, Talent Acquisition of a late-stage startup, 2023).

In Letícia's account, the structured nature of the activity is key. Canoeing introduces not just leisure, but a set routine outside of work—an externally imposed boundary that compels her to stop working at a certain time. Importantly, the emphasis she places on the *non-competitive* ethos of the sport contrasts sharply with the hyper-individualized performance metrics of her job. In this sense, lifestyle sports become not just a tool for stress relief, but a means of reorienting relational and temporal dynamics that are otherwise dominated by productivity logics. Through canoeing, Letícia enacts a bodily form of resistance—one that carves out time, space, and affective intensity beyond the metrics of productivity. Her choice of a collective yet non-competitive sport also offers a counterpoint to the neoliberal valorization of entrepreneurial individuality, suggesting alternative forms of sociality rooted in collaboration rather than competition.

Fernanda, in turn, frames physical activity as her “*stress escape valve*” and a personal barometer of well-being. Like many workers in this study, she notes that it is often difficult to recognize the early signs of burnout while immersed in high-pressure work cycles. For her, the ability—or inability—to maintain a workout routine functions as a diagnostic signal, revealing when her boundaries are beginning to collapse.

Sports are my stress escape valve, you know? It's where I channel all the bad stuff. Any physical activity—I come back reset. But this whole work-life balance thing, which I've been discussing a lot with my therapist during this sabbatical, is that I've finally relearned how to connect with myself and make myself a priority. Because whenever I jump back into the job market, my tendency is to forget myself, to erase myself. I think I'm a bit of a workaholic—I hyperfocus on problems. And if the problem gets too big, my brain won't shut off. I turn into this little problem-solving machine, completely consumed by it. There are times when I get so overloaded that I stop exercising. That's my red flag—my warning that 'shit's about to hit the fan.' Because then I crash hard and need like two full days alone, sleeping constantly, almost depressive because I can't get out of bed. So what I'm working on now is not crossing that line—not letting a company push me past it, and not pushing myself past it for a company (Fernanda, 30 years old, Product Manager, unemployed, 2022).

Fernanda's testimony highlights how physical activity can become entangled with therapeutic self-awareness and self-regulation. Sports and therapy here serve as *technologies of the self* (Foucault, 1988)—practices through which workers seek to govern their emotions, habits, and temporal rhythms amid unstable labor conditions. What emerges is a form of moral subjectivity centered on balance, self-knowledge, and boundary-setting.

Moreover, the use of the body as an instrument for diagnosing emotional collapse underscores how burnout becomes embodied before it is fully articulated. As scholars of affect and labor have shown, affective exhaustion often precedes conscious recognition, and the body registers crisis through breakdowns in routine or somatic disruptions (Duarte, 1988; Illouz, 2007). In this context, exercise and therapy function as monitoring devices through which workers attempt to remain attuned to these signs—and to keep themselves operational within environments that offer little systemic protection.

Ultimately, both Letícia's and Fernanda's narratives illustrate how leisure and physical activity, while often framed as acts of self-care, are also shaped by broader logics of responsabilization and self-discipline. Yet they also point to the emergence of embodied and affective forms of resistance, however fragile, through which workers attempt to renegotiate their relationship to time, work, the body, and the self.

14.3.2 Therapy and self-awareness

As discussed earlier, in most of the cases observed, physical activity practices were often accompanied by cognitive-behavioral therapy. The pursuit of self-knowledge, therapeutic self-regulation, and emotional management—processes that Illouz (2007) identifies as central to the emotional culture of late capitalism—emerge as key strategies that allow workers not only to endure the pressures of their jobs but also to remain employable within demanding work environments. For many, therapy becomes a means of adapting to the emotional turbulence and structural volatility of startup labor. Gustavo, for instance, frames therapy as a deliberate act of self-investment:

What's the difference between my environment now and before? Therapy. I've realized that to work in tech these days, you have to stay on top of therapy. It's an investment in myself—one I choose over other things. Could be paying off a new car right now, could've upgraded mine. Let's be real: it's basically a loan installment. I drop R\$500 every month on therapy and meds (Gustavo, 33 years-old, Sales Consultant of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Gustavo's statement reflects a broader pattern among workers, for whom therapy is not only a response to suffering, but a calculated decision to maintain functionality and optimize performance. Something we can also see on Kelly's reflection:

What made me seek therapy was realizing I wasn't functioning anymore. What scared me was knowing that if I kept going like that, I'd get fired - and in the emotional state I was in, I wouldn't even be able to look for another job. But then I started therapy, and it was amazing because it helped me get back on my feet. [...] Then I switched departments and started hitting targets again, consistently reaching about 90% of my goals (Kelly, 31 years old, Sales Account Executive of a late-stage startup, 2022).

This logic of “*therapeutic investment*” aligns with the broader ethos of productivity and self-discipline in startup cultures: therapy becomes less about healing and more about maintenance—of one’s emotional stability, focus, and employability.

More broadly, therapy was widely regarded by interlocutors as a crucial tool for managing stress, anxiety, and burnout, as well as for navigating interpersonal and organizational challenges in the workplace. In response to the growing demand for such services, many companies have begun offering therapy benefits or subsidized access to mental health platforms. Both Elisa and Cristina, for instance, recounted how they were only able—or felt compelled—to begin therapy because it was offered as a benefit by their respective companies:

When I first joined [the company], I didn't have access to therapy—hadn't for years. That's a key detail. Then the company partnered with a mental health startup, and suddenly there were professionals available. I started sessions, and it changed my life. [...] Now I know when I'm anxious. I can recognize it. With my therapist, that was the goal: to catch it right as the first physical symptoms hit. 'Feel that? Then act.' Literally step away. Do something—meditate, listen to music, eat candy. Whatever eases it, so I can keep going with my day (Elisa, 31 years old, Customer Success of an early-stage startup, 2023).

Elisa emphasizes how transformative therapy became for her, particularly because she had lacked access to such services prior to joining her current company. Her account reflects how therapy is not only framed as a form of care, but also as a tool for enabling continued productivity. Learning to identify the early signs of anxiety and swiftly deploying coping mechanisms becomes part of a self-regulatory toolkit—one aimed not at challenging the conditions of distress, but at allowing her to “*keep going*” with the workday. Emotional management is thus folded into a broader logic of resilience, aligning well-being with uninterrupted labor performance.

Cristina also initially accessed therapy through her company’s partnership with a mental health platform, but later transitioned to a private therapist. Her narrative

reveals a shift from managing professional discomfort to addressing deeper emotional and existential challenges—yet even this process is rooted in the demands of the workplace:

We have Vibrancy [a mental health platform] at work, so I used it to see this psychologist I knew was good. Coincidentally, she was married to one of the company directors, so she really understood the context—could easily connect the dots—but she kept the personal and professional completely separate. Then she got pregnant and went on leave. That's when I started with my current therapist, who was recommended by a friend. I dropped the company plan and now pay out of pocket. [...] I do cognitive behavioral therapy, and I was specifically looking for a therapist who'd hit me with hard truths—like a wake-up call. I didn't want someone to just ramble with me; I needed someone to shake me awake. Because by then, I'd finally started tackling more personal stuff. At first, my therapy was all about handling my professional role at the company—especially since that's where I had to learn to navigate hierarchy and power dynamics (Cristina, 32 years old, Marketing Coordinator at a late-stage startup, 2023).

Cristina's experience illustrates how therapy becomes a crucial mechanism for adapting to organizational ambiguity and navigating the affective terrain of startup labor. Her demand for *"hard truths"* and structured behavioral correction reflects a growing trend in which therapy is not sought merely for healing, but also for sharpening one's competitive edge and managing internalized failure. This shift aligns with what Rose (1999) describes as *therapeutic governance*: the outsourcing of social and emotional regulation to expert systems that enable individuals to govern themselves in alignment with economic rationalities.

In both Cristina and Elisa cases, therapy is normalized as a necessary condition for survival in fast-paced work environments. As Illouz (2007) argues, the rise of therapeutic discourse has contributed to a new moral economy, where emotional self-awareness and continuous self-improvement become markers of the competent neoliberal subject. In this framework, therapy operates less as a space for transformation and more as a site for responsabilization—a process through which individuals are made accountable for their own well-being, regardless of the structural forces contributing to their distress.

Although frequently perceived as positive, workers' perceptions on corporate mental health initiatives varied considerably. While some interlocutors had long-standing therapeutic relationships that predated their current jobs, others sought therapy specifically in response to acute work-related stress or personal crises that had been amplified by their professional environments. Although these resources

were often appreciated—and in some cases even described as “*life-changing*”—they also exposed a central contradiction in the way care is managed within companies. On the one hand, HR departments and leadership teams increasingly position themselves as promoters of well-being and mental health. On the other hand, many workers remain acutely aware that the primary sources of their stress and suffering lie within the organizational structures themselves: poor management, unattainable goals, constant surveillance despite the promise of autonomy, and a culture of overwork.

This tension is clearly articulated in the testimonies of both Lara and Luciana, whose experiences shed light on the contradictions embedded in contemporary corporate approaches to mental health.

The demands never stop—never. There's always more, always another task, another email, another fire to put out. Managers are completely swamped. You'll never finish your day and think, 'Nice, nothing left to do!' That day doesn't exist. The work just keeps coming. And let's be real—people overwork themselves for all sorts of reasons. Maybe they're chasing a promotion, maybe they're scared of falling behind, or maybe they're just terrified of what happens if they don't respond fast enough. 'What if I get fired?' It's messed up when you think about it. We're basically enslaving ourselves—not literally, but... yeah, kind of. And the wildest part? We act like it's cool! [laughs] Honestly, the only reason I'm keeping my head above water is therapy and working on my own self-awareness (Lara, 32 years-old, New Business Coordinator - Key Account Manager of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

At Unisus, there was so much micromanagement. I remember needing to go to the doctor, needing to take care of my health, but I wouldn't because I knew I'd get criticized, get those judgmental looks. Early on at Unisus, if you left at 6pm, you'd hear managers in the hallway saying things like 'Leaving at this hour? Losing motivation?' [...] Today we'd easily recognize this as workplace harassment, right? But back then I didn't have that awareness. I was young, inexperienced, and lacked the tools and information. [...] Ironically, Unisus itself helped educate me about these issues. The People team actually brought in a lot of this awareness. But the pressure for results at Unisus was intense - and often for unrealistic targets. There were periods when only 20% of the team hit their goals. When that happens consistently, the problem isn't the team - it's the unrealistic goals. I was 'lucky' enough to hit those targets myself, but at what cost? The cost of neglecting doctor visits for three straight years. I only started recognizing this when Unisus itself began educating us about harassment, work-life balance... I've been in therapy since childhood - many years of it. But more recently, I've focused my therapy specifically on workplace issues (Luciana, 35 years old, Sales Representative at a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Lara's account emphasizes the self-perpetuating logic of overwork, in which workers, driven by fear, ambition, or internalized ideals of performance, push themselves beyond sustainable limits. Even as she jokes about the normalization of

this dynamic—“*we act like it’s cool*”—her comment points to a deeper insight: without the possibility of a collective organization that could advocate for systemic change, she turns to individual strategies, such as therapy and self-awareness, to deal with the problem of overwork.

Luciana’s narrative echoes and expands this perspective. While her company invested in “*mental health awareness*” and education initiatives, these efforts did little to transform the core organizational drivers of distress—such as unrealistic targets, chronic micromanagement, and punitive norms around availability. The irony she points to is striking: it was the very company responsible for producing harmful conditions that later attempted to educate workers about them, without ever addressing their root causes. In this way, corporate care appears as both a remedy and a deflection, managing symptoms while preserving the status quo.

Together, Lara and Luciana illuminate the ambivalence of therapeutic culture in the workplace. Therapy is vital—it helps workers cope, make sense of their suffering, and reclaim some degree of agency. But in the absence of institutional accountability, it also becomes a technology of endurance: a means to keep going despite exploitative conditions.

Ultimately, their testimonies reveal how individualized solutions and corporate well-being rhetoric coexist with—and often obscure—the structural violence of work. Workers are encouraged to take responsibility for their own mental health, while the systems that produce burnout remain largely untouched. Unless a formal complaint is made, harmful practices persist unchecked, and even then, structural change remains elusive. In this context, therapy can be both a lifeline and a coping mechanism that allows the work force to keep running.

14.3.3 Drugs and Medicalization

What happens when leisure, physical activity, and therapy are no longer sufficient to manage the demands and distress of work? For many of the interlocutors in this study, the answer lies in the turn to psychoactive substances—either through the recreational use of marijuana or through medicalization via psychiatric diagnoses and the use of psychotropics.

Despite its illegal status in Brazil, marijuana remains the most widely consumed illicit drug in the country (FIOCRUZ, 2019). As Bruna Overbeck (2023)

notes, common sense often perceives the city of Florianópolis—particularly certain neighborhoods like *Campeche*, *Rio Tavares*, and *Lagoa da Conceição*—as *patches* (Magnani, 2002) where marijuana use is informally tolerated. These are areas where white, middle-class bodies move with relative freedom, enjoying a kind of de facto “decriminalization.” Overbeck’s findings mirror the ethnographic reality observed in this research: most participants—also predominantly white and middle class—reported regular use of marijuana, particularly outside work hours.

Much like post-work drinking rituals among industrial workers (Duarte, 1988), these startup workers use marijuana as a boundary ritual—a way to signal the end of the workday and transition into leisure. Especially in remote or hybrid work contexts, where spatial and temporal boundaries between labor and life have become blurred, marijuana helps demarcate these domains. Yet unlike alcohol, its use is perceived as less physiologically harmful and more conducive to relaxation, focus, or introspection.

I'm having a crisis with my hobbies, to be quite honest. One thing I end up resorting to a lot is cannabis to relax. So it's that moment, to listen to music, smoke and relax (Camila, 25 years-old, People Manager of an early-stage startup, 2022).

As Camila’s statement reveals, marijuana use functions both as a coping mechanism and a form of self-care in a context where hobbies are often sacrificed to overwork, and mental overload makes traditional leisure difficult to access or enjoy. The act of smoking—particularly in solitary or quiet settings—is described as a deliberate strategy to disconnect from the mental loops of work, soothe anxiety, and regain a sense of autonomy over one’s time and emotions.

In this light, marijuana serves dual functions: a rite of passage, helping workers mentally exit the workday, and an emotional regulator, modulating the psychic impacts of a labor regime characterized by high demands, porous boundaries, and perpetual connectivity. While the broader legal and social implications of marijuana use in Brazil remain complex, among these workers, its use reflects an informal, embodied response to the emotional and cognitive strains of contemporary labor.

Nevertheless, when neither therapy nor marijuana prove sufficient, workers often find themselves confronting a more ambivalent threshold: the possibility of psychiatric treatment and medicalization. This path is rarely taken lightly. For many, it is preceded by resistance, hesitation, and a search for alternative forms of care—

including flower remedies or cannabidiol oil (CBD)—all of which are perceived as more “natural” or less stigmatized than psychotropic medication.

I had a series of panic attacks—it took a full week to finally calm down. I took 15 days off work, saw a psychologist who referred me to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist wanted to prescribe medication. I was furious, I absolutely refused to take meds at first. But eventually I said, 'Fine, maybe it's necessary... for now' (Kelly, 32 years old, Sales Account Executive of a late-stage startup, 2023).

During my worst anxiety episodes, I tried everything: flower remedies, meditation, even family constellation therapy... Man, I did every damn thing imaginable to calm my nerves, until I finally had to face the truth: I needed to see a psychiatrist. Nowadays, I take CBD that has been prescribed by my psychiatrist (Fabricio, 25 years-old, Entry-level Software Developer of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Right now I'm on Citalopram—you know, the one everyone takes. It's supposed to help with my brain's serotonin levels. At first, I resisted, but my doctor said it was just support, that I was suffering unnecessarily alone. [...] It's been almost two years now. If I need longer treatment, I'd rather manage with CBD. Honestly? I'd choose CBD for life over pharmaceuticals, but for now [the medication] has helped tremendously. I know for sure I only survived that 2019-2022 period because I was medicated (Cristina, 32 years old, Marketing Coordinator at a late-stage startup, 2023).

Across these narratives, a common pattern emerges: the initial reluctance to accept psychiatric medication is rooted in a mix of moral reasoning and cultural meaning—concerns about dependency, fear of “chemical” interventions, and a deeper sense of failure, as if one had not been able to manage distress through willpower, therapy, or lifestyle adjustments. In this sense, medicalization is often experienced not only as treatment but as a last resort, signaling that suffering has exceeded the bounds of what can be controlled through individual strategies or self-care.

However, once this threshold is crossed, many acknowledge the transformative role of psychotropic medications, even as they remain critical of their long-term use or side effects. Some, like Felix and Cristina, turn to CBD as a more acceptable or sustainable form of support—one that blends medical authority with the perception of a more “natural,” less invasive form of care.

This oscillation between resistance and acceptance highlights the moral and biopolitical complexities of psychiatric medicalization in contemporary work contexts. It is not simply about accessing treatment, but about navigating a landscape where emotional suffering is at once individualized, pathologized, and responsabilized—where the imperative to stay productive coexists with the recognition that something

is profoundly wrong. As such, the decision to medicate is both an act of surrender and survival: a way to remain functional in a world that offers few systemic solutions to the psychic costs of labor.

These trajectories mirror what Ana also expressed during her account of burnout. Even when medication is accepted, the process is rarely linear. Finding the “right” prescription often involves trial and error, side effects, dosage adjustments, and continued ambivalence.

At the time, I was on Venvanse—some people take it now to boost focus. It gives you hyperfocus but kills your social skills. You get so locked into tasks because you're insanely productive. You see yourself crushing it at work, and suddenly you lose all desire for social interactions that don't feel 'productive.' (Ana, 33 years old, Financial Controller of a late-stage startup, 2022).

Moreover, Ana's experience illustrates a pattern seen across several interviews: the increasing normalization of psychiatric medication not only as a response to suffering, but as a tool to enhance functionality within the rhythms of startup labor. In her account, Venvanse—a stimulant commonly prescribed for ADHD—emerges not just as treatment, but as a performance enhancer, a drug that renders one more compatible with the startup ethos of intensity, speed, and results. Yet, as she notes, this hyperproductivity comes at a cost: the erosion of social life, spontaneity, and emotional presence.

Camila, who—as mentioned earlier—uses marijuana to decompress, also reports using Ritalin, another stimulant, in moments of heightened distress linked to declining productivity:

I use Ritalin as needed: only when I notice my anxiety or depression worsening beyond my normal ADHD fluctuations. When things start feeling overwhelming, that's when I begin taking it daily. Just one small pill after lunch to help me focus. [...] For me, anxiety and depression are directly tied to low productivity. When that snowball effect starts, feeling unmotivated, getting less done, which then makes me more anxious and depressed, that's when the medication helps me reorganize myself (Camila, 25 years-old, People Manager of an early-stage startup, 2022).

In both narratives, pharmaceuticals such as Venvanse and Ritalin appear not merely as treatments, but as what Rogério Azize (2002) refers to as *lifestyle drugs*—substances used not solely to alleviate illness, discomfort, or disorder, but as tools for navigating and managing the emotional volatility generated by one's environment, all while maintaining the capacity to perform within it.

In this sense, Ritalin and Venvanse appear to occupy a cultural and symbolic position similar to that held by Prozac—which, as Ehrenberg (2010) argued, came to represent not just the alleviation of depression but the broader imperative of emotional control, psychic optimization, and self-regulation in late capitalist societies. If Prozac epitomized the subject who had to be freed from inhibition in order to act, Venvanse and Ritalin seem to correspond to a subject who must stay focused, accelerated, and functional—even as that functionality erodes their capacity for rest, relationality, and joy.

14.3.4 Resignation and life change

From an individual perspective, burnout often sets in once the boundaries between personal and professional life have been significantly eroded. As some interlocutors described, “*after getting companies used to treating us poorly*”—such as routinely working beyond reasonable limits—it becomes increasingly difficult to reestablish boundaries.

Certainly, practices like physical activity, engaging in hobbies, or using substances can function as external buffers that help to delineate the contours of work. Therapy and medication, likewise, provide tools for self-knowledge and emotional regulation to avoid “*getting carried away*” by the demands of the job. However, these strategies tend to have diminishing returns in the face of continuous pressure, and their effectiveness often breaks down over time.

Now I recognize that I operate in cycles—I have this tendency to slip back into overwork, and I need to build other mechanisms in my life to break free. If those safeguards are not solid, work becomes my everything [...] Whenever I catch myself, I know it's the [capitalist] system doing this to me. I try to push it away, but I always relapse. Like recently: I took vacation, came back thinking, Wow, I'd forgotten what this felt like! Two days later? Shit, I forgot to eat lunch again. This happens to me so easily (Letícia, 30 years old, People Analytics of a late-stage startup, 2023).

Letícia’s account captures the cyclical and systemic nature of overwork. Her reflection helps illuminate how difficult it is to break away from suffering on an individual level, particularly in an environment where labor intensity is naturalized and reabsorbed into personal aspirations.

Given these conditions, it is unsurprising that when all coping strategies “fail,” resignation becomes a last resort—a chance to reset boundaries and reclaim control.

Due to the longitudinal nature of this research, it was possible to revisit interlocutors who, in the first interview, had recently started new jobs. Many expressed hope that this new cycle would be different: that they would not work unpaid hours, would respect legal limits, avoid becoming too emotionally involved with coworkers or company leadership, and keep a healthy distance from the company's mission and values.

Franco, for instance, had been at his new company for only three months when we spoke in 2022. He had left his previous job after reaching a breaking point:

At my old job, nearly every day, I'd say: I need to quit. I was completely drained from stress—just fed up with everything being 'urgent,' with demands coming from all directions. So much responsibility, too. I was genuinely exhausted. [...] I worked from my bedroom. I'd clock out but still be in the bedroom, you know? So it felt like my day never actually ended. More like I was just hitting pause—always stuck in this loop. The separation was impossible. [...] Eventually I thought, I need a change of scenery. So I job-hunted, saw F.'s posting, applied, and got in. [...] But I learned from all that. Now I actively try to separate workspaces, say no sometimes, not accept every task... anything to avoid slipping back to that dark place. When I joined [the new company], I vowed: This time, no blending. No work messages at home—my therapist's advice too. Implementing this was training, not magic. At first, if I finished something Friday, I'd obsess all weekend wondering if it was okay. Pure torture. But I practiced. And now? I can actually not think of work during weekends (Franco, 24 years old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2022).

Arthur shared a similar trajectory, having resigned from a managerial position at an early-stage startup only to re-enter the market as an intern of a growth-stage company:

The company [early-stage startup] noticed I had a knack for data collection and offered me a data manager position. At first, I was thrown into the deep end—I didn't really know what I was doing, but I accepted the challenge because a management role symbolizes career growth, right? It did ultimately change my career path and how I view data. I started studying and completed a professional data analysis course, but I realized that the company wasn't really applying these methods. I couldn't implement what I was learning in my daily work. That's why I eventually resigned—I was frustrated at not being able to put my new skills into practice. [...] Besides, mentally, I was constantly irritated—always stressed. I think there were times I actually made myself sick. Only later did I realize my contract stipulated 6-hour workdays, but I was consistently putting in 8+ hours because I'd get pulled into projects or had to build things from scratch (Arthur, 30 years old, Data Analyst Trainee of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

Arthur, much like Franco, decided to quit and start over at a new company after an extended period of stress. In his case, he applied to a growth-stage startup

he had been following on social media, hoping that a more mature organization would provide a more structured and sustainable work environment.

I noticed how tight-knit the team was—like, they'd all hit the gym together—and I immediately thought, 'This seems like a great place to work.' [...] It feels like a startup with more market maturity. You've got that light, cool company vibe but with seasoned professionals. [...] I'd love to build my career here, mainly for the stability. Maybe this is not the highest salary out there, but the cultural fit is perfect. You can tell the company culture is solid—they've already shown interest in converting me to full-time. And honestly? As an intern here, I'm learning way more than I did as a manager at my last startup (Arthur, 30 years old, Data Analyst Trainee of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

These narratives show how switching jobs within the tech sector is often framed as a personal reset—a chance to build a healthier relationship with work. However, revisiting these interlocutors a year later revealed a recurring pattern: despite efforts to “do it differently,” many were already exhausted once again. Their initial hopes had faded, and the structural forces that shaped their prior experiences—intensified pace, boundary collapse, emotional investment—had reasserted themselves back in the context of overwork and exhaustion.

Franco, for instance, described himself as significantly more stressed than usual in 2023, especially due to the wave of layoffs that repeatedly hit his company throughout the year. According to him, approximately ten people were let go each month without replacement. Those who remained were left not only to manage their own responsibilities, but also to absorb the workload of their former colleagues.

We'd been through mass layoffs before, but tech was always untouched. So to us, it almost felt theoretical—you'd see people's profile pics turn gray in the chat, but it never hit close to our team. Then when they cut the first tech guy. That's when the bomb detonated in our backyard. Those were intense weeks. These days, we cope with jokes—'Oh, they got promoted to Open to Work'—but there's always this weird tension. You log in [on the company's Slack chat] to see the auto-message: 'X is no longer with the company.' Zero context. Maybe they told their manager to fuck off. Maybe performance issues. Who knows? The company's discourse is all 'transparency is our value!' until you realize their transparency stops at page two (Franco, 25 years old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

To endure such turbulent periods, Franco relied on a mix of vacation time, humor, and camaraderie with colleagues. Still, he confided that he was already planning his exit—applying to European companies abroad, a move he would make in 2024.

Before my vacation, I had zero patience left. After taking time off, it helped a bit, but not enough. I've realized my 'normal' now [in 2023] is way more stressed than I used to be—like my daily stress threshold at this company has permanently leveled up. The upside is that seeing people from the team every day helps distract me. I'm super extroverted, so I'm constantly cracking jokes and all. But even so, these past few months, the stress episodes have been hitting more often (Franco, 25 years old, Data Analyst of a growth-stage startup, 2023).

Arthur, who had initially joined the new company with enthusiasm, also found himself confronting a similar threshold. After a year without being promoted from intern to a full-time position, he requested to quit. The situation deteriorated when a mid-level colleague resigned and was not replaced, significantly intensifying Arthur's workload.

Last year I was pulling all-nighters, chugging energy drinks to meet deadlines. I'd racked up insane overtime—technically illegal since interns aren't supposed to work extra hours. When I said I'd quit, I think the company felt guilty; they even paid out some of that overtime. But legally? Interns shouldn't be doing this shit. [...] Overwork intensified when the mid-level guy who worked with me quit while we were in the middle of a big project—he'd had enough. The company refused to meet his flexibility needs. Talking to him later, I totally got it: they were demanding way too much. [After he left] my manager kept dumping tasks on me—task after task. As an intern, I'd push back sometimes, but ultimately I had to deliver. Thing is, I'm not a machine. Hell, I doubt even a machine could process that much crap (Arthur, 31 years old, Data Analyst Trainee of a growth-stage startup, 2024).

Eventually, Arthur managed to negotiate a transfer to a different sub team under a new manager and set a personal deadline: if he was not officially hired by the end of his second year, he would leave. When he was finally offered a full-time position after a year and eight months as a trainee, he chose to stay with the company.

These accounts underscore how, even when workers develop coping mechanisms by changing jobs, setting fresh new boundaries, and attempting to reclaim control over their professional trajectories, their efforts often clash with a broader context marked by instability, labor intensification, and constantly shifting expectations. The optimistic reset they initially seek—through job changes or boundary-setting—gradually unravels under pressure, revealing not a personal failure in returning to cycles of stress, but rather the systemic impossibility of fully escaping them in a work environment that continuously undermines stability.

14.3.5 Collective coping

As discussed in Chapter Six, startup companies often offer institutionalized coping mechanisms designed to help employees manage stress. These typically include subsidized therapy sessions or wellness programs created under the premises of *corporate maternalism* (Chen, 2022). Yet, such initiatives tend to psychologize and individualize the problem of stress—treating it as an internal deficit to be managed rather than addressing the structural conditions embedded in the organization of work itself.

In contrast, Chapter Seven, so far, has explored the individual strategies that workers themselves mobilize to cope with stress and emotional exhaustion. However, this does not mean that coping is always an individual endeavor, or that the work environment of startups precludes the possibility of collective responses. Beyond the formal initiatives promoted by management and the self-care routines cultivated by individuals, there are also informal and often improvised spaces for collective coping that emerge within the *gray areas of contemporary employment* (Bureau *et al.*, 2024). Even in a context increasingly shaped by remote work, social fragmentation, and internal competition, workers continue to carve out micro-spaces of resistance—fragile, yet vital forms of solidarity that help them navigate the daily pressures of startup life.

According to Lorient (2015), there are three main dimensions of collective coping:

First, redefining the constraints or difficulties as an acceptable or normal part of “risks of the job,” and which are necessary in order to perform well, which would be the object of collective pride. [...] Second], the group tries to influence stressors by reducing or eliminating them through mutual support, resolving difficulties in advance, acting on the environment by informal agreement or social movement, sharing the tricks of the trade, and by the internal division of labor. Finally, the collectivity may redefine the meaning of hardship or discomfort, not as a demonstration of individual weakness but rather as the symptom of a condition shared collectively and against which one can and should fight together. [...] Rather than speaking of suffering, stress, or harassment, the situation is described as exploitation, alienation, a conflict of interest between “them”—the leaders, bosses, management who know nothing about work and only see the short-term profitability—and “us”—those in the profession who know what quality is and how to obtain it. (Lorient, 2015, p. 5-6).

As we discussed in Chapter Five, the majority of the tech working class does not take the leap of transforming coping mechanisms into sustained, collective forms

of unionization or organized resistance. This helps explain the persistently low levels of union representation in the sector. Nevertheless, among startup workers, we can observe how both the normalization of a certain baseline level of stress and the emergence of mutual support practices are reproduced in everyday life. Let us now explore how these two dynamics manifest within the startup work environment.

In most startup companies, stress is not necessarily framed as a pathological deviation but rather as an expected—and even valorized—feature of the work environment (Loriol, 2015). Within this framework, stress becomes something to be endured and managed, often internalized as a marker of dedication and resilience. Many workers cope with this reality by reinforcing their sense of commitment and belonging, aligning themselves with the collective narrative that a certain degree of stress is justified—perhaps even noble—if it means contributing to something meaningful: a company that is “*disrupting*” industries or “*changing the world*” through innovation.

As this thesis has shown, however, such moral investment tends to erode when workers begin to feel that their dedication is no longer reciprocated. A lack of recognition—often exacerbated by disorganized leadership or poor management practices—breeds frustration and disillusionment. The promise of meaningful, mission-driven labor gives way to the perception that their work and loyalty are undervalued, calling into question the legitimacy of the very commitment that once sustained them.

When frustrations such as these accumulate—especially in conjunction with other stressors like layoffs and intensified workloads for those who remain—a different set of collective coping mechanisms emerges. One of the most common is the practice of confiding in trusted colleagues, often through parallel channels such as WhatsApp or informal video calls during work hours. These exchanges are not intended to resolve work-related tasks but to complain about them, offering a space to vent, validate one another’s experiences, and briefly suspend the isolating effects of remote labor. However, identifying who can be trusted in such interactions takes time—especially in remote settings, where spontaneous conversations during shared lunches or hallway encounters are no longer possible.

Some workers, like Kelly, creatively mobilize formal company tools—such as “*one-on-one*” meetings—as opportunities to build alliances and find support. In her case, to avoid feeling isolated in her team and to navigate a situation involving an

abusive manager, she proactively requested a “one-on-one” meeting with a more senior colleague. Framing it as a request for professional mentorship, she successfully cultivated a relationship of trust that allowed her to express distress and receive emotional support. This tactic was echoed by other interlocutors as well. Yet, despite their value, such forms of collective coping remain fragmented and precarious. They often depend on individual initiative and are vulnerable to disruption—especially during layoffs, when a single dismissal can dissolve an entire support dyad.

When such ruptures occur, the informal network may not disappear entirely, but it weakens significantly. For those who remain in the company, two dominant coping strategies tend to surface. The first is what some describe as entering “*survivor mode*”: feeling simultaneously grateful for having kept their job and fearful of being next, they throw themselves more deeply into work, often suppressing dissent. The second is the construction of a *community of coping* (Loriol, 2015) through humor. As Franco described, workers began to sarcastically refer to colleagues who had been laid off as having been “*promoted to Open to Work*”—a bitterly ironic reference to the phrase used on LinkedIn profiles by the recently unemployed. In this way, humor becomes a tool not only for solidarity, but also for emotional regulation within an environment where anxiety and uncertainty have become structural.

Another form of community of coping emerges among middle managers, who at times attempt to create protective “*bubbles*” for their teams within an otherwise hostile work environment. Cristina, for instance, describes how she actively tried to shield one of her subordinates from the excessive demands imposed by abusive upper management, assuming the dual role of manager and emotional buffer.

I had already noticed that my team member wasn't doing well, but it was 2020—no one was doing well. Then her therapist said she was showing signs of burnout, and she came to talk to me about it. The first thing I did was reach out to someone from HR to talk, because the therapist told her to take time off. But she [my team member] said she'd go crazy if she stopped working completely. So what we did was: I took on all of her work, and she worked part-time just handling a few specific things when I really needed her. [...] Watching her suffer was awful, because she started spiraling, thinking she was incompetent. So on top of doing her job and mine, I was also trying to keep her sane and okay. I spent a long time reminding her that she was sick, and that she shouldn't be so hard on herself. [...] I basically became a buffer for her, until she was finally able to take a vacation (Cristina, 31 years old, Marketing Coordinator at a late-stage startup, 2022).

Cristina's account illustrates how, even within hierarchical structures, bonds of solidarity can emerge—particularly when a worker is diagnosed with burnout and receives formal validation of their suffering. While this kind of intervention reflects care and ethical commitment, it also reveals the contradictions embedded in middle management roles. In attempting to protect her team member, Cristina assumed an unsustainable workload herself, effectively absorbing both the emotional and operational pressures of the job. Her experience shows how acts of solidarity—though vital—often rely on individual sacrifices that can place the manager's own well-being at risk.

In conclusion, while startup environments often frame burnout and emotional exhaustion as individual shortcomings to be managed through institutionalized wellness initiatives, the everyday practices of workers reveal more complex, collective dynamics of coping and resistance. As this chapter has demonstrated, even within highly individualized, competitive, and remote work settings, workers carve out informal spaces of solidarity—through humor, trust-building, tactical alliances, and mutual support. These fragile forms of collective coping both mitigate suffering and expose the systemic contradictions that underpin startup labor: the valorization of stress, the instability of emotional support networks, and the hidden costs of care assumed by individuals. Ultimately, understanding these informal and precarious solidarities is crucial for grasping not only how workers survive under conditions of subjective precariousness, but also why more sustained forms of collective organization remain so difficult to achieve in the contemporary tech sector.

14.4 HOW EACH BEHAVIORAL TYPE DEALS WITH DISTRESS AND BURNOUT

In Chapter Five, we identified four emergent patterns of behavior that offered a more dynamic understanding of how workers position themselves within the moral and affective landscape of startup ethos and labor. These were: Overly Commitment, Neoliberal Reformism, Cynicism, and Resigned Criticism. While the previous categorization focused on mapping workers' diverse orientations toward belief, identity, and systemic engagement, this section revisits these patterns to examine how their subject positions shape their experiences of burnout and inform their coping strategies. As previously discussed, burnout—conceived as a socially constructed and historically situated phenomena—does not affect workers uniformly.

Its manifestations are closely intertwined not only with individuals' relationships to labor, meaning, and belief, but also with the shifting dynamics of the company's venture round, management strategies, and stage of development. Therefore, drawing on the behavioral patterns previously outlined, we now explore and speculate on how each behavioral pattern tends to experience distress and adopt distinct mechanisms to cope with it.

Framework 6 – Burnout and coping strategies across behavioral patterns

Behavioral Pattern	Burnout Risk	Burnout Causes	Coping Mechanisms
Overly Commitment	Very High	Over-identification with work, long hours of work, internalized pressure	Therapy, medication, temporary withdrawal
Neoliberal Reformism	Moderate	Emotional investment, community expectations, overwork	Community engagement, rationalization, boundary-setting
Cynicism	High	Past disillusionment, lack of recognition	Substances, sports, consumption, sarcastic detachment
Resigned Criticism	Low–Moderate	Ethical conflict, social isolation	Political reflection, informal networks outside work, resignation, irony

Source: elaborated by the author.

Among all patterns, Overly Commitment presents the highest vulnerability to burnout. Its intense emotional and identity investment in work fosters a condition of subjective precarity, wherein failure or disillusionment affects not only professional expectations but strikes at the very core of the self. In this context, burnout is experienced as exhaustion resulting from prolonged periods of deep work engagement, compounded by a perceived lack of recognition, organizational contraction, or ideological disillusionment. Because this pattern is marked by declarations such as *“loving what one does”* or *“loving the company,”* coping strategies often involve psychiatric or therapeutic support—a phenomenon that can be understood as the medicalization of burnout—as individuals attempt to restore

their productive selves through pharmaceutical or clinical interventions. When these measures prove insufficient, some temporarily withdraw from work, but the majority tend to resign and seek a fresh start in another company. However, this move is rarely accompanied by a critical reassessment of the ideological commitments underlying their overinvestment. As a result, the cycle of overwork is perpetuated, demanding either constant self-management or a more radical reorientation of life to avoid recurrent crises.

By contrast, the Neoliberal Reformism pattern of behavior entails a moderate risk of burnout. While still characterized by deep engagement with work, this pattern incorporates a more critical perspective on organizational structures, allowing for the establishment of pragmatic boundaries and a degree of emotional detachment. Here, burnout does not typically stem from uncritical devotion to a company but rather from the friction between reformist ideals and the structural limitations of implementation—especially when ethical, sustainable, or inclusive initiatives are ignored, neutralized, or co-opted by management. Coping strategies associated with this pattern tend to be more collective, involving participation in mentorship networks, professional associations, or strategic internal mobility in pursuit of more value-aligned roles. Although still exposed to exhaustion, this pattern demonstrates greater emotional elasticity than Overly Commitment, largely because professional identity is not entirely tethered to a single organization. Engagement with a broader ecosystem of actors within the tech and startup field provides alternative sources of validation and belonging, mitigating the personal impact of professional setbacks.

The Cynicism pattern of behavior, in many cases, reflects the aftermath of burnout. Often emerging from prior Overly Commitment, this pattern takes shape following disillusioning experiences such as layoffs, breaches of trust, or prolonged exposure to toxic leadership. Though individuals continue to work within the startup ecosystem, they do so with markedly diminished expectations. Burnout, in this case, is neither fully confronted nor adequately processed; instead, it is masked by irony, sarcasm, and a performative detachment from one's professional role. Coping strategies commonly include individualized lifestyle adjustments—such as intensified focus on fitness, travel, or consumption of luxury goods—which are framed as compensation for occupational frustrations. In some cases, reliance on psychiatric medication or substance use serves as a mechanism for managing residual emotional strain. The relationship to burnout within this pattern is cyclical and

insufficiently addressed: cynicism functions simultaneously as a protective shield and an impediment to deeper introspection. As a result, frequent job changes often become a means of temporarily resetting emotional involvement without fundamentally altering the underlying orientation to work.

The pattern of Resigned Criticism tends to be marked by a distinct form of psychic exhaustion—one less anchored in the sheer volume of work and more in the persistent tension of inhabiting a system that is fundamentally critiqued. Distress associated with this pattern arises not primarily from overwork, but from the emotional and moral strain of living in contradiction: recognizing the structural injustices and alienating conditions of startup labor while continuing to participate in it due to economic necessity or the perceived absence of viable alternatives within the capitalist system. This form of distress often manifests as isolation, disenchantment, and a quiet sense of resignation. Resigned Criticism typically gives rise to coping mechanisms rooted in reflective or politicized conversations, offering partial solace through small, informal networks of peers who share similar critiques. The suffering attached to this behavioral pattern is rooted in the cognitive dissonance of not believing yet continuing to comply, while coping strategies are characterized by a combination of irony, endurance, and an ongoing—if often discreet—search for alternative professional pathways that might offer greater alignment between personal values and labor conditions.

In sum, burnout among startup workers cannot be understood in isolation from the belief systems, moral orientations, and subject positions that structure their experiences of work, identity, and meaning. The different patterns of behavior illustrate how different modes of engagement within the startup ethos shape not only vulnerability to exhaustion but also the available forms of coping and resilience. Burnout, therefore, emerges not as a uniform or purely individual phenomenon, but as a socially and culturally mediated response to the contradictions of contemporary tech labor. By mapping these differentiated pathways through suffering and recovery, we not only deepen our understanding of individual distress, but also reveal the moral and structural tensions that underpin the startup ecosystem, marked by subjective precariousness, systemic instability, and the persistent search for meaning under conditions of work intensification.

14.5 PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this chapter, we have approached the phenomenon of burnout from the standpoint of workers' lived experiences in startup environments. Rather than treating burnout as a static or exclusively clinical category, we sought to understand what workers mean when they describe themselves as suffering from it. This ethnographic attention revealed that the term *burnout* often operates as a vernacular shorthand for a broad spectrum of work-related distress—encompassing tensions, contradictions, and breakdowns that emerge from the rhythms and moral expectations of everyday organizational life. In this sense, burnout becomes a socially intelligible way of naming and communicating the affective costs of contemporary labor.

We observed that burnout frequently takes shape when *passion for work*—initially cultivated as a marker of authenticity, purpose, and self-actualization—becomes entangled with productivity metrics, and when productivity itself is internalized as a reflection of personal worth. This dynamic illustrates how emotional investment is not peripheral to labor in startups, but central to how value is produced and extracted. Yet it is precisely the intensification of this emotional labor that renders workers acutely vulnerable to suffering.

By tracing how workers navigate these contradictions, we refined our understanding of burnout as a dynamic and evolving process, shaped by the ongoing interplay between individual agency and structural constraint. Burnout, then, is not merely a personal failure or discrete event, but a trajectory embedded in the shifting moral economies of contemporary labor. It reflects how workers continually negotiate their place within an unstable and often contradictory work regime.

Furthermore, we have seen how stress, rather than being pathologized, is often normalized and valorized in these environments. Experiencing high levels of stress is reframed as a sign of entrepreneurial commitment and professional engagement. However, when this stress exceeds what is physically and emotionally sustainable, it manifests through the body—via insomnia, gastrointestinal issues, headaches, tachycardia, panic attacks, and more—making visible the corporeal toll of such organizational demands. In other words, we were able to see how startup workers experience the effects of late capitalism in their own bodies.

In response to these pressures, workers employ a variety of individual coping strategies. Practices such as physical activity, leisure, therapy, medical treatment, and even resignation are all shaped by neoliberal imperatives of responsabilization, performance optimization, and self-discipline. Yet these same practices also carry the potential for fragile, embodied forms of resistance—moments where workers seek to renegotiate their relationships to time, labor, the body, and the self. Although these responses are largely individual, we have also observed the emergence of collective forms of care, solidarity, and cooperation—however tentative and precarious they may be.

Ultimately, the narratives examined in this chapter reveal the cyclical and systemic nature of overwork in startup contexts. Even when workers attempt to distance themselves from previous patterns of exhaustion, the structural forces that produced their suffering—accelerated pace, blurred boundaries, and emotional overinvestment tend to reassert themselves. Therefore, as long as startup workers continue to confront burnout primarily through individualized strategies, their efforts to escape or mitigate its effects are likely to remain fragile and incomplete. Breaking this cycle of exhaustion and overwork requires collective responses capable of challenging the structural conditions that sustain it.

The experiences of burnout discussed here are therefore not exceptional, nor can they be reduced to lapses in individual resilience. Rather, they are symptomatic of deeper contradictions embedded in the organization of contemporary labor under capitalism. As such, they demand a broader, structural reconsideration of the moral, emotional, and political logics that currently shape work and subjectivity.

15 GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The initial objective of this thesis was to investigate the Brazilian startup ecosystem through the *limit case* (Leite Lopes, 1988) of the startup scene in Florianópolis. Moving between macro-, meso- and micro-levels of analysis, this research has explored how the economic imperatives of rapid growth intersect with startup organizational cultures and the subjective experiences of workers. More specifically, it set out to examine what initially appeared to be a paradox: how could a sector that claims to “*change the world*” through technological, disruptive products and to “*reinvent work*” through more flexible, horizontal, meaningful, and creativity-driven organizational models also be the same sector reporting a growing incidence of burnout among its workers and founders since 2020?

While the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly contributed to a global rise in psychological distress—evidenced by a 25% increase in cases of depression and anxiety reported by the WHO (2022) in 2020–2021 alone—it would be reductive to attribute episodes of burnout among startup workers solely to the pandemic. The structures of emotional engagement and overexploitation were already well established within startup environments prior to 2020. The pandemic, rather than initiating this dynamic, served to exacerbate and render more visible pre-existing patterns of distress. Indeed, qualitative data gathered in this research identified instances of acute stress and burnout among startup workers as early as 2018 and 2019. Consequently, this led us to rule out the pandemic as the only plausible explanation for these burnout cases. Instead of seeking explanations external to startup ecosystems and the capitalist system itself, we sought to examine the internal contradictions of this system (Carcanholo, 2021) and the rhythms and ways in which startups organize their work.

As discussed in Part One, startups present themselves as “*alternatives*” to traditional corporate models, focusing on the development of technology-based solutions aimed at scalability, rapid growth, and high profitability. These companies are predominantly financed by Venture Capitalists who invest in high-risk ventures with the expectation of swift and substantial returns. This logic of investment underpins the *boom* phenomenon that characterizes much of the tech sector, driving an accelerated pace of work to meet the ambitious objectives set by investors. Central to this model is the startup ethos, which champions entrepreneurialism,

meritocracy, and the figure of the *self-made man*—ideals deeply embedded in the Californian ideology propagated by Silicon Valley. We also examined how the startup movement gained traction in Brazil in the early 2010s, with Florianópolis emerging as one of the country’s primary hubs for innovation and startup development. While the city no longer holds the highest concentration of startups, its ecosystem continues to exert significant influence within the national context, earning it the symbolic title of “*National Capital of Startups*” in 2024, which made it an ideal case study for research.

Despite the Brazilian startup sector’s rhetorical emphasis on “*autonomy*”, “*innovation*”, and “*purpose-driven labor*,” Part Two of this thesis has revealed a more complex and disquieting reality. By analytically tracing the organizational transformations of startups from early- to growth- and late- stages, we observed that their modes of work organization are not static but evolve in ways that often contradict the sector’s foundational ideals. While early-stage startups tend to promote flexible, horizontal, and informal work environments, these are also marked by precariousness, instability, and high levels of uncertainty. As startups transition into growth and late stages, we identified a shift toward increasing formalization, hierarchical, and performance-driven structures. Thus, although the rhetoric of “*autonomy*” and “*meaning*” may persist—especially in the early phases—startup environments are simultaneously shaped by accelerated work rhythms, intensified emotional demands, and a growing verticalization of managerial control.

Moreover, we have observed that even after the easing of the pandemic, a significant number of startups continue to adopt remote or hybrid work models. While many workers report appreciating remote work—often citing increased autonomy of their schedule and the potential for greater “*work-life balance*”—our findings suggest a more complex reality. Rather than leading to reduced working hours and enhanced leisure time, remote work often results in extended hours and heightened self-discipline. The absence of shared physical spaces and collective routines, which once served as informal boundaries regulating work time, contributes to the erosion of temporal limits. In many startups, where the requirement to log working hours is absent, workers are left to self-manage their schedules. This form of self-regulation frequently results in intensified self-surveillance and overwork, reinforcing Chung’s (2022) argument that flexible and remote work arrangements, far from being liberatory, can exacerbate self-exploitation under the guise of freedom.

These findings suggest that overwork, frustration, distress and burnout among workers are not incidental or exceptional, but rather constitutive of the organizational logics underpinning the startup model itself. Yet, rather than widespread resistance to this exploitative system, the research uncovered a more ambivalent picture. Many workers expressed strong affective attachment to their jobs, a sense of gratitude toward their employers, and a willingness to over-commit themselves—often framing their experience in terms of *passion* and *personal fulfillment*. This affective alignment, however, did not equate to total alienation. Alongside the Overly Commitment pattern of behavior—marked by intense investment in the startup model—we also identified patterns characterized by efforts to reform the system from within, as well as those shaped by more cynical, disillusioned, or resigned orientations. These latter patterns, while marked by emotional or ideological distancing, often remain materially and structurally embedded within the very system they critique.

Part Three of this thesis examined how both startup companies—through managerial and disciplinary practices—and workers themselves attempt to cope with burnout. Despite some initiatives, such as the deployment of what Chen (2022) terms *corporate maternalism*, organizational responses tend to fall short of addressing the deeper structural issues involved. A key observation is that the erosion of collective labor structures has significantly heightened workers' exposure to psychosocial risks. As Lorient (2015) argues, solidarity is far easier to dismantle than to reconstruct. In this context, the so-called “*collaborative*” spaces promoted by startups and their human resources departments often appear superficial and instrumental, failing to provide genuine support or mitigate the structural conditions that produce burnout. Rather than fostering true collective resilience, these initiatives tend to individualize responsibility and overlook the need for more substantive forms of collective organization and support.

In the face of increasing individualization, most workers resort to personal strategies to cope with distress. Those employed at late-stage startups—who generally enjoy higher salaries—often have greater means to manage their stress. Many turn to practices that reconnect them with nature, such as outdoor sports, or engage in hobbies that help them disconnect from work in an effort to impose limits on their work availability and carve out time for leisure. Nearly all interlocutors in this study reported engaging in therapy to better regulate their emotions and “*alleviate*” psychological strain. When these strategies prove insufficient, pharmacological

treatment and the use of substances may enter the picture as coping mechanisms for enduring especially demanding days. Ultimately, when personal resources are exhausted, resignation from a position—and the hope of reinventing oneself in a new job—emerges as a last resort. Yet, as this study has shown, changing companies often proves to be a temporary solution, with workers soon finding themselves again entangled in similar patterns of stress and overwork. Although moments of solidarity and shared humor among colleagues also surface as important collective coping mechanisms, these bonds tend to be fragile. The high turnover characteristic of the startup environment makes it difficult to sustain lasting relationships, further eroding the potential for enduring forms of mutual support.

The insufficiency of both managerial and individual responses becomes even more evident when burnout is understood not as a clinical endpoint but as a socially and culturally situated process. By adopting a longitudinal approach that allowed us to accompany interlocutors from 2022 to 2024, this research was able to observe how burnout is not merely an individual outcome, but rather a socially and culturally situated process. Our extended engagement revealed that experiences of burnout and distress tend to vary over time, shaped by the ongoing negotiations workers must make in relation to their workload, personal values, organizational demands, and shifting life circumstances.

Therefore, what initially appeared as a paradox—burnout among individuals who profess to “love” their work—ultimately reveals itself as a symptom of the deeper contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Rather than being an aberration, burnout emerges as a coherent outcome of a regime that demands affective investment while offering little in the way of security, clear boundaries between personal and professional spheres, or robust collective mechanisms for coping with distress.

Furthermore, this thesis sought to interrogate what, if anything, is truly novel about the organizational forms and labor practices encapsulated in the so-called “*startup way of doing things*.” As we deepened our engagement with the literature on the transition from the Fordist model of production to flexible accumulation, it became increasingly evident that the organizational innovations attributed to startups are less about structural novelty and more about the repackaging of longstanding neoliberal principles. While startups do incorporate digital technologies that accelerate and decentralize work processes, their organizational models largely reflect a refined and aestheticized version of neoliberal ideals applied to emergent firms. What

distinguishes the 2010s—when the startup sector began gaining prominence in Brazil—is not the invention of new forms of work, but rather the fact that the political, economic, and cultural groundwork for their implementation had already been laid. Unlike in the 1970s to early 2000s, when significant effort was required to dismantle labor protections and undermine collective organization, startups in Brazil emerged in a context where these barriers had already been weakened. The State was prepared to offer tax incentives and regulatory flexibility, young professionals—particularly from the middle classes—had been socialized into accepting precarious, project-based work, and the ideological foundations of entrepreneurialism and individual responsibility were firmly in place. In this context, startups did not have to confront or overcome resistance; instead, they found a neoliberal landscape already amenable to their labor model.

This contextual foundation also helps to explain the emergence of specific patterns of behavior among startup workers analyzed throughout this thesis—namely, Overly Commitment, Neoliberal Reformism, Cynicism, and Resigned Criticism. These patterns of behavior are not random or merely individual dispositions; rather, they are culturally and structurally produced responses to the contradictions embedded within the startup labor model. In an environment where traditional labor protections have been eroded, and entrepreneurial ideals are valorized, workers are encouraged to internalize the risks of work as personal challenges and to interpret emotional exhaustion as a failure of resilience or adaptability. The patterns of Overly Commitment and Neoliberal Reformism particularly illustrate how the startup ethos is sustained from within, as they involve the active reproduction of values such as productivity, flexibility, and individual responsibility—often at the expense of workers' own well-being. In contrast, the patterns of Cynicism and Resigned Criticism point to moments of rupture or disillusionment; yet even these behaviors tend to reflect a limited capacity for collective action within a context where solidarity and labor-led movements have been historically weakened or dismantled. Thus, the startup model's apparent novelty lies not in its organizational structures and management strategies, but in its ability to harness pre-existing neoliberal subjectivities and intensify their emotional and existential implications, making burnout not a deviation but a structural feature of this mode of work.

These insights highlight that addressing burnout cannot be reduced to individual coping strategies or superficial well-being initiatives, but rather requires confronting the organizational and cultural conditions that sustain it. Based on the data analyzed, it is possible to suggest that a meaningful reduction in burnout among startup workers would require structural changes—foremost among them, a genuine reduction in working hours. However, as the ethnographic evidence has shown, such a shift remains unlikely within the current startup model, which tends to intensify and extend working time through mechanisms such as flexible scheduling, remote work, and the strategic use of *perks*—all of which often result in unpaid labor. Another potential avenue for mitigating burnout lies in the reconstruction of collective forms of worker solidarity. Yet this, too, faces significant obstacles, as it would require the creation of spaces outside the formal work environment where workers can rearticulate spontaneous, non-instrumental forms of collective support and resistance. Without such spaces, the individualized and competitive ethos of the startup world continues to undermine efforts toward more collective and sustainable responses to emotional exhaustion and overwork.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this thesis. The first concerns the contextual specificity of the Florianópolis startup ecosystem. While this study rests on the hypothesis that, at a macro level, startup organizational models tend to reproduce themselves with a certain degree of homogeneity across innovation ecosystems in the Western world—thereby disseminating a relatively consistent startup ethos—a micro-level analysis reveals that each ecosystem likely bears its own historical, cultural, and institutional specificities. These differences may significantly shape how workers experience and respond to labor conditions, including manifestations of psychological distress and burnout. A comparative ethnographic approach would be valuable in making such distinctions more explicit. Although an initial plan involved conducting a comparative fieldwork between the startup ecosystems of Paris and Florianópolis, this aspect of the project could not be pursued, leaving open a promising avenue for future research.

A second limitation lies in the insufficient exploration of the gendered dimensions of labor within the tech sector. While the thesis does introduce data and reflections on the sexual division of labor, several emerging hypotheses—such as the possibility that women may be more exposed to psychosocial risks and more susceptible to developing burnout—remain underdeveloped and require further

empirical investigation. This gap also opens a compelling direction for subsequent research, particularly through the integration of feminist and intersectional approaches to labor, health, and organizational culture.

A third limitation concerns the complex relationship between workplace harassment and experiences of suffering at work. While some interviewees recounted instances of mistreatment or abuse that could be characterized as moral harassment, this thesis does not assert a direct or causal link between such experiences and the development of burnout. Nonetheless, the connection between these phenomena may be more deeply rooted than it initially appears. On one hand, moral harassment often signals a breakdown of collective solidarity—workers report feeling isolated, unsupported, and excluded from peer networks. On the other, accounts of moral harassment may also point to broader organizational dysfunctions, such as a lack of open dialogue around institutional objectives or covert managerial strategies aimed at encouraging employee departures without formal dismissal procedures. These conditions create a fertile terrain for psychological distress and burnout, even when harassment is not explicitly named. As such, a more comprehensive understanding of this intersection between moral harassment and burnout remains a pressing area for further research.

By tracing the lived experiences of Brazilian startup workers and analyzing the structural, cultural, and emotional dynamics underlying burnout, this thesis contributes to broader debates in the anthropology and sociology of labor, health, and contemporary capitalism, while also advancing the analysis of tech companies as a legitimate object of ethnographic and critical inquiry.

Moreover, it shows that burnout cannot be reduced to an individual pathology or clinical outcome, but must instead be understood as a socially and culturally situated process, shaped by the contradictions between entrepreneurial ideals and the material realities of work. Through ethnographic inquiry, this research highlights how the startup model—despite its rhetoric of flexibility, autonomy, and purpose—reproduces and intensifies forms of labor exploitation, emotional regulation, and organizational control. The findings underscore the need to reframe mental health issues at work not as private struggles, but as collective symptoms of broader systemic pressures. Moreover, this thesis invites reflection on the limits of individualized coping strategies and HR-led well-being initiatives, arguing instead for the urgent need for structural change and renewed forms of collective organization.

In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that insists mental suffering at work must be addressed not merely as a health concern, but as a critical site of struggle against labor exploitation and alienation.

RESUMO EXPANDIDO

Introdução

Desde 2010, uma nova leva de empresas de base tecnológica — as startups — espalhou-se pelo Brasil, atraindo, principalmente, jovens profissionais de classe média recém-formados. Sob a premissa de *“mudar o mundo”* através do desenvolvimento de produtos *“inovadores”* e *“disruptivos”*, essas organizações também prometeram redefinir os modos de organização do trabalho. Segundo empreendedores de startups, era preciso *“opor-se”* ao capitalismo corporativo tradicional e criar ambientes de trabalho onde *“felicidade”*, *“engajamento”* e *“propósito”* fizessem parte da rotina laboral.

Apesar desse ideal, a partir de 2020 passaram a proliferar relatos midiáticos de casos de burnout entre trabalhadores do setor. Estudos mercadológicos elaborados por diferentes *Health Techs* apontavam que *“64% dos trabalhadores [de startups] relatam sentir estresse frequente”*, apesar de *“87% afirmarem ser apaixonados por seus empregos”* (Caderno de campo 27 jan. 2023). Tal quadro mostrou-se surpreendente. Afinal, em geral, os trabalhadores de startups desfrutam de salários mais altos do que a média nacional e de uma cultura empresarial supostamente mais *“moderna”*, *“flexível”* e *“horizontal”*, distante das hierarquias corporativas convencionais. Por que, então, esses trabalhadores estavam e estão adoecendo? Em que momento se rompe o elo entre a narrativa do mundo inovador das startups e a experiência concreta dos trabalhadores?

Inicialmente, a explicação mais imediata do próprio setor foi imputar o fenômeno de sofrimento mental à pandemia de COVID-19. Essa de fato ampliou os níveis de estresse global e a sobrecarga de trabalho em diversos setores. Contudo, como será demonstrado, as razões pelas quais os trabalhadores de startups sofriam e sofrem de burnout têm menos a ver com os efeitos da pandemia e mais com o engajamento emocional que os trabalhadores são impelidos a ter em relação ao seu trabalho. Deste modo, foi sobre esta aparente contradição — o surgimento de sofrimento psíquico em espaços celebrados como inovadores e gratificantes — que se constituiu o eixo central desta tese.

Para compreender os aspectos sociais do sofrimento, foi necessário se deter sobre a análise do que são empresas tipo startup; quais são seus modos de

organização do trabalho; de que forma tais empresas lidam com o fenômeno do burnout; bem como compreender os modos como os trabalhadores vivenciam os “novos” regimes de organização do trabalho, e as formas como lidam, enquanto indivíduos, com os episódios de estresse e burnout.

Para tal, esta tese apoiou-se nos estudos socioantropológicos que buscam compreender o neoliberalismo e seu impacto na vida das pessoas. Segundo Dardot e Laval (2013), o neoliberalismo é a racionalidade predominante no capitalismo contemporâneo. Assim, embora se reconheça que a racionalidade neoliberal já permeia grande parte das relações sociais e que vivemos em um mundo neoliberal (Brown, 2015; 2019), ainda há espaço para analisar como o neoliberalismo afeta a vida cotidiana em universos específicos. Especialmente quando o universo de estudo escolhido é marcado por ideologias empreendedoras que prometem “*realização pessoal*”, mas acabam gerando crescente “*frustração e sofrimento*”.

Assim, com o intuito de analisar o capitalismo contemporâneo, esta tese baseou-se em insights teóricos de estudos econômicos, sociológicos e antropológicos, incluindo os trabalhos de Marx ([1867] 2023), Foucault (1975; 2010), Sennett (1998), Boltanski e Chiapello ([1999] 2011), Fischer ([2009] 2020), entre outros. Esse quadro teórico permitiu compreender como a busca por autonomia, flexibilidade, significado e lucro, sob o atual regime de acumulação de capital, reflete-se tanto na proliferação de empresas que alegam promover modelos organizacionais “*horizontais*”, bem como na ampliação dos casos de sofrimento psíquico.

Além disso, esta tese também deu ênfase significativa às intersecções entre trabalho e tecnologia (Huws, 2009; Standing, 2014; Muntaner, 2018; Antunes; Braga, 2009); bem como saúde mental (Loriol, 2015; 2019; Maluf, 2024) e trajetórias de vida (Santelli, 2019), o que permitiu uma compreensão mais sutil dos modos como trajetórias individuais respondem às transformações econômicas e tecnológicas mais amplas. Ao integrar essas estruturas analíticas, a tese objetivou fornecer um relato abrangente da complexa interação entre a dinâmica do trabalho, o sofrimento mental e as forças estruturais que sustentam o capitalismo contemporâneo em sua forma neoliberal.

Já com relação aos aspectos metodológicos, as questões empíricas que orientaram esta tese concentraram-se em três eixos principais. Em primeiro lugar, a pesquisa investigou a cultura empreendedora e de trabalho que caracteriza o

ambiente das startups, com ênfase no setor de tecnologia e informação do Brasil. Em segundo lugar, a pesquisa procurou compreender as experiências cotidianas de trabalhadores no contexto das startups de Florianópolis, analisando seus valores, práticas e estratégias de navegação no universo profissional. Por fim, buscou-se explorar como o burnout é percebido e tratado no setor de tecnologia, tanto a partir da perspectiva individual dos trabalhadores quanto por meio das respostas organizacionais formuladas pelas próprias startups. Esses três eixos forneceram a base para uma análise das dinâmicas socioeconômicas que moldam esse cenário em constante transformação.

Para investigar esse campo empírico, adotou-se um desenho metodológico plural que combinou análise documental, observação participante, registros visuais, notas de campo e entrevistas em profundidade, articulados em perspectiva longitudinal (2022/2023 e 2023/2024). A coleta de dados, realizada entre 2020 e 2024, organizou-se em três eixos principais: A) revisão de literatura e exame de materiais produzidos pelo ecossistema de startups de Florianópolis — incluindo livros que narram sua trajetória e relatórios de associações locais e nacionais; B) inserção em uma startup da região por meio de trabalho em meio período, somada à observação ativa em eventos tecnológicos promovidos pelo ecossistema; C) condução de entrevistas em profundidade com trabalhadoras e trabalhadores de startups, voltadas a compreender rotinas laborais e práticas de bem-estar.

O período de observação participante dentro da startup estendeu-se por 18 meses (abril de 2020 a outubro de 2021). Entre agosto de 2022 e março de 2024, participaram-se de dez eventos de tecnologia — majoritariamente presenciais, embora alguns híbridos ou inteiramente on-line — e realizaram-se 55 entrevistas com 30 interlocutores. Buscou-se conduzir as entrevistas presencialmente; contudo, em virtude da familiaridade dos participantes com o trabalho remoto, cerca da metade das entrevistas ocorreu por videoconferência.

Com relação à organização da tese, esta foi estruturada em três partes, organizadas de modo a acompanhar uma escala analítica que vai do macro ao micro. Na primeira parte, o foco recai sobre os conceitos de startup e ecossistema. A partir de uma perspectiva global, examina-se o surgimento das startups no Vale do Silício e sua posterior expansão internacional. Em seguida, analisa-se a origem e o desenvolvimento do ecossistema de startups de Florianópolis, entre a década de

2010 e 2024, dando destaque à importância simbólica de Florianópolis na composição mais ampla do ecossistema de startups brasileiro.

A segunda parte da tese desloca o olhar para o cotidiano organizacional das empresas. Saindo do plano idealizado do discurso sobre “*propósito, inovação e bem-estar*”, essa seção explora a “anatomia” das organizações startup (Bailey, 2020), abordando como empresas em estágios iniciais (*early-stage*), de crescimento (*growth-stage*) e mais avançados (*late-stage*) estruturam suas principais áreas de atuação e modos de organização do trabalho. Esta parte também busca compreender quem são os *trabalhadores do conhecimento* (Huws, 2009) desse setor, tanto a partir de dados sociodemográficos quanto de padrões de comportamento observados em campo.

Por fim, a terceira parte da tese dedica-se à análise dos efeitos do ritmo de trabalho intenso das startups e aos episódios de estresse e burnout entre seus funcionários. Explora-se tanto o conceito de burnout desde seu surgimento nos anos 1970, bem como os modos como as empresas lidam de forma gerencial com o sofrimento dos indivíduos e como os trabalhadores descrevem suas experiências de burnout e quais sentidos atribuem a esse sofrimento.

Startups como fenômeno social

Para compreender os efeitos da cultura de trabalho das startups sobre o bem-estar dos trabalhadores, foi necessário, antes de tudo, entender o que é uma startup e sob qual lógica essas empresas operam.

Historicamente, é possível traçar o “início” das empresas tipo startup à Califórnia dos anos 1970, quando Apple e Microsoft surgiram impulsionando o mercado de computadores pessoais. Esse mercado consolidou-se ao longo da década de 1990, com a popularização da internet e o aparecimento de empresas como Yahoo! e Google. Contudo, foi após o lançamento dos smartphones, em 2007, com o barateamento e a disseminação das TIC que ocorreu a grande explosão das startups em todo o mundo.

Todos esses avanços tecnológicos abriram um vasto mercado digital a ser ocupado por empresas de serviços de base tecnológica. Entretanto, paralelamente, desenrolavam-se mudanças políticas, econômicas e sociais essenciais para entender as startups enquanto fenômeno social. A partir dos anos 1970, fortaleceu-

se a transição do modelo de acumulação fordista para o regime de acumulação flexível (Harvey, 1992). Tal transição não só criou as bases para a emergência do neoliberalismo como regime econômico e forma de racionalidade e subjetivação (Dardot; Laval, 2013; Brown, 2015), mas também facilitou a financeirização das empresas por meio de investimentos de capital de risco.

Como não é possível falar de startups sem mencionar o *venture capital*, é fundamental reconhecer que muitas dependem diretamente desse tipo de financiamento. Ao recorrer a fundos de *venture capital*, as startups não apenas obtêm recursos, mas também se submetem à influência ativa dos investidores, que frequentemente interferem na estratégia das empresas. Essa relação molda profundamente suas dinâmicas internas. Como aponta Shestakofsky (2024), tal arranjo impõe uma pressão constante por resultados, transformando as startups em ambientes marcados por crescimento acelerado, inovação incessante e altos níveis de incerteza.

Assim, historicamente, as startups não são apenas empresas inovadoras de base tecnológica e crescimento rápido; elas também resultam de transformações técnicas, ideológicas, econômicas e socioculturais mais amplas, bem como de desdobramentos neoliberais associados à financeirização capitalista.

Culturalmente, grande parte dessas “novas” empresas de tecnologia surgiu com a promessa de revolucionar o mundo do trabalho, especialmente em seus aspectos gerenciais e organizacionais. Para fundadores e trabalhadores, uma startup não é apenas uma organização inovadora, mas também um “*mindset*” — um modo específico de fazer, falar e agir que orienta práticas cotidianas e visões de mundo. De modo geral, o *ethos startupeiro* é atravessado por um discurso liberal e meritocrático, fortemente ancorado na figura do *self-made man* americano, que associa a realização pessoal ao desempenho profissional (Flécher, 2021; Zanon, 2019).

Quando essas empresas despontaram no Brasil, ao longo da década de 2010, contribuíram para a construção de um imaginário social que apresentava o mercado de trabalho sob uma nova perspectiva. Escritórios coloridos e descontraídos, com mesas de sinuca e pingue-pongue, passaram a compor a cenografia de um ambiente supostamente mais “cool”, informal e gratificante (Faria, 2018). Nesse contexto, o trabalho aparecia não apenas como meio de subsistência, mas como fonte de prazer, propósito e identidade.

Essas empresas foram amplamente celebradas por promoverem “ambientes criativos, colaborativos e horizontais”, onde seria possível exercer a “flexibilidade” e “fazer o que se ama”. Como aponta Zanon (2019), esse discurso projeta o trabalho como espaço privilegiado de autorrealização, convidando os indivíduos a se perceberem como protagonistas de suas trajetórias profissionais. No entanto, esse investimento emocional e pessoal rapidamente se converte em ferramenta de gestão: ao alinhar paixão e produtividade, as startups diluem as fronteiras entre vida pessoal e trabalho, reforçando o emprego como o principal locus de constituição identitária dos sujeitos.

Entretanto, se, ao longo dos anos 2010, as startups eram percebidas como espaços de trabalho menos alienantes, mais significativos e divertidos, a partir de 2020 esse imaginário começou a mudar. Escândalos de vazamento de dados, a intensificação do trabalho remoto durante a pandemia de COVID-19 e a publicização de casos de burnout expuseram contradições profundas do setor. Esta pesquisa, realizada entre 2020 e 2024, mostra como esse período representou importantes inflexões no imaginário dos trabalhadores sobre o universo das startups. Do entusiasmo inicial dos anos 2010 à desilusão dos anos 2020, fatores como isolamento social, adoecimento mental e demissões em massa revelaram a fragilidade das promessas de realização pessoal do setor.

O antigo lema “*work hard, play hard*”, popularizado após 2008 entre muitas empresas de tecnologia, começou a perder força nos anos 2020. Escritórios vibrantes com mesas de sinuca e cerveja foram substituídos por home offices solitários e reuniões intermináveis no Zoom. O otimismo especulativo que alimentava o setor tornou-se instável à medida que os recursos de capital de risco encolhiam e os desligamentos aumentavam (Shestakofsky, 2024). Esse declínio simbólico recente, especialmente após a pandemia, marca um momento crucial para investigar criticamente os sentidos contemporâneos do trabalho, do valor e do bem-estar em um setor que promete autonomia e inovação, mas exige entrega emocional e resiliência—ao mesmo tempo que celebra a liberdade e frequentemente reproduz estruturas de controle e exaustão.

Brasil, seus ecossistemas de startups e Florianópolis

Diversos empreendedores e influenciadores frequentemente alegam que as startups são o “*motor econômico*” do Brasil (Caderno de campo 10 nov. 2021). Porém, o setor brasileiro de startups representa apenas uma fração do vasto e complexo macro setor de TIC, dentro do qual encontra-se inserido. Em geral, o macro setor de TIC inclui atividades diversas como telecomunicações, desenvolvimento de software, serviços digitais e hardware. Segundo a Brasscom (2024), o setor de TIC correspondeu a 6,5% do PIB brasileiro em 2023, sendo que o segmento de software e serviços — onde se concentram a maioria das startups — representou apenas 1,7% desse total. Apesar do entusiasmo e da visibilidade que as startups adquiriram na última década, sua contribuição econômica ainda é modesta quando comparada a outros setores produtivos brasileiros.

A mão de obra empregada no setor de TIC ultrapassa dois milhões de trabalhadores no Brasil. Contudo, o setor enfrenta desafios estruturais importantes: escassez de profissionais qualificados, baixos índices de sindicalização e níveis de precarização do trabalho. Um aspecto central desse cenário é a prática da *pejotização* — contratação de trabalhadores como pessoas jurídicas, mascarando vínculos empregatícios. Mesmo com salários que chegam a ser de 2,5 a 10 vezes acima da média nacional (Brasscom, 2023; Moreno, 2021), muitos desses profissionais renunciam a direitos trabalhistas básicos ao adentrarem o modelo *pejota*. Essa lógica de informalidade e individualização também se reproduz no interior dos ecossistemas de startups, especialmente entre as empresas em estágio inicial (*early-stage*), quando os contratos tendem a ser menos protegidos.

Deste modo, podemos concluir que: 1) o mercado de startups tende a diluir-se no macro setor das TIC no Brasil e; 2) tende a reproduzir as mesmas condições de precarização dos demais trabalhadores da tecnologia, ainda que estes tendam a auferir salários mais elevados do que a média nacional.

A emergência das startups no Brasil ocorreu tardiamente em comparação com os Estados Unidos. Enquanto o conceito já era consolidado internacionalmente nos anos 2000, no Brasil o termo só começou a ganhar relevância pública por volta de 2010. Até então, prevaleciam no país as chamadas “empresas inovadoras de base tecnológica”, muitas vezes vinculadas a incubadoras universitárias. A virada conceitual para o modelo startup, com ênfase em crescimento acelerado, capital de risco e metodologias ágeis, ganhou força somente a partir de 2011, com o surgimento de aceleradoras privadas e a criação de associações como a Abstartups.

Desde então, houve um esforço sistemático para popularizar a cultura empreendedora no país, inclusive entre estudantes e trabalhadores jovens, moldando subjetividades alinhadas a valores como autonomia, meritocracia, flexibilidade e inovação.

Atualmente, o Brasil abriga mais de 13 mil startups ativas (Abstartups, 2024), espalhadas por mais de 235 ecossistemas locais. A distribuição dessas startups reflete a concentração do mercado de tecnologia no país. A região Sudeste lidera com 57,6% do total, seguida pela região Sul, com 21,2%, destacando-se o estado de Santa Catarina. Florianópolis, sua capital, ocupa posição de destaque no cenário nacional e foi oficialmente nomeada “*Capital Nacional das Startups*” em 2024, por meio do Projeto de Lei 4.987/2019. A justificativa para esse reconhecimento baseia-se na alta densidade de startups por habitante, na presença de duas universidades públicas de excelência (UFSC e UDESC), e na infraestrutura de apoio ao empreendedorismo tecnológico — como incubadoras, parques tecnológicos, aceleradoras e programas como o Startup SC (Sebrae). Além disso, essa nomeação representa tanto um reconhecimento simbólico do ecossistema de inovação local, quanto uma estratégia institucional para promover o setor de tecnologia da cidade como modelo para as demais regiões do país. Atualmente, o setor de tecnologia em Florianópolis conta com mais de mil empresas e cerca de 31 mil trabalhadores (ACATE, 2021).

Após uma década de consolidação de diversos ecossistemas de inovação no país, o boom das startups brasileiras atingiu seu auge entre 2020 e 2021. Esse crescimento foi impulsionado pela aceleração da digitalização durante a pandemia de COVID-19 e por um volume inédito de investimentos de capital de risco. A rápida transição das startups para o regime de trabalho remoto — favorecida por sua familiaridade com ferramentas digitais — e o aumento do interesse de investidores no setor levaram à percepção de que as empresas de base tecnológica estariam relativamente imunes aos impactos adversos da crise sanitária.

Entretanto, a partir de 2022, esse cenário mudou drasticamente. A queda nos investimentos internacionais e a desaceleração global do setor tecnológico levaram a uma onda massiva de demissões. Segundo o site independente Layoffs.fyi, entre o início de 2022 e janeiro de 2024, 58 empresas brasileiras de tecnologia demitiram, em conjunto, 7.785 profissionais (Kelly, 2024). Esse cenário gerou grande instabilidade e insegurança entre os trabalhadores de startups em todo

o país — um sentimento que ficou evidente nas entrevistas realizadas durante esta pesquisa. Pelo menos dois dos meus interlocutores passaram por processos de demissão em 2022 e precisaram buscar novas oportunidades de trabalho. Aqueles que permaneceram em seus cargos relataram um aumento significativo de demandas, sendo obrigados a assumir as funções dos colegas dispensados.

Apesar da ampliação da instabilidade, da intensificação do trabalho e da ampliação do sofrimento, o discurso dominante seguiu racionalizando os processos de demissão em massa enquanto estratégias de “*correção de mercado*” e “*ajustes necessários pós-boom*”. Esse processo reflete uma lógica neoliberal de mercado autorregulado, onde as crises são tratadas como inevitáveis e os custos recaem sobre os trabalhadores. Pouco a pouco, o entusiasmo com o crescimento das startups foi substituído por um sentimento de desilusão. A retórica da “*resiliência*” e da “*adaptação*” tornou-se uma exigência subjetiva para os trabalhadores, reforçando o darwinismo social que estrutura o ecossistema.

No caso de Florianópolis, a cidade segue se promovendo como polo de inovação, combinando estilo de vida e oportunidades tecnológicas. Mas, por trás da paisagem idealizada da “*Ilha do Silício*”, desafios estruturais persistem: especulação imobiliária, pressão sobre infraestrutura urbana e intensificação das desigualdades no acesso ao trabalho qualificado. A narrativa de sucesso das startups, portanto, precisa ser compreendida à luz dessas contradições — entre a promessa de liberdade e a reprodução da precarização.

A anatomia de uma startup

Esta seção explora os modos de organização do trabalho em startups. Através da análise da “*evolução*” das empresas, por meio de diferentes estágios de desenvolvimento, observa-se como o modelo gerencialista de gestão (Gaulejac, 2007) passa a ser adotado pelas empresas e a sustentar seus processos organizacionais, mas não só. Segundo Dejours (2000; 2009), estudar a organização do trabalho requer reconhecê-la não como uma estrutura fixa ou monolítica, mas como um conjunto fluido de dinâmicas sociais em constante evolução. Ou seja, examinar a organização do trabalho envolve investigar não apenas os modos prescritos de trabalho — as estruturas e processos formais estabelecidos pela gestão —, mas também as discrepâncias entre tais prescrições e as práticas que se

desenrolam no cotidiano. Essas tensões e contradições oferecem insights valiosos sobre a complexa interação entre discursos e práticas, expondo a lacuna entre o design organizacional intencional e as experiências dos sujeitos vividas no local de trabalho (Dejours, 2000).

Com isso em mente, nesta seção analisa-se sistematicamente as três principais fases de desenvolvimento de uma startup, com ênfase nas transformações que ocorrem nos ambientes de trabalho e nas estruturas gerenciais à medida que essas empresas recebem sucessivos aportes de capital de risco. Considerando a abordagem metodológica adotada nesta pesquisa — que não se limitou ao acompanhamento de uma única empresa, mas reuniu narrativas de trabalhadores vinculados a diferentes organizações —, foi possível incorporar perspectivas de profissionais que atuaram em aproximadamente 28 startups ou empresas de base tecnológica distintas.

Adicionalmente, observa-se como os trabalhadores experienciam, em seus próprios corpos, os efeitos do ritmo acelerado de trabalho que tende a se intensificar ao longo da trajetória de crescimento dessas organizações. A tese central aqui sustentada é a de que as pressões contínuas por produtividade e as exigências de resposta rápida não são meramente ocasionais ou pontuais, mas sim forças estruturantes. Elas atravessam diferentes estágios de desenvolvimento das empresas e moldam de forma sistemática as rotinas cotidianas, o bem-estar e as experiências de sofrimento no trabalho.

Estágio Inicial

Segundo especialistas em startups (Matos, 2017), uma startup em estágio inicial é definida como uma empresa com uma ideia escalável que busca ativamente financiamento para expansão, com uma equipe inicial focada no desenvolvimento de um protótipo que atenda às necessidades do mercado. Essa fase é frequentemente caracterizada por uma abordagem de tentativa e erro, que envolve ajustes contínuos nas características do produto, estratégias de marketing e estrutura organizacional de maneira dinâmica e responsiva. Como observou um dos interlocutores, trabalhar em uma startup em estágio inicial *“é como construir um carro... enquanto ele está em movimento... e pegando fogo!”* (Gustavo, 33 anos, Consultor de Vendas de uma startup em fase de crescimento, 2022).

Nos primeiros anos das startups, as estruturas organizacionais tendem a ser fluidas e passam por reconfigurações frequentes. Nessa fase, é comum que as startups adotem uma estrutura flexível, pouco hierárquica, sustentada por uma equipe enxuta, onde cada indivíduo assume múltiplas funções. Essa estrutura improvisada e experimental, muitas vezes romantizada pela imagem simbólica de uma “garagem”, captura o ethos das startups em estágio inicial como espaços de inovação e experimentação empreendedora.

Notavelmente, os trabalhadores nos estágios iniciais operam de maneira mais próxima a um modo de produção artesanal, mantendo maior autonomia e envolvimento direto em diversos aspectos de seu trabalho. Nesse estágio, as *zonas de incerteza* (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977) são particularmente pronunciadas — não apenas para os donos da empresa, que enfrentam questões fundamentais sobre a viabilidade e sobrevivência do negócio, mas também para os funcionários, que frequentemente buscam navegar e capitalizar essa instabilidade como meio de acelerar suas trajetórias profissionais dentro da organização.

Nessa fase, a equipe geralmente varia entre cinco e 30 pessoas e é composta por alguns atores-chave — um desenvolvedor de software, um especialista em vendas e um em marketing —, evoluindo conforme as necessidades da empresa. A estrutura horizontal e a informalidade das relações contribuem para um senso de conexão e resolução coletiva de problemas, criando um ambiente onde os funcionários em estágio inicial se sentem mais engajados e capacitados para tomar decisões.

Quando a startup é pequena, você faz tudo: planeja, escreve, executa. A única coisa que eu não fazia era preparar café [risos]. Mas eu não me importava porque estava fazendo o que queria. [...] Eu dizia para mim mesma: ‘Eu realmente quero isso’. Eu estava fazendo por mim também. Quando você está começando, fica tão imerso no negócio e tem tanta energia que não percebe como isso está afetando seu sono e sua própria disposição. Você está tão animado! (Lara, 32 anos, Coordenadora de Novos Negócios de uma startup em fase de crescimento, 2022).

Nas startups em estágio inicial, grande parte do estresse e desgaste emocional decorre da falta de processos organizacionais estruturados; da pressão por alto desempenho; e da instabilidade subjacente devido ao risco inerente de falha da empresa. Nesse estágio, o estresse parece surgir não apenas da discrepância entre o trabalho prescrito e o trabalho real (Dejours, 2000), mas também do nível surpreendentemente baixo de organização ou diretrizes formais. A ausência de

estruturas claras obriga os trabalhadores a navegarem em fluxos de trabalho caóticos, ampliando seu senso de incerteza e medo do fracasso.

Entretanto, dificuldades compartilhadas, como lidar com projetos exigentes ou superar incertezas no local de trabalho, tendem a unir os funcionários. Pequenas ações cotidianas, como conversas paralelas no WhatsApp após uma reunião difícil, oferecer um ouvido atento ou ajudar um colega em necessidade, tornam-se gestos significativos de solidariedade que reforçam os laços entre os membros da equipe. Esses atos de apoio são essenciais tanto para a cooperação espontânea quanto para o desenvolvimento do próprio trabalho, criando um ambiente onde os trabalhadores se sentem mutuamente investidos no bem-estar uns dos outros, apesar das pressões que enfrentam.

Fase de Crescimento

Quando a empresa alcança o “*product-market fit*” e começa a demonstrar “*tração*” — ou seja, aceitação por parte do mercado —, ela entra na fase de crescimento. Simbolicamente, a imagem de um “*foguete*” é frequentemente usada para representar startups nessa fase, destacando a ênfase no progresso rápido e no impulso para frente.

Segundo Ries (2011), esse estágio é marcado por uma série de avanços estratégicos, incluindo a expansão de esforços de marketing e vendas, o uso de feedback dos primeiros clientes para refinar o produto ou serviço e o monitoramento rigoroso de indicadores-chave de desempenho para avaliar o progresso de desenvolvimento. Além disso, espera-se que as startups otimizem operações e implementem práticas de gestão mais sofisticadas.

Nessa fase, metodologias “*lean*”, como as defendidas por Ries (2011), são sistematicamente adotadas. Elas servem a um duplo propósito: alinhar os trabalhadores e otimizar processos, ao mesmo tempo que garantem a produção de resultados mensuráveis essenciais para acompanhar o progresso da empresa. Essa abordagem estruturada marca a transição das práticas de gestão improvisadas das fases iniciais para uma gestão mais disciplinada e orientada por métricas.

A fase de crescimento de uma startup é particularmente ilustrativa do fenômeno do *boom*, no qual as empresas expandem rapidamente suas operações, impulsionadas pelo financiamento de capital de risco. É também nesse estágio que a pressão sobre os processos de trabalho organizacional se torna mais visível, muitas

vezes manifestando-se como ineficiências, rupturas ou crises. Como observou Ricardo, durante a fase de crescimento, *“tudo quebra, tudo está mudando o tempo todo, sabe?”* (Ricardo, 42 anos, CEO de uma startup em fase de crescimento, 2022). Ao mesmo tempo, entretanto, a fase de crescimento é fortemente marcada pela adrenalina do dinamismo e do risco, mantendo muitos dos trabalhadores engajados em suas atividades laborais. Essa dualidade — em que o crescimento é ao mesmo tempo empolgante e caótico — destaca a atmosfera da cultura startup durante sua fase de expansão.

Nessa fase, a contratação de novos funcionários torna-se uma atividade crítica e contínua, já que a pressão para escalar operações rapidamente intensifica os esforços de recrutamento. Isso frequentemente leva a uma competição acirrada entre startups pelo limitado número de talentos qualificados no mercado de trabalho. Assim, durante os primeiros anos de crescimento acelerado, não é incomum que startups integrem dezenas de funcionários a cada mês, criando um fluxo constante de novos colaboradores. Em geral, nesta fase, as empresas podem ter de 100 a 500 funcionários. Esse influxo rápido de trabalhadores exige a implementação de programas estruturados de treinamento coletivo, frequentemente chamados de *“onboarding”*. Esses programas servem como ferramentas estratégicas para integrar novos contratados de forma eficiente, alinhando-os com a cultura, objetivos e modelos de gestão das empresas.

Durante esta fase, é profunda a influência que as startups exercem sobre a vida social e pessoal de seus trabalhadores, cultivando um senso de pertencimento que muitas vezes transcende fronteiras profissionais. Essa integração não é apenas incentivada pelos gestores, mas também almejada por muitos trabalhadores, refletindo a intrincada fusão entre trabalho e identidade social na cultura startup (Shestakofsky, 2024). Além disso, conforme exploraremos adiante, as demandas da fase de crescimento se intensificam, deixando os trabalhadores com pouco tempo livre e energia psicológica para atividades fora do trabalho. À medida que as esferas profissional e social se fundem cada vez mais, não é surpreendente que muitos funcionários de startups vejam suas vidas girando em torno do local de trabalho e da sociabilidade que ele facilita.

Quanto ao financiamento, startups em crescimento geralmente captam recursos de capital de risco, um marco crucial que acelera significativamente sua trajetória. Enquanto startups em estágio inicial direcionam seus recursos limitados

para validar seu produto ou ideia, startups em crescimento aproveitam os investimentos substanciais recebidos para finalizar o desenvolvimento de seus produtos principais, superar concorrentes e expandir novos mercados.

Quando perguntei aos meus interlocutores sobre as transformações que ocorrem em uma startup antes e depois da captação de recursos, muitos foram enfáticos ao afirmar que o ritmo de trabalho passa por uma mudança profunda e radical.

Tem dois momentos que influenciam o ritmo de trabalho. Um é quando a empresa está captando recursos e precisa ser muito cuidadosa com o fluxo de caixa para estender o runway. Nesse cenário, o ritmo desacelera. Mas logo depois de um investimento, a empresa precisa provar seu valor o mais rápido possível, porque o investimento não foi baseado apenas no histórico da empresa, mas no que a empresa ainda tem capacidade de fazer. Então é tiro, porrada e bomba. É uma relação direta. (Isabel, 34 anos, Gerente Sênior de Produto em uma startup em estágio avançado, 2022).

Ao afirmar uma relação direta entre uma nova rodada de investimento e a aceleração do ritmo de trabalho, Isabel nos ajuda a entender que a injeção de capital traz expectativas elevadas dos investidores, que agora exigem escalabilidade rápida e retornos mensuráveis sobre seus investimentos.

O ritmo incessante de mudanças, somado às altas expectativas de desempenho, frequentemente resulta em estresse considerável para os funcionários. Embora startups em crescimento possam oferecer salários mais altos do que as em estágio inicial, esse “benefício” tem um custo. Cientes disso, as startups recorrem cada vez mais a iniciativas de “cuidado” como ferramentas de retenção e motivação, na tentativa de mitigar os efeitos adversos das condições de trabalho exigentes. Chen (2022) classifica tais iniciativas como *maternalismo corporativo*. Segundo a autora,

o maternalismo corporativo [é] quando as empresas assumem o cuidado pessoal de seus funcionários para torná-los felizes, saudáveis e (portanto) produtivos. As empresas de tecnologia não romperam as leis do mercado. Ainda não existe almoço grátis, de verdade. O maternalismo corporativo monetiza as partes não produtivas da vida que o trabalhador ocupado de tecnologia não tem tempo para dedicar — comer, exercitar-se, descansar, hobbies, espiritualidade e amizades — e as integra ao trabalho. (idem, p. 60, 2022).

As iniciativas de maternalismo corporativo são geralmente concebidas e implementadas pelas equipes de Recursos Humanos ou Gestão de Pessoas, que desempenham um papel central na integração de estratégias de cuidado no

operacional das empresas. Nessa fase, surgem também cargos como *Chief Happiness Officer* (CHO), explicitamente encarregados de promover a felicidade e produtividade dos funcionários como parte de estratégias mais amplas de gestão (Cabanas; Illouz, 2022). Esses papéis não apenas promovem uma “cultura positiva”, mas também garantem que as iniciativas de bem-estar estejam alinhadas com os objetivos organizacionais, reforçando a capacidade da startup de extrair valor enquanto mantém uma equipe comprometida e produtiva.

Conforme observações realizadas em campo, as iniciativas de maternalismo corporativo em startups brasileiras podem ser categorizadas em três áreas principais: *benefícios*; *atividades de integração social*; e *programas de bem-estar*. Os *benefícios* geralmente envolvem investimentos menores, como *dress code* casual, acesso a videogames e mesas de sinuca no escritório, almoços gratuitos, arranjos de trabalho híbrido e horários flexíveis. As *atividades de integração social* podem variar de *Happy Hours* presenciais ou virtuais a dinâmicas de *team building*, almoços coletivos e festas pós-expediente, todas estrategicamente desenhadas para fomentar a socialização entre funcionários e gestores. Esses eventos não apenas fortalecem conexões interpessoais, mas também cultivam um senso de comunidade. Por fim, os *programas de bem-estar* frequentemente incluem acesso a suporte psicológico interno, além de plataformas de saúde e bem-estar que oferecem terapia online e *workshops* de saúde mental. Essas iniciativas são projetadas para abordar o que os gestores de RH enxergam como um dos problemas mais urgentes no setor de tecnologia hoje: o burnout.

Assim, as startups frequentemente enquadram essas iniciativas de maternalismo corporativo como esforços para reter funcionários, prevenir burnout e manter o engajamento — fatores-chave para gerenciar as demandas crescentes da fase de crescimento. No entanto, sob a superfície, essas estratégias revelam um duplo propósito: embora pareçam abordar o bem-estar, estão alinhadas com o objetivo maior de maximizar produtividade e sustentar o ritmo implacável de crescimento imposto por investidores e competição de mercado.

As principais fontes de estresse para os trabalhadores durante a fase de crescimento podem surgir de múltiplos fatores: a pressão incessante por crescimento acelerado imposta por investidores, as constantes mudanças em processos e objetivos que frequentemente exigem refazer tarefas, a frustração com expectativas salariais não atendidas e o acúmulo de sobrecarga. Se, no estágio

inicial, o estresse surgia da ausência de estruturas claras, na fase de crescimento, ele emerge de duas discrepâncias-chave. Primeiro, a lacuna entre o trabalho prescrito e o real (Dejours, 2000), onde os funcionários precisam navegar demandas crescentes que frequentemente divergem das expectativas formalizadas. Segundo, o desequilíbrio na dinâmica *dádiva/contra-dádiva* (Alter, 2002) torna-se ainda mais pronunciado, já que os trabalhadores investem tempo, esforço e energia emocional na empresa enquanto recebem desproporcionalmente pouco em troca. Essa assimetria reforça frustração e exaustão, aprofundando a precariedade do trabalho nas startups.

Estágio Avançado

Segundo Blank e Dorf (2012), uma startup em estágio avançado é uma empresa que atingiu um nível significativo de maturidade e sucesso. Essas empresas geralmente oferecem produtos bem consolidados no mercado e são amplamente reconhecidas pelo público e por sua base de clientes. Diferentemente da fase de crescimento, em que operar com prejuízo ou “*queimar caixa*” é frequentemente considerado normal, startups em estágio avançado devem obter receitas robustas.

Nesse estágio, também é comum que fundadores e investidores busquem ativamente um “*exit*” lucrativo, seja através de “*aquisição*” por uma empresa maior ou uma “*oferta pública inicial*” de ações (IPO) (Shestakofsky, 2024). O simbolismo frequentemente associado a startups avançadas é o do “*unicórnio*”, representando não apenas geração significativa de receita, mas também a conquista “mágica” de um marco tão raro. Considerando a alta taxa de falência de startups nos estágios iniciais, aquelas que chegam a uma fase avançada são vistas por especialistas como casos raros e notáveis de sucesso.

Nesse estágio, as startups já cresceram significativamente, empregando centenas ou até milhares de trabalhadores. Suas estruturas organizacionais não são mais tão flexíveis ou informais quanto nas fases anteriores; em vez disso, são mais definidas e sofisticadas, com processos bem estabelecidos e departamentos especializados supervisionando diferentes aspectos do negócio. Essa mudança contrasta fortemente com a abordagem informal e abrangente das startups em estágios iniciais e de crescimento. Nas fases anteriores, os trabalhadores frequentemente se envolviam em uma ampla gama de tarefas, desfrutando de

autonomia e criatividade. No entanto, à medida que a empresa escala, os processos de trabalho se fragmentam e se padronizam, refletindo a lógica mais ampla da produção capitalista avançada. A ênfase em eficiência, previsibilidade e extração de mais-valia impõe estruturas rígidas que não apenas reduzem a agência dos trabalhadores, mas também transformam seus papéis em funções estreitas dentro de uma máquina corporativa maior. Essa mudança é ainda mais exemplificada pela cadeia hierárquica de comando, que agora inclui múltiplas camadas — gerentes, diretores, vice-presidentes, o CEO e um conselho de investidores. Essas transformações ilustram como a aceleração das startups se alinha às tendências mais amplas do capitalismo de subordinar criatividade e autonomia humanas aos imperativos implacáveis de crescimento e maximização de lucro.

Apesar da maior formalização de processos de ampliação da hierarquização da gestão, isso não significa que as startups em estágio avançado sejam necessariamente mais estáveis. O depoimento de Letícia oferece ideias valiosas sobre como os processos de reestruturação impactam diretamente a organização diária do trabalho nas startups.

Tudo está mudando, mas como você não tem todas as informações necessárias, às vezes segue um caminho. Aí percebe que não era o certo, tenta outro e descobre que também não era aquele caminho. E então parece que você está constantemente em movimento, sempre se ajustando, mas é mais por causa da ambiguidade do ambiente — é um ambiente [de trabalho] super ambíguo. [...] Tivemos uma reunião com uma das diretoras executivas da empresa, e alguém perguntou como ela lidava com toda essa ambiguidade, e ela disse que não gostava de pensar nisso como ‘ambiguidade’, que preferia ver como espaço para criatividade, porque em um ambiente sem regras, as pessoas estão ‘constantemente’ criando novas regras... Para quem está no topo, até entendo que seja ótimo incentivar a experimentação. Mas para quem precisa entregar demandas, a mudança constante nos processos é terrível, porque a gente perde tempo e não chega a lugar nenhum, sabe? (Letícia, 29 anos, Recrutamento Técnico para Diversidade e Inclusão em uma startup avançada, 2022).

Para navegar essas dinâmicas complexas, a maioria dos trabalhadores admite ter que aprender a “jogar o jogo corporativo”, aprender a ser “diplomático” ou “político”. Embora a terminologia varie, essas expressões apontam consistentemente para as dinâmicas de poder embutidas em startups avançadas. Considerando que estruturas organizacionais tendem a funcionar como redes de jogos interconectados (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977), aprender a dominar esses “jogos” ou adotar uma abordagem “diplomática” permite aos trabalhadores atravessarem reestruturações,

reposicionar-se dentro da empresa ou escapar de subequipes que percebem como prejudiciais ao seu bem-estar.

Além disso, à medida que as startups se tornam “*scale-ups*”, os processos de trabalho tendem a tornar-se altamente repetitivos, sacrificando os aspectos criativos do trabalho que tanto atraía os trabalhadores. Com a maioria dos papéis já claramente definidos, o nível de autonomia no local de trabalho diminui significativamente. Além disso, no estágio avançado, os objetivos da empresa alinham-se cada vez mais aos imperativos de acumulação de capital, levando à implementação de uma série de medidas de redução de custos, incluindo demissões em massa (Gaulejac, 2007; Ho, 2009).

Episódios de demissões, somados à intensificação do trabalho, nos ajudam a entender que as fontes de estresse em startups avançadas também surgem de uma combinação de fatores: a pressão constante para atingir metas de crescimento, a crescente repetitividade e diminuição da criatividade nas tarefas, reestruturações frequentes de equipes e a necessidade de navegar dinâmicas complexas de poder gerencial (Gaulejac, 2007). No estágio avançado, a discrepância entre trabalho prescrito e real (Dejours, 2000) é ainda mais acentuada pela erosão da ilusão *startupeira*. Nesse ponto, a narrativa idealista que outrora motivou os trabalhadores é ofuscada por pressões crescentes. Frustrações também surgem de promessas de promoção não cumpridas e da busca implacável por redução de custos, aumentando o temor de demissões em massa. Juntos, esses fatores criam um ambiente estressante onde os trabalhadores se sentem compelidos a vigilância constante para não se tornarem irrelevantes dentro da organização.

Do estágio inicial ao estágio avançado

Como pudemos observar, no estágio inicial, as startups apresentam uma abordagem quase artesanal de organização do trabalho. Contudo, à medida que transitam para as fases de crescimento e estágio avançado, a divisão do trabalho torna-se progressivamente mais estruturada e complexa no nível organizacional. Paralelamente, no nível individual, o trabalho se fragmenta e especializa, refletindo os imperativos capitalistas mais amplos de eficiência e extração de mais-valia (Pirc, 2022). Ademais, alcançar o estágio avançado não necessariamente atenua as pressões do trabalho por desempenho; pelo contrário, os trabalhadores permanecem sob tensão constante para sustentar o crescimento da empresa

enquanto minimizam custos. A crescente especialização, somada à intensificação das pressões, reduz as oportunidades de autonomia e criatividade, corroendo o senso de propósito que inicialmente atraiu muitos trabalhadores, exacerbando sua frustração com o trabalho.

Além disso, se conceituamos o estresse como decorrente do descompasso entre trabalho prescrito e real, aliado ao desequilíbrio entre elevado auto-investimento e baixa recompensa (Pirc, 2022) — ou à ruptura da dinâmica dádiva/contra-dádiva (Alter, 2002) —, podemos observar como tanto o auto-investimento, por parte dos trabalhadores, quanto o estresse evoluem ao longo dos estágios de desenvolvimento da empresa. No estágio inicial, os trabalhadores são movidos por um compromisso moral com o bem comum (Gaulejac, 2007) e pela crença de que estão contribuindo para uma empresa destinada a “*mudar o mundo*”. Seus esforços são frequentemente enquadrados como um “investimento” em um retorno financeiro futuro, geralmente esperado após a primeira grande rodada de financiamento por capital de risco. Nessa fase, o idealismo atua como um poderoso motivador, e o estresse deriva principalmente do medo do fracasso — tanto da empresa quanto individual —, criando um ambiente de alta pressão onde o sacrifício pessoal é justificado pela promessa de sucesso futuro.

Na fase de crescimento, entretanto, o idealismo típico dos estágios iniciais começa a se dissipar, à medida que os trabalhadores são pressionados a performar no ritmo exigido pelos investidores e imposto pelo modelo gerencialista (Gaulejac, 2007; Linhart, 2023). Nesse momento, a ênfase se desloca do “*propósito coletivo*” para a “*eficiência operacional*”, com métricas de desempenho e escalabilidade assumindo precedência sobre a visão inicial de transformação social. A narrativa outrora inspiradora de “*mudar o mundo*” é progressivamente eclipsada pelas expectativas de crescimento dos investidores e a busca implacável por rentabilidade. Embora alguns funcionários prosperem na adrenalina de trabalhar em uma empresa em expansão acelerada, muitos outros experimentam exaustão devido ao ritmo de trabalho incessante. Ainda que alguns optem por mudar de emprego durante essa fase de expansão, a transição para outra startup em crescimento frequentemente revela que o ritmo implacável persiste, independentemente dos benefícios oferecidos pelo maternalismo corporativo ou das promessas de desenvolvimento pessoal e profissional.

No estágio avançado, o ambiente dinâmico e caótico das startups em crescimento cede lugar às pressões de operar como uma empresa madura em busca da manutenção de vantagem competitiva. Aqui, os trabalhadores não são mais motivados primordialmente pelo medo do fracasso, mas por ansiedades relacionadas à segurança no emprego, demissões em potencial e a frustração de expectativas de carreira não atendidas, apesar de anos de auto-investimento. À medida que a competição interna se intensifica, os funcionários passam a depender cada vez mais de alianças estratégicas com colegas para assegurar suas posições e navegar as dinâmicas de poder mutáveis da organização. Ao fazê-lo, reconhecem a necessidade de aceitar e aprender a manejar as “regras do jogo” (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977), nas quais a sobrevivência profissional depende tanto de perspicácia política quanto de desempenho.

Esse desequilíbrio persistente entre elevado auto-investimento e baixa recompensa, inerente ao universo das startups, frequentemente se manifesta no que os interlocutores descrevem como “*frustração*”. Dado que o poder gerencialista constantemente mobiliza desejos e aspirações dos trabalhadores, não surpreende que o termo mais recorrente para descrever o mal-estar no trabalho não seja “*fadiga*”, mas sim “*frustração*”. Afinal, é legítimo que os trabalhadores busquem realização nos papéis que desempenham. Contudo, o colapso das expectativas estabelecidas — seja na forma de promessas não cumpridas, reconhecimento tardio ou estagnação de carreira — leva à frustração de seus desejos por reconhecimento e autorrealização. Essa lacuna entre aspiração e realidade torna-se uma fonte pervasiva de descontentamento no ambiente laboral.

Modalidades Híbridas de Organização do Trabalho

Para além de compreender os padrões gerais de funcionamento das startups, também se faz necessário compreender as modalidades remotas e híbridas de trabalho que passaram a ser adotadas por boa parte das startups brasileiras desde 2020. Uma vez que todos os trabalhadores de startups necessitam apenas de um computador e uma boa conexão de internet para trabalhar, ou seja, são majoritariamente *knowledge workers* (trabalhadores do conhecimento) (Huws, 2009), é essencial questionar: O que implica a imagem social contemporânea do trabalhador do conhecimento? Que tipos de rotinas laborais estão tipicamente

associadas a eles? E, mais importante, que tipo de vida o “trabalhador do conhecimento das startups” encarna?

Para começar a responder a essas perguntas, é importante destacar que, em primeiro lugar, os trabalhadores de startups são principalmente funcionários de escritório (Huws, 2009) que migraram para o trabalho remoto durante a pandemia. Embora o trabalho remoto tenha sido tradicionalmente associado a freelancers, autônomos e empreendedores (Cingolani; Corsani, 2024), ele já estava presente entre trabalhadores de startups — especialmente gerentes e desenvolvedores de software — antes da pandemia. No entanto, não era o modo dominante de trabalho e só se generalizou após a COVID-19 chegar ao Brasil em março de 2020.

Segundo uma pesquisa de 2024 da Abstartups, 44,8% dos trabalhadores de startups brasileiras operam totalmente no modo remoto, enquanto 44,1% seguem um modelo híbrido — um aumento significativo em relação aos 39,7% de 2023. Em contraste, apenas 11% trabalham exclusivamente de forma presencial. Esses números evidenciam a predominância dos arranjos remotos e híbridos no ecossistema de startups brasileiro, refletindo uma transformação mais ampla nas práticas organizacionais.

Dados etnográficos coletados entre 2020 e 2024 corroboram essa tendência. Muitos trabalhadores de startups entrevistados estavam acostumados a rotinas presenciais antes da pandemia. No entanto, o surgimento da COVID-19 e as restrições sanitárias subsequentes levaram a uma migração em massa para o trabalho remoto. Nos anos seguintes, os contratos de trabalho foram reestruturados para acomodar arranjos híbridos, com alguns funcionários permanecendo majoritariamente em casa e outros alternando entre trabalho remoto e presencial.

Ou seja, mais do que uma adaptação temporária à crise, essa mudança sugere a consolidação de um modelo de trabalho centrado em flexibilidade e autogestão — princípios que, paradoxalmente, reforçam novos modos de controle laboral.

Nômades corporativos

Considerando que os trabalhadores de startups são trabalhadores do conhecimento que tendem a trabalhar, sobretudo, de forma remota, podemos equipará-los ao arquétipo de *nômades corporativos*.

Segundo Julian Marx *et al.* (2023), o arquétipo do *nômade corporativo* é baseado em como os trabalhadores se relacionam com cinco dimensões-chave do trabalho: controle, tempo, ambiente social, tecnologia e espaço. Em geral, esse arquétipo de trabalhador representa um modelo híbrido, adotando e rejeitando seletivamente aspectos tanto do trabalhador corporativo tradicional (que deve cumprir horários rígidos de trabalho e executar suas funções no escritório) quanto do nômade digital (sem horários ou local fixo de trabalho). Como descrevem Marx *et al.*:

[Eles] são funcionários permanentes que trabalham de forma independente de localização, aproveitando a tecnologia da informação. Diferenciam-se dos nômades digitais por contarem com uma rede de segurança social robusta e por seguirem horários de trabalho centrais e tecnologia padronizada. Distinguem-se dos trabalhadores corporativos tradicionais por moldarem seu estilo de vida e ambiente de trabalho conforme preferências individuais e decisões democráticas em arranjos com superiores e colegas (2023, p. 303).

Isso sugere que, embora os *nômades corporativos* permaneçam sujeitos ao controle organizacional, eles mantêm certo grau de autonomia, condicionado a horários centrais, agendas flexíveis e acordos negociados com seus empregadores (Marx *et al.*, 2023). Diferentemente dos trabalhadores corporativos tradicionais, eles não são obrigados a trabalhar exclusivamente no escritório, o que supostamente lhes proporciona melhor equilíbrio entre vida pessoal e profissional, permitindo-lhes escolher entre trabalhar em casa ou em outros locais convenientes. Além disso, continuam a usufruir de certa estabilidade empregatícia, ao mesmo tempo em que desfrutam de algumas das vantagens percebidas de um ambiente de trabalho mais flexível e informal.

Os nômades corporativos podem ser contrastados com o conceito de “trabalhador remoto assalariado”, proposto por Cingolani e Corsani (2024), já que representam “novas formas de organização do trabalho assalariado na era das tecnologias digitais” (idem, p. 249). No entanto, como a maioria dos nômades corporativos está desterritorializada em relação aos espaços de trabalho, eles tendem a trabalhar principalmente de casa, enfrentando o risco de “destruição da esfera privada” (Cingolani; Corsani, 2024, p. 255). Como resultado, permanecem sujeitos a restrições significativas: pressão para permanecer constantemente disponíveis; jornadas de trabalho estendidas; falta de um ambiente de trabalho estável; sensação de isolamento. Esses fatores desafiam a noção de que o

nomadismo corporativo ou o trabalho remoto garantem automaticamente maior equilíbrio entre vida pessoal e profissional.

A partir das características e limitações da figura do nômade corporativo, é possível argumentar que os trabalhadores contemporâneos de startups, no cenário pós-pandêmico, vivenciam controle, tempo, ambientes sociais, tecnologia e organização espacial de maneira muito próxima a esse arquétipo. O trabalhador de startups, nesse sentido, ocupa uma posição intermediária: enquanto desfruta da estabilidade relativa do emprego formal (quando há), também abraça muitos dos valores associados ao nomadismo digital, como flexibilidade, mobilidade e autonomia.

Em geral, os trabalhadores de startups buscam escapar de jornadas rígidas, resistem ao microgerenciamento e rejeitam o que percebem como “*ineficiência*” ou “*perda de tempo*” em deslocamentos até o escritório. Nesse quadro, o trabalho remoto é amplamente visto não apenas como um marcador de liberdade pessoal, mas também como uma fonte de otimização de tempo e aumento de produtividade — valores que, notavelmente, são centrais aos discursos gerencialistas incorporados pelos próprios trabalhadores (Gaulejac, 2007).

Dado que as startups frequentemente operam nas *zonas cinzentas da empregabilidade* (Bureau *et al.*, 2024), as rotinas quotidianas de trabalho frequentemente borram os limites entre trabalho e lazer, assim como entre responsabilidades profissionais e domésticas — uma ambiguidade que pode tanto ampliar flexibilidade e autonomia quanto agravar a intensificação do trabalho e corroer o bem-estar.

Além disso, a maioria dos trabalhadores de startups com contratos híbridos alterna entre: Home office (escritório em casa), “*anywhere office*” (trabalho em qualquer lugar), e uso ocasional do escritório físico da empresa. Podendo, um mesmo trabalhador, transitar por todas essas modalidades de trabalho em diferentes momentos.

A percepção do trabalho remoto

Desde a pandemia, a maioria das startups e seus funcionários adotou positivamente o trabalho remoto. Do ponto de vista de empreendedores e gestores, o trabalho remoto foi posicionado como “*o futuro do trabalho*”. Uma possibilidade de

aumentar a produtividade dos trabalhadores, ao mesmo tempo em que proporcionaria mais “*equilíbrio entre vida pessoal e profissional*”.

De fato, para muitos trabalhadores, o trabalho remoto foi, e ainda é, uma oportunidade de melhorar a qualidade de vida — seja mudando-se para perto da praia em Florianópolis, tendo mais tempo para a prática de esportes de estilo de vida ou dedicando tempo a hobbies, sem descuidar das obrigações profissionais. Além disso, a flexibilidade do trabalho remoto tende a ser valorizada pela autonomia que supostamente proporciona na realização de tarefas cotidianas que seriam difíceis de conciliar em um regime presencial tradicional, como marcar consultas médicas, resolver pendências pessoais ou buscar os filhos na escola.

Por mais que muitos trabalhadores consigam conciliar melhor suas atividades pessoais com o trabalho, o trabalho remoto também abre uma nova zona de incertezas (Crozier; Friedberg, 1977), percebida de formas distintas por empregadores e empregados. Para os trabalhadores, o trabalho remoto representa possibilidade de maior liberdade, às vezes até mesmo de “burlar” o sistema e trabalhar menos horas. Para as empresas, no entanto, introduz a oportunidade de estender a jornada de trabalho e intensificar as demandas de produtividade das equipes.

Enquanto o trabalho remoto reduz a influência direta do poder disciplinar (que tradicionalmente monitora e controla os corpos dos trabalhadores no escritório), ele fortaleceu o poder gerencial ao aprofundar o controle sobre a subjetividade dos trabalhadores — deslocando o foco da presença física para a entrega de resultados e objetivos pré-definidos. Assim, apesar dos aparentes benefícios do trabalho remoto, o quanto sua flexibilidade se traduz em autonomia e bem-estar genuínos permanece uma questão crítica. Como alertam Durães *et al.* (2021), enquadrar o trabalho remoto como inerentemente moderno ou progressista corre o risco de reforçar narrativas orientadas pelo mercado que, em última análise, servem aos interesses capitalistas. Além disso, apenas um número limitado de trabalhadores realmente experimenta os benefícios do equilíbrio entre vida pessoal e profissional.

Na maioria dos casos, os funcionários de startups acabam caindo no que Chung (2022) define como o *paradoxo da flexibilidade*, em que o aumento da flexibilidade resulta paradoxalmente em maiores demandas de trabalho e um maior apagamento dos limites entre vida profissional e pessoal. Em geral, o trabalho remoto tende a isolar os trabalhadores em seus próprios cronogramas, muitas vezes

levando a episódios de hiperfoco, em que indivíduos trabalham por horas a fio sem interrupção, esquecendo-se de alongar-se, hidratar-se ou até mesmo fazer pausas para necessidades básicas.

Em contraste, nos espaços físicos de trabalho, os ritmos coletivos ofereciam uma forma de estruturação temporal: os intervalos eram feitos em conjunto, criando um ritmo compartilhado que legitimava pausas e permitia interações sociais espontâneas. Como destaca Lorient (2021), essas temporalidades compartilhadas desempenham um papel fundamental no amortecimento das pressões psicológicas do trabalho, oferecendo não apenas momentos de descanso, mas também um senso de pertencimento e reconhecimento mútuo. Sem essas temporalidades compartilhadas, muitos trabalhadores tendem a se sentir mais sobrecarregados de trabalho e, por vezes, até mesmo “culpados” por não estarem trabalhando.

Essas transformações ilustram como, no contexto das startups, a flexibilidade e a autonomia do trabalho remoto são, simultaneamente, promessas emancipatórias e mecanismos de controle, reconfigurando as experiências laborais em um cenário pós-pandêmico marcado por tensões entre liberdade e exploração.

Trabalhadores de startups: perfis e comportamentos

Até este ponto, examinamos como os ambientes de trabalho em startups operam por meio de práticas gerenciais, imperativos de crescimento, lógicas de investimento e modalidades híbridas de organização laboral. Nosso objetivo foi demonstrar as condições sociais que podem tornar o burnout inteligível não como uma patologia isolada, mas como um fenômeno cultural e contextualmente situado. No entanto, ainda assim, o burnout se manifesta nos corpos individuais dos trabalhadores, corpos que estão inseridos e influenciados por estruturas sociais mais amplas. Com isso em mente, nossa análise agora se volta para um exame mais próximo dos perfis sociais dos trabalhadores de startups, buscando entender suas origens de classe, aspirações e como estas são mobilizadas pelas empresas.

O perfil do trabalhador típico de startups no Brasil é relativamente homogêneo: predominantemente cisgênero, homem, branco, com faixa etária entre 20 e 40 anos, formação superior completa e origem majoritariamente das classes média e alta. No entanto, a implementação de políticas de Diversidade e Inclusão (D&I) no ecossistema brasileiro de startups tem levado a uma gradual diversificação

da força de trabalho ao supostamente contratar mais mulheres, mais pessoas negras, pessoas PCD e transgênero. Movimento que faz com que alguns interlocutores expressem satisfação por trabalharem em ambientes que consideram diversos e inclusivos. Ainda assim, padrões sociais e demográficos dominantes continuam a moldar práticas de recrutamento, e cargos de liderança na indústria permanecem amplamente alinhados com estereótipos tradicionais.

Observações de campo sugerem, por exemplo, que mulheres contratadas no setor de tecnologia são frequentemente direcionadas para áreas como Recursos Humanos, Customer Success e Marketing; funções historicamente associadas ao cuidado, comunicação e trabalho emocional, rotuladas como *soft* (Castro, 2018) e desvalorizadas simbolicamente e materialmente. Homens, por outro lado, continuam predominantemente alocados em funções estratégicas e técnicas como gestão, desenvolvimento de software e análise de dados; áreas socialmente construídas como *hard* (Ibid.) e vinculadas a racionalidade, objetividade e liderança.

Além disso, dados da Abstartups (2024) revelam uma queda acentuada na representatividade à medida que as startups escalam. Em estágios iniciais (11-20 funcionários), mulheres representam 7,1% da força de trabalho e pessoas negras e pardas 4,6%. Na fase de crescimento (201-500 funcionários), esses números caem para 0,2% e, em empresas ainda maiores, tornam-se estatisticamente insignificantes. Apesar das disparidades, 51% das startups entrevistadas pela Abstartups em 2024 afirmaram priorizar a diversidade como um valor-chave. No entanto, 59% não implementavam processos de recrutamento direcionados para promover maior inclusão.

Ou seja, apesar de muitas startups afirmarem um discurso progressista de inclusão e diversidade, são poucas aquelas empresas que possuem programas de D&I de fato inclusivos. Essa tendência se alinha ao que Fraser (2020) chama de “*neoliberalismo progressista*”, em que as políticas de D&I são abraçadas como um “ativo de negócios”, mas permanecem desconectadas de questões socioeconômicas mais profundas.

Eu acho que quanto mais privilegiada é uma pessoa, mais fácil é para ela ter sucesso numa startup. Ela não precisa fazer malabarismos com mais nada! Mas quanto mais os marcadores de diversidade entram em jogo — sejam questões sociais, responsabilidades familiares ou dependência financeira — mais difícil fica. A lacuna aumenta e as coisas se tornam muito mais complicadas. [...] Alguém que vem de uma origem altamente privilegiada joga esse jogo [corporativo] com muito mais facilidade,

obviamente, porque não tem mais nada com que se preocupar (Kelly, 30 anos, executiva de contas de vendas de uma startup em estágio avançado, 2022).

Como observa Kelly, quanto mais o trabalhador se aproxima do estereótipo ideal — branco, homem, cisgênero e de classe social elevada —, maiores são suas chances de alcançar sucesso em uma startup. Essa percepção evidencia que o êxito nesse ecossistema não decorre unicamente do mérito individual, mas está profundamente ancorado em privilégios sociais e estruturais. Consequentemente, mulheres, pessoas negras e indivíduos oriundos das classes populares tornam-se mais vulneráveis aos riscos psicossociais que contribuem para o estresse e o burnout.

Para além das políticas de recrutamento de D&I, diversos interlocutores relataram a existência de *grupos de afinidade* nas empresas para as quais trabalham. Esses grupos, em geral, são espaços de encontro e diálogo de trabalhadores segundo diferentes marcadores identitários: grupos de mulheres, de pessoas negras, de pessoas LGBTQ+ e assim por diante. Num primeiro momento, a presença desses grupos poderia sugerir uma via potencial para a organização coletiva dos trabalhadores em torno de preocupações comuns. No entanto, esses grupos diferem substancialmente dos coletivos ou movimentos trabalhistas clássicos, sobretudo em sua estrutura, objetivos e capacidade de produzir mudanças sistêmicas. Enquanto os movimentos tradicionais buscavam formas de resistência à exploração (Linhart, 1978; Linhart, 2023), os grupos de afinidade nas startups operam dentro dos limites discursivos do gerencialismo, voltando-se à melhoria de processos internos sem questionar as estruturas de dominação que os sustentam.

Ao institucionalizar esses grupos, as startups não apenas atendem ao desejo de seus funcionários de promover um ambiente de trabalho mais inclusivo e socialmente consciente, mas também se posicionam como organizações progressistas que praticam uma *“gestão humanizada”*. Essa estratégia reforça a imagem de empresas orientadas por propósito, valores e transformações significativas. No entanto, tal abordagem tende a deslocar o foco das desigualdades estruturais para questões identitárias, individualizando o sofrimento dos trabalhadores. Como consequência, enfraquece-se o potencial de resistência solidária e dilui-se a força coletiva necessária para enfrentar as raízes sistêmicas do sofrimento no ambiente de trabalho.

Ao questionar os interlocutores deste estudo sobre sua participação em sindicatos ou organizações coletivas de trabalhadores, as respostas foram invariavelmente negativas ou, quando muito, remetiam aos grupos de afinidade anteriormente discutidos. Em geral, a mobilização de trabalhadores de TI para a sindicalização é percebida como particularmente desafiadora por aqueles que já tentaram fazê-lo. Vale destacar que a taxa geral de sindicalização entre trabalhadores brasileiros vem declinando consistentemente na última década, atingindo seus níveis mais baixos nos últimos anos. Em 2023, apenas 8,4% dos 100,7 milhões de pessoas empregadas eram sindicalizadas, totalizando 8,4 milhões de indivíduos (Cabral; Nery, 2024).

Esse declínio pode ser atribuído a uma combinação de fatores estruturais e culturais, principalmente relacionados ao dismantelamento progressivo dos coletivos de trabalho e ao aumento do emprego informal. Como aponta Linhart (2023), a erosão dos coletivos de trabalho acelerou-se paralelamente à crescente individualização e intensificação da competição entre trabalhadores. As estratégias utilizadas para enfraquecer a solidariedade entre funcionários são diversas, indo desde a implementação de horários de trabalho flexíveis — projetados para impedir que os trabalhadores desenvolvam rotinas consistentes em conjunto — até a introdução de sistemas de avaliação de desempenho e estruturas salariais baseadas em performance (Bernard, 2020). As startups não fogem à regra, incorporando ativamente essas práticas enquanto simultaneamente promovem uma ilusão de empoderamento individual.

Entre as principais hipóteses que explicam a baixa taxa de sindicalização no setor de tecnologia, identificam-se os seguintes fatores: A) O próprio conceito de *trabalhador* é esvaziado neste setor. Seja devido à terminologia empregada — as startups consistentemente se referem a seus funcionários como “*colaboradores*” em vez de trabalhadores — ou às estratégias de comunicação que adotam, muitos trabalhadores do conhecimento em startups não se percebem como parte da classe trabalhadora. B) O setor é caracterizado por contratos de trabalho e estruturas salariais altamente heterogêneas, dificultando a unificação dos trabalhadores sob uma identidade laboral comum ou demandas coletivas (Moreno, 2021). C) Uma parcela significativa da força de trabalho opera remotamente, complicando ainda mais os esforços para organizar ações coletivas e estabelecer solidariedade entre os empregados. D) Quando ocorre mobilização, ela frequentemente é canalizada

através dos grupos de afinidade. Contudo, em vez de fomentar uma organização independente liderada por trabalhadores, essas agendas são absorvidas pela própria empresa, institucionalizadas e gerenciadas internamente, garantindo que nunca escapem ao controle corporativo. E) Por fim, a ampla implementação de sistemas individuais de avaliação de desempenho nas startups não apenas intensifica a competição entre os funcionários, mas também mina a colaboração necessária para a realização das tarefas diárias.

No entanto, a ausência de sindicatos no setor de tecnologia não deve ser interpretada como falta de consciência crítica entre os trabalhadores. Como observa Leroux (2015) “a robustez do [modelo] gerencial não está no fato de escapar às críticas, mas em resistir a elas, conseguindo marginalizá-las ou repelí-las” (2015, p. 2013). Os indivíduos mais profundamente inseridos na cultura das startups são frequentemente impulsionados por uma *paixão* por seu trabalho. Em nome dessa paixão e da busca por avanço na carreira, a crítica tende a assumir uma forma reformista em vez de oposicionista — buscando “melhorar” em vez de desafiar fundamentalmente o sistema. Em contraste, aqueles que tentam resistir ou questionar a cultura das startups de forma mais radical vão sendo tipicamente jogados para as margens: trabalhadores que já deixaram o setor ou que se tornaram desiludidos e desengajados como resultado de frustrações acumuladas.

Padrões de comportamento

Durante o trabalho de campo, participantes frequentemente questionavam por que algumas pessoas desenvolvem burnout enquanto outras não. Essa pergunta carregava uma curiosidade implícita sobre quais ações — ou omissões — poderiam levar alguns indivíduos ao esgotamento profissional ou a um suposto equilíbrio entre vida pessoal e trabalho. Embora seja uma linha de questionamento válida e instigante, ela também apresenta riscos analíticos significativos. O principal deles é a tendência de individualizar o fenômeno, enquadrando o burnout como consequência de resiliência pessoal, vulnerabilidade emocional ou escolhas de estilo de vida específicas. Tais interpretações arriscam obscurecer as dimensões culturais e organizacionais que moldam a experiência do burnout nos regimes laborais contemporâneos.

Para resistir a esse reducionismo, esta seção apresenta uma tipologia de orientações comportamentais inspirada na tipologia dos padrões de adaptação de

Merton (1968), que explora como os indivíduos respondem aos objetivos culturais dominantes — neste caso em específico, encapsulados no ethos das startups — e aos meios institucionalizados para alcançá-los. Conforme discutido na seção um, conformar-se ao ethos das startups significa internalizar slogans como “*ame o que você faz*” e “*trabalhe duro, divirta-se muito*”, tratando o trabalho tanto como caminho para autorrealização quanto como projeto identitário. Isso implica ver o trabalho não meramente como um emprego, mas como uma missão pessoal, com a empresa posicionada como extensão do eu — algo a ser nutrido e defendido ou pelo qual vale a pena sacrificar-se.

A fim de compreender os padrões de comportamento observados em campo, desenvolveu-se uma tipologia de orientações comportamentais, tratando-as como respostas dinâmicas e contextualmente dependentes às pressões culturais e organizacionais presentes nos ambientes de trabalho de empresas tipo startup. Em geral, esses padrões são moldados pela posição dos trabalhadores na organização, seus valores pessoais e suas interpretações sobre o que significa ter sucesso ou sobreviver nesses ambientes. A tipologia se inicia com a análise de Chen (2022) sobre as subjetividades dos trabalhadores de tecnologia no Vale do Silício, que identifica duas orientações dominantes entre trabalhadores de startups: os “verdadeiros crentes” (que internalizam a missão empreendedora *startupeira*) e os “não-crentes” (que participam do sistema mas permanecem desengajados de suas promessas morais).

Apesar da tipologia de Chen ser um bom ponto de partida, no campo brasileiro de startups, observaram-se padrões comportamentais que vão para além da crença ou não na missão ou no sucesso das empresas. Dentro do cenário brasileiro, a questão relevante não é sobre o quanto os trabalhadores creem ou não nos discursos empresariais, mas o “quanto estão dispostos a jogar o jogo corporativo?” Segundo os próprios interlocutores, “jogar o jogo” envolve um engajamento pragmático de suas partes, que pode variar desde o entusiasmo que os leva a “vestir a camiseta da empresa” até a atuar nessas de forma cínica e desengajada.

Com isto em mente, foram identificados quatro padrões principais de comportamento. Essas estruturas analíticas oferecem lentes complementares para examinar como diferentes grupos de indivíduos respondem aos imperativos culturais dominantes do trabalho em startups.

O padrão de *Comprometimento Excessivo* está frequentemente associado a comportamentos marcados por altos níveis de investimento subjetivo no trabalho e uma forte disposição em dedicar o tempo necessário para “*fazer acontecer*”. À semelhança dos *crentes verdadeiros* descritos por Chen, esse padrão expressa a priorização da carreira em detrimento das obrigações pessoais, sendo particularmente comum entre profissionais nos estágios iniciais de suas trajetórias no setor de tecnologia. Com poucos vínculos externos e uma fé inabalável na meritocracia, o Comprometimento Excessivo sustenta a ideia de que a realização profissional é a via privilegiada para a autorrealização. O engajamento com o universo das startups, nesse caso, não é meramente pragmático — é existencial. A startup é imaginada como espaço de liberdade, autonomia e crescimento pessoal. Com base na tipologia de Merton, esse padrão exemplifica a conformidade, na medida em que há adesão tanto aos objetivos culturais quanto aos meios institucionalizados promovidos pela cultura startup.

Em continuidade, o padrão do *Reformismo Neoliberal* guarda proximidade com o anterior no que diz respeito ao entusiasmo com o trabalho, mas dele se distancia em aspectos centrais. Esse padrão tende a emergir após um ciclo mais longo de inserção no ecossistema — geralmente cerca de uma década —, quando os trabalhadores acumulam experiências de expansão, retração e *rebranding* organizacional. Essa temporalidade favorece o surgimento de uma postura mais crítica. No entanto, em vez de romper com o ethos startupeiro, o Reformismo Neoliberal preserva a crença no potencial transformador da tecnologia e do empreendedorismo, vislumbrando neles ferramentas para a mudança social. As contradições vividas não levam ao desengajamento, mas a projetos de reforma interna — um esforço para construir empresas mais éticas, sustentáveis ou inclusivas. Menos individualista que o padrão anterior, o Reformismo Neoliberal é marcado por um investimento no trabalho com consciência social. Na perspectiva de Merton, ele se alinha à inovação: há adesão aos objetivos culturais, mas por meio de rotas alternativas.

O padrão do *Cinismo*, por sua vez, constitui a forma mais recorrente de comportamento descrente identificada nesta pesquisa. Ele geralmente resulta de uma transição a partir do Comprometimento Excessivo, precipitada por rupturas significativas como burnout, demissões ou a repetição de ciclos intensos de sobrecarga e frustração. Sua marca principal é a longa permanência no ecossistema

de startups, acompanhada de um vaivém entre entusiasmo e desilusão. Com o tempo, a crença em um trabalho significativo cede lugar à sensação de traição. Na ausência de vínculos coletivos ou de uma consciência política mais ampla, essas crises tendem a ser interpretadas como falhas individuais, e não como expressões de contradições estruturais. O resultado é uma forma particular de retraimento afetivo: desiludido, porém complacente; frustrado, mas funcional. O trabalho, nesse caso, torna-se sobretudo instrumental, justificado não por convicção, mas pelo consumo: “*trabalho para poder gastar*”. Segundo Merton, esse padrão pode ser lido como ritualismo (manutenção das rotinas sem crença nos objetivos) ou retirada (afastamento do sentido).

Em contraste, o padrão da *Crítica Resignada* é menos frequente, mas não menos relevante. Ele constitui uma contraposição ideológica ao Reformismo Neoliberal. Embora ambos compartilhem uma consciência das contradições sociais e estruturais do setor, a Crítica Resignada vai além das aspirações reformistas, rejeitando tanto os objetivos quanto os meios promovidos pelas startups. Seus valores estão ancorados na comunidade, na solidariedade e em princípios anticapitalistas. Diferentemente do Cinismo, a Crítica Resignada não deriva de uma desilusão tardia, pois nunca houve um investimento ideológico profundo ao ethos startupeiro. Os laços mantidos com coletivos e comunidades extraorganizacionais funcionam não apenas como suporte emocional, mas também como estratégia deliberada de resistência à absorção profissional total. No entanto, por sua posição marginal e pela ausência de infraestrutura coletiva organizada de apoio, esse padrão frequentemente resulta em isolamento político e afetivo. Ele expõe os limites ideológicos do ecossistema: a crítica é possível, mas a resistência sustentada é extremamente difícil. Na tipologia de Merton, esse padrão ecoa a rebelião — a recusa tanto dos fins culturais quanto dos meios institucionais, acompanhada da busca por alternativas. Contudo, a dificuldade em viabilizar essas alternativas confere ao padrão sua ambiguidade fundamental: ao mesmo tempo crítica e resignada, profundamente consciente, mas limitada em sua capacidade de ação.

Esses quatro padrões de comportamento — *Comprometimento Excessivo*, *Reformismo Neoliberal*, *Cinismo* e *Crítica Resignada* — não devem ser entendidos como categorias fixas, mas como dispositivos heurísticos. Eles nos permitem mapear as formas diversas e, muitas vezes ambivalentes, pelas quais os trabalhadores de startups navegam pelas contradições de um campo marcado pela

promessa de realização e pela realidade da exploração. Esses padrões nos ajudam a perceber como o burnout não resulta simplesmente da incapacidade individual de gerenciar tempo ou energia, mas emerge como dinâmica processual influenciada pelas contradições sistêmicas do capitalismo tecnológico. Eles expõem como crenças podem ser instrumentalizadas, como a crítica é frequentemente individualizada, e como a dissonância moral — mais do que o desapego — pode ser fonte primária de sofrimento.

Burnout: a produção sistêmica da fadiga laboral

O desconforto no trabalho sempre foi uma característica persistente do labor na sociedade da alienação (Antunes, 2009). Contudo, em diferentes períodos históricos e modelos de gestão, esse desconforto se manifestou sob diversos nomes e expressões sintomáticas, refletindo as condições socioeconômicas e estruturas laborais de cada época (Dunker, 2020).

Nos anos 1980, o mal-estar no trabalho era frequentemente conceituado como “doença dos nervos”, termo que encapsulava uma ampla gama de males psicológicos e fisiológicos atribuídos às ansiedades do trabalho (Duarte, 1988). Nas décadas de 1990 e 2000, o discurso dominante migrou para o estresse, categoria que se tornou central para entender o sofrimento laboral sob regimes de emprego cada vez mais flexíveis e precários (Clot, 2010; Dejours, 2000; Lorient, 2021; Pirc, 2022; Velázquez, 2019). Recentemente, porém, houve um aumento marcante nos diagnósticos de depressão (Gaulejac, 2007; Corbanezi, 2021; Dunker, 2021; Ehrenberg, 2010) e burnout (Lorient, 2000; Trigo et al., 2007; Tamayo, 2009; Vieira; Russo, 2019) — ambos termos prevalentes nas discussões sobre saúde mental no trabalho contemporâneo.

Considerando que vivemos sob um regime neoliberal em que indivíduos são cada vez mais cobrados a gerir e avaliar suas vidas com as mesmas métricas e indicadores de performance das empresas (Dardot; Laval, 2013), é preciso considerar o sofrimento laboral não como mero subproduto acidental do trabalho, mas característica intrínseca dos sistemas econômicos modernos. Nestes contextos, os trabalhadores são pressionados a superar constantemente seus limites, internalizando a responsabilidade por seu próprio sofrimento, enquanto as empresas buscam otimizar sua força de trabalho para máxima eficiência com mínima

responsabilidade. Portanto, a angústia psíquica não emerge no vácuo — ela é moldada pelos discursos dominantes e imperativos socioeconômicos de cada momento histórico. Se, como sugere Safatle (2020), cada época prescreve a linguagem através da qual o sofrimento é expresso, cabe questionar por que, desde os anos 2020, o termo burnout se tornou uma das principais formas de articular o mal-estar laboral entre trabalhadores de startups.

Apesar de seu amplo reconhecimento, o burnout permanece de difícil definição como condição médica distinta, com classificação fluida e contestada. Conceitualmente, está intimamente ligado ao estresse, sendo frequentemente comparado à depressão. De fato, o burnout pode emergir do estresse crônico exacerbado e, em alguns casos, levar à depressão. Porém, como destacam Zorzanelli *et al.* (2016), difere do estresse por não ser apenas uma reação temporária ou uma resposta aguda a desafios específicos. O burnout decorre da exposição prolongada a condições laborais exigentes — agravadas por mecanismos de enfrentamento restritos — culminando em exaustão emocional, física e cognitiva.

Assim como o estresse se tornou um termo difuso e ubíquo, o conceito de burnout se expandiu — particularmente após a pandemia de COVID-19 — passando a circular no discurso público como categoria ampla e frequentemente ambígua. Nesse contexto, se o estresse funciona como intermediário entre experiências somáticas e psicológicas (Zorzanelli *et al.*, 2016) e é comumente usado para descrever perturbações cotidianas, o burnout emerge como categoria psicossomática distinta. Operando na intersecção entre dimensões psíquicas e sociais, passa a denotar especificamente o sofrimento e as rupturas vivenciados nos locais de trabalho contemporâneos.

Por ter etiologia enraizada em fatores sociais e psicológicos, o burnout pode ser considerado por alguns um diagnóstico psicossocial (Zorzanelli *et al.*, 2016). Contudo, essa mesma característica o expõe ao risco persistente de ser enquadrado como falha moral individual, onde o sofredor é considerado integralmente responsável por sua condição. Essa perspectiva individualizante não apenas obscurece fatores estruturais e organizacionais — com suas disputas, mediações e relações de poder — que contribuem para o burnout, como também reforça ideais neoliberais de autogestão. Nesse modelo, espera-se que os trabalhadores internalizem a culpa por seu sofrimento, tratando a exaustão como deficiência

peçoal em vez de questionar forças sistêmicas mais amplas que moldam e sustentam o mal-estar laboral.

Para superar explicações de cunho moralizante, biológico ou estritamente psicológico, autores como Lóriol (2019) propõem compreender o burnout e o estresse como fenômenos socialmente construídos e historicamente situados. Em vez de serem tratados como estados emocionais fixos ou problemas exclusivamente individuais, esses quadros devem ser entendidos como processos dinâmicos, cuja gravidade pode se intensificar — evoluindo, por exemplo, para formas mais severas de sofrimento psíquico, como a depressão —, dependendo da presença ou ausência de recursos de enfrentamento disponíveis.

Esses recursos podem ser de natureza individual (como uso de medicação, requalificação profissional ou redefinição de expectativas pessoais) ou coletiva (como acesso a suporte institucional, redistribuição das cargas de trabalho ou inserção em redes de solidariedade). Crucialmente, a trajetória do burnout é moldada pelo contexto no qual o trabalho ocorre. Em regimes neoliberais — especialmente em startups e no setor tecnológico — os ambientes organizacionais tendem a combinar alta exigência com baixa proteção: intensificam restrições (por meio da precarização, da competição permanente e da pressão por desempenho) ao mesmo tempo em que enfraquecem ou desmontam formas coletivas de apoio que poderiam atenuar seus efeitos.

Fatores como alta rotatividade, juventude e transitoriedade da força de trabalho, fragilidade das organizações sindicais e a normalização do teletrabalho contribuem para a desarticulação de vínculos coletivos e para a fragilização de mecanismos institucionais de suporte. Nesse cenário, o ônus da adaptação recai cada vez mais sobre o indivíduo, que deve gerir, por conta própria, os impactos subjetivos da intensificação do trabalho.

Portanto, compreender o burnout na contemporaneidade exige mais do que empatia com o sofrimento subjetivo: exige atenção à erosão estrutural dos amortecedores coletivos que, em outros contextos históricos, permitiam aos trabalhadores enfrentar as demandas laborais com maior resiliência e suporte social.

Apesar do Brasil ser considerado um dos países mais ansiosos e depressivos do mundo (Carvalho, 2024), há poucos dados sobre o número de casos de burnout no país. Diante da ausência de dados estatísticos abrangentes sobre burnout entre trabalhadores brasileiros, avaliar com precisão sua prevalência no

setor de tecnologia do país se torna ainda mais desafiador. Entretanto, apesar dessa carência de números precisos, diversas fontes — desde artigos em sites especializados até *webinars*, palestras em eventos corporativos e estudos internos realizados por startups — oferecem insights sobre como o setor de startups percebe e aborda o burnout.

Nos estudos mercadológicos publicados por *Health Techs*, emerge um padrão discernível que visa apresentar o burnout enquanto um problema de saúde mental que precisa ser enfrentado. Primeiro, esses relatórios enfatizam a importância de abordar a saúde mental dos trabalhadores, frequentemente enquadrando a questão através de uma lente econômica. Declarações como *“aproximadamente 12 bilhões de dias de trabalho são perdidos anualmente devido a depressão e ansiedade, resultando em um custo econômico global de quase US\$ 1 trilhão”* (ZenKlub, 2022) ou *“até 2030, distúrbios psicológicos devem custar US\$ 6 trilhões à economia global”* (Caderno de campo, 27 jan. 2023) servem para justificar investimentos corporativos em iniciativas de saúde mental.

Em seguida, após definir um contexto de crise de saúde mental amplo, tais relatórios apresentam seus próprios achados sobre prevalência de ansiedade, depressão, estresse e burnout em trabalhadores brasileiros. Tipicamente, esses números derivam de dados coletados na base de clientes de cada empresa, dificultando a compreensão detalhada da amostra de tais estudos. Algumas estatísticas reportadas incluem: “32% dos brasileiros exibem sintomas moderados a severos de ansiedade” e “31% apresentam sintomas severos de depressão” (ZenKlub, 2022). “64% dos trabalhadores relatam sofrer estresse frequente”, apesar de “87% afirmarem ser apaixonados por seus trabalhos” (Caderno de campo, 27 jan. 2023). “53,5% dos profissionais de RH conhecem colegas que foram demitidos por burnout” (Flash, 2023). Embora indiscutivelmente alarmantes, esses dados devem ser interpretados com olhar crítico. Os números, muitas vezes disseminados pelas próprias startups, não apenas expressam o sofrimento individual, mas contribuem para a construção de uma narrativa de crise no interior do ecossistema brasileiro de startups — uma crise que, segundo essa lógica, exigiria intervenção imediata e tecnicamente orientada.

Importa destacar que essas empresas não atuam como observadoras neutras do cenário que descrevem. Ao contrário, são agentes ativos na produção e na disseminação dos dados que fundamentam essa crise, apresentando suas

próprias plataformas e serviços como soluções. Por meio de white papers, webinars e summits, essas startups constroem um enquadramento segundo o qual a saúde mental no ambiente de trabalho é concebida como um problema gerencial que pode — e deve — ser tratado por meio de inovação, monitoramento contínuo e intervenções terapêuticas mediadas por tecnologia.

Dessa forma, observa-se que, ao produzirem e divulgarem relatórios sobre saúde mental, startups do setor de Health Tech buscam não apenas chamar atenção para o burnout como um fenômeno preocupante, mas, sobretudo, mobilizar preocupação estratégica. Não se trata de condenar o sofrimento como algo moralmente inaceitável, mas de reposicioná-lo como um desafio organizacional que demanda investimento em sua gestão. Nesse processo, imperativos éticos são alinhados a soluções de mercado, configurando aquilo que Rose (2019) descreve como uma nova racionalidade psicopolítica, onde o cuidado se transforma em oportunidade de negócio.

A publicação desses dados costuma ser acompanhada por uma proliferação de novos produtos e serviços lançados pelas mesmas Health Techs responsáveis pelos relatórios, estabelecendo uma relação cíclica entre a produção de diagnósticos e a oferta de soluções. Essa dinâmica aprofunda o que Eva Illouz (2007) denomina de mercantilização da saúde mental — um processo que, hoje, não é mais conduzido exclusivamente por corporações farmacêuticas, mas também por uma economia digital que instrumentaliza o cuidado por meio de dados e dispositivos tecnológicos.

Neste enquadramento mercantilizado, condições como ansiedade, depressão e, sobretudo, burnout raramente são compreendidas como processos sociais e historicamente situados ou como consequências de dinâmicas laborais exaustivas. Em vez disso, são frequentemente reinterpretadas como disfunções individuais, interrupções à produtividade ou obstáculos a serem corrigidos. As intervenções propostas, nesse contexto, tendem a ser legitimadas não por sua eficácia terapêutica ou valor ético, mas por sua capacidade de reduzir licenças médicas, manter o engajamento e assegurar a continuidade do fluxo de trabalho. Isso nos leva a uma questão fundamental: essas plataformas realmente promovem o bem-estar dos trabalhadores ou funcionam, antes, como ferramentas gerenciais voltadas à conformidade regulatória e à manutenção da produtividade?

Ao mesmo tempo em que as Health Tech apresentam seus investimentos em plataformas de bem-estar e terapia remota como gestos de responsabilidade corporativa, o ônus do cuidado continua recaindo sobre os indivíduos. Espera-se que monitorem a si mesmos, regulem suas emoções e invistam continuamente em seu próprio aprimoramento, mesmo em ambientes de trabalho cujos danos estruturais permanecem amplamente intocados. Nesse cenário, o discurso do cuidado opera como um dispositivo estratégico: reconfigura a saúde mental não como campo de transformação coletiva, mas como instrumento de governança gerencial, recoberto por uma linguagem terapêutica.

Quanto mais trabalhadores são “diagnosticados” como em “risco de burnout”, mais essas plataformas os conduzem a uma narrativa terapêutica centrada na autoajuda, na gestão emocional e na responsabilização individual. Em lugar de enfrentar as condições estruturais que produzem o sofrimento — como a precarização, a sobrecarga de trabalho, as metas inatingíveis e a ausência de mecanismos coletivos de enfrentamento —, o mal-estar é reformulado como um déficit pessoal. Cabe ao indivíduo desenvolver competências de autorregulação, resiliência ou buscar tratamento terapêutico, enquanto as causas sistêmicas seguem invisibilizadas.

Burnout sob a perspectiva dos trabalhadores de startups

Nos ecossistemas de startups, o burnout não circula apenas como um problema individual a ser gerido por meio do auxílio tecnológico ou através de processos de medicalização. Emerge também como conceito êmico, invocado pelos próprios trabalhadores para nomear e dar sentido ao seu sofrimento. Transforma-se em diagnóstico vernacular, forma de articular tensões, contradições e rupturas decorrentes do cotidiano laboral. Por isso, é essencial perguntar: o que burnout significa para os trabalhadores? Como descrevem, interpretam e navegam essa experiência em seus próprios termos?

Crucialmente, qualquer análise do burnout no universo das startups deve ser situada em relação a uma economia afetiva mais ampla, marcada pela articulação entre paixão, produtividade e exploração. Como discutido anteriormente, as culturas organizacionais desse setor cultivam ativamente aquilo que Lorient e Leroux (2015) descrevem como *trabalho apaixonado*, frequentemente mobilizado pelo discurso

gerencial do *“faça o que ama”*. Neste enquadramento, o trabalho deixa de ser representado como uma obrigação onerosa e passa a ser promovido como caminho privilegiado para o desenvolvimento pessoal e a realização subjetiva. Os trabalhadores não são concebidos apenas como executores de tarefas, mas como sujeitos integralmente engajados, emocionalmente investidos, intrinsecamente motivados e identificados com o trabalho como extensão de si mesmos e como fonte de felicidade.

Esse enquadramento afetivo tende a borrar as fronteiras entre trabalho e identidade, reforçando uma visão segundo a qual o labor se torna o principal *locus* de produção de sentido na vida contemporânea. Ao convocar os trabalhadores a investirem emocionalmente em suas funções, gestores conseguem intensificar o engajamento e impulsionar a produtividade — mas a um custo elevado. Como demonstrado ao longo desta tese, a paixão no trabalho raramente é uma expressão espontânea de desejo individual. Antes, ela deve ser compreendida como uma construção social e histórica, resultado de dinâmicas neoliberais que incentivam os sujeitos a otimizarem seu desempenho e tornarem-se “excelentes” em todos os domínios da vida. Nesse contexto, a paixão torna-se um vetor disciplinar, profundamente entrelaçado a mecanismos de controle e autoexploração.

Porém, o imperativo da excelência, quando levado ao limite, não conduz necessariamente ao florescimento pessoal, mas frequentemente à exaustão. As qualidades celebradas pela cultura startup — dedicação, entusiasmo, disponibilidade ilimitada e resiliência — podem rapidamente se converter em armadilhas subjetivas quando as exigências ultrapassam o limiar do sustentável. Como observou uma das interlocutoras desta pesquisa: *“amar o que você faz é estar a dois passos do burnout”*. Sua fala sintetiza a ambivalência constitutiva do trabalho apaixonado, no qual o investimento afetivo aprofunda tanto o potencial de realização quanto a vulnerabilidade ao adoecimento. A paixão, em outras palavras, converte-se em métrica de produtividade, e a produtividade, por sua vez, em medida de valor pessoal que, quando não alcançada, pode levar ao estresse e ao sofrimento psíquico.

Como argumenta Lóriel (2019), diferentes grupos profissionais desenvolvem compreensões coletivas distintas sobre o que constitui estresse em seus respectivos ambientes de trabalho. Ademais, não é incomum que esses grupos reconheçam determinado grau de estresse como legítimo, e até mesmo como inerente ao

exercício de suas atividades. O mesmo ocorre no setor de startups: por se tratarem de ambientes intensos, acelerados e orientados por metas ambiciosas, o estresse é frequentemente percebido como uma condição contingente — um dado do qual não se pode prescindir. Contudo, quando esse estresse esperado ultrapassa os limites considerados ideais ou suportáveis, ou quando os mecanismos coletivos de atenuação não estão disponíveis, o que era inicialmente tolerado converte-se em sofrimento.

Importa destacar que as fontes específicas de estresse variam significativamente entre os diferentes setores que compõem as startups. Profissionais de vendas, por exemplo, apontam a pressão constante por metas mensais como seu principal fator de tensão. Equipes de *Customer Success* relatam a sobrecarga emocional envolvida na gestão de problemas pós-venda. Profissionais de recursos humanos mencionam os conflitos interpessoais e a mediação de disputas como fontes recorrentes de desgaste. Já as equipes de Suporte técnico enfatizam o estresse de estar permanentemente de plantão para responder a falhas sistêmicas. Por fim, desenvolvedores de software salientam o peso da responsabilidade contínua por manter as plataformas operacionais.

Entretanto, esses estressores não podem ser compreendidos como eventos extraordinários ou imprevisíveis. Ao contrário, estão profundamente imbricados nas expectativas normativas de cada função. Tratam-se de pressões antecipadas, reconhecidas e incorporadas ao exercício profissional especializado que caracteriza o modelo organizacional das startups. Nesse sentido, tais pressões configuram aquilo que autores como Cru (2014) e Roche (2016) denominam *riscos ocupacionais* — elementos que os trabalhadores, em geral, aceitam e legitimam como parte constitutiva do seu ofício, uma vez que se alinham à lógica de funcionamento e ao valor simbólico atribuído ao próprio trabalho. Assim, esses riscos tornam-se não apenas tolerados, mas internalizados como componentes da identidade profissional, contribuindo para a naturalização do sofrimento como parte do cotidiano laboral.

Para além desses riscos específicos por setor, há também fatores estressores transversais, que afetam trabalhadores de startups em diferentes áreas. Entre eles, destaca-se a recorrência de mudanças estratégicas abruptas, impostas pela alta gestão, que exigem o refazimento de tarefas e desorganizam rotinas previamente estruturadas. Somam-se a isso as percepções de esforço desperdiçado, a perda de produtividade, a redução da autonomia e o bloqueio da

criatividade. A iminência de demissões coletivas ou reestruturações organizacionais também figura como fonte significativa de tensão, não apenas por ameaçar a estabilidade do emprego, mas por sinalizar que o investimento subjetivo e o trabalho realizado podem ter sido descartados ou desvalorizados. Nesses contextos, muitos trabalhadores expressam frustração por não conseguirem realizar suas tarefas de modo satisfatório — e, portanto, por não alcançarem a realização pessoal que esperavam encontrar no trabalho.

Diante dessas experiências, os relatos dos trabalhadores revelam um repertório amplo, heterogêneo e mutável de sintomas, autodescrições e categorias diagnósticas. Longe de constituírem narrativas homogêneas ou facilmente classificáveis, os testemunhos analisados expressam múltiplos referenciais mobilizados para dar sentido ao sofrimento. Esses referenciais variam de acordo com trajetórias de vida, estados emocionais e compreensões em transformação sobre saúde mental. De modo geral, episódios de estresse e burnout foram frequentemente articulados pelos interlocutores através do corpo. Em vez de recorrerem, de imediato, a uma linguagem psicológica ou a rótulos diagnósticos formais, muitos trabalhadores descreveram seu sofrimento em termos somáticos — relatando dores de cabeça persistentes, insônia, desconfortos gastrointestinais e variações significativas de peso corporal. Tais sintomas, embora impactantes, eram muitas vezes interpretados como gerenciáveis e, portanto, não necessariamente indicativos de um problema médico. Eram vistos como sinais de um corpo sob tensão, mas ainda operando dentro dos limites considerados aceitáveis de resistência profissional. Nos casos mais agudos, no entanto, o corpo deixava de funcionar como mero recipiente do estresse e passava a ser o próprio local de seu colapso. Diversos interlocutores relataram episódios de pânico, crises de choro incontrolável, erupções cutâneas e taquicardia — respostas fisiológicas que sinalizavam um desarranjo mais profundo e sistêmico do eu. Tais manifestações não apenas evidenciam a sobrecarga vivida, mas revelam a materialidade do sofrimento laboral, que se expressa e se inscreve no corpo de maneira visceral.

Portanto, as formas de nomeação do mal-estar vão desde manifestações somáticas — como fadiga crônica, insônia ou dores de cabeça — até diagnósticos formais como TDAH, ansiedade, estresse e burnout. Crucialmente, essas categorias não são estáticas: transformam-se ao longo do tempo, influenciadas por discursos

culturais mais amplos, pela evolução da linguagem da saúde mental, por reflexões subjetivas e por alterações nas condições de trabalho e de vida.

Dada a natureza transitória, relacional e dinâmica do estresse no contexto laboral, apresento a seguir um quadro classificatório que busca mapear como, de maneira geral, os indivíduos entrevistados nesta pesquisa referenciam suas experiências de sofrimento no trabalho. Tal classificação não pretende fixar diagnósticos retrospectivos sobre os interlocutores, tampouco impor categorias clínicas às suas narrativas. Seu objetivo é triplo. Primeiro, oferecer uma lente interpretativa para que o leitor possa acompanhar a fluidez com que os sujeitos transitam entre diferentes terminologias e formas de conceitualizar seu mal-estar laboral. Segundo, destacar como o termo burnout vem sendo amplamente absorvido pelo senso comum, frequentemente empregado de maneira expandida, para além de sua definição clínica restrita. Por fim, evidenciar o fato de que muitos trabalhadores, mesmo diante de sofrimento intenso, permanecem sem acesso a atenção especializada ou a intervenções estruturais — especialmente nos casos mais graves, em que o cuidado profissional e mudanças organizacionais seriam não apenas recomendáveis, mas urgentes.

Tabela – Conceitualizações nativas de sofrimento no trabalho

Conceitualizações nativas de sofrimento no trabalho	Número de indivíduos
Relata não apresentar predisposição significativa a respostas de estresse	5
Relata tendências ansiosas e maior sensibilidade a situações de estresse	2
Relata diagnóstico de TDAH e propensão a respostas de estresse	3
Relata uma propensão a reatividade elevada ao estresse	4
Relata ter se aproximado de um estado de burnout	7
Relata ter atingido um estado de burnout que não foi clinicamente verificado	6
Recebeu diagnóstico clínico de burnout, mas optou por não tirar licença médica	2
Recebeu diagnóstico clínico de burnout e utilizou licença médica posteriormente	1

Fonte: elaborado pela autora.

Conforme demonstrado, entre os 30 interlocutores apenas cinco não relataram níveis significativos de estresse relacionado ao trabalho. Em suas narrativas, esses participantes descreviam seus empregos como mero meio de subsistência — sem forte investimento identitário — ou afirmavam dispor de autonomia suficiente para moldar o trabalho às exigências da vida pessoal, e não o contrário.

Dois entrevistados, embora sofressem de mal-estar laboral, não recorreram às categorias “estresse” ou “burnout”; ambos identificaram sua angústia como ansiedade crônica, atualmente tratada com medicação. Outros três atribuíram o sofrimento ocupacional a um diagnóstico prévio de TDAH, sublinhando que dificuldades na autorregulação da atenção e nas funções executivas se agravavam em ambientes de alta demanda. Para mitigar tais desafios, enfatizaram rotinas rigorosas, *planners*, lembretes digitais e alarmes como estratégias de manutenção do foco.

Quatro participantes utilizaram a noção de estresse de forma episódica e amplamente manejável. Embora reconhecessem custos fisiológicos — sobretudo fadiga e queda de energia em dias de pico —, não consideravam o estresse intrinsecamente prejudicial nem demandavam intervenção médica. Para esses trabalhadores, o estresse se normaliza como componente temporário da vida profissional.

Em contraste, dezesseis interlocutores recorreram ao termo burnout para qualificar seu sofrimento. Destes, oito relataram sentir-se “à beira” do burnout em fases particularmente intensas de trabalho, percebendo sinais físicos precoces e buscando mecanismos de enfrentamento para evitar colapso pleno. Cinco afirmaram já ter atravessado episódios de burnout que motivaram trocas de emprego ou afastamentos prolongados; embora alguns estivessem em psicoterapia, nenhum buscou avaliação psiquiátrica, de modo que não houve diagnóstico clínico formal — o que evidencia como vivências subjetivas de esgotamento podem gerar rupturas mesmo sem validação médica.

Apenas três participantes procuraram assistência médica e receberam diagnóstico clínico de burnout. Entre eles, um obteve licença formal e posteriormente pediu demissão; os demais permaneceram na mesma organização, amparando-se em medicação, pequenas reduções de carga horária e breves períodos de descanso. Seus relatos revelam que o forte apego afetivo ao trabalho e o sentido

moral de responsabilidade profissional podem suplantam a legitimidade do diagnóstico, moldando estratégias de recuperação que privilegiam a continuidade laboral em detrimento de afastamentos mais extensos.

Em conjunto, essas trajetórias evidenciam a pluralidade de significados atribuídos ao sofrimento ocupacional no contexto das startups — desde a normalização do estresse como parte da rotina até a medicalização parcial ou completa do burnout. Revelam, ainda, como as decisões relacionadas ao cuidado e ao afastamento não se reduzem a critérios clínicos, mas são mediadas por valores culturais, pelo grau de investimento identitário no trabalho e pela disponibilidade (ou ausência) de recursos institucionais. Em última análise, os testemunhos analisados apontam que o burnout, nesse contexto, não é apenas um colapso do corpo ou da mente, mas um colapso de sentido, de confiança e de coerência emocional. Sua gênese está vinculada não apenas à volatilidade organizacional, mas às exigências contraditórias impostas aos trabalhadores: espera-se que sejam emocionalmente resilientes e estrategicamente distantes, que se importem profundamente com o que fazem — e, ao mesmo tempo, consigam permanecer inafetados.

É precisamente nesse paradoxo que o burnout se enraíza — não apenas como uma patologia a ser tratada, mas como um sintoma vivido das tensões não resolvidas do trabalho contemporâneo. O que está em jogo não é simplesmente determinar se o burnout é “real”, mas compreender como sua nomeação se torna uma via legítima de expressão de um sofrimento frequentemente invisível, moralmente ambíguo e entrelaçado às contradições estruturais da vida organizacional.

Mecanismos de enfrentamento ao burnout

Embora momentos de conexão e apoio mútuo ainda existam entre colegas de trabalho, esses tendem a ser informais, difusos e facilmente desarticulados por demissões ou reestruturações internas. Como resultado, esta seção foca principalmente nas estratégias individualizadas de enfrentamento, que emergiram como o modo prevalente de navegar o sofrimento durante o trabalho de campo. Através da análise dessas estratégias, torna-se possível compreender as complexas negociações morais e emocionais que os trabalhadores empreendem para se sustentar em ambientes marcados por alto crescimento e alta pressão — contextos que demandam não apenas desempenho, mas também a contínua otimização de si.

Diante do sofrimento e da escassez de alternativas coletivas para enfrentá-lo, a maioria dos trabalhadores só se sente compelida a agir quando sintomas físicos ou emocionais se tornam demasiado agudos para serem ignorados. Em muitos casos, passam a buscar ativamente bem-estar apenas quando se percebem à beira do burnout — não por negligência consciente de sinais iniciais, como insônia ou dores de cabeça, mas, como explicou Letícia, por dificuldade em reconhecer que eram elas mesmas que estavam sofrendo. A ação, portanto, costuma ocorrer apenas quando se sentem à beira do colapso.

Mesmo quando um “*quase burnout*” ocorre, os mecanismos de enfrentamento adotados tendem a reforçar lógicas psicológicas dominantes e narrativas autodisciplinares. Embora a maioria consiga situar seu sofrimento no contexto mais amplo do trabalho em startups — caracterizado por mudanças organizacionais frequentes, demandas excessivas ou relações conflituosas com gestores —, muitos internalizam a crença de que falharam em estabelecer limites adequados ou em gerenciar corretamente seu próprio estresse.

É nesse ponto que a lógica da autodisciplina se impõe. O domínio sobre tempo, energia e atenção torna-se não apenas um ideal profissional, mas também um imperativo moral — necessário para alcançar sucesso no trabalho e, ao mesmo tempo, desfrutar da vida fora dele. Quando essa autodisciplina falha, como inevitavelmente ocorre sob pressão prolongada, outras ferramentas são mobilizadas: suplementos e fármacos psicoativos para sustentar energia e foco; sessões de terapia on-line para regular emoções e evitar que o burnout desemboque em colapso. Essas práticas refletem o que alguns estudiosos descrevem como a *virada terapêutica* da governança neoliberal (Illouz, 2007), na qual o cuidado de si se torna tanto uma obrigação pessoal quanto um requisito de performance.

Lazer e atividade física, embora frequentemente enquadrados como formas de autocuidado, também são atravessados por lógicas mais amplas de responsabilização e autodisciplina. Ainda assim, podem apontar para o surgimento de formas frágeis, porém significativas, de resistência encarnada e afetiva, por meio das quais trabalhadores tentam renegociar sua relação com o tempo, o corpo, o trabalho e o eu. Ou seja, práticas de atividade física, principalmente, tornam-se não apenas uma ferramenta para aliviar o estresse, mas um meio de reorientar a dinâmica relacional e temporal que, de outra forma, é dominada pela lógica da produtividade.

Na maioria dos casos observados, a prática de atividade física vinha acompanhada por terapia cognitivo-comportamental. A busca por autoconhecimento, autorregulação terapêutica e gerenciamento emocional — processos que Illouz (2007) identifica como centrais na cultura emocional do capitalismo tardio — emergia como estratégia-chave para suportar as pressões dos empregos e manter a empregabilidade em ambientes laborais exigentes. Para muitos, a terapia tornou-se um meio de adaptação à turbulência emocional e à volatilidade estrutural do trabalho em startups. De modo mais amplo, era amplamente vista como ferramenta fundamental para lidar com estresse, ansiedade e burnout, bem como para enfrentar desafios interpessoais e organizacionais no ambiente de trabalho. A terapia era percebida como vital — auxiliava os trabalhadores a enfrentar dificuldades, dar sentido ao sofrimento e reivindicar certo grau de agência. No entanto, na ausência de responsabilização institucional, também assumia a função de tecnologia de resistência: um meio de seguir em frente, apesar das condições exploratórias.

Mas o que acontece quando lazer, atividade física e terapia deixam de ser suficientes para gerenciar as demandas e o sofrimento no trabalho? Para muitos interlocutores deste estudo, a resposta foi recorrer a substâncias psicoativas — seja através do uso recreativo de maconha, seja pela medicalização via diagnósticos psiquiátricos e uso de psicotrópicos. A relutância inicial em aceitar medicação estava enraizada em uma combinação de raciocínio moral e construções culturais — preocupações com dependência, medo de intervenções “químicas” e uma percepção mais profunda de fracasso pessoal, como se não tivessem conseguido gerir o sofrimento por meio da força de vontade, da terapia ou de ajustes no estilo de vida. Assim, a medicalização era frequentemente experienciada não apenas como tratamento, mas como último recurso — sinal de que o sofrimento ultrapassara os limites do que seria possível controlar por estratégias individuais.

Certamente, práticas como atividade física, hobbies ou uso de substâncias funcionavam como amortecedores externos, que ajudavam a estabelecer contornos para o trabalho. Terapia e medicação, de maneira semelhante, forneciam ferramentas para autoconhecimento e regulação emocional, ajudando a evitar ser completamente engolido pelas exigências do emprego. No entanto, essas estratégias mostravam retornos decrescentes diante da pressão contínua, e sua eficácia tendia a se deteriorar com o tempo.

Diante desse cenário, não surpreende que, quando todas as estratégias de enfrentamento “falhavam”, a demissão surgisse como último recurso — uma oportunidade de redefinir limites e recuperar certo grau de controle. Trocar de emprego no setor tecnológico era frequentemente enquadrado como um *reset* pessoal — a esperança de construir uma relação mais saudável com o trabalho através de um novo emprego. No entanto, o acompanhamento longitudinal revelou um padrão recorrente: apesar dos esforços para “fazer diferente”, muitos dos interlocutores voltavam a relatar os mesmos níveis de exaustão após cerca de um ano no novo emprego. Suas esperanças haviam se dissipado, e as mesmas forças estruturais — ritmo intensificado, colapso de fronteiras e investimento emocional — se reimpunham, reproduzindo novamente os ciclos de sobrecarga e esgotamento.

Conclusão Geral

Esta tese teve como objetivo investigar o ecossistema de startups no Brasil a partir do *caso-limite* (Leite Lopes, 1988) de Florianópolis. Combinando múltiplas escalas de análise — macro, meso e micro —, buscou-se compreender de que maneira os imperativos econômicos de crescimento acelerado se articulam às culturas organizacionais das startups e às experiências subjetivas de seus trabalhadores. O ponto de partida foi a observância de um aparente paradoxo: como um setor que se apresenta como inovador, flexível e criativo passou a registrar, sobretudo após 2020, altos índices de burnout?

Embora a pandemia de COVID-19 tenha agravado os quadros de sofrimento psíquico — com aumento global de 25% nos casos de depressão e ansiedade, segundo a OMS (2022) —, os dados empíricos desta pesquisa demonstram que sinais de exaustão já estavam presentes antes de 2020. Assim, ao invés de atribuir o fenômeno exclusivamente à pandemia, esta tese buscou explorar as contradições internas do modelo organizacional das startups e suas conexões com o regime de acumulação capitalista contemporâneo (Carcanholo, 2021).

Inicialmente, vimos que as startups se constituem como empresas orientadas à escalabilidade, ao crescimento rápido e à inovação, frequentemente financiadas por capital de risco. A lógica de valorização imposta pelos investidores institui ritmos intensificados de trabalho. A ideologia do Vale do Silício — centrada no empreendedorismo, na meritocracia e na figura do *self-made man* — está no

cerne desse modelo. No Brasil, esse discurso ganhou força a partir da década de 2010, com Florianópolis consolidando-se como um dos principais polos nacionais de inovação. Nomeada “*Capital Nacional das Startups*” em 2024, a cidade tornou-se um caso exemplar para a análise etnográfica.

Em seguida, observou-se que a organização do trabalho nas startups é marcada por dinamicidade e transformações ao longo do tempo. Nos estágios iniciais, predominam ambientes horizontais e flexíveis, mas também instáveis e informalizados. À medida que amadurecem, essas empresas tendem a adotar estruturas mais formalizadas, hierarquizadas e orientadas por metas e desempenho. Mesmo mantendo o discurso da “autonomia”, constata-se uma intensificação do controle e das exigências emocionais sobre os trabalhadores.

Além disso, grande parte das startups adotam regimes de trabalho híbrido ou remoto sob a alcunha de, assim, promoverem mais equilíbrio entre vida pessoal e profissional. Entretanto, os dados revelam que, na prática, a modalidade remota tem contribuído para jornadas mais extensas e para o aumento da autoexploração. A ausência de delimitações temporais e de controle direto favorece a intensificação do trabalho sob a aparência de liberdade (Chung, 2022).

Finalmente, a tese analisou as estratégias, tanto organizacionais quanto individuais, mobilizadas para lidar com o sofrimento dos trabalhadores. Embora algumas empresas adotem iniciativas de “bem-estar corporativo”, estas se mostram insuficientes para enfrentar as causas estruturais do burnout. O esvaziamento de formas coletivas de organização torna os trabalhadores mais vulneráveis a riscos psicossociais. A maioria recorre a estratégias individuais, como psicoterapia, práticas esportivas ou contato com a natureza para lidar com o sofrimento. Em casos mais graves, optam por medicação ou pela demissão voluntária. No entanto, mudar de empresa raramente resolve a questão, já que os mesmos padrões de sobrecarga tendem a se repetir nos demais ambientes de trabalho. Dessa forma, esta tese propõe compreender o burnout não como falha individual, mas como um processo social e culturalmente situado. Sendo este não uma anomalia de causas extrínsecas, mas uma expressão intrínseca do sofrimento encontrado nas startups.

Além disso, observou-se que a suposta novidade das startups reside menos em suas estruturas organizacionais e mais na intensificação de ideais neoliberais já consolidados. A emergência dessas empresas ocorreu em um contexto político e econômico favorável: com o enfraquecimento de direitos trabalhistas, o Estado

oferecendo incentivos fiscais e uma força de trabalho — especialmente jovem e de classe média — já socializada sob os valores do empreendedorismo, da flexibilidade e da autorresponsabilização.

Conclui-se, portanto, que enfrentar o burnout requer transformações estruturais. Redução da carga de trabalho e reconstrução de formas coletivas de solidariedade despontam como caminhos possíveis — ainda que difíceis de concretizar dentro do modelo vigente. Esta tese sustenta a necessidade de reposicionar o sofrimento mental no trabalho como uma questão política e coletiva, e não como um problema meramente individual de saúde.

RÉSUMÉ ÉLARGI

Introduction

Depuis 2010, une nouvelle vague d'entreprises technologiques – les startups – s'est répandue au Brésil, attirant principalement de jeunes professionnels de la classe moyenne récemment diplômés. Sous le principe de « *changer le monde* » par le développement de produits « *innovants* » et « *disruptifs* », ces organisations ont également promis de redéfinir les modes d'organisation du travail. Selon les entrepreneurs de startups, il était nécessaire de « s'opposer » au capitalisme d'entreprise traditionnel et de créer des environnements de travail où le « *bonheur* », « *l'engagement* » et le « *but* » faisaient partie de la routine de travail.

Malgré cet idéal, à partir de 2020, les reportages médiatiques sur des cas d'épuisement professionnel parmi les travailleurs du secteur ont commencé à proliférer. Des études de marché menées par différentes *Health Tech* ont indiqué que « 64 % des travailleurs [des startups] déclarent ressentir un stress fréquent », malgré « 87 % affirmant être passionnés par leur travail » (Field notebook, 27 janvier 2023). Cette image s'est avérée surprenante. Après tout, les travailleurs des startups bénéficient généralement de salaires plus élevés que la moyenne nationale et d'une culture d'entreprise soi-disant plus « *moderne* », « *flexible* » et « *horizontale* », très éloignée des hiérarchies d'entreprise conventionnelles. Pourquoi alors ces travailleurs sont-ils malades ? À quel moment le lien entre le récit du monde innovant des startups et l'expérience concrète des travailleurs se rompt-il ?

Au départ, l'explication la plus immédiate du secteur a été d'attribuer le phénomène de souffrance mentale à la pandémie de COVID-19. Celle-ci a en effet augmenté les niveaux de stress à l'échelle mondiale et la surcharge de travail dans plusieurs secteurs. Cependant, comme nous le verrons, les raisons pour lesquelles les travailleurs des startups ont souffert et continuent de souffrir d'épuisement professionnel ont moins à voir avec les effets de la pandémie qu'avec l'engagement émotionnel que les travailleurs sont amenés à avoir par rapport à leur travail. C'est donc cette contradiction apparente – l'émergence de la souffrance psychologique dans des espaces célébrés comme innovants et gratifiants – qui constitue l'axe central de cette thèse.

Pour comprendre les aspects sociaux de la souffrance, il était nécessaire de se concentrer sur l'analyse de ce que sont les entreprises de type startup ; quelles sont leurs façons d'organiser le travail ; comment ces entreprises gèrent le phénomène de l'épuisement professionnel ; ainsi que de comprendre la manière dont les travailleurs vivent les « nouveaux » régimes d'organisation du travail et la manière dont ils gèrent, en tant qu'individus, les épisodes de stress et d'épuisement professionnel.

À cette fin, cette thèse s'est appuyée sur des études socio-anthropologiques qui cherchent à comprendre le néolibéralisme et son impact sur la vie des gens. Selon Dardot et Laval (2013), le néolibéralisme est la rationalité prédominante dans le capitalisme contemporain. Ainsi, bien qu'il soit reconnu que la rationalité néolibérale imprègne déjà une grande partie des relations sociales et que nous vivons dans un monde néolibéral (Brown, 2015 ; 2019), il reste encore de la place pour analyser comment le néolibéralisme affecte la vie quotidienne dans des univers spécifiques – surtout lorsque l'univers d'étude choisi est marqué par des idéologies entrepreneuriales qui promettent « *l'épanouissement personnel* », mais finissent par générer de plus en plus de « *frustration et de souffrance* ».

Ainsi, pour analyser le capitalisme contemporain, cette thèse s'est appuyée sur des éclairages théoriques issus d'études économiques, sociologiques et anthropologiques, notamment les travaux de Marx ([1867] 2023), Foucault (1975 ; 2010), Sennett (1998), Boltanski et Chiapello ([1999] 2011), Fischer ([2009] 2020), entre autres. Ce cadre théorique nous a permis de comprendre comment la recherche d'autonomie, de flexibilité, de sens et de profit, sous le régime actuel d'accumulation du capital, se reflète à la fois dans la prolifération d'entreprises qui prétendent promouvoir des modèles organisationnels « *horizontaux* », ainsi que dans l'augmentation des cas de souffrance psychologique.

En outre, cette thèse a également mis l'accent sur les intersections entre le travail et la technologie (Huws, 2009 ; Standing, 2014 ; Muntaner, 2018 ; Antunes ; Braga, 2009) ; ainsi que sur la santé mentale (Loriol, 2015 ; 2019 ; Maluf, 2024) et les trajectoires de vie (Santelli, 2019), ce qui a permis une compréhension plus subtile de la manière dont les trajectoires individuelles répondent aux transformations économiques et technologiques plus larges. En intégrant ces cadres analytiques, la thèse visait à fournir un compte rendu complet de l'interaction complexe entre la

dynamique du travail, la détresse mentale et les forces structurelles qui sous-tendent le capitalisme contemporain dans sa forme néolibérale.

Concernant les aspects méthodologiques, les questions empiriques qui ont guidé cette thèse se sont concentrées sur trois axes principaux. Dans un premier temps, la recherche a examiné la culture entrepreneuriale et professionnelle qui caractérise l'environnement des startups, en mettant l'accent sur le secteur de la technologie et de l'information au Brésil. Deuxièmement, la recherche a cherché à comprendre les expériences quotidiennes des travailleurs dans le contexte des startups à Florianópolis, en analysant leurs valeurs, leurs pratiques et leurs stratégies de navigation dans l'univers professionnel. Enfin, nous avons cherché à explorer comment l'épuisement professionnel est perçu et traité dans le secteur technologique, à la fois du point de vue individuel des travailleurs et à travers les réponses organisationnelles formulées par les startups elles-mêmes. Ces trois axes ont servi de base à une analyse des dynamiques socio-économiques qui façonnent ce scénario en constante évolution.

Pour étudier ce champ empirique, une conception méthodologique plurielle a été adoptée, combinant analyse documentaire, observation participante, enregistrements visuels, notes de terrain et entretiens approfondis, articulés dans une perspective longitudinale (2022/2023 et 2023/2024). La collecte de données, réalisée entre 2020 et 2024, a été organisée en trois axes principaux :

A) revue de la littérature et examen des matériaux produits par l'écosystème des startups de Florianópolis — y compris les livres qui racontent sa trajectoire et les rapports des associations locales et nationales ;

B) insertion dans une startup de la région par le biais d'un travail à temps partiel, combinée à une observation active lors d'événements technologiques promus par l'écosystème ;

C) conduite d'entretiens approfondis avec des travailleurs de startups, visant à comprendre les routines de travail et les pratiques de bien-être.

La période d'observation participante au sein de la startup a duré 18 mois (d'avril 2020 à octobre 2021). Entre août 2022 et mars 2024, dix événements technologiques ont été suivis — principalement en personne, bien que certains aient été hybrides ou entièrement en ligne — et 55 entretiens ont été menés avec 30 interlocuteurs. Nous avons cherché à mener les entretiens en personne ; cependant,

en raison de la familiarité des participants avec le travail à distance, environ la moitié des entretiens ont eu lieu par vidéoconférence.

Concernant l'organisation de la thèse, elle a été structurée en trois parties, organisées de manière à suivre une échelle analytique allant du macro au micro. Dans la première partie, l'accent est mis sur les concepts de startup et d'écosystème. D'un point de vue globale, l'émergence des startups dans la Silicon Valley et leur expansion internationale ultérieure sont examinées. Ensuite, l'origine et le développement de l'écosystème des startups de Florianópolis sont analysés, entre la décennie 2010 et 2024, soulignant l'importance symbolique de Florianópolis dans la composition plus large de l'écosystème des startups brésiliennes.

La deuxième partie de la thèse se concentre sur la vie organisationnelle quotidienne des entreprises. S'éloignant du plan idéalisé du discours sur « *l'objectif, l'innovation et le bien-être* », cette section explore « l'anatomie » des organisations de startups (Bailey, 2020), en abordant la manière dont les entreprises en phase de démarrage, en phase de croissance et en phase plus avancée (phase tardive) structurent leurs principaux domaines d'activité et leurs modes d'organisation du travail. Cette partie cherche également à comprendre qui sont les *travailleurs du savoir* (Huws, 2009) dans ce secteur, à la fois à partir de données sociodémographiques et de modèles de comportement observés sur le terrain.

Enfin, la troisième partie de la thèse est consacrée à l'analyse des effets du rythme de travail intense des startups et des épisodes de stress et d'épuisement professionnel chez leurs salariés. Le concept d'épuisement professionnel est exploré depuis son émergence dans les années 1970, ainsi que la manière dont les entreprises traitent la souffrance des individus de manière managériale, et la manière dont les travailleurs décrivent leurs expériences d'épuisement professionnel et les significations qu'ils attribuent à cette souffrance.

Les startups comme phénomène social

Pour comprendre les effets de la culture de travail des startups sur le bien-être des travailleurs, il était d'abord nécessaire de comprendre ce qu'est une startup et sous quelle logique ces entreprises opèrent.

Historiquement, il est possible de retracer le « début » des entreprises de type startup en Californie dans les années 1970, lorsque Apple et Microsoft ont

émergé, dynamisant le marché des ordinateurs personnels. Ce marché s'est consolidé tout au long des années 1990, avec la popularisation d'Internet et l'émergence d'entreprises telles que Yahoo! et Google. Mais c'est après le lancement des smartphones en 2007, avec la baisse des prix et la diffusion des TIC, qu'a eu lieu la grande explosion des startups à travers le monde.

Toutes ces avancées technologiques ont ouvert un vaste marché numérique, pouvant être occupé par des entreprises de services basées sur la technologie. Cependant, dans le même temps, des changements politiques, économiques et sociaux se produisaient, essentiels pour comprendre les startups en tant que phénomène social. À partir des années 1970, la transition du modèle d'accumulation fordiste vers le régime d'accumulation flexible s'est renforcée (Harvey, 1992). Cette transition a non seulement créé les bases de l'émergence du néolibéralisme en tant que régime économique et forme de rationalité et de subjectivation (Dardot ; Laval, 2013 ; Brown, 2015), mais a également facilité la financiarisation des entreprises par le biais d'investissements en capital-risque.

Puisqu'il n'est pas possible de parler de startups sans évoquer le capital-risque, il est essentiel de reconnaître que beaucoup dépendent directement de ce type de financement. En utilisant des fonds de capital-risque, les startups obtiennent non seulement des ressources, mais se soumettent également à l'influence active des investisseurs, qui interfèrent souvent dans la stratégie des entreprises. Cette relation façonne profondément leur dynamique interne. Comme le souligne Shestakofsky (2024), un tel arrangement impose une pression constante sur les résultats, transformant les startups en environnements marqués par une croissance accélérée, une innovation incessante et des niveaux élevés d'incertitude.

Ainsi, historiquement, les startups ne sont pas seulement des entreprises innovantes et à croissance rapide, basées sur la technologie ; elles résultent également de transformations techniques, idéologiques, économiques et socioculturelles plus larges, ainsi que des évolutions néolibérales associées à la financiarisation capitaliste.

Sur le plan culturel, bon nombre de ces « nouvelles » entreprises technologiques ont émergé avec la promesse de révolutionner le monde du travail, notamment dans ses aspects managériaux et organisationnels. Pour les fondateurs et les travailleurs, une startup n'est pas seulement une organisation innovante, mais aussi un « *mindset* » – une manière spécifique de faire, de parler et d'agir qui guide

les pratiques quotidiennes et les visions du monde. De manière générale, l'éthique des startups est imprégnée d'un discours libéral et méritocratique, fortement ancré dans la figure du *self-made man* américain, qui associe l'épanouissement personnel à la performance professionnelle (Flécher, 2021 ; Zanon, 2019).

Lorsque ces entreprises ont émergé au Brésil, tout au long des années 2010, elles ont contribué à la construction d'un imaginaire social présentant le marché du travail sous un angle nouveau. Des bureaux colorés et décontractés, avec des tables de billard et de ping-pong, ont commencé à faire partie de la scénographie d'un environnement soi-disant « *cool* », informel et gratifiant (Faria, 2018). Dans ce contexte, le travail apparaît non seulement comme un moyen de subsistance, mais aussi comme une source de plaisir, de sens et d'identité.

Ces entreprises ont été largement saluées pour avoir favorisé des « *environnements créatifs, collaboratifs et horizontaux* » où il était possible d'exercer une « *flexibilité* » et de « *faire ce que l'on aime* ». Comme le souligne Zanon (2019), ce discours projette le travail comme un espace privilégié de réalisation de soi, invitant les individus à se considérer comme protagonistes de leurs trajectoires professionnelles. Mais cet investissement émotionnel et personnel devient vite un outil de management : en alignant passion et productivité, les startups brouillent les frontières entre vie personnelle et vie professionnelle, renforçant l'emploi comme principal lieu de formation identitaire des individus.

Cependant, si, tout au long des années 2010, les startups étaient perçues comme des espaces de travail moins aliénants, plus significatifs et amusants, à partir de 2020, cette image a commencé à changer. Les scandales de fuites de données, l'intensification du travail à distance pendant la pandémie de COVID-19 et la médiatisation des cas d'épuisement professionnel ont révélé de profondes contradictions dans le secteur. Cette recherche, menée entre 2020 et 2024, montre comment cette période a représenté des inflexions importantes dans l'imaginaire des travailleurs sur le monde des startups. De l'enthousiasme initial des années 2010 à la désillusion des années 2020, des facteurs tels que l'isolement social, la maladie mentale et les licenciements massifs ont révélé la fragilité des promesses d'épanouissement personnel du secteur.

La vieille devise « *work hard, play hard* », popularisée après 2008 parmi de nombreuses entreprises technologiques, a commencé à perdre du terrain dans les années 2020. Les bureaux animés avec des tables de billard et de la bière ont été

remplacés par des bureaux à domicile solitaires et des réunions Zoom sans fin. L'optimisme spéculatif qui alimentait l'industrie est devenu fragile à mesure que les ressources en capital-risque diminuaient et que les licenciements augmentaient (Shestakofsky, 2024). Ce récent déclin symbolique, notamment à la suite de la pandémie, marque un moment crucial pour examiner de manière critique les significations contemporaines du travail, de la valeur et du bien-être dans un secteur qui promet autonomie et innovation, mais exige abandon émotionnel et résilience, tout en célébrant la liberté et en reproduisant souvent des structures de contrôle et d'épuisement.

Le Brésil, ses écosystèmes de startups et Florianópolis

Plusieurs entrepreneurs et influenceurs affirment souvent que les startups sont le « *moteur économique* » du Brésil (Field notebook, 10 nov. 2021). Cependant, le secteur des startups brésiliennes ne représente qu'une fraction du vaste et complexe macro-secteur des TIC dans lequel il s'insère. En général, le macro-secteur des TIC comprend diverses activités telles que les télécommunications, le développement de logiciels, les services numériques et le hardware. Selon Brasscom (2024), le secteur des TIC représentait 6,5 % du PIB brésilien en 2023, le segment des logiciels et des services — où se concentrent la plupart des startups — ne représentant que 1,7 % de ce total. Malgré l'enthousiasme et la visibilité que les startups ont acquis au cours de la dernière décennie, leur contribution économique reste modeste par rapport aux autres secteurs productifs brésiliens.

La main-d'œuvre employée dans le secteur des TIC dépasse les deux millions de travailleurs au Brésil. Cependant, le secteur est confronté à des défis structurels importants : une pénurie de professionnels qualifiés, de faibles taux de syndicalisation et des conditions de travail précaires. Un aspect central de ce scénario est la pratique de la *pejotização* — l'embauche de travailleurs en tant qu'entités juridiques, masquant ainsi les relations de travail. Même avec des salaires 2,5 à 10 fois supérieurs à la moyenne nationale (Brasscom, 2023 ; Moreno, 2021), beaucoup de ces professionnels renoncent aux droits fondamentaux du travail lorsqu'ils entrent dans le modèle *pejota*. Cette logique d'informalité et d'individualisation se reproduit également au sein des écosystèmes de startups,

notamment parmi les entreprises en phase de démarrage, où les contrats ont tendance à être moins protégés.

Ainsi, nous pouvons conclure que : 1) le marché des startups a tendance à être dilué dans le macro-secteur des TIC au Brésil ; et 2) a tendance à reproduire les mêmes conditions précaires que les autres travailleurs du secteur technologique, même s'ils ont tendance à gagner des salaires plus élevés que la moyenne nationale.

L'émergence des startups au Brésil s'est produite plus tard qu'aux États-Unis. Alors que le concept était déjà consolidé au niveau international dans les années 2000, au Brésil, le terme n'a commencé à gagner en pertinence publique qu'autour de 2010. Jusqu'alors, les entreprises dites « innovantes basées sur la technologie » prévalaient dans le pays, souvent liées aux incubateurs universitaires. Le changement conceptuel vers le modèle startup, mettant l'accent sur la croissance accélérée, le capital-risque et les méthodologies agiles, n'a pris de l'ampleur qu'à partir de 2011, avec l'émergence d'accélérateurs privés et la création d'associations telles qu'Abstartups. Depuis lors, un effort systématique a été déployé pour populariser la culture entrepreneuriale dans le pays, y compris parmi les étudiants et les jeunes travailleurs, façonnant des subjectivités alignées sur des valeurs telles que l'autonomie, la méritocratie, la flexibilité et l'innovation.

Actuellement, le Brésil abrite plus de 13 000 startups actives (Abstartups, 2024), réparties dans plus de 235 écosystèmes locaux. La répartition de ces startups reflète la concentration du marché technologique dans le pays. La région du Sud-Est est en tête avec 57,6 % du total, suivie de la région du Sud, avec 21,2 %, l'État de Santa Catarina se démarquant. Florianópolis, sa capitale, occupe une position de premier plan sur la scène nationale et a été officiellement nommée « *Capitale nationale des startups* » en 2024, par le biais du Projet de Loi 4 987/2019. La justification de cette reconnaissance est basée sur la forte densité de startups par habitant, la présence de deux excellentes universités publiques (UFSC et UDESC) et l'infrastructure soutenant l'entrepreneuriat technologique — comme les incubateurs, les parcs technologiques, les accélérateurs et les programmes tels que Startup SC (Sebrae). De plus, cette nomination représente à la fois une reconnaissance symbolique de l'écosystème d'innovation local et une stratégie institutionnelle visant à promouvoir le secteur technologique de la ville comme modèle pour d'autres

régions du pays. Actuellement, le secteur technologique de Florianópolis compte plus d'un millier d'entreprises et environ 31 000 travailleurs (ACATE, 2021).

Après une décennie de consolidation de plusieurs écosystèmes d'innovation dans le pays, le *boom* des startups brésiliennes a atteint son apogée entre 2020 et 2021. Cette croissance a été tirée par l'accélération de la numérisation pendant la pandémie de COVID-19 et par un volume sans précédent d'investissements en capital-risque. La transition rapide des startups vers le travail à distance — favorisée par leur familiarité avec les outils numériques — et l'intérêt accru des investisseurs pour le secteur ont conduit à la perception que les entreprises basées sur la technologie seraient relativement immunisées contre les impacts négatifs de la crise sanitaire.

Cependant, à partir de 2022, ce scénario a radicalement changé. La baisse des investissements internationaux et le ralentissement mondial du secteur technologique ont entraîné une vague massive de licenciements. Selon le site indépendant Layoffs.fyi, entre début 2022 et janvier 2024, 58 entreprises technologiques brésiliennes ont licencié, au total, 7 785 professionnels (Kelly, 2024). Ce scénario a généré une grande instabilité et une grande insécurité parmi les travailleurs des startups à travers le pays — un sentiment qui est ressorti clairement des entretiens menés au cours de cette recherche. Au moins deux de mes interlocuteurs ont connu des processus de licenciement en 2022 et ont dû chercher de nouvelles opportunités d'emploi. Ceux qui sont restés à leur poste ont signalé une augmentation significative des exigences, étant obligés d'assumer le rôle de collègues licenciés.

Malgré l'augmentation de l'instabilité, l'intensification du travail et l'augmentation de la souffrance, le discours dominant a continué à rationaliser les processus de licenciements massifs comme des stratégies de « *correction du marché* » et « *d'ajustements nécessaires après le boom* ». Ce processus reflète une logique néolibérale d'un marché autorégulé, où les crises sont traitées comme inévitables et où les coûts retombent sur les travailleurs. Petit à petit, l'enthousiasme pour la croissance des startups a été remplacé par un sentiment de désillusion. La rhétorique de la « *résilience* » et de « *l'adaptation* » est devenue une exigence subjective des travailleurs, renforçant le darwinisme social qui structure l'écosystème.

Dans le cas de Florianópolis, la ville continue de se promouvoir comme un pôle d'innovation, combinant style de vie et opportunités technologiques. Mais derrière le paysage idéalisé de la « *Silicon Island* », des défis structurels persistent : spéculation immobilière, pression sur les infrastructures urbaines et aggravation des inégalités d'accès à la main-d'œuvre qualifiée. Le récit du succès des startups doit donc être compris à la lumière de ces contradictions — entre la promesse de liberté et la reproduction de la précarité.

L'anatomie d'une startup

Cette section explore les façons dont le travail est organisé dans les startups. À travers l'analyse de « l'évolution » des entreprises travers différentes étapes de développement, on observe comment le modèle de gestion managériale (Gaulejac, 2007) commence à être adopté par les entreprises et à soutenir leurs processus organisationnels — mais pas seulement. Selon Dejours (2000 ; 2009), étudier l'organisation du travail nécessite de la reconnaître non pas comme une structure fixe ou monolithique, mais comme un ensemble fluide de dynamiques sociales en constante évolution. Autrement dit, examiner l'organisation du travail implique d'examiner non seulement les modes de travail prescrits — les structures et processus formels établis par la direction — mais aussi les écarts entre ces prescriptions et les pratiques qui se déroulent dans la vie quotidienne. Ces tensions et contradictions offrent des perspectives précieuses sur l'interaction complexe entre les discours et les pratiques, exposant l'écart entre la conception organisationnelle intentionnelle et les expériences vécues des sujets sur le lieu de travail (Dejours, 2000).

Dans cette optique, cette section analyse systématiquement les trois principales phases du développement d'une startup, en mettant l'accent sur les transformations qui se produisent dans les environnements de travail et les structures de gestion à mesure que ces entreprises reçoivent des investissements successifs en capital-risque. Compte tenu de l'approche méthodologique adoptée dans cette recherche — qui ne s'est pas limitée au suivi d'une seule entreprise, mais a rassemblé des récits de travailleurs liés à différentes organisations —, il a été possible d'intégrer les perspectives de professionnels ayant travaillé dans environ 28 startups ou entreprises technologiques différentes.

De plus, on observe comment les travailleurs ressentent, dans leur propre corps, les effets du rythme accéléré du travail, qui tend à s'intensifier tout au long de la trajectoire de croissance de ces organisations. La thèse centrale défendue ici est que les pressions continues en matière de productivité et les exigences de réponse rapide ne sont pas simplement occasionnelles ou ponctuelles, mais plutôt des forces structurantes. Elles couvrent différentes étapes du développement de l'entreprise et façonnent systématiquement les routines quotidiennes, le bien-être et les expériences de souffrance au travail.

Stage initial

Selon les experts en startups (Matos, 2017), une startup en phase de démarrage est définie comme une entreprise avec une idée potentielle qui recherche activement un financement pour son expansion, avec une équipe initiale axée sur le développement d'un prototype qui répond aux besoins du marché. Cette phase est souvent caractérisée par une approche d'essais et d'erreurs, qui implique des ajustements continus des fonctionnalités du produit, des stratégies marketing et de la structure organisationnelle de manière dynamique et réactive. Comme l'a fait remarquer une personne interrogée, travailler dans une startup en phase de démarrage « *c'est comme construire une voiture... pendant qu'elle roule... et qu'elle est en feu !* » (Gustavo, 33 ans, Consultant commercial dans une startup en phase de croissance, 2022).

Au cours des premières années des startups, les structures organisationnelles ont tendance à être fluides et à subir de fréquentes reconfigurations. À ce stade, il est courant que les startups adoptent une structure flexible et non hiérarchique, soutenue par une équipe allégée, où chaque individu assume plusieurs fonctions. Cette structure improvisée et expérimentale, souvent romancée par l'image symbolique d'un « garage », capture l'éthique des startups en phase de démarrage en tant qu'espaces d'innovation et d'expérimentation entrepreneuriale.

Il est à noter que les travailleurs des premières étapes fonctionnent plus étroitement selon un mode de production artisanal, conservant une plus grande autonomie et une implication directe dans divers aspects de leur travail. À ce stade, les zones d'incertitude (Crozier ; Friedberg, 1977) sont particulièrement prononcées, non seulement pour les propriétaires d'entreprise, qui sont confrontés à des

questions fondamentales sur la viabilité et la survie de l'entreprise, mais aussi pour les employés, qui cherchent souvent à naviguer et à capitaliser sur cette instabilité comme moyen d'accélérer leur trajectoire de carrière au sein de l'organisation.

À ce stade, l'équipe varie généralement entre cinq et trente personnes et est composée de quelques acteurs clés — un développeur de logiciels, un spécialiste des ventes et un spécialiste du marketing — et évolue en fonction des besoins de l'entreprise. La structure horizontale et le caractère informel des relations contribuent à un sentiment de connexion et à une résolution collective des problèmes, créant un environnement dans lequel les employés en début de carrière se sentent plus engagés et habilités à prendre des décisions.

Quand la startup est petite, on fait tout : planifier, écrire, exécuter. La seule chose que je n'ai pas faite, c'est faire du café [rires]. Mais je m'en fichais parce que je faisais ce que je voulais. [...] Je me suis dit : « Je veux vraiment ça. » Je le faisais aussi pour moi. Lorsque vous débutez, vous êtes tellement immergé dans l'entreprise et avez tellement d'énergie que vous ne réalisez pas à quel point cela affecte votre sommeil et votre propre humeur. Tu es tellement excité ! (Lara, 32 ans, New Business Coordinator d'une startup en phase de croissance, 2022).

Dans les startups en phase de démarrage, une grande partie du stress et de l'épuisement émotionnel provient du manque de processus organisationnels structurés, de la pression pour une performance élevée, et de l'instabilité sous-jacente due au risque inhérent d'échec de l'entreprise. À ce stade, le stress semble provenir non seulement de l'écart entre le travail prescrit et le travail réel (Dejours, 2000), mais aussi du niveau étonnamment faible d'organisation formelle ou de directives. L'absence de structures claires oblige les travailleurs à naviguer dans des flux de travail chaotiques, ce qui accroît leur sentiment d'incertitude et leur peur de l'échec.

Cependant, les défis communs, comme la gestion de projets exigeants ou la lutte contre l'incertitude au travail, ont tendance à rassembler les employés. De petits gestes du quotidien, comme des conversations en aparté sur WhatsApp après une réunion difficile, offrir une oreille attentive ou aider un collègue dans le besoin, deviennent des gestes de solidarité significatifs qui renforcent les liens entre les membres de l'équipe. Ces actes de soutien sont essentiels à la fois pour la coopération spontanée et pour le développement du travail lui-même, créant un environnement où les travailleurs se sentent mutuellement investis dans le bien-être de chacun, malgré les pressions auxquelles ils sont confrontés.

Phase de croissance

Lorsqu'une entreprise atteint l'« *adéquation produit-marché* » et commence à démontrer une « *traction* » — c'est-à-dire une acceptation par le marché — elle entre dans la phase de croissance. Symboliquement, l'image d'une « fusée » est souvent utilisée pour représenter les startups à ce stade, soulignant l'accent mis sur les progrès rapides et l'élan vers l'avant.

Selon Ries (2011), cette étape est marquée par une série d'avancées stratégiques, notamment l'expansion des efforts de marketing et de vente, l'utilisation des commentaires des premiers clients pour affiner le produit ou le service, et le suivi rigoureux des indicateurs clés de performance pour évaluer les progrès du développement. En outre, les startups doivent rationaliser leurs opérations et mettre en œuvre des pratiques de gestion plus sophistiquées.

À ce stade, des méthodologies « *lean* », telles que celles préconisées par Ries (2011), sont systématiquement adoptées. Elles servent un double objectif : aligner les travailleurs et optimiser les processus, tout en assurant la production de résultats mesurables, essentiels au suivi des progrès de l'entreprise. Cette approche structurée marque la transition des pratiques de gestion improvisées des premières étapes vers une gestion plus disciplinée et axée sur les mesures.

La phase de croissance d'une startup illustre particulièrement le phénomène de *boom*, au cours duquel les entreprises étendent rapidement leurs opérations, alimentées par le financement en capital-risque. C'est également à ce stade que la pression sur les processus de travail organisationnels devient la plus visible, se manifestant souvent par des inefficacités, des perturbations ou des crises. Comme Ricardo l'a observé, pendant la phase de croissance, « *tout se casse, tout change tout le temps, vous savez ?* » (Ricardo, 42 ans, PDG d'une startup en phase de croissance, 2022). Dans le même temps, la phase de croissance est fortement marquée par l'adrénaline du dynamisme et du risque, ce qui maintient de nombreux travailleurs engagés dans leurs activités professionnelles. Cette dualité, où la croissance est à la fois excitante et chaotique, met en évidence l'atmosphère de la culture startup pendant sa phase d'expansion.

À ce stade, l'embauche de nouveaux employés devient une activité critique et continue, car la pression pour faire évoluer rapidement les opérations intensifie les efforts de recrutement. Cela conduit souvent à une concurrence féroce entre les

startups pour le bassin limité de talents qualifiés sur le marché du travail. Ainsi, au cours des premières années de croissance rapide, il n'est pas rare que les startups intègrent des dizaines d'employés chaque mois, créant ainsi un flux constant de nouvelles embauches. En général, à ce stade, les entreprises peuvent compter entre 100 et 500 salariés. Cet afflux rapide de travailleurs nécessite la mise en œuvre de programmes de formation collective structurés, souvent appelés « *onboarding* ». Ces programmes servent d'outils stratégiques pour intégrer efficacement les nouvelles recrues, en les alignant sur la culture, les objectifs et les modèles de gestion de l'entreprise.

Durant cette phase, les startups ont une profonde influence sur la vie sociale et personnelle de leurs employés, cultivant un sentiment d'appartenance qui transcende souvent les frontières professionnelles. Cette intégration est non seulement encouragée par les managers, mais également souhaitée par de nombreux travailleurs, reflétant la fusion complexe entre le travail et l'identité sociale dans la culture des startups (Shestakofsky, 2024). De plus, comme nous l'explorerons plus tard, les exigences de la phase de croissance s'intensifient, laissant aux travailleurs peu de temps libre et d'énergie psychologique pour des activités en dehors du travail. Alors que les sphères professionnelle et sociale fusionnent de plus en plus, il n'est pas surprenant que de nombreux employés de startups voient leur vie tourner autour du lieu de travail et de la sociabilité qu'il facilite.

En matière de financement, les startups en croissance lèvent souvent du capital-risque, une étape cruciale qui accélère considérablement leur trajectoire. Alors que les startups en phase de démarrage consacrent leurs ressources limitées à la validation de leur produit ou de leur idée, les startups en croissance tirent parti des investissements substantiels qu'elles reçoivent pour finaliser le développement de leurs produits de base, surpasser leurs concurrents et se développer sur de nouveaux marchés.

Lorsque j'ai interrogé mes interlocuteurs sur les transformations qui s'opèrent dans une startup avant et après une levée de fonds, beaucoup ont été catégoriques en affirmant que le rythme de travail subit un changement profond et radical.

Il y a deux moments qui influencent le rythme de travail. L'un d'eux se produit lorsque l'entreprise lève des capitaux et doit être très prudente avec ses flux de trésorerie pour prolonger sa période d'exploitation. Dans ce scénario, le rythme ralentit. Mais juste après un investissement, l'entreprise

doit prouver sa valeur le plus rapidement possible, car l'investissement n'est pas seulement basé sur l'histoire de l'entreprise, mais sur ce que l'entreprise a encore la capacité de faire. Donc, on tire, on frappe et on bombarde. C'est une relation directe. (Isabel, 34 ans, Senior Product Manager dans une startup en phase de développement, 2022).

En établissant une relation directe entre un nouveau cycle d'investissement et l'accélération du rythme de travail, Isabel nous aide à comprendre que l'injection de capital suscite de grandes attentes de la part des investisseurs, qui exigent désormais une évolutivité rapide et des rendements mesurables sur leurs investissements.

Le rythme effréné du changement, associé à des attentes de performance élevées, entraîne souvent un stress considérable pour les employés. Même si les startups en croissance peuvent offrir des salaires plus élevés que celles en phase de démarrage, cet « avantage » a un coût. Conscientes de cela, les startups se tournent de plus en plus vers des initiatives de « care » comme outils de rétention et de motivation, pour tenter d'atténuer les effets néfastes des conditions de travail exigeantes. Chen (2022) classe ces initiatives dans la catégorie du *maternalisme d'entreprise*. Selon l'auteur :

Le maternalisme d'entreprise se produit lorsque les entreprises prennent en charge les soins personnels de leurs employés pour les rendre heureux, en bonne santé et (donc) productifs. Les entreprises technologiques n'ont pas enfreint les lois du marché. Il n'existe toujours pas de repas gratuit, vraiment. Le maternalisme d'entreprise monétise les aspects non productifs de la vie pour lesquels les travailleurs du secteur technologique n'ont pas le temps – manger, faire de l'exercice, se reposer, se divertir, se ressourcer, se sentir spirituel et avoir des amitiés – et les intègre au travail. (idem, p. 60, 2022).

Les initiatives de maternalisme en entreprise sont généralement conçues et mises en œuvre par les équipes des ressources humaines ou de gestion du personnel, qui jouent un rôle central dans l'intégration des stratégies de soins dans les opérations des entreprises. À ce stade, des postes tels que *Chief Happiness Officer* (CHO) émergent également, explicitement chargés de promouvoir le bonheur et la productivité des employés dans le cadre de stratégies de gestion plus larges (Cabanais ; Illouz, 2022). Ces rôles favorisent non seulement une « culture positive », mais garantissent également que les initiatives de bien-être sont alignées sur les objectifs organisationnels, renforçant ainsi la capacité de la startup à extraire de la valeur tout en maintenant une équipe engagée et productive.

Selon les observations faites sur le terrain, les initiatives de maternalisme d'entreprise dans les startups brésiliennes peuvent être classées en trois domaines principaux : *les avantages* ; *les activités d'intégration sociale* ; et *les programmes de bien-être*. Les avantages impliquent généralement des investissements plus modestes, tels que des codes vestimentaires décontractés, l'accès à des jeux vidéo et à des tables de billard au bureau, des déjeuners gratuits, des modalités de travail hybrides et des horaires flexibles. Les activités d'intégration sociale peuvent aller des *Happy Hours* en personne ou virtuels aux dynamiques de *team building*, aux déjeuners collectifs et aux soirées après le travail, toutes conçues stratégiquement pour encourager la socialisation entre les employés et les gestionnaires. Ces événements renforcent non seulement les liens interpersonnels, mais cultivent également un sentiment de communauté. Enfin, les programmes de bien-être incluent souvent l'accès à un soutien psychologique interne, ainsi qu'à des plateformes de santé et de bien-être qui proposent des thérapies en ligne et des ateliers de santé mentale. Ces initiatives visent à répondre à ce que les responsables RH considèrent comme l'un des problèmes les plus urgents du secteur technologique actuel : l'épuisement professionnel.

Ainsi, les startups présentent souvent ces initiatives de « maternalisme » d'entreprise comme des efforts visant à retenir les employés, à prévenir l'épuisement professionnel et à maintenir l'engagement – des facteurs clés dans la gestion des demandes croissantes de la phase de croissance. Cependant, sous la surface, ces stratégies révèlent un double objectif : alors qu'elles semblent viser le bien-être, elles sont alignées sur l'objectif plus large de maximiser la productivité et de maintenir le rythme effréné de croissance imposé par les investisseurs et la concurrence du marché.

Les principales sources de stress des travailleurs pendant la phase de croissance peuvent provenir de multiples facteurs : la pression incessante pour une croissance accélérée imposée par les investisseurs ; les changements constants dans les processus et les objectifs, qui nécessitent souvent de refaire les tâches ; la frustration face aux attentes salariales non satisfaites ; et l'accumulation de surcharges. Si, au stade initial, le stress résultait de l'absence de structures claires, au stade de croissance, il émerge de deux divergences fondamentales. Premièrement, l'écart entre le travail prescrit et le travail réel (Dejours, 2000), où les employés doivent composer avec des exigences croissantes qui divergent souvent

des attentes formalisées. Deuxièmement, le déséquilibre dans la dynamique *don/contre-don* (Alter, 2002) devient encore plus prononcé lorsque les travailleurs investissent du temps, des efforts et de l'énergie émotionnelle dans l'organisation tout en recevant disproportionnellement peu en retour. Cette asymétrie renforce la frustration et l'épuisement, aggravant la précarité du travail dans les startups.

Stage avancé

Selon Blank et Dorf (2012), une startup en phase avancée est une entreprise qui a atteint un niveau significatif de maturité et de succès. Ces entreprises proposent généralement des produits bien établis sur le marché et largement reconnus par le public et leur clientèle. Contrairement à la phase de croissance, où fonctionner à perte ou « brûler de l'argent » est souvent considéré comme normal, les startups en phase avancée doivent générer des revenus solides.

À ce stade, il est également courant que les fondateurs et les investisseurs recherchent activement une « *exit* » rentable, que ce soit par une « *acquisition* » par une entreprise plus grande ou par une « *introduction en bourse* » (IPO) d'actions (Shestakofsky, 2024). Le symbolisme souvent associé aux startups avancées est celui de la « licorne », qui représente non seulement une génération de revenus importante, mais aussi la réalisation « magique » d'une étape aussi rare. Compte tenu du taux d'échec élevé des startups dans les premières phases, celles qui atteignent un stade avancé sont considérées par les experts comme des cas de réussite rares et notables.

À ce stade, les startups ont déjà connu une croissance significative, employant des centaines, voire des milliers de travailleurs. Leurs structures organisationnelles ne sont plus aussi flexibles ou informelles que dans les phases précédentes ; au lieu de cela, elles sont plus définies et sophistiquées, avec des processus bien établis et des départements spécialisés supervisant différents aspects de l'entreprise. Ce changement contraste fortement avec l'approche informelle et pratique des startups en phase de démarrage et de croissance. Dans les phases antérieures, les travailleurs étaient souvent engagés dans une grande variété de tâches, jouissant d'autonomie et de créativité. Cependant, à mesure que l'entreprise se développe, les processus de travail se fragmentent et se standardisent, reflétant la logique plus large de la production capitaliste avancée. L'accent mis sur l'efficacité, la prévisibilité et l'extraction de la plus-value impose des

structures rigides qui non seulement réduisent l'autonomie des travailleurs, mais transforment également leurs rôles en fonctions étroites au sein d'une machine d'entreprise plus vaste. Ce changement est également illustré par la chaîne de commandement hiérarchique, qui comprend désormais plusieurs niveaux : les gestionnaires, les directeurs, les vice-présidents, le PDG et un conseil d'investisseurs. Ces transformations illustrent comment l'accélération des startups s'aligne sur les tendances plus larges du capitalisme visant à subordonner la créativité et l'autonomie humaines aux impératifs incessants de croissance et de maximisation des profits.

Malgré la plus grande formalisation des processus visant à élargir la hiérarchie de gestion, cela ne signifie pas que les startups à un stade avancé sont nécessairement plus stables. Le témoignage de Letícia offre des informations précieuses sur la manière dont les processus de restructuration impactent directement l'organisation quotidienne du travail dans les startups.

Tout change, mais comme vous n'avez pas toutes les informations dont vous avez besoin, vous suivez parfois un chemin. Puis vous réalisez que ce n'était pas le bon chemin, vous essayez autre chose et découvrez que ce n'était pas ce chemin non plus. Et donc, on a l'impression d'être constamment en mouvement, toujours en train de s'adapter, mais c'est surtout à cause de l'ambiguïté de l'environnement — c'est un environnement [de travail] extrêmement ambigu. [...] Nous avons eu une réunion avec l'un des PDG de l'entreprise, et quelqu'un lui a demandé comment elle gérât toute cette ambiguïté, et elle a dit qu'elle n'aimait pas penser à cela comme à une « ambiguïté », qu'elle préférerait voir cela comme un espace de créativité, car dans un environnement sans règles, les gens créent « constamment » de nouvelles règles... Pour ceux qui sont au sommet, je peux même comprendre qu'il soit formidable d'encourager l'expérimentation. Mais pour ceux qui doivent répondre à des demandes, le changement constant des processus est terrible, car nous perdons du temps et n'arrivons à rien, vous savez ? (Letícia, 29 ans, Recrutement technique pour la diversité et l'inclusion dans une startup avancée, 2022).

Pour naviguer dans cette dynamique complexe, la plupart des travailleurs admettent devoir apprendre à « jouer le jeu de l'entreprise », à être « diplomates » ou « politiques ». Bien que la terminologie varie, ces expressions soulignent systématiquement la dynamique de pouvoir ancrée dans les startups avancées. Considérant que les structures organisationnelles ont tendance à fonctionner comme des réseaux de jeux interconnectés (Crozier ; Friedberg, 1977), apprendre à maîtriser ces « jeux » ou adopter une approche « diplomatique » permet aux travailleurs de naviguer dans les restructurations, de se repositionner au sein de

l'entreprise ou d'échapper à des sous-équipes qu'ils perçoivent comme préjudiciables à leur bien-être.

De plus, à mesure que les startups deviennent des « *scale-ups* », les processus de travail ont tendance à devenir très répétitifs, sacrifiant les aspects créatifs du travail qui attiraient autrefois les travailleurs. La plupart des rôles étant déjà clairement définis, le niveau d'autonomie sur le lieu de travail diminue considérablement. De plus, à un stade avancé, les objectifs de l'entreprise s'alignent de plus en plus sur les impératifs d'accumulation de capital, ce qui conduit à la mise en œuvre d'une série de mesures de réduction des coûts, y compris des licenciements massifs (Gaulejac, 2007 ; Ho, 2009).

Les épisodes de licenciements, couplés à l'intensification du travail, nous aident à comprendre que les sources de stress dans les startups avancées proviennent également d'une combinaison de facteurs : la pression constante pour atteindre les objectifs de croissance, la répétitivité croissante et la diminution de la créativité dans les tâches, les restructurations fréquentes des équipes et la nécessité de naviguer dans des dynamiques de pouvoir managériales complexes (Gaulejac, 2007). Au stade avancé, l'écart entre le travail prescrit et le travail réel (Dejours, 2000) est encore accentué par l'érosion de l'illusion de la startup. À ce stade, le récit idéaliste qui motivait autrefois les travailleurs est éclipsé par des pressions croissantes. Les frustrations naissent également des promesses de promotion non tenues et de la poursuite incessante des réductions de coûts, qui font craindre des licenciements massifs. Ensemble, ces facteurs créent un environnement stressant dans lequel les travailleurs se sentent obligés d'être constamment vigilants afin de ne pas devenir inutiles au sein de l'organisation.

Du stade de démarrage au stade avancé

Comme nous l'avons vu, dans la phase initiale, les startups présentent une approche presque artisanale de l'organisation du travail. Cependant, à mesure qu'elles progressent vers des stades de croissance et d'avancement, la division du travail devient progressivement plus structurée et complexe au niveau organisationnel. Dans le même temps, au niveau individuel, le travail est fragmenté et spécialisé, reflétant les impératifs capitalistes plus larges d'efficacité et d'extraction de plus-value (Pirc, 2022). De plus, atteindre un statut avancé n'allège pas nécessairement les pressions au travail en matière de performance ; au contraire, les

travailleurs restent soumis à une pression constante pour soutenir la croissance de l'entreprise tout en minimisant les coûts. La spécialisation croissante, associée à des pressions accrues, réduit les possibilités d'autonomie et de créativité, érodant le sens du devoir qui attirait initialement de nombreux travailleurs et exacerbant leur frustration au travail.

De plus, si nous conceptualisons le stress comme résultant de l'inadéquation entre le travail prescrit et le travail réel, combinée au déséquilibre entre un investissement personnel élevé et une faible récompense (Pirc, 2022) — ou à la perturbation de la dynamique don/contre-don (Alter, 2002) —, nous pouvons observer comment l'investissement personnel de la part des travailleurs, et le stress, évoluent tout au long des étapes de développement de l'entreprise. Dans la phase initiale, les travailleurs sont animés par un engagement moral envers le bien commun (Gaulejac, 2007) et par la conviction qu'ils contribuent à une entreprise destinée à « *changer le monde* ». Leurs efforts sont souvent présentés comme *un « investissement »* dans un rendement financier futur, généralement attendu après le premier tour de financement important en capital-risque. À ce stade, l'idéalisme agit comme un puissant facteur de motivation, et le stress provient principalement de la peur de l'échec, tant au niveau de l'entreprise qu'au niveau individuel, créant un environnement de haute pression où le sacrifice personnel est justifié par la promesse d'un succès futur.

Dans la phase de croissance, cependant, l'idéalisme typique des étapes initiales commence à se dissiper, car les travailleurs sont poussés à travailler au rythme exigé par les investisseurs et imposé par le modèle managérialiste (Gaulejac, 2007 ; Linhart, 2023). À ce stade, l'accent se déplace de « l'objectif collectif » vers « l'efficacité opérationnelle », les indicateurs de performance et l'évolutivité prenant le pas sur la vision initiale de transformation sociale. Le récit autrefois inspirant de « *changer le monde* » est progressivement éclipsé par les attentes de croissance des investisseurs et la poursuite incessante de la rentabilité. Alors que certains employés s'épanouissent grâce à la poussée d'adrénaline que procure le fait de travailler dans une entreprise en pleine croissance, beaucoup d'autres souffrent d'épuisement professionnel en raison du rythme effréné du travail. Si certains choisissent de changer d'emploi durant cette phase d'expansion, la transition vers une autre startup en croissance révèle souvent que le rythme effréné persiste, quels que soient les

avantages offerts par le maternalisme corporatif ou les promesses de développement personnel et professionnel.

Au stade avancé, l'environnement dynamique et chaotique des startups en croissance cède la place aux pressions liées au fonctionnement d'une entreprise mature cherchant à maintenir un avantage concurrentiel. Ici, les travailleurs ne sont plus motivés principalement par la peur de l'échec, mais par les angoisses liées à la sécurité de l'emploi, aux licenciements potentiels et à la frustration des attentes professionnelles non satisfaites malgré des années d'investissement personnel. Alors que la concurrence interne s'intensifie, les employés s'appuient de plus en plus sur des alliances stratégiques avec leurs collègues pour sécuriser leurs postes et naviguer dans la dynamique de pouvoir changeante de l'organisation. Ce faisant, ils reconnaissent la nécessité d'accepter et d'apprendre à gérer les « *règles du jeu* » (Crozier ; Friedberg, 1977), dans lesquelles la survie professionnelle dépend autant de la perspicacité politique que de la performance.

Ce déséquilibre persistant entre un investissement personnel élevé et une faible récompense, inhérent à l'univers des startups, se manifeste souvent par ce que les interlocuteurs qualifient de « *frustration* ». Étant donné que le pouvoir managérial mobilise constamment les désirs et les aspirations des travailleurs, il n'est pas surprenant que le terme le plus courant pour décrire le mal-être au travail ne soit pas « fatigue » mais plutôt « frustration ». Après tout, il est légitime que les travailleurs recherchent l'épanouissement dans les rôles qu'ils jouent. Cependant, l'effondrement des attentes établies – que ce soit sous la forme de promesses non tenues, de reconnaissance tardive ou de stagnation de carrière – conduit à la frustration de leurs désirs de reconnaissance et d'épanouissement personnel. Cet écart entre les aspirations et la réalité devient une source omniprésente de mécontentement sur le lieu de travail.

Modalités d'organisation du travail hybride

En plus de comprendre les modèles généraux de fonctionnement des startups, il est également nécessaire d'analyser les modalités de travail à distance et hybrides adoptées par un grand nombre de startups brésiliennes depuis 2020. Étant donné que la majorité des travailleurs de ce secteur n'ont besoin que d'un ordinateur et d'une bonne connexion Internet pour exercer leurs fonctions — autrement dit, qu'il

s'agit principalement de travailleurs du savoir (Huws, 2009) —, il est essentiel de se poser les questions suivantes : que véhicule aujourd'hui l'image sociale du travailleur du savoir ? Quels types de routines de travail lui sont généralement associés ? Et, plus important encore, quel mode de vie incarne le « travailleur du savoir en démarrage » ?

Pour commencer à répondre à ces questions, il convient de souligner que les travailleurs des startups sont d'abord et avant tout des *employés de bureau* (Huws, 2009) qui, durant la pandémie, sont passés massivement au travail à distance. Bien que ce mode de travail soit traditionnellement associé aux *freelances*, aux travailleurs indépendants et aux entrepreneurs (Cingolani ; Corsani, 2024), il était déjà pratiqué dans certaines startups — notamment parmi les managers et les développeurs de logiciels — avant la pandémie. Toutefois, il ne s'agissait pas encore de la modalité dominante, et ce n'est qu'à partir de l'arrivée de la COVID-19 au Brésil, en mars 2020, qu'il s'est généralisé.

Selon une enquête réalisée en 2024 par Abstartups, 44,8 % des travailleurs de startups brésiliennes travaillent entièrement à distance, tandis que 44,1 % suivent un modèle hybride — une augmentation significative par rapport aux 39,7 % enregistrés en 2023. En revanche, seuls 11 % travaillent exclusivement en présentiel. Ces chiffres soulignent la prédominance des dispositifs à distance et hybrides dans l'écosystème des startups brésiliennes, reflétant une transformation plus large des pratiques organisationnelles.

Les données ethnographiques recueillies entre 2020 et 2024 corroborent cette tendance. De nombreux travailleurs de startups interrogés étaient habitués à des routines en présentiel avant la pandémie. Toutefois, l'apparition de la COVID-19 et les restrictions sanitaires qui ont suivi ont conduit à une migration massive vers le travail à distance. Dans les années qui ont suivi, les contrats de travail ont été réorganisés pour s'adapter aux modalités hybrides, certains employés restant majoritairement à domicile, tandis que d'autres alternaient entre travail à distance et présence au bureau.

Autrement dit, plus qu'une simple adaptation temporaire à la crise, ce changement indique la consolidation d'un modèle de travail centré sur la flexibilité et l'autogestion — des principes qui, paradoxalement, renforcent de nouvelles formes de contrôle du travail.

Nomades d'entreprise

Étant donné que les travailleurs des startups sont des travailleurs du savoir ayant tendance à exercer principalement leurs fonctions à distance, on peut les assimiler à l'archétype des « nomades d'entreprise ».

Selon Julian Marx *et al.* (2023), cet archétype repose sur la manière dont les travailleurs se rapportent à cinq dimensions clés du travail : le contrôle, le temps, l'environnement social, la technologie et l'espace. En général, ce type de travailleur incarne un modèle hybride, adoptant et rejetant de manière sélective des aspects à la fois du travailleur d'entreprise traditionnel (soumis à des horaires fixes et au travail au bureau) et du nomade numérique (dépourvu d'horaires fixes ou de lieu de travail défini). Comme le décrivent Marx et ses collègues :

[Ils] sont des employés permanents qui travaillent indépendamment du lieu où ils se trouvent, en s'appuyant sur les technologies de l'information. Ils diffèrent des nomades numériques en ce qu'ils disposent d'un solide filet de sécurité sociale et suivent des horaires de travail centralisés ainsi qu'une technologie standardisée. Ils se distinguent des travailleurs traditionnels des entreprises en façonnant leur mode de vie et leur environnement de travail selon leurs préférences individuelles et les décisions démocratiques prises dans le cadre d'accords avec leurs supérieurs et collègues (2023, p. 303).

Cela suggère que, même si les nomades d'entreprise restent soumis au contrôle organisationnel, ils conservent un certain degré d'autonomie, conditionné par des horaires fixes, une flexibilité temporelle et des accords négociés avec leurs employeurs (Marx *et al.*, 2023). Contrairement aux employés des entreprises traditionnelles, ils ne sont pas obligés de travailler exclusivement au bureau, ce qui leur permet de mieux concilier vie professionnelle et vie privée, en choisissant de travailler à domicile ou dans d'autres lieux jugés plus pratiques. En outre, ils continuent de bénéficier d'une certaine stabilité d'emploi, tout en accédant à certains des avantages perçus d'un environnement de travail plus flexible et informel.

Les nomades d'entreprise peuvent être rapprochés du concept de « travailleur salarié à distance », proposé par Cingolani et Corsani (2024), car ils représentent « de nouvelles formes d'organisation du travail salarié à l'ère des technologies numériques » (*idem*, p. 249). Cependant, comme la plupart de ces travailleurs sont déterritorialisés par rapport aux espaces de travail formels, ils ont tendance à travailler principalement depuis leur domicile, s'exposant ainsi au risque de « destruction de la sphère privée » (Cingolani ; Corsani, 2024, p. 255). De ce fait, ils demeurent confrontés à des contraintes importantes : pression à rester

constamment disponibles, allongement des journées de travail, absence d'environnement de travail stable, et sentiment d'isolement. Ces éléments remettent en question l'idée selon laquelle le nomadisme d'entreprise ou le travail à distance garantiraient automatiquement un meilleur équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée.

En se fondant sur les caractéristiques et les limites de la figure du nomade d'entreprise, il est possible d'affirmer que les travailleurs des startups contemporaines, dans le contexte post-pandémique, expérimentent les dimensions du contrôle, du temps, des environnements sociaux, de la technologie et de l'organisation spatiale de manière très proche de cet archétype. Le travailleur de startup, en ce sens, occupe une position intermédiaire : tout en bénéficiant d'une stabilité relative liée à l'emploi formel (lorsqu'elle existe), il adhère également à de nombreuses valeurs associées au nomadisme numérique, telles que la flexibilité, la mobilité et l'autonomie.

En règle générale, les employés de startups cherchent à échapper aux horaires de travail rigides, à résister à la microgestion, et à rejeter ce qu'ils perçoivent comme de « *l'inefficacité* » ou du « *temps perdu* » dans les trajets domicile-travail. Dans ce contexte, le travail à distance est largement perçu non seulement comme un marqueur de liberté personnelle, mais aussi comme une source d'optimisation du temps et d'augmentation de la productivité — des valeurs qui se trouvent, d'ailleurs, au cœur des discours managériaux intériorisés par les travailleurs eux-mêmes (Gaulejac, 2007).

Étant donné que les startups évoluent souvent dans des zones grises en matière d'employabilité (Bureau *et al.*, 2024), les routines de travail quotidiennes brouillent fréquemment les frontières entre travail et loisirs, ainsi qu'entre responsabilités professionnelles et domestiques — une ambiguïté qui peut, à la fois, accroître la flexibilité et l'autonomie, mais aussi intensifier le travail et nuire au bien-être.

De plus, la majorité des employés de startups sous contrat hybride alternent entre le bureau à domicile, le « *anywhere office* » et l'usage occasionnel des locaux physiques de l'entreprise. Un même travailleur peut ainsi passer d'un mode de travail à un autre selon les périodes et les contextes.

Depuis la pandémie, la plupart des startups et de leurs employés ont adopté le travail à distance de manière positive. Du point de vue des entrepreneurs et des managers, le travail à distance a été présenté comme « *l'avenir du travail* » : une possibilité d'accroître la productivité des travailleurs tout en offrant un meilleur « *équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée* ».

En effet, pour de nombreux travailleurs, le travail à distance représentait, et représente encore, une opportunité d'améliorer leur qualité de vie — qu'il s'agisse de se rapprocher de la plage de Florianópolis, de disposer de plus de temps pour pratiquer des sports liés à un certain style de vie ou de se consacrer à des loisirs, sans pour autant négliger les obligations professionnelles. En outre, la flexibilité qu'offre le travail à distance est généralement valorisée pour l'autonomie qu'elle est censée permettre dans l'exécution de tâches quotidiennes difficilement conciliables avec un régime de travail en présentiel, comme la planification de rendez-vous médicaux, la résolution de problèmes personnels ou le retour des enfants à l'école.

Bien que de nombreux travailleurs parviennent à mieux concilier leurs activités personnelles et professionnelles, le travail à distance ouvre également une nouvelle zone d'incertitude (Crozier ; Friedberg, 1977), perçue différemment par les employeurs et les employés. Pour les travailleurs, il représente la possibilité d'une plus grande liberté, voire, parfois, de « tricher » le système et de travailler moins d'heures. Pour les entreprises, il constitue en revanche une opportunité d'allonger la journée de travail et d'intensifier les exigences de productivité imposées aux équipes.

Si le travail à distance réduit l'influence directe du pouvoir disciplinaire (qui, traditionnellement, surveille et contrôle le corps des travailleurs dans les bureaux), il a renforcé le pouvoir managérial en approfondissant le contrôle exercé sur la subjectivité des travailleurs — en déplaçant l'attention de la présence physique vers la livraison de résultats et l'atteinte d'objectifs prédéfinis. Ainsi, malgré les avantages apparents du travail à distance, la mesure dans laquelle sa flexibilité se traduit par une véritable autonomie et un bien-être reste une question cruciale. Comme le soulignent Durães *et al.* (2021), présenter le travail à distance comme intrinsèquement moderne ou progressiste risque de renforcer des discours axés sur le marché, qui servent en fin de compte les intérêts capitalistes. De plus, seul un nombre restreint de travailleurs bénéficient réellement des promesses d'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée.

Dans la plupart des cas, les employés de startups finissent par tomber dans ce que Chung (2022) définit comme le paradoxe de la flexibilité, selon lequel une flexibilité accrue entraîne paradoxalement des exigences de travail plus importantes et un brouillage accru des frontières entre la vie professionnelle et la vie personnelle. En général, le travail à distance tend à isoler les travailleurs dans leurs propres rythmes, ce qui conduit fréquemment à des épisodes d'hyperconcentration, au cours desquels les individus travaillent pendant de longues heures sans interruption, oubliant de s'étirer, de s'hydrater, voire de satisfaire des besoins fondamentaux.

À l'inverse, dans les espaces de travail physiques, les rythmes collectifs offraient une forme de structuration temporelle : les pauses étaient prises collectivement, créant un rythme partagé qui légitimait ces moments d'arrêt et permettait des interactions sociales spontanées. Comme le souligne Lorient (2021), ces temporalités partagées jouent un rôle fondamental pour atténuer les pressions psychologiques liées au travail, en offrant non seulement des instants de repos, mais aussi un sentiment d'appartenance et de reconnaissance mutuelle. En l'absence de ces temporalités collectives, de nombreux travailleurs tendent à se sentir plus débordés et, parfois, même « *coupables* » de ne pas travailler.

Ces transformations illustrent comment, dans le contexte des startups, la flexibilité et l'autonomie associées au travail à distance constituent à la fois des promesses d'émancipation et des mécanismes de contrôle, reconfigurant les expériences de travail dans un scénario post-pandémique marqué par des tensions entre liberté et exploitation.

Les travailleurs des startups : profils et comportements

Jusqu'à présent, nous avons montré comment les environnements de travail des startups sont façonnés par les pratiques de gestion, les impératifs de croissance, les logiques d'investissement et les formes hybrides d'organisation du travail. Notre objectif était de révéler les conditions sociales qui rendent le burn-out intelligible non pas comme une pathologie isolée, mais comme un phénomène culturellement et contextuellement situé. Cependant, l'épuisement professionnel se manifeste toujours dans les corps individuels des travailleurs, eux-mêmes insérés dans des structures sociales plus larges. Dans cette optique, l'analyse se tourne désormais vers les profils sociaux des salariés des startups, afin de comprendre leurs origines de

classe, leurs aspirations et la manière dont celles-ci sont mobilisées par les entreprises.

Le profil type du salarié de startup au Brésil demeure relativement homogène : majoritairement cisgenre, masculin, blanc, âgé de 20 à 40 ans, titulaire d'un diplôme de l'enseignement supérieur et issu des classes moyennes ou supérieures. La mise en place de politiques de diversité et d'inclusion (D&I) dans l'écosystème brésilien a certes entraîné une diversification progressive de la main-d'œuvre, avec le recrutement, revendiqué, de davantage de femmes, de personnes noires, handicapées ou transgenres. Ce mouvement conduit certains interlocuteurs à se réjouir d'évoluer dans des environnements qu'ils jugent inclusifs. Néanmoins, les modèles sociaux et démographiques dominants continuent d'orienter les pratiques de recrutement, et les postes de direction restent largement conformes aux stéréotypes traditionnels.

Les observations de terrain indiquent, par exemple, que les femmes embauchées dans le secteur technologique sont fréquemment orientées vers les ressources humaines, la réussite client ou le marketing : des fonctions historiquement associées aux soins, à la communication et au travail émotionnel, qualifiées de *soft* (Castro, 2018) et, partant, symboliquement et matériellement dévalorisées. Les hommes, à l'inverse, se voient majoritairement confier des rôles stratégiques et techniques — gestion, développement logiciel, analyse de données —, domaines socialement construits comme *hard* (ibid.), associés à la rationalité, à l'objectivité et au leadership.

Les données d'Abstartups (2024) confirment cet écart : dans les jeunes pousses de 11 à 20 employés, les femmes représentent 7,1 % des effectifs et les personnes noires ou brunes 4,6 %. Lorsque l'entreprise atteint 201 à 500 salariés, ces proportions chutent respectivement à 0,2 % et deviennent statistiquement négligeables dans les structures plus grandes. Malgré ces disparités, 51 % des startups interrogées déclarent faire de la diversité une valeur centrale, alors que 59 % n'ont mis en place aucun processus de recrutement ciblé.

Autrement dit, bien que nombre de startups adoptent un discours progressiste sur l'inclusion et la diversité, peu disposent de programmes D&I réellement efficaces. Cette dynamique rejoint ce que Fraser (2020) qualifie de *néolibéralisme progressiste*, où les politiques de diversité sont considérées comme

un « atout commercial », sans pour autant s'attaquer aux inégalités socio-économiques sous-jacentes.

Je pense que plus une personne est privilégiée, plus il lui est facile de réussir dans une startup. Elle n'a pas besoin de jongler avec autre chose ! Mais plus les marqueurs de diversité entrent en jeu — qu'il s'agisse de contraintes sociales, de responsabilités familiales ou de dépendance financière —, plus cela devient difficile. L'écart se creuse et tout se complique. [...] Quelqu'un issu d'un milieu très privilégié joue ce jeu [entrepreneurial] beaucoup plus aisément, évidemment, parce qu'il n'a rien d'autre à craindre. (Kelly, 30 ans, responsable de compte commercial dans une startup en phase de développement, 2022)

Comme le souligne Kelly, plus un salarié correspond au stéréotype idéal — homme, blanc, cisgenre et issu des classes supérieures —, plus ses chances de réussir dans une startup sont élevées. Le succès dans cet écosystème n'est donc pas uniquement lié au mérite individuel : il s'appuie sur des privilèges sociaux et structurels. Ainsi, les femmes, les personnes noires ou celles issues des classes populaires se révèlent plus exposées aux risques psychosociaux qui alimentent stress et épuisement professionnel.

Outre les politiques de recrutement D&I, plusieurs interlocuteurs mentionnent l'existence de *groupes d'affinité* — espaces de dialogue réunissant, par exemple, femmes, personnes noires ou personnes LGBT+. À première vue, ces groupes pourraient constituer une forme d'organisation collective autour de préoccupations partagées. Ils se différencient toutefois des collectifs ouvriers classiques : plutôt que de contester l'exploitation (Linhart 1978 ; 2023), ils demeurent circonscrits au langage gestionnaire et s'attachent à optimiser des processus internes sans remettre en cause les structures de domination sous-jacentes.

En institutionnalisant ces groupes, les startups répondent au désir d'un environnement plus inclusif tout en se présentant comme organisations progressistes pratiquant une « *gestion humanisée* ». Cette stratégie renforce leur image d'entreprises porteuses de valeurs et de transformations. Cependant, elle déplace l'attention des inégalités structurelles vers les identités individuelles, privatisant la souffrance des salariés et affaiblissant la résistance solidaire nécessaire pour s'attaquer aux causes systémiques de la détresse au travail.

Lorsque l'on interroge les personnes rencontrées sur leur participation à des syndicats ou à des organisations de travailleurs, les réponses se révèlent invariablement négatives, ou renvoient tout au plus à ces groupes d'affinité. Mobiliser

les professionnels des technologies de l'information pour la syndicalisation s'avère particulièrement ardu. Globalement, le taux de syndicalisation des salariés brésiliens ne cesse de diminuer : en 2023, seuls 8,4 % des 100,7 millions de personnes employées adhéraient à un syndicat (Cabral ; Nery, 2024).

Ce recul tient à des facteurs structurels et culturels : démantèlement des collectifs de travail, montée de l'informalité et individualisation croissante. Linhart (2023) montre que la solidarité se voit affaiblie par des horaires flexibles, pensés pour empêcher la formation de routines communes, et par la multiplication des évaluations de performance (Bernard, 2020). Les startups ne font pas exception, combinant ces pratiques tout en nourrissant l'illusion d'une autonomisation individuelle.

Plusieurs raisons expliquent le faible taux de syndicalisation dans le secteur technologique : A) La catégorie même de *travailleur* est édulcorée : les startups désignent leurs salariés comme « *collaborateurs* », et beaucoup d'entre eux ne se perçoivent pas comme membres de la classe ouvrière. B) Les contrats et grilles salariales y sont très hétérogènes, ce qui freine la construction d'une identité professionnelle partagée (Moreno, 2021). C) La proportion élevée de travail à distance complique l'organisation collective et la solidarité. D) La mobilisation passe souvent par les groupes d'affinité ; or, ceux-ci sont institutionnalisés et encadrés par l'entreprise, ce qui maintient le contrôle managérial. E) Les dispositifs d'évaluation individuelle généralisés intensifient la concurrence et entravent la coopération quotidienne.

Cependant, l'absence de syndicats ne signifie pas pour autant une absence de conscience critique. Comme le rappelle Leroux (2015), « la robustesse du modèle managérial tient moins à son immunité face à la critique qu'à sa capacité à la marginaliser ». Les salariés les plus investis restent mus par la passion du travail ; leur contestation prend une forme réformiste, visant à améliorer plutôt qu'à transformer le système. Ceux qui adoptent une posture plus radicale finissent souvent relégués en marge : ils quittent le secteur ou se désengagent, désillusionnés par l'accumulation de frustrations.

Modèles de comportement

Au cours du travail de terrain, les participants se demandaient souvent pourquoi certaines personnes développent un épuisement professionnel alors que d'autres y échappent. Cette question impliquait une curiosité quant aux actions — ou inactions — susceptibles de conduire certains individus au burn-out ou, au contraire, à un prétendu équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée. Bien qu'il s'agisse d'une interrogation pertinente et stimulante, elle comporte aussi un risque analytique : individualiser le phénomène et présenter le burn-out comme le simple produit de la résilience personnelle, de la vulnérabilité émotionnelle ou de choix de vie spécifiques. De telles interprétations occultent les dimensions culturelles et organisationnelles qui façonnent l'expérience de l'épuisement dans les régimes de travail contemporains.

Pour éviter ce réductionnisme, cette section propose une typologie des orientations comportementales, inspirée des modèles d'adaptation de Merton (1968). Celui-ci examine la manière dont les individus réagissent aux objectifs culturels dominants — ici encapsulés dans l'éthique des startups — et aux moyens institutionnalisés d'y parvenir. Comme on l'a vu précédemment, se conformer à cette éthique, c'est intérioriser des slogans tels que « *aimez ce que vous faites* » et « *work hard, play hard* », en concevant le travail comme voie d'épanouissement personnel et projet identitaire ; le travail devient mission, l'entreprise étant vécue comme une extension de soi qu'il convient de nourrir, de défendre, voire pour laquelle on accepte de se sacrifier.

Afin d'interpréter les comportements observés, la typologie élaborée ici considère ces orientations comme des réponses dynamiques, dépendantes du contexte, aux pressions culturelles et organisationnelles propres aux startups. Elles sont façonnées par la position occupée dans l'entreprise, les valeurs personnelles et les représentations de la réussite ou de la survie dans ces environnements. La réflexion prend pour point de départ l'analyse de Chen (2022) sur les subjectivités des salariés de la Silicon Valley, laquelle distingue deux grandes orientations : les « vrais croyants », qui intériorisent la mission entrepreneuriale, et les « non-croyants », qui participent au système tout en restant détachés de ses promesses morales.

Bien que cette dichotomie constitue un repère utile, le terrain brésilien révèle des comportements qui dépassent la simple croyance dans la mission ou le succès de l'entreprise. Ici, la question pertinente n'est pas tant « y croient-ils ? » que

« jusqu’où sont-ils prêts à jouer le jeu de l’entreprise ? ». Selon les interlocuteurs, « *jouer le jeu* » implique un engagement pragmatique pouvant aller de l’enthousiasme — « *porter la chemise de l’entreprise* » — à un cynisme désengagé.

Dans cette perspective, quatre grands modèles de comportement ont été identifiés. Ces cadres analytiques offrent des éclairages complémentaires sur la manière dont divers groupes d’individus répondent aux impératifs culturels dominants du travail en startup.

Le modèle du *Sur Engagement* se caractérise par un fort investissement subjectif et une volonté de consacrer tout le temps nécessaire pour « *y arriver* ». Proche des « vrais croyants » de Chen, il privilégie la carrière au détriment des obligations personnelles et se rencontre surtout chez les professionnels en début de parcours. Animés d’une foi inébranlable dans la méritocratie et disposant de liens externes limités, ces travailleurs considèrent l’épanouissement professionnel comme la voie royale de la réalisation de soi. Leur engagement envers l’univers des startups n’est pas seulement pragmatique : il est existentiel. La startup est imaginée comme espace de liberté, d’autonomie et de croissance personnelle. Selon la typologie de Merton, ce modèle illustre la *conformité*, puisqu’il adhère à la fois aux objectifs culturels et aux moyens institutionnalisés promus par la culture startup.

Dans la continuité, le modèle du *Réformisme Néolibéral* partage avec le précédent l’enthousiasme pour le travail, mais s’en distingue sur des points essentiels. Il tend à émerger après un cycle d’insertion plus long dans l’écosystème — généralement une décennie environ — au cours duquel les travailleurs ont vécu des phases d’expansion, de contraction et de rebranding organisationnel. Cette temporalité favorise une posture plus critique ; néanmoins, loin de rompre avec l’éthique des startups, le réformisme néolibéral maintient la foi dans le potentiel transformateur de la technologie et de l’entrepreneuriat, envisagés comme leviers de changement social. Les contradictions vécues ne conduisent pas au désengagement, mais à des projets internes de réforme visant à construire des entreprises plus éthiques, durables ou inclusives. Moins individualiste que le modèle précédent, il se caractérise par un investissement dans un travail socialement conscient et correspond, dans la typologie de Merton, à *l’innovation* : adhésion aux objectifs culturels, mais par des voies alternatives.

Le modèle du *Cynisme* constitue la forme incrédule la plus répandue observée dans cette étude. Il résulte le plus souvent d’un *Sur Engagement* initial,

brusquement interrompu par des événements tels que burn-out, licenciements ou cycles répétés de surcharge et de frustration. Sa marque distinctive est une longue présence dans l'écosystème, oscillant entre enthousiasme et désillusion. Au fil du temps, la quête de sens cède place à un sentiment de trahison ; faute de liens collectifs ou de conscience politique élargie, ces crises sont interprétées comme des échecs individuels plutôt que comme des contradictions structurelles. Il en découle un retrait émotionnel particulier : désillusionné mais complaisant, frustré mais fonctionnel. Le travail devient essentiellement instrumental, justifié non par conviction mais par la consommation : « *Je travaille pour pouvoir dépenser.* » Selon Merton, ce modèle s'apparente au *ritualisme* (maintien des routines sans adhésion aux fins) ou au *retrait* (désaffection vis-à-vis du sens).

À l'inverse, le modèle de la *Critique Résignée* est plus rare, mais non moins pertinent. Il s'oppose idéologiquement au Réformisme Néolibéral : tous deux partagent la conscience des contradictions structurelles du secteur, mais la Critique Résignée dépasse les aspirations réformistes en rejetant à la fois les objectifs et les moyens promus par les startups. Ses valeurs s'enracinent dans des principes communautaires, solidaires et anticapitalistes. Contrairement au Cynisme, il ne procède pas d'une désillusion tardive : il n'y a jamais eu d'investissement idéologique profond dans l'éthique startup. Les liens entretenus avec des collectifs extra-organisationnels offrent un soutien émotionnel et une stratégie consciente de résistance à l'absorption professionnelle totale. Toutefois, en raison de sa position marginale et de l'absence d'infrastructures collectives organisées, ce modèle conduit souvent à un isolement politique et émotionnel, révélant les limites idéologiques de l'écosystème : la critique est possible, mais une résistance durable reste difficile. Dans la grille de Merton, il renvoie à la *rébellion* : refus des fins culturelles et des moyens institutionnels, assorti de la recherche d'alternatives ; or, la difficulté à rendre celles-ci viables confère au modèle son ambiguïté fondamentale : à la fois critique et résigné, lucide mais restreint dans sa capacité d'action.

Ces quatre modèles — Sur Engagement, Réformisme Néolibéral, Cynisme et Critique Résignée — ne doivent pas être compris comme des catégories fixes, mais comme des dispositifs heuristiques permettant de cartographier les façons diverses, souvent ambivalentes, dont les travailleurs de startups négocient les contradictions d'un secteur où la promesse d'épanouissement côtoie la réalité de l'exploitation. Ils montrent que le burn-out ne découle pas simplement d'une

incapacité individuelle à gérer son temps ou son énergie ; il émerge d'une dynamique processuelle façonnée par les contradictions systémiques du capitalisme technologique. Ces modèles révèlent comment les croyances peuvent être instrumentalisées, comment la critique est fréquemment individualisée et comment la dissonance morale — plus que le détachement — peut devenir une source majeure de souffrance.

Burnout : la production systémique de fatigue au travail

L'inconfort au travail a toujours été une caractéristique persistante du travail dans une société d'aliénation (Antunes, 2009). Cependant, à différentes périodes historiques et selon divers modèles de gestion, ce malaise s'est manifesté sous des noms et des expressions symptomatiques variés, reflétant les conditions socio-économiques et les structures du travail propres à chaque époque (Dunker, 2020).

Dans les années 1980, le mal-être au travail était souvent conceptualisé comme une « maladie des nerfs », un terme englobant un large éventail de troubles psychologiques et physiologiques attribués à l'anxiété professionnelle (Duarte, 1988). Dans les années 1990 et 2000, le discours dominant s'est déplacé vers le stress, une catégorie devenue centrale pour comprendre la souffrance au travail dans des régimes d'emploi de plus en plus flexibles et précaires (Clot, 2010 ; Dejours, 2000 ; Lorient, 2021 ; Pirc, 2022 ; Velázquez, 2019). Récemment, toutefois, on a constaté une augmentation marquée des diagnostics de dépression (Gaulejac, 2007 ; Corbanezi, 2021 ; Dunker, 2021 ; Ehrenberg, 2010) et d'épuisement professionnel (Lorient, 2000 ; Trigo et al., 2007 ; Tamayo, 2009 ; Vieira ; Russo, 2019) — deux termes désormais omniprésents dans les discussions sur la santé mentale au travail contemporain.

Considérant que nous vivons sous un régime néolibéral dans lequel les individus sont de plus en plus tenus de gérer et d'évaluer leur vie à travers les mêmes mesures et indicateurs de performance que les entreprises (Dardot ; Laval, 2013), il devient nécessaire de considérer la souffrance au travail non comme un simple sous-produit accidentel du travail, mais comme une caractéristique intrinsèque des systèmes économiques modernes. Dans ces contextes, les travailleurs sont poussés à dépasser constamment leurs limites, intériorisant la responsabilité de leur propre souffrance, tandis que les entreprises cherchent à

optimiser leur main-d'œuvre pour une efficacité maximale avec un minimum de responsabilité. L'angoisse psychique n'apparaît donc pas dans le vide : elle est façonnée par les discours dominants et les impératifs socio-économiques de chaque moment historique. Si, comme le suggère Safatle (2020), chaque époque prescrit le langage à travers lequel la souffrance s'exprime, il convient de se demander pourquoi, depuis les années 2020, le terme *burn-out* est devenu l'un des principaux moyens d'articuler l'inconfort au travail parmi les travailleurs des startups.

Malgré sa large reconnaissance, l'épuisement professionnel reste difficile à définir comme une condition médicale distincte, avec une classification fluide et contestée. Conceptuellement, il est étroitement lié au stress et souvent comparé à la dépression. En effet, l'épuisement professionnel peut résulter d'un stress chronique exacerbé et, dans certains cas, conduire à la dépression. Cependant, comme le soulignent Zorzanelli *et al.* (2016), il diffère du stress en ce qu'il ne constitue pas simplement une réaction temporaire ou une réponse aiguë à des défis spécifiques. L'épuisement professionnel résulte d'une exposition prolongée à des conditions de travail exigeantes — aggravée par des mécanismes d'adaptation limités — et aboutit à un épuisement émotionnel, physique et cognitif.

Tout comme le stress est devenu un terme omniprésent et répandu, le concept d'épuisement professionnel s'est élargi — en particulier à la suite de la pandémie de COVID-19 — pour circuler dans le discours public comme une catégorie large et souvent ambiguë. Dans ce contexte, si le stress fonctionne comme un intermédiaire entre les expériences somatiques et psychologiques (Zorzanelli *et al.*, 2016) et est couramment utilisé pour décrire les perturbations quotidiennes, l'épuisement professionnel apparaît comme une catégorie psychosomatique distincte. Opérant à l'intersection des dimensions psychiques et sociales, il commence à désigner spécifiquement les souffrances et les ruptures vécues dans les milieux de travail contemporains.

Parce que son étiologie est enracinée dans des facteurs sociaux et psychologiques, l'épuisement professionnel peut être considéré par certains comme un diagnostic psychosocial (Zorzanelli *et al.*, 2016). Cependant, cette même caractéristique l'expose au risque persistant d'être classé comme un échec moral individuel, où le malade est considéré comme pleinement responsable de son état. Cette perspective individualisante non seulement occulte les facteurs culturelles et organisationnels — avec leurs conflits, leurs médiations et leurs relations de pouvoir —

qui contribuent à l'épuisement professionnel, mais renforce également les idéaux néolibéraux d'autogestion. Dans ce modèle, on attend des travailleurs qu'ils intériorisent la responsabilité de leur souffrance, en considérant l'épuisement professionnel comme une faiblesse personnelle plutôt que de remettre en question les forces systémiques plus larges qui façonnent et entretiennent le mal-être au travail.

Pour dépasser les explications de nature moralisatrice, biologique ou strictement psychologique, des auteurs comme Lorient (2019) proposent de comprendre le burn-out et le stress comme des phénomènes socialement construits et historiquement situés. Plutôt que d'être considérées comme des états émotionnels fixes ou des problèmes exclusivement individuels, ces conditions doivent être comprises comme des processus dynamiques, dont la gravité peut s'intensifier – évoluant, par exemple, vers des formes plus graves de souffrance psychologique, comme la dépression – en fonction de la présence ou de l'absence de ressources d'adaptation disponibles.

Ces ressources peuvent être de nature individuelle (comme le recours à des médicaments, la requalification professionnelle ou la redéfinition des attentes personnelles) ou collective (comme l'accès à un soutien institutionnel, la redistribution des charges de travail ou l'inclusion dans des réseaux de solidarité). Il est crucial de noter que la trajectoire de l'épuisement professionnel est façonnée par le contexte dans lequel le travail se déroule. Dans les régimes néolibéraux — en particulier dans les startups et le secteur technologique — les environnements organisationnels ont tendance à combiner des exigences élevées avec une faible protection : ils intensifient les restrictions (par la précarité, la concurrence permanente et la pression de la performance) tout en affaiblissant ou en démantelant les formes collectives de soutien qui pourraient atténuer leurs effets.

Des facteurs tels que le taux de rotation élevé, la jeunesse et le caractère transitoire de la main-d'œuvre, la fragilité des organisations syndicales et la normalisation du télétravail contribuent à la désarticulation des liens collectifs et à l'affaiblissement des mécanismes de soutien institutionnel. Dans ce scénario, le fardeau de l'adaptation repose de plus en plus sur l'individu, qui doit gérer, par lui-même, les impacts subjectifs de l'intensification du travail.

Par conséquent, comprendre l'épuisement professionnel à l'époque contemporaine exige plus que de l'empathie pour la souffrance subjective : cela

nécessite de prêter attention à l'érosion structurelle des tampons collectifs qui, dans d'autres contextes historiques, ont permis aux travailleurs de faire face aux exigences du travail avec une plus grande résilience et un plus grand soutien social.

Bien que le Brésil soit considéré comme l'un des pays les plus anxieux et les plus déprimés au monde (Carvalho, 2024), il existe peu de données sur le nombre de cas d'épuisement professionnel dans le pays. Étant donné le manque de données statistiques complètes sur l'épuisement professionnel parmi les travailleurs brésiliens, évaluer avec précision sa prévalence dans le secteur technologique du pays devient encore plus difficile. Cependant, malgré ce manque de chiffres précis, plusieurs sources — des articles sur des sites Web spécialisés aux webinaires, en passant par des conférences lors d'événements d'entreprise et des études internes menées par des startups — offrent un aperçu de la manière dont le secteur des startups perçoit et aborde l'épuisement professionnel.

Dans les études de marché publiées par les *Health Techs*, un modèle discernable émerge, visant à présenter l'épuisement professionnel comme un problème de santé mentale devant être traité. Premièrement, ces rapports soulignent l'importance de s'attaquer à la santé mentale des travailleurs, en envisageant souvent la question sous un angle économique. Des déclarations telles que « *environ 12 milliards de journées de travail sont perdues chaque année à cause de la dépression et de l'anxiété, ce qui entraîne un coût économique mondial de près de 1 000 milliards de dollars* » (ZenKlub, 2022), ou « *d'ici 2030, les troubles psychologiques devraient coûter 6 000 milliards de dollars à l'économie mondiale* » (Field Notebook, 27 janvier 2023), servent à justifier les investissements des entreprises dans les initiatives de santé mentale.

Ensuite, après avoir défini un contexte plus large de crise de santé mentale, ces rapports présentent leurs propres conclusions sur la prévalence de l'anxiété, de la dépression, du stress et de l'épuisement professionnel chez les travailleurs brésiliens. En règle générale, ces chiffres sont dérivés de données collectées auprès de la clientèle de chaque entreprise, ce qui rend difficile la compréhension détaillée de l'échantillon de ces études. Certaines statistiques rapportées incluent : « *32 % des Brésiliens présentent des symptômes d'anxiété modérés à sévères* » et « *31 % présentent des symptômes sévères de dépression* » (ZenKlub, 2022) ; « *64 % des travailleurs déclarent ressentir du stress fréquemment* », malgré le fait que « *87 % d'entre eux se disent passionnés par leur travail* » (Field Notebook, 27 janvier 2023) ;

« 53,5 % des professionnels des RH connaissent des collègues qui ont été licenciés pour cause d'épuisement professionnel » (Flash, 2023). Bien que sans aucun doute alarmantes, ces données doivent être interprétées avec un regard critique. Les chiffres, souvent diffusés par les startups elles-mêmes, expriment non seulement la souffrance individuelle, mais contribuent à la construction d'un récit de crise au sein de l'écosystème des startups brésiliennes — une crise qui, selon cette logique, nécessiterait une intervention immédiate et techniquement orientée.

Il est important de souligner que ces entreprises n'agissent pas comme des observateurs neutres du scénario qu'elles décrivent. Au contraire, elles sont des agents actifs dans la production et la diffusion des données qui sous-tendent cette crise, présentant leurs propres plateformes et services comme des solutions. Au moyen de livres blancs, de webinaires et de sommets, ces startups construisent un cadre dans lequel la santé mentale au travail est conçue comme un problème de gestion qui peut — et doit — être traité par l'innovation, une surveillance continue et des interventions thérapeutiques médiatisées par la technologie.

Ainsi, on observe que, lors de la production et de la publication de rapports sur la santé mentale, les startups du secteur *Health Tech* cherchent non seulement à attirer l'attention sur le burn-out comme un phénomène préoccupant, mais surtout à mobiliser une préoccupation stratégique. Il ne s'agit pas de condamner la souffrance comme quelque chose de moralement inacceptable, mais de la repositionner comme un défi organisationnel qui exige un investissement dans sa gestion. Dans ce processus, les impératifs éthiques s'alignent sur les solutions du marché, configurant ce que Rose (2019) décrit comme une nouvelle rationalité psychopolitique, où les soins se transforment en une opportunité commerciale.

La publication de ces données s'accompagne généralement d'une prolifération de nouveaux produits et services lancés par les mêmes *Health Tech* responsables des rapports, établissant une relation cyclique entre la production de diagnostics et la fourniture de solutions. Cette dynamique approfondit ce qu'Ilouz (2007) appelle la *marchandisation de la santé mentale* — un processus qui, aujourd'hui, n'est plus exclusivement porté par les sociétés pharmaceutiques, mais aussi par une économie numérique qui instrumentalise les soins par le biais de données et de dispositifs technologiques.

Dans ce cadre marchandisé, des conditions telles que l'anxiété, la dépression et, surtout, l'épuisement professionnel sont rarement comprises comme

des processus socialement et historiquement situés ou comme des conséquences d'une dynamique de travail épuisante. Au lieu de cela, elles sont souvent réinterprétées comme des dysfonctionnements individuels, des perturbations de la productivité ou des obstacles à corriger. Les interventions proposées dans ce contexte tendent à être légitimées non pas par leur efficacité thérapeutique ou leur valeur éthique, mais par leur capacité à réduire les congés de maladie, à maintenir l'engagement et à assurer la continuité du flux de travail. Cela nous amène à une question fondamentale : ces plateformes favorisent-elles réellement le bien-être des travailleurs, ou fonctionnent-elles plutôt comme des outils de gestion visant à la conformité réglementaire et au maintien de la productivité ?

Alors que les entreprises de technologie de la santé présentent leurs investissements dans les plateformes de bien-être et la thérapie à distance comme des gestes de responsabilité d'entreprise, le fardeau des soins continue de peser sur les individus. On attend d'eux qu'ils se surveillent, régulent leurs émotions et investissent continuellement dans leur propre amélioration, même dans des environnements de travail où les dommages structurels restent largement intacts. Dans ce scénario, le discours du soin fonctionne comme un dispositif stratégique : il reconfigure la santé mentale non pas comme un champ de transformation collective, mais comme un instrument de gouvernance managériale, recouvert par un langage thérapeutique.

Plus les travailleurs sont « diagnostiqués » comme « à risque d'épuisement professionnel », plus ces plateformes les conduisent vers un récit thérapeutique centré sur l'entraide, la gestion émotionnelle et la responsabilité individuelle. Au lieu de s'attaquer aux conditions structurelles qui produisent la souffrance — comme la précarité, la surcharge de travail, les objectifs inatteignables et l'absence de mécanismes d'adaptation collectifs —, le malaise est reformulé comme un déficit personnel. Il appartient à l'individu de développer des capacités d'autorégulation, de résilience ou de rechercher un traitement thérapeutique, tandis que les causes systémiques restent invisibles.

L'épuisement professionnel vu par les travailleurs des startups

Dans les écosystèmes startup, le burn-out ne circule pas seulement comme un problème individuel à gérer par une assistance technologique ou par des

processus de médicalisation. Il apparaît également comme un concept émique, invoqué par les travailleurs eux-mêmes pour nommer et donner un sens à leur souffrance. Il devient alors un diagnostic vernaculaire, une manière d'articuler les tensions, les contradictions et les ruptures qui naissent du travail quotidien. Il est donc essentiel de se demander : que signifie l'épuisement professionnel pour les travailleurs ? Comment décrivent-ils, interprètent-ils et naviguent-ils dans cette expérience selon leurs propres termes ?

Il est crucial que toute analyse de l'épuisement professionnel dans l'univers des startups soit située en relation avec une économie affective plus large, marquée par l'articulation entre passion, productivité et exploration. Comme nous l'avons vu précédemment, les cultures organisationnelles de ce secteur cultivent activement ce que Lorient et Leroux (2015) décrivent comme un travail passionné, souvent mobilisé par le discours managérial du « *fais ce que tu aimes* ». Dans ce cadre, le travail cesse d'être représenté comme une obligation onéreuse et commence à être promu comme une voie privilégiée vers le développement personnel et l'épanouissement subjectif. Les travailleurs ne sont pas simplement conçus comme des exécutants de tâches, mais comme des sujets pleinement engagés, investis émotionnellement et intrinsèquement motivés, qui s'identifient au travail comme une extension d'eux-mêmes et comme une source de bonheur.

Ce cadrage affectif tend à brouiller les frontières entre travail et identité, renforçant une vision selon laquelle le travail devient le principal lieu de production de sens dans la vie contemporaine. En appelant les travailleurs à investir émotionnellement dans leurs rôles, les managers peuvent accroître l'engagement et stimuler la productivité, mais à un coût élevé. Comme démontré tout au long de cette thèse, la passion au travail est rarement une expression spontanée du désir individuel. Il faut plutôt la comprendre comme une construction sociale et historique, résultat de dynamiques néolibérales qui encouragent les individus à optimiser leurs performances et à devenir « excellents » dans tous les domaines de la vie. Dans ce contexte, la passion devient un vecteur disciplinaire, profondément lié aux mécanismes de contrôle et d'exploration de soi.

Cependant, l'impératif d'excellence, poussé à l'extrême, ne conduit pas nécessairement à l'épanouissement personnel, mais souvent à l'épuisement. Les qualités célébrées par la culture des startups — dévouement, enthousiasme, disponibilité illimitée et résilience — peuvent rapidement devenir des pièges

subjectifs lorsque les exigences dépassent le seuil de durabilité. Comme l'a observé l'une des personnes interrogées dans le cadre de cette recherche : « *aimer ce que l'on fait est à deux pas de l'épuisement professionnel* ». Son discours résume l'ambivalence constitutive du travail passionné, dans lequel l'investissement affectif approfondit à la fois le potentiel de réussite et la vulnérabilité à la maladie. En d'autres termes, la passion devient une mesure de la productivité, et la productivité, à son tour, devient une mesure de la valeur personnelle qui, lorsqu'elle n'est pas atteinte, peut conduire au stress et à la souffrance psychologique.

Comme le soutient Loriol (2019), différents groupes professionnels développent des compréhensions collectives différentes de ce qui constitue le stress dans leurs environnements de travail respectifs. De plus, il n'est pas rare que ces groupes reconnaissent un certain degré de stress comme légitime, voire comme inhérent à l'exercice de leurs activités. Il en va de même dans le secteur des startups : comme il s'agit d'environnements intenses et rapides, motivés par des objectifs ambitieux, le stress est souvent perçu comme une condition contingente, une donnée qui ne peut être ignorée. Cependant, lorsque ce stress attendu dépasse les limites considérées comme idéales ou supportables, ou lorsque les mécanismes d'atténuation collectifs ne sont pas disponibles, ce qui était initialement toléré devient souffrance.

Il est important de souligner que les sources spécifiques de stress varient considérablement entre les différents secteurs qui composent les startups. Les professionnels de la vente, par exemple, soulignent que la pression constante pour atteindre les objectifs mensuels constitue leur principale source de stress. Les équipes de réussite client signalent le fardeau émotionnel lié à la gestion des problèmes après-vente. Les professionnels des ressources humaines mentionnent les conflits interpersonnels et la médiation des différends comme des sources récurrentes d'épuisement professionnel. Les équipes de support technique soulignent le stress lié à la nécessité d'être en permanence disponibles pour répondre aux pannes systémiques. Enfin, les développeurs de logiciels insistent sur le poids de la responsabilité continue de maintenir les plateformes opérationnelles.

Cependant, ces facteurs de stress ne peuvent pas être considérés comme des événements extraordinaires ou imprévisibles. Au contraire, ils sont profondément ancrés dans les attentes normatives de chaque fonction. Il s'agit de pressions anticipées, reconnues et intégrées à la pratique professionnelle spécialisée qui

caractérise le modèle organisationnel des startups. En ce sens, ces pressions configurent ce que des auteurs comme Cru (2014) et Roche (2016) appellent les risques professionnels — des éléments que les travailleurs, en général, acceptent et légitiment comme une partie constitutive de leur travail, car ils s'alignent sur la logique de fonctionnement et la valeur symbolique attribuée au travail lui-même. Ainsi, ces risques deviennent non seulement tolérés, mais également internalisés comme composantes de l'identité professionnelle, contribuant à la naturalisation de la souffrance comme partie intégrante du travail quotidien.

Outre ces risques sectoriels spécifiques, il existe également des facteurs de stress transversaux qui affectent les travailleurs des startups dans différents domaines. Parmi ceux-ci, on distingue la récurrence de changements stratégiques brusques, imposés par la haute direction, qui nécessitent de reprendre les tâches à zéro et de désorganiser les routines précédemment structurées. À cela s'ajoutent les perceptions d'efforts gaspillés, de perte de productivité, d'autonomie réduite et de créativité entravée. L'imminence de licenciements collectifs ou de restructurations organisationnelles apparaît également comme une source importante de tension, non seulement parce qu'elle menace la stabilité de l'emploi, mais aussi parce qu'elle signale que l'investissement subjectif et le travail réalisé peuvent avoir été abandonnés ou dévalorisés. Dans ces contextes, de nombreux travailleurs expriment leur frustration de ne pas pouvoir accomplir leurs tâches de manière satisfaisante et, par conséquent, de ne pas atteindre l'épanouissement personnel qu'ils espéraient trouver au travail.

À la lumière de ces expériences, les rapports des travailleurs révèlent un répertoire large, hétérogène et changeant de symptômes, d'autodescriptions et de catégories diagnostiques. Loin de constituer des récits homogènes ou facilement classables, les témoignages analysés expriment de multiples références mobilisées pour donner sens à la souffrance. Ces références varient en fonction des trajectoires de vie, des états émotionnels et de l'évolution des conceptions de la santé mentale. En général, les épisodes de stress et d'épuisement professionnel étaient fréquemment articulés par les interlocuteurs à travers le corps. Plutôt que de recourir immédiatement au langage psychologique ou à des étiquettes diagnostiques formelles, de nombreux travailleurs ont décrit leur souffrance en termes somatiques, signalant des maux de tête persistants, de l'insomnie, des troubles gastro-intestinaux et des fluctuations importantes du poids corporel. Ces symptômes, bien

qu'impactantes, étaient souvent interprétés comme gérables et n'étaient donc pas nécessairement révélateurs d'un problème médical. Ils étaient perçus comme des signes d'un corps soumis à un stress, mais fonctionnant encore dans des limites acceptables d'endurance professionnelle. Dans les cas les plus aigus, cependant, le corps cessait de fonctionner comme un simple récipient pour le stress et devenait le lieu même de son effondrement. Plusieurs interlocuteurs ont signalé des épisodes de panique, des crises de larmes incontrôlables, des éruptions cutanées et de la tachycardie — des réponses physiologiques qui signalaient un trouble plus profond et plus systémique du soi. De telles manifestations mettent non seulement en évidence la surcharge vécue, mais révèlent également la matérialité de la souffrance liée au travail, qui s'exprime et s'inscrit dans le corps de manière viscérale.

Par conséquent, les manières de nommer le mal-être vont des manifestations somatiques — comme la fatigue chronique, l'insomnie ou les maux de tête — aux diagnostics formels tels que le TDAH, l'anxiété, le stress et l'épuisement professionnel. Il est crucial de noter que ces catégories ne sont pas statiques : elles évoluent au fil du temps, influencées par des discours culturels plus larges, l'évolution du langage de la santé mentale, des réflexions subjectives et des changements dans les conditions de travail et de vie.

Étant donné la nature transitoire, relationnelle et dynamique du stress dans le contexte de travail, je présente ci-dessous un cadre de classification qui cherche à cartographier la manière dont, en général, les individus interrogés dans cette recherche se réfèrent à leurs expériences de souffrance au travail. Cette classification n'a pas pour but d'établir des diagnostics rétrospectifs sur les interlocuteurs, ni d'imposer des catégories cliniques à leurs récits. Son objectif est triple. Premièrement, offrir une perspective interprétative afin que le lecteur puisse suivre la fluidité avec laquelle les sujets se déplacent entre différentes terminologies et façons de conceptualiser leur inconfort lié au travail. Deuxièmement, souligner comment le terme burn-out a été largement absorbé par le bon sens, souvent utilisé de manière élargie, au-delà de sa définition clinique restreinte. Enfin, mettre en évidence le fait que de nombreux travailleurs, même confrontés à d'intenses souffrances, restent sans accès à des soins spécialisés ou à des interventions structurelles — en particulier dans les cas les plus graves, dans lesquels des soins professionnels et des changements organisationnels seraient non seulement souhaitables, mais urgents.

Tableau – Conceptualisations autochtones de la souffrance au travail

Conceptualisations autochtones de la souffrance au travail	Nombre d'individus
Ne signale aucune prédisposition significative aux réactions de stress	5
Signale des tendances anxieuses et une sensibilité accrue aux situations stressantes	2
Fait état d'un diagnostic de TDAH et d'une propension aux réactions de stress	3
Signale une propension à une forte réactivité au stress	4
Fait état d'un état proche de l'épuisement professionnel	7
Fait état d'un état d'épuisement professionnel non vérifié cliniquement	6
A reçu un diagnostic clinique d'épuisement professionnel, mais a choisi de ne pas prendre de congé maladie	2
A reçu un diagnostic clinique d'épuisement professionnel et a pris un congé maladie	1

Source : préparé par l'auteure.

Comme démontré, parmi les 30 interlocuteurs, seulement cinq n'ont pas signalé de niveaux significatifs de stress lié au travail. Dans leurs récits, ces participants ont décrit leur travail comme un simple moyen de subsistance — sans investissement identitaire fort — ou ont affirmé disposer d'une autonomie suffisante pour adapter leur travail aux exigences de leur vie personnelle, et non l'inverse.

Deux personnes interrogées, bien que souffrant d'un inconfort lié au travail, n'ont pas utilisé les catégories « stress » ou « burn-out » ; toutes deux ont identifié leur détresse comme une anxiété chronique, actuellement traitée par des médicaments. Trois autres ont attribué leur détresse professionnelle à un diagnostic antérieur de TDAH, soulignant que les difficultés d'autorégulation de l'attention et des fonctions exécutives étaient aggravées dans les environnements à fortes exigences. Pour atténuer ces défis, ils ont mis l'accent sur des routines rigoureuses, des planificateurs, des rappels numériques et des alarmes comme stratégies pour maintenir la concentration.

Quatre participants ont utilisé la notion de stress de manière épisodique et largement gérable. Bien qu'ils aient reconnu les coûts physiologiques — en particulier la fatigue et les baisses d'énergie les jours de pointe — ils ne considéraient pas le stress comme intrinsèquement nocif ni comme nécessitant une

intervention médicale. Pour ces travailleurs, le stress devient une composante normale et temporaire de la vie professionnelle.

En revanche, seize interlocuteurs ont utilisé le terme burn-out pour décrire leur souffrance. Parmi eux, huit ont déclaré se sentir « au bord » de l'épuisement professionnel lors de phases de travail particulièrement intenses, avoir remarqué des signes physiques précoces et avoir cherché des mécanismes d'adaptation pour éviter un effondrement complet. Cinq d'entre eux ont déclaré avoir déjà vécu des épisodes d'épuisement professionnel ayant entraîné des changements d'emploi ou des absences prolongées ; bien que certains aient suivi une psychothérapie, aucun n'a demandé d'évaluation psychiatrique, il n'y a donc pas eu de diagnostic clinique formel — ce qui montre comment les expériences subjectives d'épuisement peuvent générer des ruptures même sans validation médicale.

Seuls trois participants ont sollicité une assistance médicale et ont reçu un diagnostic clinique d'épuisement professionnel. Parmi eux, l'un a obtenu un congé officiel et a ensuite démissionné ; les autres sont restés dans la même organisation, comptant sur des médicaments, de petites réductions de charge de travail et de brèves périodes de repos. Leurs récits révèlent qu'un fort attachement émotionnel au travail et un sens moral de la responsabilité professionnelle peuvent l'emporter sur la légitimité du diagnostic, façonnant des stratégies de rétablissement qui privilégient la poursuite du travail plutôt que des absences plus longues.

Ensemble, ces trajectoires mettent en lumière la pluralité des significations attribuées à la souffrance professionnelle dans le contexte des startups — de la normalisation du stress comme faisant partie de la routine à la médicalisation partielle ou complète du burn-out. Elles révèlent également comment les décisions liées aux soins et aux congés ne se réduisent pas à des critères cliniques, mais sont médiatisées par des valeurs culturelles, le degré d'investissement identitaire dans le travail et la disponibilité (ou l'absence) de ressources institutionnelles. En définitive, les témoignages analysés indiquent que l'épuisement professionnel, dans ce contexte, n'est pas seulement une rupture du corps ou de l'esprit, mais une rupture du sens, de la confiance et de la cohérence émotionnelle. Sa genèse est liée non seulement à la volatilité organisationnelle, mais aussi aux exigences contradictoires imposées aux travailleurs : on attend d'eux qu'ils soient émotionnellement résilients et stratégiquement détachés, qu'ils se soucient profondément de ce qu'ils font — et, en même temps, qu'ils restent imperturbables.

C'est précisément dans ce paradoxe que prend racine le burn-out — non seulement comme une pathologie à traiter, mais comme un symptôme vécu des tensions non résolues du travail contemporain. L'enjeu n'est pas simplement de déterminer si l'épuisement professionnel est « réel », mais de comprendre comment sa dénomination devient un moyen légitime d'exprimer une souffrance souvent invisible, moralement ambiguë et étroitement liée aux contradictions structurelles de la vie organisationnelle.

Mécanismes d'adaptation à l'épuisement professionnel

Bien que des moments de connexion et de soutien mutuel existent encore entre collègues, ceux-ci tendent à être informels, diffus et facilement démantelés par des licenciements ou des restructurations internes. Par conséquent, cette section se concentre principalement sur les stratégies d'adaptation individualisées, qui sont apparues comme le moyen le plus répandu de gérer la détresse pendant le travail de terrain. En analysant ces stratégies, il devient possible de comprendre les négociations morales et émotionnelles complexes que les travailleurs entreprennent pour se maintenir dans des environnements marqués par une forte croissance et une pression constante — des contextes qui exigent non seulement des performances, mais aussi une auto-optimisation continue.

Face à la souffrance et à la rareté des alternatives collectives pour y faire face, la plupart des travailleurs n'agissent que lorsque les symptômes physiques ou émotionnels deviennent trop aigus pour être ignorés. Dans de nombreux cas, ils ne commencent à rechercher activement le bien-être que lorsqu'ils se rendent compte qu'ils sont au bord de l'épuisement professionnel — non pas parce qu'ils négligent consciemment les premiers signes, comme l'insomnie ou les maux de tête, mais, comme l'explique Letícia, à cause de la difficulté à reconnaître qu'ils souffrent eux-mêmes. L'action ne survient donc généralement que lorsqu'ils se sentent au bord de l'effondrement.

Même lorsque l'épuisement professionnel se produit, les mécanismes d'adaptation adoptés tendent à renforcer les logiques psychologiques dominantes et les récits autodisciplinaires. Bien que la plupart des personnes soient capables de situer leur détresse dans le contexte plus large du travail en startup – caractérisé par des changements organisationnels fréquents, des exigences excessives ou des

relations conflictuelles avec les managers –, beaucoup intériorisent la conviction qu’elles n’ont pas su fixer des limites appropriées ou bien gérer leur propre stress.

C’est à ce moment-là que s’impose la logique de l’autodiscipline. La maîtrise du temps, de l’énergie et de l’attention devient non seulement un idéal professionnel, mais aussi un impératif moral, nécessaire pour réussir au travail tout en profitant de la vie en dehors de celui-ci. Lorsque cette autodiscipline échoue, comme c’est inévitablement le cas en situation de pression prolongée, d’autres outils sont mobilisés : des suppléments et des médicaments psychoactifs pour maintenir l’énergie et la concentration ; des séances de thérapie en ligne pour réguler les émotions et éviter que l’épuisement professionnel ne mène à la dépression. Ces pratiques reflètent ce que certains chercheurs décrivent comme le tournant thérapeutique de la gouvernance néolibérale (Illouz, 2007), dans lequel prendre soin de soi devient à la fois une obligation personnelle et une exigence de performance.

Les loisirs et l’activité physique, bien que souvent considérés comme des formes de soins personnels, sont également imprégnés de logiques plus larges de responsabilité et d’autodiscipline. Pourtant, ils peuvent marquer l’émergence de formes fragiles mais significatives de résistance incarnée et affective, à travers lesquelles les travailleurs tentent de renégocier leur relation au temps, au corps, au travail et à eux-mêmes. En d’autres termes, les pratiques d’activité physique, en particulier, deviennent non seulement un outil de soulagement du stress, mais un moyen de réorienter les dynamiques relationnelles et temporelles qui, autrement, sont dominées par la logique de la productivité.

Dans la plupart des cas observés, la pratique de l’activité physique était accompagnée d’une thérapie cognitive-comportementale. La recherche de la connaissance de soi, de l’autorégulation thérapeutique et de la gestion émotionnelle — des processus qu’Illouz (2007) identifie comme essentiels à la culture émotionnelle du capitalisme tardif — est apparue comme une stratégie clé pour résister aux pressions de l’emploi et maintenir l’employabilité dans des environnements de travail exigeants. Pour beaucoup, la thérapie est devenue un moyen de s’adapter aux bouleversements émotionnels et à la volatilité structurelle du travail en startup. Plus largement, elle était considérée comme un outil fondamental pour gérer le stress, l’anxiété et l’épuisement professionnel, ainsi que pour relever les défis interpersonnels et organisationnels sur le lieu de travail. La thérapie était perçue comme essentielle : elle aidait les travailleurs à faire face aux difficultés, à

donner un sens à la souffrance et à retrouver un certain degré d'autonomie. Cependant, en l'absence de responsabilité institutionnelle, elle a également assumé la fonction d'une technologie de résistance : un moyen d'avancer malgré des conditions d'exploitation.

Mais que se passe-t-il lorsque les loisirs, l'activité physique et la thérapie ne suffisent plus à gérer les exigences et la souffrance au travail ? Pour de nombreux interlocuteurs de cette étude, la réponse a été de recourir à des substances psychoactives — que ce soit par l'usage récréatif de la marijuana ou par la médicalisation via des diagnostics psychiatriques et l'utilisation de médicaments psychotropes. Leur réticence initiale à accepter les médicaments était enracinée dans une combinaison de raisonnements moraux et de constructions culturelles : inquiétudes concernant la dépendance, peur des interventions « chimiques » et un sentiment plus profond d'échec personnel, comme s'ils n'avaient pas réussi à gérer leur souffrance par la volonté, la thérapie ou des ajustements de style de vie. Ainsi, la médicalisation était souvent vécue non seulement comme un traitement, mais comme un dernier recours — un signe que la souffrance avait dépassé les limites de ce qui pouvait être contrôlé par des stratégies individuelles.

Certes, des pratiques telles que l'activité physique, les loisirs ou la consommation de substances ont fonctionné comme des tampons externes, ce qui a aidé à établir les contours du travail. La thérapie et les médicaments ont également fourni des outils de prise de conscience de soi et de régulation émotionnelle, aidant à éviter d'être complètement absorbé par les exigences du travail. Cependant, ces stratégies ont montré des rendements décroissants sous une pression continue, et leur efficacité a eu tendance à se détériorer au fil du temps.

Dans ce contexte, il n'est pas surprenant que, lorsque toutes les stratégies d'adaptation ont « échoué », le licenciement soit apparu comme un dernier recours — une occasion de redéfinir les limites et de retrouver un certain degré de contrôle. Changer d'emploi dans le secteur technologique était souvent présenté comme une réinitialisation personnelle — l'espoir de construire une relation plus saine avec le travail grâce à un nouvel emploi. Cependant, le suivi longitudinal a révélé un schéma récurrent : malgré les efforts pour « faire les choses différemment », de nombreuses personnes interrogées ont recommencé à signaler les mêmes niveaux d'épuisement après environ un an dans leur nouvel emploi. Leurs espoirs s'étaient dissipés et les mêmes forces structurelles — rythme intensifié, effondrement des frontières et

investissement émotionnel — se réimposaient, reproduisant une fois de plus les cycles de surcharge et d'épuisement professionnel.

Conclusion générale

Cette thèse s'est attachée à étudier l'écosystème des startups au Brésil à partir du *cas limite* de Florianópolis (Leite Lopes, 1988). En combinant plusieurs échelles d'analyse — macro, méso et micro —, nous avons cherché à comprendre comment les impératifs économiques de croissance accélérée s'articulent avec les cultures organisationnelles propres aux startups et les expériences subjectives de leurs travailleurs. Le point de départ était un paradoxe apparent : comment un secteur qui se présente comme innovant, flexible et créatif en est-il venu, notamment après 2020, à enregistrer des niveaux élevés d'épuisement professionnel ?

Bien que la pandémie de COVID-19 ait exacerbé la détresse psychologique — avec une hausse mondiale de 25 % des cas de dépression et d'anxiété, selon l'OMS (2022) —, les données empiriques de cette recherche montrent que les signes d'épuisement étaient déjà présents avant 2020. Il ne s'agissait donc pas d'attribuer le phénomène exclusivement à la pandémie, mais d'explorer les contradictions internes du modèle organisationnel des startups et ses liens avec le régime d'accumulation capitaliste contemporain (Carcanholo, 2021).

Dans un premier temps, nous avons vu que les startups sont des entreprises orientées vers la scalabilité, la croissance rapide et l'innovation, souvent financées par du capital-risque. La logique d'appréciation imposée par les investisseurs induit une intensification des rythmes de travail. L'idéologie de la Silicon Valley — fondée sur l'entrepreneuriat, la méritocratie et le mythe du self-made-man — constitue le socle de ce modèle. Au Brésil, ce discours s'est consolidé à partir des années 2010, Florianópolis s'imposant comme l'un des principaux pôles nationaux d'innovation. Consacrée « *Capitale nationale des startups* » en 2024, la ville a constitué un terrain exemplaire pour une analyse ethnographique.

Nous avons également observé que l'organisation du travail dans les startups se caractérise par un dynamisme constant. Dans les premières phases, les environnements sont généralement horizontaux, flexibles — mais aussi instables et informels. À mesure qu'elles se développent, ces entreprises tendent à adopter des structures plus hiérarchisées, focalisées sur la performance et la productivité. Malgré

le maintien du discours sur l'autonomie, on assiste à une intensification du contrôle et à une montée des exigences émotionnelles à l'égard des salariés.

Par ailleurs, bien que de nombreuses startups promeuvent des modalités hybrides ou à distance censées améliorer l'équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie personnelle, les données recueillies révèlent qu'en pratique, ces formats ont souvent conduit à l'allongement du temps de travail et à une forme d'auto-exploitation accrue. L'effacement des frontières temporelles et l'absence de contrôle direct favorisent une intensification du travail dissimulée sous les apparences de la liberté (Chung, 2022).

Enfin, la thèse a examiné les stratégies, tant organisationnelles qu'individuelles, mobilisées pour faire face à la souffrance des travailleurs. Si certaines entreprises ont mis en place des programmes de « bien-être en entreprise », ces initiatives se sont révélées largement insuffisantes pour traiter les causes structurelles de l'épuisement. L'affaiblissement des formes collectives d'action rend les travailleurs plus vulnérables aux risques psychosociaux. En l'absence de réponses collectives, beaucoup se tournent vers des solutions individuelles — psychothérapie, activité physique, contact avec la nature. Dans les cas les plus critiques, certains optent pour la médication ou la démission. Mais changer d'entreprise ne résout généralement pas le problème : les schémas de surcharge se reproduisent dans de nouveaux environnements. Il convient donc de comprendre le burnout non comme un échec individuel, mais comme un processus socialement et culturellement situé — une expression intrinsèque de la souffrance au travail dans les startups, et non une anomalie accidentelle.

En outre, il apparaît que la prétendue nouveauté des startups réside moins dans leurs structures organisationnelles que dans l'approfondissement de logiques néolibérales déjà bien ancrées. L'essor de ces entreprises s'inscrit dans un contexte politique et économique favorable, marqué par l'affaiblissement des protections sociales, des incitations fiscales étatiques et une main-d'œuvre — souvent jeune et de classe moyenne — déjà socialisée aux valeurs d'entrepreneuriat, de flexibilité et d'auto-responsabilité.

En conclusion, cette thèse soutient que la lutte contre l'épuisement professionnel appelle des transformations plus larges. La réduction du temps de travail et la reconstruction de formes collectives de solidarité apparaissent comme des pistes nécessaires, bien qu'ambitieuses, dans le contexte actuel. Il est urgent de repositionner la souffrance psychique au travail comme un enjeu politique et collectif

— et non comme un simple problème individuel relevant de la sphère privée ou médicale.

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APPENDIX A – SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Saúde e bem-estar nos ecossistemas de startups	Health and Well-Being in Startup Ecosystems
Você está sendo convidado(a) e concorda em participar, como voluntário(a), da pesquisa provisoriamente intitulada "Saúde e bem-estar nos ecossistemas de startups" desenvolvida por Virgínia Squizani Rodrigues. Você pode me contatar a qualquer momento para esclarecimento de eventuais dúvidas por meio do e-mail virginia.squizani@gmail.com ou do telefone (48)9XXXXXXX. Esta pesquisa é realizada junto ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Antropologia Social da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, sob supervisão da Professora Viviane Vedana e Letícia Cesarino, e junto ao Programa de Sociologia da Universidade Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, sob supervisão do professor Marc Lorient. Esta pesquisa possui financiamento da Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES).	You are being invited and have agreed to participate voluntarily in the research provisionally entitled "Health and Well-Being in Startup Ecosystems", conducted by Virgínia Squizani Rodrigues. You may contact me at any time for further clarification via email at virginia.squizani@gmail.com or by phone at (48) 9XXXXXXX. This study is being conducted as part of the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), under the supervision of Professors Viviane Vedana and Letícia Cesarino, and also as part of the Sociology Program at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, under the supervision of Professor Marc Lorient. The research is funded by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES).
1) Nome completo (apenas para controle interno da pesquisa - todos os participantes serão anonimizados)	1) Full name (for internal research control only – all participants will remain anonymous)
2) Idade	2) Age
3) Com qual gênero você se identifica? () Feminino () Masculino () Prefiro não dizer	3) With which gender do you identify? () Female () Male () Prefer not to say
4) Com qual cor ou raça/etnia você se identifica? () Amarelo () Branco () Indígena () Pardo () Preto	4) With which race/ethnicity do you identify? () East Asian () White () Indigenous () Mixed race (Pardo) () Black
5) Qual o seu estado civil? () Solteiro(a) () Relacionamento estável () Casado(a) () Divorciado(a)	5) What is your marital status? () Single () In a stable relationship () Married () Divorced
6) Possui filhos e/ou enteados? () Sim () Não	6) Do you have children and/or stepchildren? () Yes () No
7) Qual o seu nível de escolaridade? () Ensino médio incompleto () Ensino médio completo	7) What is your highest level of education? () Incomplete secondary education () Completed secondary education

☐ Curso técnico incompleto ☐ Curso técnico completo ☐ Curso superior incompleto (graduação) ☐ Curso superior completo (graduação) ☐ Especialização incompleto (MBA / especialização) ☐ Especialização completo (MBA / especialização) ☐ Pós-graduação incompleto (mestrado / doutorado) ☐ Pós-graduação completo (mestrado / doutorado)	☐ Incomplete technical education ☐ Completed technical education ☐ Incomplete undergraduate degree ☐ Completed undergraduate degree ☐ Incomplete postgraduate specialization (MBA/specialization) ☐ Completed postgraduate specialization (MBA/specialization) ☐ Incomplete graduate studies (Master's/PhD) ☐ Completed graduate studies (Master's/PhD)
8) Qual o seu curso de formação/especialização?	8) What is your field of study/training or specialization?
9) Como você descreve a sua atual situação de trabalho? ☐ Empregado 44 horas semanais (CLT) ☐ Empregado 44 horas semanais (MEI / CNPJ) ☐ Empregado 26 horas semanais / meio período (CLT) ☐ Empregado 26 horas semanais / meio período (MEI / CNPJ) ☐ Não empregado e procurando um emprego ☐ Não empregado em período sabático (não procurando emprego)	9) How would you describe your current employment situation? ☐ Employed full-time (44 hours/week) under formal contract (CLT) ☐ Employed full-time (44 hours/week) as self-employed (MEI / CNPJ) ☐ Employed part-time (26 hours/week) under formal contract (CLT) ☐ Employed part-time (26 hours/week) as self-employed (MEI / CNPJ) ☐ Unemployed and seeking work ☐ Unemployed and on sabbatical (not seeking work)
10) Você trabalha em regime de teletrabalho (home office)? ☐ Sim, trabalho na minha casa ☐ Sim, trabalho na minha casa ou em coworkings ☐ Não, trabalho no escritório da empresa ☐ Trabalho no formato híbrido (na minha casa e no escritório da empresa) ☐ Nenhuma das opções acima	10) Do you work remotely (home office)? ☐ Yes, I work from home ☐ Yes, I work from home and/or coworking spaces ☐ No, I work at the company office ☐ I work in a hybrid model (home and company office) ☐ None of the above
11) Qual a sua renda pessoal mensal? ☐ Menos de R\$1.100 por mês ☐ Entre R\$1.100 e R\$2.499 por mês ☐ Entre R\$2.500 e R\$3.999 por mês ☐ Entre R\$4.000 e R\$6.499 por mês ☐ Entre R\$6.500 e R\$8.499 por mês ☐ Entre R\$8.500 e R\$10.499 por mês ☐ Entre R\$10.500 e R\$12.499 por mês ☐ Mais de R\$12.500 por mês	11) What is your personal monthly income? ☐ Less than US\$219 per month ☐ Between US\$220 and US\$500 per month ☐ Between US\$501 and US\$800 per month ☐ Between US\$801 and US\$1,300 per month ☐ Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month ☐ Between US\$1,701 and US\$2,100 per month ☐ Between US\$2,101 and US\$2,500 per month ☐ More than US\$2,501 per month
12) Que cargo/posição você ocupa na empresa em que trabalha?	12) What is your job title/position in the company where you work?
13) Em qual cidade você mora?	13) In which city do you live?
14) Em qual cidade a empresa em que você trabalha se localiza?	14) In which city is the company you work for located?

15) Há quanto tempo você está na mesma empresa? ☐ Menos de 3 meses ☐ Menos de 12 meses ☐ Entre 1 e 2 anos ☐ Entre 3 e 5 anos ☐ Mais de 5 anos ☐ Nenhuma das opções acima	15) How long have you been working at your current company? ☐ Less than 3 months ☐ Less than 12 months ☐ Between 1 and 2 years ☐ Between 3 and 5 years ☐ More than 5 years ☐ None of the above
16) Quantos funcionários possui a empresa em que você trabalha? ☐ Menos de 5 pessoas ☐ Entre 5 e 10 pessoas ☐ Entre 11 e 20 pessoas ☐ Entre 21 e 50 pessoas ☐ Entre 51 e 100 pessoas ☐ Entre 101 e 300 pessoas ☐ Entre 301 e 500 pessoas ☐ Entre 501 e 999 pessoas ☐ Mais de 1000 pessoas ☐ Nenhuma das opções acima	16) How many employees does your company have? ☐ Fewer than 5 ☐ Between 5 and 10 ☐ Between 11 and 20 ☐ Between 21 and 50 ☐ Between 51 and 100 ☐ Between 101 and 300 ☐ Between 301 and 500 ☐ Between 501 and 999 ☐ More than 1000 ☐ None of the above

APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM

TERMO DE CONSENTIMENTO LIVRE E ESCLARECIDO	FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Afirmo que aceitei participar por minha própria vontade, sem receber qualquer incentivo financeiro ou ter qualquer ônus e com a finalidade exclusiva de colaborar para o sucesso da pesquisa. Fui informado(a) dos objetivos estritamente acadêmicos do estudo, que, em linhas gerais busca compreender a rotina de trabalho dos trabalhadores do ecossistema de startups de Florianópolis, SC. Minha colaboração se fará de forma anônima, por meio de entrevista semi-estruturada a ser gravada a partir desta autorização. O acesso e a análise dos dados coletados se farão apenas pela pesquisadora e/ou seus orientadores. Concordo que o material e as informações relacionadas à minha pessoa possam ser utilizadas em aulas, congressos, eventos científicos, palestras ou periódicos científicos, sendo que não serei identificada por nome ou qualquer outra forma. Eu reconheço que não sou obrigado(a) a responder todas as perguntas e poderei desistir de participar da pesquisa a qualquer momento (antes, durante ou depois de já ter aceitado participar dela ou de já ter feito a entrevista), sem ser prejudicado(a) por isso. Reconheço também que posso recusar a gravação da entrevista. Estou ciente de que os riscos pela participação na pesquisa são mínimos e que a pesquisadora segue os preceitos éticos profissionais e de pesquisa com destaque para as normas éticas destinadas à pesquisa antropológica regidas pelo Código de Ética do Antropólogo da Associação Brasileira de Antropologia.	I affirm that I have agreed to participate of my own free will, without receiving any financial compensation or incurring any obligations, with the sole purpose of contributing to the success of the research. I have been informed of the strictly academic objectives of the study, which, in general terms, seeks to understand the work routines of individuals employed within the startup ecosystem of Florianópolis, SC. My participation will be anonymous and will take place through a semi-structured interview to be recorded upon my authorization. Access to and analysis of the data collected will be conducted exclusively by the researcher and/or her academic supervisors. I agree that the material and information related to me may be used in classes, conferences, academic events, lectures, or scholarly publications, with the understanding that I will not be identified by name or in any other manner. I acknowledge that I am not required to answer all questions and may withdraw from the study at any point (before, during, or after having agreed to participate or after the interview has taken place), without any negative consequences. I also understand that I may decline the recording of the interview. I am aware that the risks associated with participating in this research are minimal and that the researcher adheres to professional and research ethics, particularly the ethical guidelines for anthropological research as outlined in the Code of Ethics of the Anthropologist of the Brazilian Anthropological Association.
Quanto ao registro das informações da entrevista por meio de gravação de voz, eu: () Autorizo a gravação. () Não autorizo a gravação.	With regard to the recording of the interview via audio: () I authorize the recording. () I do not authorize the recording.

APPENDIX C – PANEL OF INTERLOCUTORS 2022/2023

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Educational level	Field of study	Employment status	Work model	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Aline	33	F	East Asian	Married	No	Completed undergraduate degree	Journalism	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month	UX Writer	Vinhedo, SP	São Paulo, SP	Between 1 and 2 years	More than 1000 people
Isabel	34	F	Mixed race (Pardo)	Stable relationship	Yes	Specialization incomplete (MBA / specialization)	Computer Science / MBA in Business Management	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Senior Product Manager	Florianópolis, SC	São Paulo, SP	Less than 3 months	More than 1000 people
Arthur	30	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Higher education incomplete (undergraduate)	Database Technology : Emphasis in Data Analytics	Internship (30 hours per week)	Remote work	Between US\$220 and US\$500 per month	CX Internship	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Less than 3 months	Between 101 and 300 people
Lara	32	F	Mixed race (Pardo)	Single	No	Completed undergraduate degree	Communication Sciences	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$1,701 and US\$2,100 per month	New Business Coordinator - Key Account	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 101 and 300 people
Diego	29	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Specialization incomplete (MBA / specialization)	Project Management	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$801 and US\$1,300 per month	UX Designer	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 21 and 50 people

										month					(continuation)	
Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Education level	Field of study	Employment status	Work mode	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company	
Elisa	31	Trans Woman	White	Stable relationship	Yes	Completed high school	-	Employed full-time (44 hours/ Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$220 and US\$500 per month	Customer Success Assistant	Itu, SP	Florianópolis, SC	Less than 12 months	Between 21 and 50 people	
Fernando	22	M	White	Single	No	Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	Information Systems	Employed full-time (44 hours/ Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$801 and US\$1,300 per month	Front-End Developer	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Less than 3 months	Between 21 and 50 people	
Fausto	32	M	Mixed race (Pardo)	Single	No	Completed undergraduate degree	Economic Sciences	Employed full-time (44 hours/ Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$1,701 and US\$2,100 per month	Data Analyst	Manaus, AM	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 301 and 500 people	
Fabrizio	25	M	White	Single	No	Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	Information systems	Employed full-time (44 hours/ Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$501 and US\$800 per month	Fullstack developer	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 3 and 5 years	Between 101 and 300 people	
Gilberto	36	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	Information systems	Employed full-time (44 hours/ Week CLT)	Hybrid format	Between US\$501 and US\$800	Software Developer	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 11 and 20 people	

(continuation)

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Educational level	Field of study	Employment status	Work mode	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Gabriel a	45	F	White	Married	Yes	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Production engineering / mathematics	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month	Technical support Coordinator	Palhoça, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 3 and 5 years	Between 301 and 500 people
Gustavo	33	M	White	Single	No	Specialization incomplete (MBA / specialization)	Marketing and Sales	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month	Sales consultant	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 101 and 300 people
Eduardo	31	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Computer Science	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Tech Leader	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 501 and 999
Isis	31	F	White	Single	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Architecture and urbanism	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Hybrid format	Between US\$220 and US\$500 per month	Social Media Analyst	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 21 and 50 people
Fabiano	38	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Computer science	Entrepreneur	Remote work	Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month	CEO	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 21 and 50 people

										month					

(continuation)

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Educational level	Field of study	Employment status	Work mode	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Ricardo	41	M	White	Single	No	Completed specialization (MBA / specialization)	Project Management and Business Management	Entrepreneur	Remote work	Between US\$1,701 and US\$2,100 per month	CEO	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 21 and 50 people
Leticia	29	F	White	Single	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Psychology	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Hybrid format	More than US\$2,501 per month	Tech recruiter for D&I	Florianópolis, SC	São Paulo, SP	Between 1 and 2 years	More than 1000 people
Ana	33	F	White	Married	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Administration and Accounting Sciences	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Controller Manager	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 501 and 999
Kelly	30	F	Mixed race (Pardo)	Single	No	Specialization incomplete (MBA / specialization)	Advertising	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Account Executive II	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 3 and 5 years	Between 501 and 999
Kevin	33	M	Black	Single	Yes	Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	Information Systems	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$2,101 and US\$2,500 per month	Product Manager	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 301 and 500 people

(continuation)

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Education level	Field of study	Employment status	Work model	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Luciana	35	F	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed specialization (MBA / specialization)	Physical Education/Business and Marketing	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Sales Account	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 3 and 5 years	Between 101 and 300 people
Mônica	26	F	Mixed race (Pardo)	Single	No	Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	Vernacular Literature	Employed 6 hours a week (MEI/CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$220 and US\$500 per month	Community Assistant	Salvador, BA	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 11 and 20 people
Nathi	31	F	White	Single	No	Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	Journalism	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Senior Marketing Analyst	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 501 and 999 people
Camila	25	F	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Psychology	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$501 and US\$800 per month	People Manager	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 11 and 20 people
Franco	24	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher	Economics	Employed full-time	In-person	Between	Data Analyst	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Less than 3	Between 101

				ship		education (undergraduate)		(44 hours/ Week CLT)	n	US\$50 1 and US\$80 0 per month				months	and 300 people

(conclusion)

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Educational level	Field of study	Employment status	Work mode	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Priscila	32	F	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Journalism	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$501 and US\$800 per month	Community Manager	Santa Maria, RS	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 11 and 20 people
Fernanda	29	F	White	Single	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Food Engineering	Not employed and looking for a job	-	-	Product Operations	Florianópolis, SC	-	-	-
Thiago	28	M	White	Single	No	Completed high school	-	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month	Data Specialist	Sorocaba-SP	São Paulo, SP	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 501 and 999 people
Cristina	31	F	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed specialization (MBA / specialization)	Advertising and Propaganda	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Marketing Coordinator	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 501 and 999 people
Vitor	33	M	White	Single	No	Completed higher	Psychology	Self-employed	Remote	More than	Consultant	Florianópolis, SC	Multilocation	Less than 12	Less than 5

						education (undergradu ate)		(CNPJ)	work	US\$2,5 01 per month					months	people

APPENDIX D – PANEL OF INTERLOCUTORS 2023/2024

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Education level	Field of study	Employment status	Work model	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Aline	33	F	East Asian	Married	No	Completed undergraduate degree	Journalism	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month	UX Writer	Arapongas, PR	São Paulo, SP	Less than 12 months	More than 1000 people
Isabel	35	F	Mixed race (Pardo)	Stable relationship	Yes	Completed specialization (MBA / specialization)	Computer Science / MBA in Business Management	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Hybrid work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Senior Product Manager	Florianópolis, SC	São Paulo, SP	Between 1 and 2 years	More than 1000 people
Arthur	31	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Higher education incomplete (undergraduate)	Database Technology : Emphasis in Data Analytics	Internship (30 hours per week)	Remote work	Between US\$220 and US\$500 per month	Data Analytics Intern	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 101 and 300 people
Lara	34	F	Mixed race (Pardo)	Single	No	Completed undergraduate degree	Communication Sciences	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$2,101 and US\$2,500 per month	International Expansion Manager	Florianópolis, SC	São Paulo, SP	Less than 3 months	Between 51 and 100 people

(continuation)

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Education level	Field of study	Employment status	Work model	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Diego	29	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Specialization completed (MBA / specialization)	Design and Project Management	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CNPJ)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Senior UX Designer	Florianópolis, SC	San José, California, USA	Less than 12 months	More than 1000 people
Elisa	32	Trans Woman	White	Stable relationship	Yes	Completed high school	-	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$220 and US\$500 per month	Customer Success	Itu, SP	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 21 and 50 people
Fernando	23	M	White	Single	No	Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	Information Systems	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month	Fullstack Developer	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 21 and 50 people
Fabrizio	26	M	White	Single	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Information systems	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$801 and US\$1,300 per month	Fullstack Developer	Florianópolis, SC	Lages, SC	Less than 12 months	Between 501 and 999 people

								CLT)		300 per month					

(continuation)

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Educational level	Field of study	Employment status	Work mode	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Gilberto	37	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	Information systems	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT), released for union activities	Hybrid format	Between US\$501 and US\$800 per month	Software Developer	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 11 and 20
Gabriela	46	F	White	Married	Yes	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Production engineering / mathematics	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	In-person	Between US\$1,701 and US\$2,100 per month	Technical support Coordinator	Blumenau, SC	Blumenau, SC	Less than 12 months	Between 301 and 500 people
Gustavo	35	M	White	Single	No	Specialization incomplete (MBA / specialization)	Marketing and Sales	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Hybrid work	Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700 per month	Sales consultant	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 3 and 5 years	Between 101 and 300 people

Eduardo	33	M	White	Stable relationship	Yes	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Computer Science	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Specialist Developer	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 501 and 999
Fabiano	39	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Computer science	Entrepreneur	Remote work	Between US\$1,301 and US\$1,700	CEO	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 21 and 50 people

(continuation)

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Education level	Field of study	Employment status	Work model	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Ricardo	42	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed specialization (MBA / specialization)	Project Management and Business Management	Entrepreneur	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	CEO	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 21 and 50 people
Leticia	30	F	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Psychology	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Hybrid format	More than US\$2,501 per month	Recruitment Operations	Florianópolis, SC	São Paulo, SP	Between 3 and 5 years	More than 1000 people
Kelly	31	F	Mixed race (Pardo)	Stable relationship	No	Specialization incomplete (MBA / specialization)	Advertising	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Senior New Business Consultant	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 3 and 5 years	Between 501 and 999
Kevin	34	M	Black	Single	Yes	Incomplete higher education	Information Systems	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$2,101 and US\$2,500	Product Manager	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 101 and 300

						(undergraduate)		Week CLT)		01 and US\$2,500 per month					people

(continuation)

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Education level	Field of study	Employment status	Work model	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Luciana	36	F	White	Stable relationship	Yes	Completed specialization (MBA / specialization)	Physical Education/Business and Marketing	Employed full-time (44 hours/ Week CNPJ)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Partnership Manager	Florianópolis, SC	California, USA	Less than 3 months	More than 1000 people
Nathi	32	F	White	Single	No	Incomplete higher education (undergraduate)	Journalism	Employed full-time (44 hours/ Week CLT)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Senior Marketing Analyst	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 501 and 999 people
Camila	26	F	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Psychology	Employed full-time (44 hours/ Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$501 and US\$800 per month	People Manager	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 11 and 20 people

Franco	25	M	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Economics	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	In-person	Between US\$501 and US\$800 per month	Data Analyst	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 101 and 300 people
Priscila	33	F	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Journalism	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CNPJ)	Remote work	Between US\$501 and US\$800	Community Manager	Santa Maria, RS	Florianópolis, SC	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 11 and 20 people

(conclusion)

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Children	Education level	Field of study	Employment status	Work mode	Monthly personal income	Job title	City of residence	Company's city location	Length of time at the current company	Number of employees at the company
Fernanda	30	F	White	Single	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Food Engineering	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Remote work	Between US\$1,701 and US\$2,100 per month	Product Manager	Florianópolis, SC	São Paulo, SP	Less than 12 months	Between 101 and 300 people
Cristina	32	F	White	Stable relationship	No	Completed specialization (MBA / specialization)	Advertising and Propaganda	Employed full-time (44 hours/Week CLT)	Hybrid format	More than US\$2,501 per month	Marketing Coordinator	Florianópolis, SC	Florianópolis, SC	More than 5 years	Between 501 and 999 people
Vitor	33	M	White	Single	No	Completed higher education (undergraduate)	Psychology	Self-employed (CNPJ)	Remote work	More than US\$2,501 per month	Consultant	Florianópolis, SC	Multilocation	Between 1 and 2 years	Less than 5 people

