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Digital Labor: An Examination of the Labor Mechanism of Internet Celebrities

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Abstract:
As Internet technology and social media have become ubiquitous, the emergence of the "online celebrity economy" has become increasingly pronounced. Despite this, the labor mechanisms underlying it remain underexplored. This study adopts a "digital labor" framework to scrutinize the role and labor processes of internet celebrities, recognizing them as a nascent workforce. Furthermore, it dissects the value chain associated with this demographic, uncovering intricate issues related to the distribution of profits and the apportionment of risks. This research aims to engender a wider discourse on digital labor conditions and to delve into their significant repercussions for work, societal dynamics, economic structures, and personal identity.

Keywords:
Internet Celebrity Economy, *Digital Labor*, *Internet Celebrity Labor*

1.Introduction

In 2021, President Xi Jinping made an important deployment for the development of the digital economy during the collective study by the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, emphasizing the importance of 'fully leveraging the advantages of massive data and rich application scenarios to foster new industries, new forms of business, and new models'. In 2022, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council released the 'Outline of Strategy for Expanding Domestic Demand (2022-2035)', which advocates for the rapid development of emerging consumption patterns. It encourages the transition of traditional cultural and entertainment sectors to online platforms and endorses diverse business models, including social e-commerce and live streaming [1]. Against this backdrop, the burgeoning digital economy gains further momentum, increasingly pervading every facet of societal production and personal life. Within this realm, the internet celebrity economy emerges as a salient exemplar of robust growth in the digital sector.

This study focuses on online celebrities from platforms like TikTok and Kwai, using digital labor theory to analyze their role positioning, labor mechanisms, and impact. It also explores the significance of the audience-number symbiosis in the digital economy era.

2. Literature review

The Digital Transformation of Labor Theory. Labor represents the most foundational practical activity of

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humanity. The term "labor" originated in "Zhuangzi · Prince Rang," where it described operational conduct like "spring plowing" [2]. Over time, society has organized and refined its perceptions of labor, leading to the advancement of human civilization. According to "Cihai," labor, as a noun, encompasses the creation of material or spiritual wealth by humans, sometimes denoting physical work specifically; as a verb, it means "engaging in physical labor" [3]. Marx significantly contributed to labor theory by proposing that originally, labor constituted the connection between individuals and nature, where individuals acted as mediators and engaged in constant adjustment and interaction with the external environment [4]. He defined "labor products" as the embodiment of labor within a specific object, emphasizing that labor lies at the core of human existence. Marx's analysis of labor alienation under capitalism unveiled the crucial aspects of alienated labor theory, enhancing our comprehension of labor mechanisms. He highlighted the evolving relationship between laborers and their products, illustrating how labor products often stand in opposition to workers within this system [5]. Marx systematically elucidated the mechanisms and impacts of labor while advocating for a society centered on empowering workers.

The rapid societal progress and widespread adoption of digitalization have propelled the transformation of labor theory toward digitization. Extensive research on digital labor has been conducted both domestically and internationally. In the 1960s, Tiziana Terranova conducted pioneering studies on digital labor theory, highlighting how internet users functioned as unpaid laborers exploited by capital, often referred to as "internet slaves." Their digital tasks such as browsing web pages, chatting, commenting, website design, and software development constituted a form of "free labor." This type of unpaid work represents a knowledge-based consumption behavior seen as productive, contributing to capital accumulation and value enhancement while being provided without compensation. Terranova argues that digital labor is a vital element in the capital's economic endeavor to derive monetary value from knowledge, culture, and emotions. Uncompensated online labor, characterized by emotional engagement and fulfillment, serves as the cornerstone for value creation in the digital economy [6].

In the early 21st century, Italian scholar Terranova introduced the concept of "digital labor" in his book "Free Labor: Creating Culture for the Digital Economy," referring to unpaid online activities akin to digital servitude [7]. Drawing upon Marxist political economy, scholar Christian Fox defines digital labor as cultural activities associated with producing and consuming digital media. Nick Srnicek employs the notion of "platform capitalism" to depict the evolution of capitalism in the digital era, aiming to leverage digital technology for restructuring the new landscape of capitalist production and economic organization. He highlights the emergence of a novel business model centered around digital platforms capable of extracting and controlling vast amounts of data [8]. Digital labor appears as a radical departure from the altruistic behaviors promoted by the internet over the past two decades—such as participation, interaction, generosity, and sharing—being characterized as virtual autonomy, ceaseless work, and institutionalized sentiment [9].

The theory of digital labor has garnered significant interest within the academic community since its emergence. It offers distinctive explanatory capabilities for phenomena like the digital economy, digital symbiosis, and digital interactions. This is particularly evident when considering the focus of this study: internet celebrities.

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3. Digital Workers - Internet Celebrities

The book "Internet Celebrity: Economic Thinking Models" defines internet celebrities as individuals who achieve widespread attention and popularity among netizens due to specific events or behaviors in either real or virtual life [10]. The evolution of internet celebrities follows its unique trajectory. In 2015, Taobao hosted a seminar focusing on internet celebrity phenomena, introducing the concept of the "internet celebrity economy" as the economic activities and advantages associated with internet celebrities, marking the inception of this emerging economic sector [11]. The year 2016 witnessed the rise of internet celebrities, with live streaming becoming a prominent source of revenue in the e-commerce sector, propelling internet celebrities into the limelight. A survey by i-Media in 2021 revealed that the sales revenue from live-streaming e-commerce in China surpassed 1.96 trillion yuan, with over 600 million online live-streaming users. By June 2022, the Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet Network released by the China Internet Network Information Center indicated that China had 716 million live-streaming platform users, constituting 68.1% of the total internet user base. These statistics underscore the normalization of internet celebrities as a prevailing development trend.

As digital workers, internet celebrities exhibit distinct labor characteristics: (i) Data-centric labor representation involves leveraging technological tools to create content and capture audience feedback through diverse digital means. (ii) Labor object virtualization contrasts with traditional physical work or past "internet slave" practices, as both parties engage in a virtual realm. Digital workers transition from real-life actions to virtual performances, interacting through digital interfaces without direct visibility of each other's physical presence, relying on virtual frameworks. (iii) Emotionalization of labor attributes. The phenomenon reflects internet celebrities' provision of intangible emotional experiences to audiences, including companionship, understanding, encouragement, and empathy. Online platforms exacerbate netizens' emotional voids, with internet celebrities serving as virtual companions addressing this emotional gap.

Amid ongoing societal transformations, the digital labor of internet celebrities serves as a remedy for individuals' emotional voids. This labor offers a respite from the pressures of modern life, providing a platform for people to alleviate anxieties, engage in online escapism, and fulfill emotional needs, catering to their curiosity and yearning for solitude. Furthermore, digital labor bridges the gap between internet celebrities and their audiences, transitioning interaction from physical proximity to digital connectivity. The pervasive influence of information cocoons has contributed to social alienation, isolating individuals within seemingly constricting boundaries. Yet, propelled by advancing media technologies, internet celebrity digital labor has united like-minded individuals into cohesive communities, addressing the audience's quest for connection and fulfillment.

4. The Digital Labor Mechanism of Internet Celebrities

Fundamentally, labor entails the monetization of an individual's physical, intellectual, emotional, and other assets. Internet celebrities, whose work leans towards the emotional spectrum, engage in a digital labor process that entails leveraging diverse strategies to boost account visibility, cultivate loyal followings, and drive traffic, thus converting their emotional input into tangible labor value. The digital labor framework of internet

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celebrities primarily revolves around crafting and upholding digital environments and emotions, establishing a structured digital inquiry system to underpin their labor value creation. A thorough examination of internet celebrities' digital labor mechanisms aids in dispelling the illusion solely reliant on numerical metrics.

(i) Media-centered digital environments have become pivotal for internet celebrities' digital labor, with "e-commerce sales," "live streaming rewards," and "advertising monetization" serving as key performance indicators. The success of these benchmarks hinges on the content production capabilities and interpersonal skills of internet celebrities. During live streams, internet personalities purposefully cultivate vibrant and distinctive atmospheres to create hyper-realistic digital spaces. To maximize the value of their labor, internet celebrities employ four primary strategies in crafting these immersive digital scenes: storyline-driven setups, where they engage in interactions like negotiation and betting with merchants to entice audiences, particularly evident in product-focused live broadcasts. For instance, renowned internet figure "Xiao Yang Ge" consistently engages in spirited negotiations with merchants during product promotions, often involving debates and wagers, effectively stimulating viewers' purchasing decisions by creating a perception of exclusive deals. Additionally, embracing cross-media approaches proves essential for enhancing engagement and expanding reach. Rather than relying solely on live streams, many influencers produce distinct short videos alongside live broadcasts—often featuring humor and real-life scenarios—to attract diverse audiences. For example, "Xiao Yang Ge" supplements live streams with unique short films, garnering a substantial following and establishing a loyal customer base. By maintaining consistency across different platforms, such as embodying familiar personas from their short videos during live sales events, influencers foster a seamless viewer experience, prompting exclamations like "watching live streams feels just like watching short videos." This integrated cross-media strategy facilitates traffic generation for live streams, translating viewership into tangible labor value. Collaboration with fellow internet celebrities in various activities, such as live streaming, product endorsements, video creation, and travel, through competitions or joint projects is another prevalent practice. Through mutual promotion, these partnerships aim to increase visibility and engagement for both parties, constituting a mutually beneficial cross-account strategy that enhances digital labor monetization. Furthermore, internet celebrities leverage interactive initiatives like lotteries, fan appreciation gestures, community building, and promotional discounts to strengthen bonds with their audience and derive value from their digital labor efforts.

The construction of digital scenes by internet celebrities epitomizes a deliberate and strategic endeavor geared towards enriching viewers' immersive experiences. This process aims to unite individuals sharing common interests, behaviors and needs within a confined platform for targeted content dissemination, ultimately bridging the gap between mere visual appeal and tangible financial gains. The media landscapes curated by internet personalities often blur the lines between authenticity and artifice. The aforementioned four strategies encompass behaviors that could potentially have adverse effects on audiences: exaggerated portrayals by internet celebrities in narrative scenarios, aggressive traffic generation tactics in cross-media frameworks, collaborative engagements among internet celebrities driven by ulterior motives in cross-account dynamics—including instances where individuals feign unfamiliarity despite underlying connections—and instances of misrepresentation through staged photography in cross-dimensional settings.

(ii) Emotions play a vital role in human language communication, with emotional expression serving as a

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cornerstone. In the digital realm, feelings of joy, sorrow, happiness, and grief are no longer conveyed through tangible means but rather through diverse symbols online. Within the sophisticated cognitive landscape of digital content creation, individuals' emotional states are significantly shaped by the visual representation of images and videos. The evolving nature of emotional interactions among individuals is increasingly shifting towards conceptual and visual modes, with facial expressions like smiles and frowns serving as powerful indicators. The notion of relaxation and spontaneity has been transformed in the digital sphere, where digital emotions subtly infiltrate individuals' thoughts and emotions as the line between virtual and tangible realities becomes increasingly blurred and abstracted through the rise of virtual beings and artificial intelligence. This evolution imbues digital emotions with deeper significance. According to Stuart Hall, the concept of "re-meaning," rooted in bodily experiences, involves extracting specific elements from their original context and integrating them into a new framework, thereby generating novel meanings detached from their initial context [12]. Regional attributes, cultural nuances, and strategies of inclusion and exclusion across diverse social groups are delineated through the lens of digital emotions.

The digital labor performed by internet celebrities predominantly entails emotional engagement strategies to drive audience engagement, including clicks, shares, comments, and product purchases, thereby enhancing their labor value proposition. Notably, internet celebrities capitalize on emotional connections to leverage their influence, effectively converting emotions into tangible labor value. They captivate consumer interest through diverse approaches, leveraging targeted events, personal narratives, and educational content dissemination. Subsequently, once they establish consumer trust, they engage in data generation, sales activities, and product endorsements to facilitate precise and expedited sales processes. Studies indicate a strong positive link between the appeal of internet celebrities and consumers' reception of their endorsed products. Products endorsed by highly appealing internet personalities tend to garner greater consumer acknowledgment [13]. This appeal reflects a form of emotional validation characterized by audiences' emotional resonance with internet celebrities.

(iii) In his "ideological theory," Althusser posited that ideology covertly summons individuals as subjects, leading them to involuntarily yield to network practitioners due to ideological imprinting and constraints [14]. Viewing the digital labor of internet celebrities as a form of consumer "interrogation" shifts the perception of this unpaid digital labor from an obligatory, objective task to a subjective choice influenced by prevailing ideologies. As a participant in digital labor, I engage in the emotive "inquiry" practices of internet celebrities, willingly immersing myself in what can be described as a "contented absorption." While internet celebrity labor appears to disrupt the equilibrium between digital labor discussions and audience interactions, ostensibly wielding dominance, it is orchestrated by capital platforms to streamline processes and maximize efficiency. Notably, not all viewers succumb to this influence. Some pause briefly to admire before moving on, opting for a more detached stance; others offer reasoned feedback and exercise judicious consumption habits. However, a significant portion tends to engage passively through actions like sending virtual gifts, liking posts, leaving comments, and making purchases.

5. Discussion

Symptoms of digital labor among internet celebrities.

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(i) Promoting the trend of digital worship: Rosa believes that modern society is in an accelerated state, and he divides social acceleration into three aspects: technological acceleration, accelerated social change, and accelerated pace of life [15]. Therefore, the acceleration of technology is undoubtedly the most intuitive and tangible state of digital life that we have experienced firsthand. The acceleration of technology is boundless, and digital resources are abundant in the Ganges River. The emergence of "digital worship" in media-based social production is also an important driving force for socioeconomic growth and wealth accumulation to a certain extent [16]. Among numerous indicators, people often use "numbers" as proof of labor value. Under the subtle influence of data systems, they donate their sensory systems and immerse themselves in the virtual world mirror constructed by numbers. This vortex vigorously accelerates the "domination" of numbers over humanity. Among them, all participants in the process of digital labor have become supporters of the status of digital deification. The deep dependence of young people on mobile visual symbols is another manifestation of digital worship. Visual symbols belong to the "low context" discourse system compared to text, making it easier for audiences from different cultural backgrounds to reach a consensus [17]. For the millennial generation who grew up with screens, intuitive and impactful visual symbols can better hit the heart and generate emotional resonance. Currently, the presentation of content has visual and contextualized features, with an intuitive sense of reaching out and being easily accessible, depriving people of their only sensory enjoyment experience like boiling a frog in warm water.

The intuitive consequence of digital worship is the abuse of subjectivity. The book "Understanding Media" emphasizes that media is an extension of human beings, permeating various aspects such as clothing, food, housing, and transportation. Humans have long been bound by media technology and are under digital control. The excessive reliance on numbers has led to the emotional manipulation of the audience in the labor field of internet celebrities. Under the progressive attacks of the "eyeball effect" and "herd effect", the original cognitive logic and interpersonal circles have been disrupted, and purposeful reconstruction has been carried out to adapt to the needs of increasing internet celebrity value. As a result, human subjectivity has been further weakened, reading and social abilities have sharply degraded, and the subject status has disappeared. Digital people have become the workers of the digital age, putting the cart before the horse. What is truly admirable are those internet celebrities who serve public welfare purposes, such as the "Han Hong Studio" which provides year-round public welfare services, Luo Yonghao who live streams a charity sale of Hubei navel oranges, the "Da Xiong Team" who helps with poverty alleviation, and Xin Youzhi who cooperates with the Miss China Competition to assist farmers in poverty alleviation, among others.

(ii) Increase the difficulty of digital supervision. A major characteristic of digital labor is the generation of endless data, especially the privacy of internet celebrities and audiences, which poses certain risks to national data management and strengthening social security. Due to the booming digital economy in our country, there are still many management loopholes that need to be addressed, such as privacy leaks between audiences and internet celebrities, and the promotion of harmful products by internet celebrities. At the same time, the data content produced by users is seized free of charge by platform creators, and the compensation allocated to internet celebrities is only a rarity. The key is that even if they claim to be known as "conspirators" of the production platform and become "new slaves" under the boundary of data rights, they only want to "happily indulge" in the manipulation of data and earn a cake that has already been divided into layers.

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(iii) Triggering social detachment behavior. Unlike the real parallel space, heterogeneous space is a spatial turn, with the most obvious feature being a virtual scenario setting that is neither real nor necessary, and both true and false. Foucault used the mirror theory to explain this characteristic of combining virtual and reality. The space in a mirror is unreal, but the mirror itself is a real existence. What "I" see is "I" and "not where I am". On the contrary, "I" is actually "not where I am" [18]. This kind of mirror regulates the digital labor field of internet celebrities, reduces panic, and utilizes familiar life fields and patterns to suppress audience reflexivity. Under the careful operation and management of online platforms, staying in virtual images for a long time will erode the audience's perception of social responsibility, values, and judgment ability, resulting in a slow forward "social detachment" behavior. Whether in the business or social fields, this social detachment behavior is in a constantly flowing state. Our understanding of algorithms, artificial intelligence, and big data far exceeds that of labor itself. Of course, in a meritorious society, there is a natural barrier between class levels, and the social detachment caused by heterogeneous spaces disrupts the original dynamic equilibrium point and exacerbates social contradictions. It mainly manifests in the following aspects: Exclusivity of profession. Compared to manual workers, internet celebrities can earn high salaries without having to put in too much physical labor, and the imbalance caused by the division of labor can create occupational exclusivity among ordinary audiences. Intensify the generation gap among groups. Looking at the online audience, the youth group is the main force. At this stage, the group has been influenced by the internet for a long time, which widens the gap with other age groups and is not conducive to close integration between groups. Internally imposed enhancement. Due to the unstable factors of external interpersonal and circle relationships, the audience places too much of their body and mind in a virtual heterogeneous space, causing a sudden increase in sensitivity to their own external and internal emotions. The exclusivity and internal compromise imposed on the outside world will make them feel anxious and helpless.

(iv) Intensify emotional labor alienation. Emotional labor is a form of labor that adjusts and manages an individual's true emotions under specific labor rules and then expresses the emotions expected by the organization to achieve specific communication goals [19]. The alienation of emotional labor discussed here is mainly reflected in three dimensions: the alienation of emotional attributes, the alienation of emotional behavior, and the alienation of emotional relationships. The alienation of emotional attributes. From a superficial perspective, as emotional subjects, people are producers and controllers of goods. The more products they produce through labor, the higher their wealth possession and sense of achievement. It's not the case. People are finding it increasingly difficult to control goods and are instead being controlled by them. Goods are good at taming Homo sapiens. Digital labor needs to go through steps such as emotional awakening, emotional guidance, and emotional development, to reshape and strengthen the emotional attributes deeply rooted in the audience's hearts, and guide them in action. Therefore, the labor subject must spend a lot of time and energy engaging in emotional connection activities. The alienation of emotional behavior. Internet celebrities are worshippers of goods under the influence of technology, and compensators of labor subjects, and their emotional behavior is also alienated, resulting in a state of extreme poverty. In digital labor, this alienation is mainly reflected in the phenomenon of emotional "loss of control". Internet celebrities transmit their thoughts, understanding, and consumption views to the audience to comply with their wishes and generate consumption behavior. This emotional reshaping and overprinting behavior itself is a phenomenon of "out of control" that deviates from the original normal. The alienation of emotional relationships. In the process of labor, if it is determined that

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the labor subject has become a vassal of the labor object, the remuneration and labor output of the labor are lost by a thousand percent. The relationship between the worker and the labor object, or between the worker and the worker, is no longer subject to control at will, but there is an external phenomenon of dissimilarity. Hegel mentioned the objectification of human essential power. Marx believed that behind objectification, there was a power of dissimilarity that would instead control the enslaved subject. This is also one of the important reasons why internet celebrities, as labor subjects, are also tools for creating platforms. The labor subject has become a "talking tool", while the labor object has become a "living person engaged in passive labor". Undoubtedly, the emotional relationship between the labor subject and the labor object has also undergone substantial alienation.

6. Conclusion

Our study investigated the evolving professional role of internet celebrities, exploring various aspects such as their establishment of influence, monetization of a fan base, and management of intricate online emotions. This form of digital labor, centered on social media platforms, has fundamentally reshaped conventional notions of work. While internet celebrity practices offer enhanced prospects and pathways for individuals, it is crucial to acknowledge potential concerns, particularly regarding the role of internet celebrity labor in addressing social inequalities, a topic requiring further empirical validation. Existing studies suggest that despite the proliferation of digital labor opportunities, there has been limited enhancement in social mobility. The pervasive impact of internet celebrity labor in contemporary society necessitates thorough comprehension and sustained attention to effectively navigate the challenges and seize the opportunities presented by the digital era.

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