

Digital Labor: Research on the Exploitation of Short Video Platform in China—Take TikTok as an Example

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Abstract: The short video platform industry represented by the TikTok platform has developed rapidly. At the same time, its development is closely connected to the enormous traffic value brought by short video users who can be regarded as "digital labor," which leads to some problems about exploitation. The short video users are exploited by generating content and data without benefit from their production. This paper takes TikTok as an example, based on the digital labor theory, explore the exploitation phenomenon and problems in TikTok's operation and profit mode from the perspectives of viewers and content creators, and put forward a relevant theoretical basis for the future study of exploitation in short video platforms.

Keywords: Digital labor; exploitation; short video platform

1. Introduction

Nowadays, new media has ushered in a period of rapid development. In September 2016, TikTok was officially launched, and it has developed from a rising star to a significant role in the industry. As a live-streaming short video platform focusing on music sharing, it is favored by people. There are functions such as sharing daily updates, giving likes and comments on others' amusing and attractive short videos, participating in hot topics, and editing cooperative videos with others. These users become the main body of short video production and dissemination. Under the exploitation mechanism of TikTok, information and knowledge consumption are transformed into additional production activities.

In recent years, many scholars have studied and characterized the concept of digital labor. Tiziana Terranova was one of the first few scholars working on this subject. He considers that "in the digital economy, the free labor has already transformed from a form of collective cultural labor to abstract labor,"[1] and their activities are taking place on "Web 2.0" [2]. Building on the research of [1] and the research of Maurizio Lazzarato, the pioneer of the concept of immaterial labor---- defining as labor produces commodity includes informational and cultural content,[3] then coin a new concept "immaterial labor 2.0", and emphasizes that this form of immaterial labor takes place in social networks. The very notion of immaterial labor 2.0 is the combination of production and consumption, referred to as "prosumption." [4]

There has been discussion for the study of digital labor for a long time. Until Fuchs came up with a relatively clear definition of digital labor: "digital workers are part of a collective workforce that

lives, uses and applies electronic media." [5] They are not a defined occupation, but they are defined by the industry in which they serve and are exploited by capital. In this paper, digital labor refers to users who engage in content production, entertainment consumption, and e-commerce on TikTok.

Exploitation, an essential aspect of digital labor, has long been questioned. It means the inequity between disadvantaged groups and advantage groups. The classical Marxist believes that labor exploitation is the consequence of the ownership by the capitalist class of the means of production [6].

With the advancement of technology, the production and consumption revolution of the third technological wave began to push Western Marxists to shift their research perspectives to the Internet, cultural products, and communication. It is Fuchs' firm belief that this scenario can be described as hyper-exploitative or "one of infinite over-exploitation, according to Critical Communications Scholar Dallas Smythe and his concept of the 'audience commodity'" [7]. However, some scholars argue that some prosumers are willing to be "free labor" since they can gain emotional value, which does not mean that the capitalist manipulates them. Marxian still thinks it is a new level of an exploitative system that capitalism is constantly searching for because exploitation no longer takes place solely in a coercive production process. The fact is that the owners who own the productive resources on the platform can exploit consumers [8].

With the advent of the Web 2.0 era, users' independent creativity on the Internet is also improving, and the "labor" trend is becoming more and more prominent. Qualitative research will be adopted in this paper, collecting existing secondary resources in texts. The topic of digital labor is analyzed under the cross-framework of politics, economy, and culture, and the underlying motivation of exploitation mechanism of the short video platform, taking TikTok as an example, will be comprehensively explored.

2. The background of TikTok short video operation mode

In the new media era, to attract more users to carry out mass communication and consumption, TikTok mainly adopts the operation mode of doing works that cater to the targeted and authentic audiences. TikTok has also invited some superstars for cooperation, enabling their fans to use and carry out consumption behavior through the fan effect and become the exploited laborers. They convert information and knowledge consumption into additional productive activities under the exploitation mechanism TikTok. In this sense, these digital laborers attracted and consumed by the content on TikTok are in an independent and conscious labor state, as if they are in an amusement park. Therefore, digital has become a kind of enjoyment for laborers, which is a kind of free labor and a kind of labor exploited by digital capitalism.

In TikTok APP, product content is mainly provided by creators, while the platform operators mainly focus on the management and promotion of the platform. As the number of TikTok users increases, the types of users are divided into four categories. The first category is the creator of high-quality content; this group often has many fans and can create high-quality content. The second category is followers, who desire to express their desire to show some of their works. Therefore, they are willing to learn from big shots on TikTok and participate in some challenging topics. The third category is the disseminators of content. These users are more active and are willing to spread and share some good video content. The fourth category is consumers of content. They only use TikTok for entertainment and consumption. Because TikTok set a low threshold, anyone can create short videos. If someone has talent, he/she may get attention and likes.

The product operation of TikTok is mainly a "top-down" operation mode in which stars drive ordinary people to participate. On the one hand, it invites those superstars to join, lets them drive their fans to use and consume. On the other hand, it adopts a decentralized way to drive ordinary people to participate in video creation, leading to product realization actively. Any advertisement

may bring expensive advertising endorsement fees for stars with millions of fans. In addition, after those ordinary people become popular because of Tik Tok, they can receive advertising endorsements according to the number of their fans, and live broadcasting can also bring benefits to their works.

3. How does TikTok cause exploitation

3.1. Exploitation of the audiences

Dallas Smythe, an early political economist studying communication, comes up with an "audience commodity." He proposes that "the commodity form of communications is audiences and readerships [9]." Smythe introduces his concepts in the context of mass media, which mainly refers to TV, radio, newspapers, billboard. Take watching TV as an example; advertisers can post an advertisement in the middle of watching a TV program. Most audiences accept to watch the advertisement passively while waiting for the continuing program. In this process, "the advertising time is sold as a commodity, the more watchers there are, the more advertising revenue will be generated"[10]. In this case, the watchers/audiences can be seen as a commodity.

In today's Internet era, short video platforms such as TikTok could be a suitable example to illustrate how audiences become a form of commodity. TikTok has developed lots of exciting and interactive methods to attract a rising number of audiences, using their off-the-job work time to browse and watch those short video clips as a form of entertainment. Meanwhile, TikTok collects data generated as audiences view short videos, including their preferences, social networks, personalities, demographic data based on its algorithm. Then, the users' data "is sold to the advertisers as a commodity"[10]. When advertisers get data, they can better analyze the current trend that the public likes and target potential customers, and thus they can better develop and improve products to stimulate people to consume advertised goods. In other words, the data generated by audiences are consumed by themselves. These audiences use their leisure time to scroll and watch short videos on the surface. Nevertheless, from the point of view of digital labor, this time belongs to work time since the labor force produced by audiences continues to create business value for TikTok.

Of course, people can refuse to use TikTok or other social platforms, but they may miss the latest topics on the Internet thus lack opportunities to communicate with others. For example, when a person is in an environment where the people around him/her are using TikTok, he/she would have less in common to share and communicate if he/she does not use TikTok. In this circumstance, the more people download and use TikTok, the easier TikTok gets to exert this coercion. In the age of Web 2.0, people are coerced to engage in digital labor under peer pressure, and those who do not catch up may be left behind.

Audiences gain spiritual satisfaction, happiness, relaxation, and a sense of self-identity from interacting with others. Nonetheless, the more emotionally they invest in TikTok, the more they become attached to it, which is more conducive to expanding TikTok's database. Through the methods mentioned above, TikTok has exploited the audiences in entertainment, and audiences are also unwittingly turned into digital laborers.

3.2. Exploitation of the content producer

3.2.1. Exploit the content value of producers

The critical model of profit of TikTok is to optimize the excellent content of the short video to attract more users, increasing the number of users and the utilization rate of the software quickly and enormously so that TikTok can achieve considerable profit by improving the user viscosity. It is

significant for the platform to stimulate the public's creativity and offer opportunities for people to make an effort to produce content of short videos. Under the circumstance, TikTok uses economic rewards to drive users to produce high-quality content, encouraging users to keep the high frequency and quality of posting videos and taking short video creation as a means of labor or even to earn a living.

In addition, for the ordinary users on the platform, who do not regard the creation of short videos as their primary way of earning income, TikTok provides high-quality dance templates or songs for talented users. Ordinary users can use some templates for lip-synching that do not need professional skills to complete their creation. It is an effective way for TikTok to retain this part of users to expand the user scale with a low threshold and provide a colossal user guarantee for the success of TikTok. The act of issuing a voluntary task or challenge to an extensive network of people has been defined as "crowdsourcing"[11].

However, the users' crowdsourcing labor is cheap or even free, but they have created content that has become the capital to attract more users and realize the transformation of commercial resources. Another reason is that the users cannot be completely independent of the platform, though they have the copyright of their short videos. Therefore, the users have to give ownership of the content, the labor products to the platform to attract users, advertising, enhance user viscosity, and other capital appreciation [12].

3.2.2. Exploit the economic value of the producers by the algorithm

The algorithm plays an essential role in pushing different videos on TikTok. It controls what people can view, although it seems that people have the freedom to choose the content they want to watch. For producers to make profits through TikTok, they must have the ability to let the public see themselves. TikTok provided the producers with the service named "Dou+," which can be applied to improve the popularity of users' accounts and the exposure of their videos. "Dou+" can recommend videos to interested users, increase the number of fans, get more thumb up, comments, and other interactions from interested users, and improve the viscosity of fans and the effect of user conversion.

It is difficult for producers to push their videos more precisely, so they need to use the algorithm function of the TikTok platform that is applied to video distribution and promotion. If producers want to increase profits, they can only invest in platform promotion. With the help of the platform of big data push, their videos could be seen by more people and get economic compensation. Money must be paid to the platform to obtain it so that users cannot escape the platform's control and can only rely on the attached platform so that the platform can exploit people's value.

3.3. Exploitation under e-commerce mode

In terms of TikTok's content positioning, it can accurately find users' pain points, formulate precision marketing strategies, and seize the curiosity of young people about new things. The tone of TikTok's products is "young people's fashion play." It uses short films to record the beauty of life. Behind this kind of precision marketing, there is not only the control of capital over culture and media but also the control over the ownership of means of production and products, which directly leads to the continuous integration of the "individuality" of audience labor into the process of capital circulation and accumulation. In essence, the users of producers are given the right to use productive resources, but the profits, users' value, and advertising revenue generated by TikTok belong to the platform. In fact, in this process, the surplus-value of the audience is deprived.

In addition, in the consumption process, TikTok's users also assume the role of producers. Some work that the employees of TikTok should have done has been completed online by users, including

all processes from purchasing goods to picking up goods. The purchase information left by users forms big data. The initiative of users does not earn them any reward. Instead, they continue to fall into the cycle of production and value exploitation. It can be seen that in addition to the content actively generated by users, other "digital traces" are also "absorbed" into the commercialization process. The basis for algorithm push includes Internet users' browsing and consumption taste, purchasing power, purchasing habits, and other demographic information. It enables TikTok to carry out research more accurately and forecast and guide market consumption more effectively based on mastering personal "information map," ensuring more profits to the enterprise, that is, more exploitative value output.

4. Conclusion

Technology is a double-edged sword, it not only provides convenience and entertainment for people but also brings out some essential questions. As more and more people use TikTok, the problem about "digital labor" seems to be more acute, and the concept of "prosumers" probably blurs the distinction between labor time and leisure time. In TikTok's operation mode, exploitation manifests itself in audiences, content producers, and the e-commerce mode. Most of the users become digital laborers and are exploited by generating data without the right to benefit from their production, leading the relationship between TikTok and its users is the relationship between the exploiter and exploitees. Although it is difficult for us to solve prosumers' nature completely, we are looking forward to making this exploitative nature more market-friendly in the future.

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