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A Three-Dimension Perspective of Individual, Community and Platform in the Literature Review on the Motivational Mechanisms of Fan Labour in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Digital technology has changed the ways fans participate in cultural activities. Practices such as chart voting, comment control, and data production gradually become unpaid, organized, and affective digital labor. In available research, scholars either emphasize capitalist exploitation or highlight fan autonomy, and the concept of affective labor is inconsistently used. The three-level dynamics of individual psychology, community culture, and platform regulation lack integration. With this background, this paper reviews the literature on affective labor, audience commodity, digital labor, and fan culture, in order to figure out why fans continue to labor voluntarily and how multiple dynamics interact. Through comparison of theoretical genealogies and literature integration, the research constructs a three-dimensional framework of individual, community, and platform, which thereby explains that fan labor is neither pure exploitation nor complete liberation, instead, it is a complex practice pulled by three forces. Meanwhile, this paper hopes that future research can move beyond the either/or judgment of exploitation and liberation, and focus more on fans' own role in labor and how fans produce meaning.

Keywords

fan labor, affective labor, digital labor, platform algorithms, fandom culture

1. Introduction

Recently, the ongoing development of digital technology has constantly been altering the general manner in which people are involved with cultural creation and cultural consumption. In this shift, there are also particular behaviors of fans which have experienced more noticeable changes. These daily star-chasing actions surrounding idols have long surpassed the limits of simple consumption or entertainment through frequent voting on Weibo Super Topics, comment controls and anti-defamation, gift-tipping and sentiment companionship in live-streaming rooms, and derivative creation and social activities in fanwork communities. Slowly but surely, they have developed into a form of digital labour that is both productive and organized as well as affective. The ones among them include the phenomenon of data production that has become the most common method of expressing feelings of affection among fans, and data traffic has also been considered as the major factor determining the commercial value of an idol. In such a scenario, one can pose a question that

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is worth exploring: in the context of a digital platform, what motivators combine in order to push fans to keep and willingly undertake unpaid digital work on a regular basis, and how do these various sources of motivation interplay to shape a holistic operational logic?

Available studies on the topic of why fans work for free tend to develop into two directions: one is concerned with the ways that capital integrates affection, placing fans as subordinated digital workers; the second one is centered on the fact of fan autonomy and meaning production in the process of star-chasing. They contradict one another and the very notion of affective labor that mediates between them experiences theoretical overlap. To be more precise, the discourse of motivational mechanisms can be found in three layers, namely individual psychology, fandom culture, and platform regulation, but are not interconnected. This paper tries to connect emotional energy, group identity, and structural discipline, to uncover the manner in which they interplay and change layers by layers, to determine the benefits and drawbacks of the current explanations, to try to incorporate them and enhance the research line, and to offer a guide to comprehend the rationale of fan labor.

2. Review of Theories Related to Fan Labor

2.1 The Proposal and Development of Affective Labor Theory

Hochschild introduced the term emotional labor in 1983. She noted that emotions are commercially exploited in the service industry, and workers are alienated by their own emotions. Nevertheless, her analysis was largely conducted on the ground of individual interaction, and she made no distinction between emotional labor and emotional performance, and could not see that emotion can also be used as the product of labor [1]. Kemper has critiqued the viewpoint of Hochschild stating that the concept of feeling rule cannot be used to explain the fact that various individuals respond emotionally to the same situation differently, and that the main causes of emotional experience are differences in power and status. Based on this, Collins developed the idea of the theory of emotional energy asserting that the degree of emotional energy is defined by the differences in power and status directly [2].

Affective labor was included in the list of immaterial labor by Hardt and Negri. The authors saw affective labor as the labor that produces or manipulates affect and contended that this form of labor has become a significant factor in the direct creation of capital. In contrast to Hochschild, Hardt and Negri focused more on the productivity of affective labor, arguing that it is not only capable of being used by capital but also creates social networks and community forms. Nevertheless, other researchers attacked the concept as overly general and confused various types of work under consideration, which in turn reduced the explanatory value of the concept [3]. The two perspectives here are actually addressing the same issue: is affective labor the exploitation of affect by capital or the expression of the subjectivity of laborers? It is the question that lies at the core of comprehending fan labor.

2.2 From Affective Labor to Digital Labor: Expansion of the Concept of Fan Labor

Critical political economy has a different methodology than affective labor theory. It considers the act of watching media as a type of labor beginning with media institutions. The audience commodity thesis was introduced by Smythe in 1977. His claim was that audience viewing is unremunerated labor because audiences are viewed as commodities and sold to advertisers through content. Livant and Jhally also suggested that watching is work. Viewing time they divided into necessary viewing time and surplus viewing time, and they claimed that viewing in surplus time engages in capital circulation. The discussion on the audience commodity thesis led to the development of the concept of the cybernetic commodity as well, which states that what media generate is audience information [4][5].

The audience's role has shifted in the Internet age. No longer passive observers, they have started to create their own content. The concept of digital labor was introduced by Terranova, who defines users' unpaid and voluntary online activity as free labor. On this foundation, Fuchs also elaborated it further and states that digital labor is a component of the collective labor force, which is used in electronic media survival, use, and application, asserting that users generate data when they consume information and therefore become a new type of prosumer commodity [4]. Nevertheless, the convergence of neoliberalism with technological advancement has exacerbated the condition of digital laborers, and platforms achieve the goal of capital

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accumulation through what seems to be the voluntary involvement of the users [6]. Critical political economy focuses more on how capital benefits in this, whereas cultural studies focus more on the subjectivity of users. At the same time, fan culture studies have also moved towards the stigmatized, idealized, and finally the critical analysis, and researchers have started to observe that fans are consumers as well as free workers [7]. Affect-driven fans organize productive practices focused on idols. Hence, the concept of fan labor cannot be explained using the paradigm of audience commodity, nor should it be extended to the concept of digital labor. The necessity is to introduce the aspect of affective labor in the context of these two concepts.

2.3 Why Existing Theories are Insufficient to Explain Fan Labor Motivation Alone

The pathway of emotional labor discussed by Hochschild is mostly concerned with individual-level emotional regulation and organizational-level control; however, it is hard to use it to explain adequately why fans still invest emotion and time when there is no external compulsion. Although a path of affective labor is proposed by Hardt and Negri that recognizes the productive possibility of affect, their excessive optimism about the concept of subjectivity and the issue of over-generalization in the conceptual boundary itself renders this theory rather ineffective in terms of explaining the fact of exploitation and alienation in fan labor. Critical political economy has adopted the framework of digital labour that indeed uncovers how capital uses fans' affect, yet it does so in a manner that views them as oppressed, unconscious objects. Thus, fans themselves become subjectively conscious, their affect is a complex structure, and the deep meanings that they make in social interactions are hidden.

A more pressing issue is that the three theoretical perspectives have different emphases. There has been a concentration on individual psychology, community culture, and platform mechanisms, but no clear explanations of how these three tiers interact and are communicated across the layers. The motivation behind fan labor is not based on one element but rather it is a complicated process created through the ongoing tension between individual affective projection, communal identity within the community, and platform algorithmic discipline. Thus, the comprehension of fan labor cannot be reduced to the audience commodity paradigm, nor can it be easily applied to the digital labor paradigm, much less to a simple affective labor theory. Rather, an integrative analysis must be created at the intersection of all three so that the multi-level structure and dynamic functioning mechanism of fan labor motivation can be uncovered.

3. Multi-Level Driving Factors of Fan Labor Motivation

3.1 Individual Level: Affective Projection and Self-Value Realization

The readiness of fans to invest unpaid work can be attributed to some internal emotional requirements, as well as the need to achieve self-value. On a more micro level, the fan information behavior has an emotional nature. Other research has indicated that the choice of information fans make and the interpretation of such information are frequently driven by their emotions at that moment. Meanwhile, the instantaneous response fans get in activities like chart voting and data creation continues to lure them into the practice of labor repetition. The underlying reason behind this behavior is a relatively central motivating force, which is the cultivation of the ideal self, i.e., fans see the idol as an idealized version of themselves. They develop their competencies and gain mental rewards in sharing information and generating content [8].

Positive experiences of fans in affective labor should not be perceived as a condition of exploitation without awareness. Other research has shown that workers can form a family-like bond by using the approach of deep acting, and in the course of boundary negotiation with interaction partners, they acquire an experience of success and self-worth in work [9]. Meanwhile, the core members who are referred to as big fans in the fan communities also keep on building cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital by engaging in prolonged affective labor and subsequently exchanging these capitals to eventually become powerful in the community [10]. Ordinary fans also constantly affirm themselves during the engagement in affective labor. According to some other research, it is noted that due to involvement in interaction and participation in online fan clubs, people start to experience a transition into the subject, i.e. they become both producers and consumers of affective labor, and they conclude with the reproduction of their own subjectivity in this way [11]. The conclusion implied by all these studies is the same: the motivation behind fans labour at the individual level is not monolithic and cannot be reduced to a simple case of laboring for love. The composite driving

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force comprises various psychological mechanisms, including self-value assurance, ability enhancement, and the pursuit of positive experience.

3.2 Community Level: Circle Interaction and Collective Identity

The practice of fan labor is not an individual phenomenon, but it is rooted in organized social interaction. A paper that examined the Weibo data stations showed that emotional mobilization takes a top-down form and works through three main strategies. One is impersonal empathy rendering, which provokes empathy among fans by describing data conditions; another is the dissemination and the correction of shame emotions, which uses the influence of influential people within the fandom to apply pressure as insiders, which makes ordinary fans feel guilty and therefore invest compensatory labor; and the third is the dissemination and intensification of anger emotions, which uses chart competition to generate a sense of data crisis and activates collective anger and converts it into collective actions [12].

Also, the internal stratification identity discipline in the community keeps reinforcing the labor motives. There are some studies that have indicated that fandom has different hierarchies based on the volume of contribution to the work, level of information and resources acquired, interpretive capabilities, and level of communication. Support associations of fans, through the creation of decision-making groups and other functional stations like comment control stations, anti-defamation stations, and data stations, apply specific entry requirements, bureaucratic organizational systems, and point-based rewards and punishment systems to convert the initial loose interaction among fans into systematic action oriented towards achieving collective objectives [13].

The so-called voting groups in talent shows can be considered a radical version of community organization. Other research has shown that fan groups create a consensus that the idol requires fans by affective mobilization coming from the inside. There are strong institutional norms, a distinct division of labor, and an irremovable hierarchy in voting groups, and they develop tactics like swapping votes, sticking to well-known candidates, and taking advantage of the golden voting times to fight the sophisticated competition structure of the platform [14]. As research on fan culture has become more profound, researchers have switched their attention from the initial romanticized view that fans are beautiful to an analytical approach to the connection between fan culture and social class and power relations [15]. In general, at the community level, through various processes including affective mobilization, formal organization, collective rituals, and social capital building, lasting emotional energy is converted into stable collective work motivation.

3.3 Platform Level: Algorithmic Recommendation and Traffic Competition

The technical architecture and commercial logic of the platform represent the third motivating force behind fan labor. Other researchers note that fan culture research and online fan communities cannot be separated by the level of the development of mass media culture in the Internet era. Media technology has reorganized the spatiotemporal space of cultural transmission and the size and frequency of fan groups have increased. The changes are directly connected with technical architecture of the platform [7].

Digital affective labor is an innovative kind of labor in the cultural sector that has been developed due to the emergence of digital technology and the growth of the digital cultural sector. A unique aspect of this labor is its capacity to represent the interactive impact of digital technology and affect. Digital affective work is facilitated and organized by digital platforms by means of algorithmic recommendation and traffic competition, among other things. The indicators of data with assessment features (i.e., likes, comments, and rankings) on platforms are passed over by idols and management companies to fans. This is how fans slowly become alienated from regular cultural entertainment and are subjugated into free digital workers [16] through the dominance of affect.

Live streaming platform behavior can be constructed using behavioral rules based on big data computation and algorithmic suggestion. Other research studies have observed that platforms track the browsing behavior, interactions, emotions, and speech of users, convert such content into measurable traffic data, and then feed it back to users in the form of so-called personalized recommendations, which creates a loop of interest capture into affective engagement and subsequently into labor contribution [17]. The same phenomenon has been noted in the sphere of esports. The commercial culture and the rules of the platform define the participation of the fans in a clear way. They consume the games, thus developing an identity as a consumer of commercial

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esports events, and participate in the fan communities facilitated by professional clubs to develop the identity of a fan. During this procedure, the commercial requirements are addressed by the interaction of the fans within the community [18].

Weibo is a social media platform that incorporates the state will, platform rules, and fan governance. According to other researches, it is established that Weibo has developed a governance logic that helps in the development of positive-energy fans through community norms and algorithmic technology. The platform employs algorithmic visibility to monitor and direct the actions of fans, as a result of which fans develop self-discipline based on the norms of the community and social expectations [19]. On balance, technological affordances, algorithmic recommendation, traffic competition, and governance discipline are exactly the conditions under which fans' affective investment becomes systematically transformed into digital labor able to valorize capital.

4. Interaction Methods and Theoretical Integration of the Three Levels

Methods of Interaction and Theoretical Synthesis of Three Levels Individual-psychology, community culture, and platform regulations are not independently related to one another. In practice, they are interwoven with one another and passed on layer by layer, creating a dynamic circulatory motivational system. In order to comprehend how this system works, it is important to follow how once the so-called emotional energy is produced inside the individual, it is strengthened by community organization, then is caught by platform algorithms and commercial reasoning and converted into data, and ultimately comes back to the individual psychological state in the shape of discipline, thus the entire cycle of motivation is complete.

4.1 Mutual Reinforcement Between Individual Psychology and Community Culture

The first enthusiasm of the fans for their participation in work can be linked to the parasocial relationships created in the individual, which led to the formation of an ideal self-projection based on this relationship. Nevertheless, when this affective response is limited to the individual realm, it is frequently disorganized and unpredictable. The function of community culture is to consolidate this scattered affect, which, with the help of a common discourse system, behavioral standards, and collective ceremonies, enables those emotional experiences that were once in the private sphere to find their place in the public sphere and receive legitimacy among the members of the group [7]. As a part of this process, the affect offered by fans ceases to be seen as a mere individual act of working out of love, but a form of symbolic capital that can be recognized and accumulated in the community. The direct feedback, including likes, comments, reposts, etc., on the one hand, it helps to validate the position of the individual in the group, and on the other hand, it adds motivation to invest further. Hence, a cycle is slowly developed whereby affective investment leads to labour output and then to community recognition, followed by a reinforcement of affect. With this cycle, a consistent interrelationship is created between the psychological needs of individuals and the collective goals of the community [20].

One must especially note that this connection is not imposed externally, but it is finished by fans individually when they actively engage in the construction of community meaning. When fans engage in actions like comment control and voting, superficially they seem to be adhering to the collective orders of the community, but underneath they are constantly affirming their fan identity, expressing affective loyalty to the idol, and simultaneously achieving a feeling of belonging and self-worth through their interactions with others who share the same interests. In this regard, the community has much more resemblance to an affective community of fans rather than an interest community. The sustainability of the community is determined significantly more by the developed implicit behavioral understanding among the members and their psychological identification with each other than by institutionalised reward and punishment systems [21]. It is exactly this internal affective motivational force that provides the mutual strengthening of individuals and the community with certain resiliency and longevity.

4.2 Game and Adaptation Between Community Culture and Platform Regulation

Once fans go to the digital platforms with affective motivation triggered by the community, they soon come to find out an issue: the identity logic in the community and the traffic logic of the platform are in fact mutually exclusive. The platform is not concerned about what depth of feeling fans have towards their idols; it is

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concerned about whether these feelings can be translated into measurable data including clicks, reposts, time spent on site, and records of consumption. Thus, the affective mobilization strategies employed by fan communities, namely depersonalized empathy rendering, dissemination and correction of shame emotion, dissemination and intensification of anger emotion, are also used by the technical architecture of the platform [12]. The features introduced by Weibo (e.g., Super Topic rankings), trending topic mechanisms, and fan power rankings are basically a collection of conversion gadgets that convert the emotional energy into data pointers. The higher the frequency of data production by fans, the greater the ability of the platform to get traffic and commercial worth out of it [22].

Nevertheless, the fact that the platform relies on fans to engage in affective labor does not imply that it would allow community behaviors to continue without any form of regulation. In case fans' collective action exceeds the regulatory minimum established by the platform, e.g., when methods like traffic brushing and controlling comments significantly disrupt the normal order of information, or when group conflicts become the object of regulation, the platform intervenes actively. It redefines the boundaries of behavior by changing the weight of algorithms, reducing the visibility of topics, and blocking violating accounts [19]. These restrictive measures implemented by the platform will not be silently accepted by fan communities. They try to find non-operational solutions in the loopholes of the platform rules. Vote swapping, attaching to popular contestants, and capturing golden voting moments are examples of "guerrilla tactics" that have been developed by fans over time through their ongoing game with the platform [14]. The game relationship cannot be merely stated as incorporation and similarly cannot be simplified to resistance. Precisely, it is an ongoing process of mutual shaping. Fans must provide affective labor in order to provide platforms with commercial benefits, and platforms must provide fans with technical capabilities to reach the goals of the community. Co-evolution occurs as both parties use each other, and restrict each other, during this process [15].

4.3 Inducement and Discipline of Platform Regulation on Individual Psychology

If the purpose of community culture is to encourage labor enthusiasm among fans by means of affective mobilization, then the purpose of platform regulation is to create the full operational logic of such enthusiasm by technical design. Such a logic defines the form or forms of fans' affective expression, the conditions of its effectiveness, and the limits of its permission. Such inducement and discipline are not achieved through public instructions, but are incorporated into the platform interface design, algorithmic recommendation, and feedback mechanisms, which work in ways that are less perceivable.

As an example, the functional modules of the livestreaming platform, including the tipping ranking, PK competition systems, and fan badge levels, create a system of evaluation whereby affect can be measured. Streamers are given the value of their popularity based on real-time ranking data, and fans are given value by the number of virtual gifts they give to the streamer [17]. Within this gamified system, the feeling that fans experience is not laboring, but rather participating in a meaningful competition. Every tip and every vote gives instant feedback on data and recognition of the community. Such instant positive reinforcement is a constant reminder to fans to engage in repeated labour. The initial sporadic manifestation of affective expression consequently steadies into a regular act of daily data production behavior [8]. During the process, the platform does not have to instruct fans to perform anything. All that it takes is to establish a rule framework, and fans will naturally fall into the cycle of producing data in the quest of visibility and recognition [23].

However, the principles of platform governance may operate in a less obvious manner. The mainstream value discourses like positive energy and clean cyberspace have also become a part of the criteria for content visibility on social platforms like Weibo due to the community norms and algorithmic review of the social platform [19]. Fans need to be conscious about whether their emotions and activities adhere to platform regulations during the act of expressing emotion. Not only is it a restriction on conduct, but it also has a more profound influence on the manner in which affective expressions are made. Fans are directed to demonstrate love to the idol as a positive social normative manifestation of emotion, whereas emotionally charged sentiments with the potential of being contentious are subtly weeded out by self-censorship systems. In this way, platform discipline of fans is no longer an external coercive agency, but it is turned into a self-management strategy of fans based on affects [24].

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4.4 Transmission Mechanism and Dynamic Cycle of Three-Level Interaction

Through the interconnection of the interactions of the three levels mentioned earlier, it will be possible to see a very clear motivational transmission chain: affective projection created inside the individual is initially energized by the organizational systems of community culture and converted into collective labour with direction and scale; this collective labour is perceived in the algorithm and commercial mechanisms of the platform as quantitative information, which creates material economic benefits; afterwards, on the platform side, the logic of creating data goes down to the individual level, which is fed back to the fans by technical design and rule adjustment, thus influencing their affective cognition and behavioral inertia; and the newly acquired affective experiences and behavioral patterns by fans during repeated data practices enter the interactive space of the community once more, which serves as the psychological foundation of the subsequent wave of affective mobilization.

A closed loop in which the position of the so-called big fans most effectively illustrates the interconnectedness of the three levels. Through long-term emotional labor, they slowly gain cultural capital (i.e. professional skills and knowledge stock at the individual level), social capital (prestige and network relations created in the community) and symbolic capital (certified titles and visibility bonuses provided by the platform) and become the opinion leaders in the community. Such a status jump cannot be detached from the mechanism of platform empowerment. Tools like Weibo Super Topic levels and official certification have institutionalized the legitimacy of the authoritative nature of big fans [10]. Once they have gained their power, big fans subsequently act as intermediaries between the platform and ordinary fans. They are required not only to pass on the rules of the platform and plan the labor activities of the ordinary fans but also to speak on behalf of the fan group in the discussions with the platform and the idol team [13]. This dual role of serving as an upward and downward hub of interaction renders big fans pivotal hubs in three-level interaction.

Moreover, fans reporting and anti-defamation activities also indicate one significant thing, that is, the role of state power in this system. Reporting behavior of the fans can use the review mechanisms of the platform itself or address state public power entities including the Cyberspace Administration of China. This platform takes two steps in such a process; it acts as an executive of regulations, and it can also be used to further traffic interest [25]. State power intervention puts more pressure on legitimacy in the regulation of platforms and also ensures that the labor behavior of fans remains within the pull and adjustment of various powers.

To sum up, the mechanism of motivation for fan labor is not an uncomplicated superposition of factors at three levels, but rather a dynamically mixed set of all three levels. People give the community some form of affective cohesion, the community gives structure to raw data material to the platform, and the platform in turn modifies the affective limits of people and their limits of action. All three levels combined form a self-perpetuating and ongoing motivational triangle.

5. Research Review and Prospects

5.1 Contributions and Shortcomings of Existing Research

The theoretical progression of the audience commodity thesis to digital labor has seen critical political economy consistently demonstrate how capital uses platform technology to convert fans' affective investments into free labor which can be exploited. Smythe was the first to theorize that the watching behavior of audiences is productive labor. On this foundation, Fuchs also introduced the idea of the prosumer commodity and extended it to the sphere of Internet users' content production. Later studies observed that the combination of neoliberalism and new communication technologies increased the precariousness of digital laborers, and the platform economy achieves the flexible accumulation of capital exactly by making use of the apparently autonomous labor of users. Empirically, researchers have shown that as a result of the combined efforts of community mobilisation, platform discipline, and algorithmic recommendations, fans will eventually turn their originally leisure hours into exploited labour hours. Meanwhile, other researchers have noticed that fan culture studies have experienced a paradigm shift in their approach, starting with stigmatization, followed by idealization, and finally, they are moving towards criticalization.

Nevertheless, there are also very clear constraints to this approach when the issue of fan labor is seen through the lens of exploitation. It happens due to the fact that such an analytical route can be reduced to the

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mere labeling of fans as digital workers, and in this process of labeling, the subjective consciousness of fans, the complexity of their affects, and the profound significance that they develop in their social interaction are mostly concealed. In particular, the huge amount of code created by fans in the control of comments does not automatically lead to capital valorization, and this activity has the features of voluntary involvement, relative freedom, and the power to leave at any given moment, all of which indicate that it is significantly different from conventional labor actions within the exploitation paradigm. Indeed, the paradigm shift of fan culture studies in general also testifies to the weakness of one point of view to some extent. The field of study has experienced several changes over time, including a rather idealistic direction, followed by a focus on the reproduction of social classes, and finally a focus on individual internal drives.e and psychological satisfaction. The prizes received by fan groups are frequently non-material and the groups themselves are self-organized. All these points imply that the notion of digital labor cannot be flexibly implemented in local fan labor studies.

5.2 Reflections on Future Research Directions

The future research can be developed in three directions: theoretical integration, broadening of the means of research and practical interest.

Theoretical perspective: Affective labor theory itself consists of two distinct traditions. One is the emotional labor tradition developed by Hochschild, and the other is the affective labor tradition proposed by Hardt and Negri. They are two alternative yet complementary analytical frameworks used to examine the topic of fan labor. The first of these paths is more revealing of how affect is subjected to discipline and alienation by the capitalist regime, whereas the second of these paths views more of how affective labor can be seen to contain some possibilities of subjective production and social relationship building. Nevertheless, the notion of affective labor is not without criticism either, and one of the most representative opinions is that the concept is too wide-ranging and suffers from the issue of over-generalization. Meanwhile, the discussions on the audience commodity thesis have also demonstrated that if the payments made by advertisers are perceived as the procurement of the audience's viewing time or as compensation for the constant capital invested in the communication process, this question is still open. Yet, with the advent of the Internet, this has become more complicated. So in future studies, it is essential to accept the fact that there is exploitation but also consider the meaning-making and self-making implemented by fans through their work process, and attempt to evade the dichotomy of the exploitation thesis versus liberation thesis.

In connection with the research methods, it is important to note that future studies ought to broaden the scope and extend the depth of empirical research. Special consideration must be given to more obscure types of digital affective labor, like the daily curation of online communities and fan creation, which are more straightforward tasks that can be easily missed. Currently, there has not been much academic interest in these areas. In case first-hand materials are available by virtue of intensive fieldwork or interviews, they would offer a stronger empirical ground to the theoretical discourse.

Under practical concerns, online entertainment platforms need to be more sustainable in their business models instead of depending on excessive fan-driven consumption. With the increasing number of continuously iterative technological advancements in the digital world, it has become somewhat urgent to create a new labor ethics system. Also, future studies require some contextual adjustment of the audience commodity thesis, analyzing how audiences are created, represented, and measured in various media forms. Meanwhile, it is also necessary to use some theoretical directions of cultural studies and consider the lively experiences that arise during the use of media objects by audiences.

6. Conclusion

Based on the theoretical genealogy of affective labor and digital labor, this paper will systematically review the drivers of fan labor motivation across multiple levels and the interactions among them. Through its research, it has been established that fan labor motivation is an effect of the combined action of three levels which are individual, community and platform. At the individual level, fans are able to achieve affective projection and affirmation of self-worth by means of parasocial relationships; at the community level, fans are able to convert individual affect into community labor motivation through affective mobilization and organization in a structure; at the platform level, platforms turn the fans affective commitment into digital labor that can be capitalized on through algorithmic recommendation and competition in traffic.

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The three levels do not operate separately, but rather are embedded into each other in a dynamic manner. Individual psychology and community culture have a mutually reinforcing relationship. Community culture and platform regulation are interdependent and they keep playing games with one another. The platform is designed technically to implement hidden control on fans psychology. All three constitute a self-perpetuating motivational system.

The current research has done significant work in unveiling the exploitative character of fan labour; however, it has the drawback of reducing fans to being digital labourers and eliminating their subjectivity. Further studies should recognize the fact that exploitation occurs, yet focus on the meaning-making of fans during the labor process, and attempt not to repeat the error of either the exploitation thesis or the liberation thesis. Fan labor is not an act of pure exploitation or pure liberation, but a more complicated interaction that is drawn by the influence of three forces, namely, individual affective projection, collective identity in the community, and platform algorithmic discipline. It is only by going beyond the one perspective and viewing fan labor as a result of the interactive relationships of various dynamics that we can better comprehend the underlying logic behind the change of labor forms in the era of digitalization.

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Conflicts of Interest

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