

Research on the Phenomenon of Younger Digital Workers on the Short Video Platform

Xinyue Cai^{1,a,*}

*¹The College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, Chengdu, 610207, China
a. xinyue20052021@163.com*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: With the development of new media technology and mobile devices, short videos have gradually become popular. However, behind the seemingly prosperous scene is the loss of subjectivity for children and adolescents in the bizarre virtual world shaped by short videos. Based on this phenomenon, this paper uses the concept of "digital labor" from the political economy of communication and uses in-depth interviews and content analysis to study the media behavior of young digital laborers on short video platforms. Finally, it concludes that the essence of minors' addiction to short videos is the unlimited exploitation of surplus value by the platforms. They actively compete for discourse power in the online world while becoming puppets of traffic in the trend of imitation and following, ultimately being trapped in an alienated childhood with abnormal growth practices.

Keywords: Digital labor, short videos, minors

1. Introduction

In recent years, minors have gradually joined the frenzy of short videos on the Internet. They not only spend a lot of time as "audiences" on screens but also become subjects of the media industry as subjects of video. They have become "digital laborers" exploited by the platforms without compensation. Although there have been studies on "digital labor", "digital child labor" is still scarce. Studies mostly focus on youth addiction to short videos and intervention methods, paying less attention to the relationship between underage internet celebrities, underage users, and the platforms. Based on the theory of "digital labor", this paper conducts research on preschool children aged 2-6 who do not have content production capabilities and primary and secondary school students aged 6-14 who already have content production capabilities, trying to analyze the formation mechanism of "digital child labor" in the new media era, expound the causes of the underage internet celebrity phenomenon, and reveal the "disappearance of childhood" brought about by the prevalence of short videos and how underage users are further exploited by capital in an alienated childhood, to provide new ideas for underage users to escape the digital dilemma.

2. Literature review

The most widely accepted academic definition of "digital labor" is from Christian Fuchs, a pioneer in the study of digital labor. According to him, "digital labor" refers to cognitive and physical labor used in the production, circulation, and use of digital media, that is, all labor required for capital

accumulation in the production and content production of digital media technology. "Digital child labor" refers to underage laborers who participate in digital labor, entering the virtual world at an early age in search of more information and broadening their knowledge. They not only gain happiness and knowledge but also face hidden exploitation from platforms and algorithms. They became "digital child labor" in the internet era. The United Nations and the World Health Organization define "youth" as individuals aged 15-24, so individuals over 15 years old do not fall within the scope of "digital child labor." Based on references and summaries of existing research, in this paper, "digital child labor" refers to preschool children aged 2-6 who do not have content production capabilities and primary and secondary school students aged 6-14 who already have content production capabilities.

3. Research design

3.1. Research subjects

This paper mainly covers two types of media behavior subjects. One is children and adolescents under 14 years old who are addicted to watching short videos. They become "digital child labor" by contributing their time on short video platforms free of charge. The other type is children and adolescents under 14 years old who actively or passively participate in the production of short videos. They either appear in the videos as symbols without subject consciousness, being consumed by labels such as "cute" and "mischievous," or are carried away by traffic, attempting to seek self-worth in the virtual world. These two types of subjects cover all forms of "digital child labor." Since these two types of subjects have very similar mechanisms of exploitation in the world of digital capitalism and underage users, these two identities often overlap in the same person, so this paper chooses to collectively study these two types of media behavior subjects in the scope of "digital child labor."

3.2. Research methods

This article has completed interviews with 22 minors who often view or post short videos and 13 parents whose children are often in contact with or post short videos. These minors are from Sichuan and Anhui Province, aged from 7 to 14 years old, of which 12 are minors who often browse short videos, and 10 are minors who often actively post short videos.

The content of the videos covers talent shows, vlogs, etc. The social media accounts have fans ranging from 100 to 20000. These parents are from Anhui and Guangdong Province. They often post videos with minors as the subjects, with content mainly focused on family daily life and talent shows that are popular on the platform. The number of fans on their social media accounts ranges from 50 to 50000. As much as possible, we cover different media use situations and use in-depth interviews to investigate the media habits, motivations, and self-awareness of different types of "digital child labor".

Based on in-depth interviews, this article conducts a textual analysis of the short videos posted by minors to supplement the argument. This article collects the latest account data from May 1st to May 31st, 2023 from data platforms such as Feigua Data, Xindu Data, and Kasi Data, selects the top 20 representative internet celebrities aged 2-14 years old from Tiktok (also called Tiktok) based on multiple evaluation systems, and analyzes their short video content based on different types of communicators. Statements about their work topics and content, text in the comment section, accumulated and new fans, and accumulated and new likes are counted to understand the basic development situation of "digital child labor" minor internet celebrity accounts on Tiktok.

4. Results

Among the 12 minors who often browse short videos, the most popular video watched is humorous videos. They all believe that when watching, they always forget the time". However, after spending a long time browsing short videos, they feel like "I'm not sure what I was doing during that time. They also have a common language with their peers about what they have browsed, and short videos have become their main way of obtaining information.

Among the 10 minors who often post short videos, their motivations for posting short videos can be summarized as follows: "posting videos for fun when bored", "expressing their emotions", "wanting to interact with strangers", and "having topics to talk about with their classmates". Some of them just regard posting videos as a hobby, while others have a strong desire to grow their fan base and often follow internet trends. These minors all believe that posting short videos takes up some of their free time, and some of them are not supported by their parents because it takes up their study time.

The 13 parents of minors who often engage in or post short videos all have a common feature: they also often browse short videos during their leisure time and spend less time with their children. Some parents do not support their children's engagement with short videos, but few of them realize that their browsing behavior may have a subtle influence on their children. As for their children's short videos, most of them are not supportive, believing that "they should focus on studying at this age", while a few respect their children's wishes and do not interfere with their children's short videos.

5. Discussion

5.1. From users to workers: The formation mechanism of digital child workers

For young users who often browse Tiktok, addiction is the most destructive. The average video duration of 15 seconds on Tiktok allows users to quickly obtain a sense of satisfaction from the stimulation of sounds, lights, and other sounds within a few seconds. At the same time, the powerful algorithm of Tiktok also tightly binds young users to the short videos, allowing them to understand and receive content without having to select it, relaxing users' awareness of excessive entertainment in fragmented time and gradually becoming immersed in the world of short videos. For the platform operators of short video platforms, the unlimited flow of users and time contributed by users are the sources of their profits, while users do not receive any compensation for the idle time they spend on the platform. This path of realizing the exploitation without compensation camouflages the "sugar coating" of the sugar-coated pill so that users become addicted to the colorful world of short videos without realizing it and make minors become "digital child laborers" [1].

The minors who actively or passively participate in producing Tiktok short videos are mostly driven by the trend and imitation and gradually lose themselves in the process. Especially after the COVID-19 outbreak, "digital survival" has transferred all aspects of children's lives to virtual space. Although the internet creates a rich and diverse space, minors do not have sufficient cognitive and behavioral control abilities to guide their media practices in the virtual world. After being in a digital environment for a long time, it is difficult for them to return to ordered autonomous learning and information production in reality again. Instead, they gradually immerse themselves in the entertainment world composed of screens and images and gradually form a worldview dominated by "screen culture". When their videos receive a lot of likes and comments, they will produce more videos to continue enjoying the adulation of the masses, happily dedicating their labor and time. In reality, all of these achievements are used as surplus value by social media platforms to accumulate capital, while the "child laborers" become lost in cyberspace under the guise of entertainment and relaxation [2].

5.2. From spectator to participant: The struggle for children's right to speak and identity construction

Maslow proposed in his hierarchy of needs theory that human needs mainly include five aspects: physiological needs (food and clothing), safety needs (job security), social needs (friendship), esteem needs, and self-actualization. Adolescents are in a stage of self-awareness and need attention from others. The attention and praise from the broad masses of netizens on short video platforms can greatly meet their needs. Students who have long been in an exam-oriented education environment have been bearing the pressure of "high scores" and "top schools". They have been evaluated and judged in reality and in the media environment, which greatly suppresses the adolescents' pursuit of freedom and equality. The short video platform is very rich in content, covering light and humorous fashion trends, skill displays, daily life, knowledge popularization, and other fields. Each individual can find their interests or skilled content in Tiktok. For example, those who are good at dancing can become dance pros, and those who like to do hand accounts can become hand account pros. The short video platform provides everyone with a platform to show themselves, express opinions, and create content, whether as the protagonist or creator of the video. This allows the social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs of adolescents to be met to varying degrees.

Wu conducted a user survey based on the use and satisfaction theory of short video social media [3]. Among the interviewees, 57.2% of users said that they used Tiktok to meet certain social needs. Inside Tiktok, there will always be a variety of trends, such as gesture dancing, god songs, or wearing a uniform, which have already formed a unique sub-culture in the Tiktok ecosystem. For example, the recent rise of the "Pai Nafang Challenge," which has a very low participation threshold and is open to anyone, has become popular all over Tiktok. All kinds of experts, and ordinary people, including teenagers and other users, are participating in this challenge and, at the same time, showing their unique video style through performance methods, filming methods, etc. This sub-cultural group presents a loose state of participation, subject generalization, and group member fluidity while paying more attention to self-identity, forming a mixed group identity. The "language system" learned by teenagers on Tiktok can help them meet those who share the same interests and hobbies as them. These people may be fans of their videos or passing commenters and viewers. Not only in the virtual world but also in the offline world, the works published by students on Tiktok will become a new social currency. The achievements obtained in the virtual world will also be praised by elders and envied by classmates, continuously expanding their social relationships and strengthening group identity.

5.3. From Childhood to Adulthood: Alienation and Abnormal Growth in Childhood

In 1982, Neil Postman proposed in "The Disappearance of Childhood" that as society moves from the era of print media to electronic media, the boundary between adults and children becomes increasingly blurred and indistinct. Traditional notions of childhood often align closely with nature, where children constantly engage, explore, and experience the joy it holds in a real natural setting [4]. Wu's research on "reminiscing about childhood" shows that for the post-60s, post-70s, and post-80s generations, the majority of memories from childhood are of innocence, freedom, and deep impressions. Some people's childhoods were often accompanied by feelings of both happiness and "hunger", Some spent their days catching frogs and crickets in the fields, while others constantly schemed to compete for handmade toys from their peers [5]. Nowadays, 32.9% of young Internet users in primary schools start using the Internet before school age, with short videos being the second most popular entertainment activity after listening to music and gaming, gradually dominating the after-school lives of minors. As a result, false, mechanical, and imaginary images in short videos are

gradually replacing real, active, and dynamic physical activities, alienating childhood from nature. Once rich physical activities are being replaced by dry visual symbols,

Innis argues that "the mode of thinking is one of the results produced by communication technology. New communication technology not only gives people new objects and content to think about but also gives people new ways of thinking." Children and adults live in the Internet era together, and short videos have made many aspects of life more entertainment-oriented and tangible. Strict logical thinking is gradually melting into a nonlinear mesh structure, with people's ways of obtaining information becoming more dependent on intuition and subconsciousness. Children and adults live in the complex cyber world together, gradually developing the same thinking patterns and emotional responses to fragmented and superficial sensory stimulation[6]. The boundary between childhood and adulthood is gradually disappearing. A 5-year-old boy named "Hang Hang to Tou Bu Da" has gained countless fans by dancing like a Korean girl group, with his flexible moves attracting many older siblings. Children form a sense of accomplishment by imitating adults in the virtual world, but this imitation also obscures the purity unique to childhood and opens up the mundaneness of adulthood. Children's imagination and creativity are gradually being swept away by traffic, with truth and falsity, good and bad, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness all swaying with the manipulation of platforms, and losing their most precious qualities as children.

6. Conclusion

The ancient Greek philosopher Sophocles once said, "All things that enter the life of mortals, strong or weak, have their drawbacks." The short video platform is undoubtedly a double-edged sword for children. Perhaps the original intention of underage users entering the short-video industry is to use the same digital status as adults to show their self-advantages highlight personal character, and discover their shining points after entering specific subdivisions. However, the values of minors are also easily influenced and shaken by others, and ultimately, it is likely to appear in videos that are crudely made or even vulgar to increase exposure and attract attention, which goes against the original intention of making videos.

At the same time, minors are obsessed with short videos gradually losing communication and connection with their families [7]. Parents often give their children a mobile phone to complete their work tasks more quickly without interruption. When short videos replace family interactions, children gradually become alienated from real-life social relationships. Unable to break their addiction and immerse themselves in the virtual world, they eventually become "hollow" digital workers drowning in the virtual world. Therefore, it is particularly important to strengthen supervision and regulation of children's media behavior. Parents should pay more attention to their children's extracurricular activities, allowing their childhood to return to the natural world. At the same time, families should prioritize the construction of parent-child relationships, listen to the deepest voices of their children, and respect their reasonable growth needs. Short-video platform operators should also prioritize the construction of a "clean network environment", strengthen supervision of vulgar content on online platforms, raise the threshold for entry into the "internet celebrity" industry, guide underage internet celebrities to develop healthily based on strict regulation, and create a more upward, upward, and virtuous network environment to restore a pure, unadulterated, and innocent beautiful childhood for "digital child workers".

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