triple C

Digital Labour and The Generation of Surplus Value on Instagram

Forouzan Yazdanipour*, Hady Faramarzi** and Abdollah Bicharanlou***

*Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran, F.yazdanipour@ut.ac.ir

**Department of Economic Development and Planning, Faculty of Management and Economics, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran, Hady.Faramarzi@modares.ac.ir

***Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran, Bikaranlou@ut.ac.ir

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to provide a map of the economy of social media platforms. We analyse digital labour on Instagram. The article asks: How are the users, who provide unpaid labour on Instagram, exploited? What kinds of labour do we find on Instagram? In doing so, the paper contributes to the literature on digital labour and the attention economy. Social media platforms exploit paid and unpaid labour in the creation and realisation of value. They capture user-generated content, transform it into commodities and sell it to companies. The article presents the results of a case study of the digital labour of Persian Internet users on Instagram. We conducted a Netnography of popular Instagram users (influencers, Internet users who make shoutouts to brands and influencers) and a survey where 600 Instagram users participated.

Keywords: digital labour, attention economy, surplus value, social media platforms, Instagram

1. Introduction

After the crash of the Dotcom bubble and with the rise of the free market in web 2.0-based advertising platforms, we witnessed the growth of theoretical literature and the introduction of influential concepts like "self-exploitation" (Terranova 2000), "free labour" (Kennedy 2012), and "digital labour" (Fuchs 2017a). Fuchs (2014a, 2014b) examined specific cases of digital labour, from the extraction of minerals in African mines to software engineering at Google and the exploitation of the users of advertising-based Internet social media platforms.

This article asks: How are the users, who provide unpaid labour on Instagram, exploited? What kinds of labour do we find on Instagram? To answer this question, we chose the Persian Instagram as a case study. Instagram is not yet filtered and censored among social networks in Iran and has the most users of all social media platforms in the country. As of January 2020, 58.42 million people in Iran had access to the Internet and 33.40 million Iranians joined at least one social media platform.

Additionally, while it may be thought that Iran's economy is a primarily a form of state capitalism that is baed on an oil-based rentier economy (see Harris 2013; Dadkhah 2003), we choose the Persian Instagram as case study to show that also digital capitalism exists in Iran.

To understand digital capitalism's function, we need to consider the global division of labour. Fuchs (2003) and Ritzer & Atalay (2010) have highlighted the periodic changes in the labour force, and Grossman (1980) and Mies (1986) discusses outsourcing and the division of international and global labour.

We theoretically divide digital labour on Instagram into four realms: celebrities, influencers, shoutouts, and ordinary users. This stratification maps the complex multidimensional free-market mechanism on Instagram. We demonstrate that ordinary users contribute to three strands. In the first strand, ordinary users create surplus value by generating content on Instagram. Second, users' attention is commodified and is sold to brands (the owners of goods and services) by celebrities, influencers, and shoutouts. Ultimately, some of these users become consumers and complement this market by buying goods and services.

In the first section, the topics related to digital labour and its role in the production of surplus value and the commodification of attention are discussed. In this article, we use the Netnography method and also a self-administered questionnaire to document the users' opinions and viewpoints. These methods help us to understand the production of surplus valueand the exploitation of digital labour on Instagram. In the fifth part, using Netnography and a questionnaire, we analyse different forms of labour on Instagram (celebrities, influencers, shoutouts, and ordinary users). We investigate the interaction between media corporations, owners of goods and services or brands, and popular users in order to analyse the users' digital labour. The analysis of the structure of Instagram leads to understanding how ordinary users are used as unpaid labourers and exploited in this process.

2. Digital Labour, Capitalism, and Surplus Value

To understand digital labour, we need to find out what labour and work are. Labour is a practice of working on the land and can be extended to other kinds of manual work. Adam Smith said that labour "is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities" (A. Smith 1977, 31). Williams (1983, 176-177) introduced labour first as an element of production in tandem with capital and other materials, and second as social class produced commodities for exchange. Marx referred to labour as the purposeful activity of creating use-value to satisfy particular needs (Marx 1861–1863) or the activity of a man to regenerate himself (Hughes 2014). He introduced work as a productive activity by human bodies to produce their means of subsistence (Marx 1845, 47). Work is a qualitative determination of labour thatcreates use-values. Labour is an alienated form of work and a historical form of work organisation in which labourers do not have control over her/his means and the results of production (Fuchs 2014a). Marx called capital dead labour, which lives by exploiting living labour (Marx 1976, 342).

Marx distinguishes between labour that generates use-value and the one that creates value. Exchange-value is the form of the appearance of value (Cleaver 2000, 111). Marx argues that labour produces surplus value for the capitalist and its opposite (capital) to become productive. The labour time required to produce commodities is their value (Marx 1973, 137).

Lazzarato (1996, 133) analysed the cognitive characteristics of labour in post-Fordist society. He identified the concept of immaterial labour as a synthesis of the emerging forms of labour that transform the traditional meaning of work in industrial capitalism. Immaterial labour is the labour that produces the information content of a commodity. This information is involved in the direct production process and becomes

objectified as fixed capital. It confronts living labour as an external force and deepens the division between manual and intellectual labour.

Hardt and Negri (2004, 108) contend that in post-Fordist capitalism, the transition from industrial labour to immaterial labour led to a crisis of measurability as it is not possible to have a universal measure of value based on labour time. He emphasizes the importance of reconstructing the labour theory of value and argues that Marx's *Grundrisse* is an important approach for renewing the labour theory of value. In the "Fragment on Machines" (a section of the *Grundrisse*), Marx predicted advanced capitalism's development, describing the moment in which the law of value would be extinguished and labour would no longer be subsumed under the capitalist command (Negri 1988, 97). Negri stresses the importance of Marx's notion of the general intellect (employees), the productive powers of knowlede work that involve social cooperation, scientific knowledge, and technological development (Marx 1973, 706).

Since information work is not separate from matter and nature, the term "immaterial" may be misleading. The activity of the human brain, like other parts of the body, is ran aspect of social production, so there is a danger that the notion of immateriality postulates two substances in the world and can lead us to the abyss of spiritualism and religion (Fuchs 2014a, 252). So, we will not use the concept of immaterial labour here because of its ontological limitation. Digital labour has the characteristics of classical labour. Language and words also have the property of work. Words are the products of humans. Thinking and speaking are the physical dimensions of work, and human relations are the social dimension (Hund and Kirchhoff-Hund 1980). According to Christian Fuchs, who builds on the approach of the philosopher of information Wolfgang Hofkirchner, information is a threefold process of cognition, communication, and cooperation. Fuchs argues that all three are work processes. According to Fuchs (2014a, 2015), cognition is the human brain's work; communication is the work of human groups, and cooperation is the collaborative work of these groups (Fuchs 2014a).

In Fuchs' approach, these three dimensions are dialectically connected and interconnected in a chain of causation. Ideas are the products of cognition, and communication uses this production as its object of work. Meanings are the products of communication, and cooperation uses this product as its object of work. Finally, cooperative work co-creates information products. Based on such assumptions, one can argue that information is a work process (Fuchs 2014a).

Information is a means of production. In the last decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, informational organisations have grown in size, and now the big five digital information companies (Amazon, Apple, Alphabet/Google, Microsoft, Tencent, see the Forbes 2000 List of World's Largest Transnational Corporations for the year 2022[1]). Apple and Alphabet control a large amount of capital. On Facebook and Instagram, ordinary users publish their personal information, which is a form of cognitive work. They objectify their subjective knowledge. They also write comments, like each other, and send messages to each other, which is the communication process. They externalise their knowledge when exchanging of messages with others. The mutual symbolic interaction that involves the objectification of subjective knowledge is communicative work. People on Instagram and Facebook communicate with other users.

Digital work is work that produces digital products on advertising-funded social media platforms. Internet users are unpaid workers who are alienated from their products

---

[1] https://www.forbes.com/lists/global2000, accessed on August 26, 2022.

and work (Fuchs 2014a). Commercial advertising-based Internet platforms like Instagram and Facebook collect, monitor, assess and classify information and data created by users. They create targeted online ads and data commodities that they sell to other companies that buy ads.

According to Fuchs (2014a), by creating social relations, users generate use-values (for themselves and others) and produce use-values for capital. Digital labour produces a digital commodity, a product that is digital in character.

Surplus value is unpaid labour time. The rate of surplus value is calculated by dividing the surplus labour time by the necessary labour time. Marx argued that during the necessary labour time, the workers producs the value of their labour-power, which is the time equivalent to the production of their means of subsistence; during surplus labour time, they continue to produce value but not for themselves, but for capital (Marx 1976, 324-327).

To shorten necessary labour time and increase surplus value, capital must turn more surplus value into fixed capital. The historical result has been the increase of productivity together with the reduction of the average socially necessary labour time (Marx 1973, 706), the average time that is necessary for producing certain commodities. Through this process, the rate of exploitation or surplus value (the proportion of unpaid labour time to paid labour time) increases (Marx 1976, 327). Through rising productivity, workers produce more commodities and value in less time than before.

In the digital age, this process of valorisation diffuses to all communities and blurs the classical division of the workering day between working time and non-working time. In contemporary capitalism, parts of what was traditionally non-working time has been transformed into productive but unpaid labour time (Bueno 2017, 157).

Herbert Marcuse (1955) argues that in the Fordist mode of capitalist production, working time was a time of suffering and the repression of pleasure. In post-Fordism capitalism, joy and labour partially converge, and playtime became productive (Fuchs 2014a). The boundaries between working time and leisure time, labour and play, have become fuzzy and lots of human time tends to be exploited for the sake of the accumulation of capital (Fuchs 2014a).

On commerical social media platforms, users conduct "playbour" (play + labour), capital exploits productive unpaid labour that has produced surplus value, while at the same time the workers enjoy their labour. Users who spend lots of time on commercial social media, generate more information and value and also receive more ads (Fuchs 2014a, 2015). The overall time spent online on corporate social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram is surplus labour-time. Users work entirely free of charge and cannot make money to buy their means of subsistence. Thus, the rate of surplus value of Internet users is extremly high (Fuchs 2017b). The distinction between labour and leisure time is blured on commerical social media. As Dallas Smythe (1977) and Jhally & Livant (1986) argued, advertising-funded media corporations sell audience attention as a commodity to advertisers and generate surplus value.

3. The Commodification of Attention

According to Smythe (1977), on capitalist advertising-funded media, audience time is sold to advertisers. Media companies, in their advertising models, sell audiences as a commodity to advertisers.

Smythe (1977, 22-51) introduced the notion of the audience commodity. He used Marx's terminology to analyse the material aspect of communication (audience labour) and focused on analysis of the creation of surplus value in the context of commercial, advertising-funded mass media.

This framework is also employed by Jhally & Livant (1986). However, they shifted the focus of analysis from the audience commodity to audience attention. They stated that by increasing the total time consumed by watching TV, listening to the radio, or reading the newspaper, which is sold as a commodity, the advertising profit of media corporations will increase.

Internet users produce content (user-generated content) and are involved in creative activities, communication, and community building (Fuchs 2010). By "liking", searching for a hashtag, publishing photos and videos, and releasing data about interests and their socio-demographic status on social media platforms, users create data that enables the sale of targeted ads.

Jhally and Livant (1986) distinguish between necessary watching-time and surplus watching-time. They argue that surplus watching-time is the origin of surplus value. It is revealed in the difference between absolute surplus value and relative surplus value. Internet companies use both absolute and relative surplus value production (Fuchs 2014a, 2015). Social media analytics services measure the audience's attention time. They can calculate and measure the audience's attention and engagements on social media platforms (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2015).

The next section introduces the methodology of a case study we conducted that was based on the theoretical foundations we just outlined.

4. Methodology

In this case study, we use two distinct methods to analyse digital labour on Instagram: Netnography and a self-administered questionnaire. Netnography was first introduced by Kozinets and initially used in online market research (Kozinets 2015, 64). It is a method that is helpful for exploring cultural relations in social networks, understanding the attitudes, thoughts, and actions in this sphere (Toledano 2017), and discovering the cultural and cogitative implications of these behaviors (Borgatti et al. 2009).

Netnography is "essentially based on the observation of textual discourse" (Kozinets 2015, 64) and is a qualitative method that is used to explore online interactions between Internet users (De Lassus and Anido Freire 2014). When conducting a Netnography, we pose research questions, evaluate the appropriate online population, collect data, make a direct copy of people's online communications in a group, and analyse, interpret, and classify the meaning of these communications.

To accompany this method, we also used a self-administered questionnaire. The self-administered questionnaire was formerly known as a fallback method, but with the advent of the Internet it became a viable alternative for collecting information. The main feature of the self-administered questionnaire is that it can be used with different demographic, economic, and educational groups (De Leeuw 2008).

We designed a series of questions in the form of a questionnaire. We asked Persian Instagram users to fill out the questionnaire. Our survey questions were derived from our theoretical foundations. They focused on the topics of the free labour of users on Instagram, the combination of labour and play, social relations on Instagram, etc.

The invitation to participate was posted posted on several popular Persian Instagram pages.679 Instagram users answered these questions.

We have tried to determine the volume of users' free labour on Instagram by asking questions about the amount of time they spend on Instagram for specific activites, the content they create, the use of hashtags and tags of well-known accounts, the sharing of links to the accounts and postings of celebrities, shoutouts, and influencers' posts. We also asked questions about the users' interests and why they use Instagram in

order to analyse the relationship of play and labour and the ideological nature of Instagram. We also asked demographic questions (including job, income, place of residence, level of education, and gender).

Our online questionnaire was visited 1107 times.679 people answered it. The response rate of the questionnaire was 78%. The average response time was seven 7 minutes. 91% of the questionnaires were filled using a mobile phone, 7% using a computer or laptop, and 2% using a tablet. 600 respondents answered all questions. The analysis focused on these 600 users.

4.1. Data

We observed the Persian Instagram as a case for obtaining general information. We selected several pages as a research sample using targeted sampling which is helpful either when identifying a specific population is impossible and expensive, or when the researcher wants to choose a precise sample and compare it to another (Blaikie and Priest 2019).

We observed the pages of Iranian celebrities (including actors and singers), influencers and shoutouts as part of the digital labour on Instagram. A shoutout is an instrument, a factor, and a virtual currency to build popularity (Drenten et al. 2020). Shoutouts are intended to show approval and give other users exposure, and can substantially increase a user's followers (Jang, Han, and Lee 2015). Shoutouts are references in postings to popular social media users, which is often done a spart of social media marketing. Brands connect to popular users and seek to thereby incerase their own social media popularity. Ten pages were chosen based on selective sampling (Table 1).

	Users	Engagement Rate	Average likes per post	Average Comments per post	Average Number of Followers	Number of Following	Activity
Influencers	sadaf_beauty	%15.34	442K	25K	3M	344	Beauty and Cosmetics
	melinataj	11.21%	134K	32K	1.4M	167	Beauty and Cosmetics
	amir_food_review	2.98%	37K	1.1K	1.27M	111	Food
	mohamadaminkarimpor	14.96%	688K	37K	4.8M	208	Comedy
	sogandorg	6.01%	48K	1.3K	817K	22	Beauty and Fun
Users who make Instagram shoutouts	ghazaa_deser	0.66%	2K	43	312K	10	Food
	hame_chiz_baraye	0.14%	3.5K	85	2.38M	23	Beauty, Fashion and Health
	zibaee_salamatii	0.61%	5.7K	96	956K	79	Beauty and Health
	thelookoftehran	0.41%	0.9K	9	207K	3195	Beauty and fashion
	basaligheha	0.18%	4.2K	94	2.35M	28	Beauty, Food, and Health

Table 1: Selected sample of influencers and shoutouts (instrack.app, 2020)

The criteria for selecting users who make Instagram shoutouts were their number of followers, their specific content, and the type of their ads. We chose users make Instagram shoutouts with different numbers of followers because this is significant for determining the difference between the activities of these pages. The selected users work

in a variety of fields including clothing, beauty, and cooking. We reviewed our sample and selected ten shoutout posts in a row and recorded their information (including the content of their posts, the number of likes and comments, and the response rate of the shoutouts' administrators to the comments). We also looked at the pages of the brands that were advertised in shoutouts and noted their characteristics (type of activities and response rates).

There is an evident relation between shoutouts and brands' pages established through tagging and hashtags. By subtracting the number of non-advertising posts from the number of advertising posts that users who make shoutous created, we observed and analysed the performance of the 48 brands that were advertised in shoutout postings. Given that many of these ads are repetitive across different pages, we observed and noted these posts for about one week (September 26 to October 2, 2020).

Influencers' pages were also selected by their activities (including fashion, beauty, humor, and cooking) and their number of followers. We chose Persian-speaking influencers with large numbers of followers. We observed other influencers' pages which have the same activity and considered their similarities. We also analysed #Hashtag and @Tagged on Instagram separately because a significant number of users' activities are conducted using these two keywords.

The distinction between influencers and users who make shoutouts is that the second type of users repost different posts from different pages, including posts from influencers, micro-influencers, stores, and brands pages. For example, while a beauty influencer advertises a cosmetic brand by taking a video of herself doing makeup, users who make shoutouts repost videos and pictures of brands or influencers on their Instagram profile and refer to the celebrities, brands, etc. in question in the form of a tag, a clickable link to their Instagram username (@username). Shoutout postings are intermediaries between consumers and brands. The pages of users who create such postings do not sell products and goods directly to users. Rather, they tag promoted accounts in their postings. Tagging the accounts of brands aims at increasing the number of their followers. Shoutout postings are promoting different products, goods or services, and even other pages.

Finally, we created a self-administered questionnaire designed with questions for ordinary users. The questions were based on our theoretical framework. 600 Instagram users thoroughly responded. We analysed their answers.

5. Digital Labour on Instagram

5.1. Celebrities

A number of celebrities (actors, singers, athletes, and comedians) are active on the Persian Instagram, and some of them have millions of followers, such as a comedian with 14.5 million followers and an actor with 12.5 million. Some of those in the top 50 were not initially celebrities and became famous on Instagram.

The content of most celebrity posts consists of the promotion of their artworks and the introduction of new brand products. In the captions of their posts, they mention their co-workers, and in some posts they share photographs of and tag their family and friends. They also publish selfies and do not refer to any political issues.

Some celebrity posts and stories have a purely advertising function, through which celebrities, as advertisers, use their credibility and popularity to promote and sell commodities. The accounts tagged in these posts are direct references to brands. Some also tag their family and friends in advertising posts, which benefits them by linking

their followers to them, increasing their followers, and consequently increasing their likes and comments.

5.2. Pages of Users who Make Shoutouts

Most shoutout posts were advertisements; and most advertising posts were about beauty and fitness, including themes such as ads for slimming, lip and cheek gel injections, cosmetics, nail implants, dental laminates, laser treatments, tattoos, the removal of excess body fat, nose surgery, hair and eyebrow implants, eyelash extensions, or the promotion of brand clothes and jewelry. They also included foods and luxury goods, and advertise other users who make shoutouts and influencers who have fewer followers.

In advertising posts, the number of responses the users who create shoutouts make to users' comments is considerably low. They only mention the advertised brand name in their captions or tag it without using hashtags (brand pages use different hashtags to increase followers and ultimately sell more products). Shoutout postings often also mark the phone number and addresses of brands in their captions.

Brand pages respond more frequently to users' questions than users who create shoutouts to brands, influencers and celebriteis because they need to communicate directly with users to sell their commodities and have to gain the trust of potential customers. In our observation, we saw many questions and answers about the price of a particular product in the comments, with brand pages usually replying "please direct your question to the admin". Brands do not disclose the price of a product in their posts because they want to make users contact them directly, ask more questions and make more comments.

Users who make shoutout postings usually respond to comments in their non-advertising posts. They sometimes publish entertaining videos or motivational photos to increase their followers' trust, and in these posts usually use hashtags.

5.3. Influencers

Influencers are public figures and third-party venerators who shape an audience's attitudes via blogs, tweets, posts, and stories (Freberg et al. 2011). They have some combination of desirable properties – personal properties like credibility and expertise, and network properties such as connectivity – that allow them to influence others (Gladwell 2000). Influencers are active in advertising in various fields including fashion, makeup, cooking, catering, tourism, and comics.

Influencers, like shoutout postings, mediate between brands and users. Brands decide which influencer is appropriate for advertising their products based on their influence, engagement rate, and their number of followers. Instagram is a strategic social media platform for influencer marketing on which companies promote their brands by employing influencers (Duffy 2017, 139). Influencers are microcelebrities who accumulate followers on social media through sharing textual and visual narratives of their personal daily lives (Abidin 2016, 86). They use Instagram advertising tools such as tags and hashtags to promote a specific brand or product. While branding was initially limited to a small group of influencers, it spread to such an extent that ordinary unpaid users now engage in the same practices (Aires 2020). With the growth of investment in influencer marketing and the specialisation of influencers (Duffy 2017), image-management businesses developed to package and classify influencers with scoring mechanisms.

Influencers sell their followers, or more precisely, their followers' attention, to brands. Influencers' followers are part of their marketing strategies (Aires 2020) and

they need to attract more followers to receive more ads and money from brands. Influencers, directly or indirectly, try to encourage their followers to choose and buy particular products.

Influencers who have more followers can increase their advertising prices, and gain followers by using friendly language to show intimacy and gain their followers' trust. They also publish non-advertising posts and screenshots of their conversations with followers, celebrate the number of followers for every "K", ask their followers to like their posts, leave comments on them, and encourage them to subscribe to their YouTube channels. Influencers also advertise in their stories, participate in competitions sponsored by brands, and invite their followers to participate. They rarely address political and social issues.

5.4. Tags and Hashtags

Instagram provides a tool called "Tag", by which one user can mention another. Many pages tag brands or influencers in their posts. Some users tag other users to increase their followers. For example, a shoutout with fewer followers may tag an influencer in its post, or a user may even repost influencer posts and tag influencer IDs.

Significantly, ordinary users who have a small number of followers also tag the IDs of brands, celebrities, or influencers in their posts. They seek to introduce themselves to other users, increase the number of their followers. By spending time and money, these users conduct unpaid labour. It is arguable that by doing this, they invest into the possibility of becoming bloggers or influencers who earn a living by Internet labour. But not all users who engage in such activities have such an objective, and not all users who want to become famous Internet celebrities or well-known online personalities will not be able to achieve it.

Another tool provided by Instagram is the hashtag (#), which creates a categorisation of different topics. In Instagram's search engine, you can find all the posts that use one hashtag by inserting the hashtag (#) next to a word. Many posts with hashtags are advertisements. In the Instagram search bar, by typing #Chi_Toz (a food brand), we observed approximately 2,000 posts using this hashtag. A significant number of posts were published by ordinary users who used the hashtag character before different words and phrases in their captions. This is advertisement content which benefits brands and influencers.

Ordinary users tag and hashtag popular pages such as brands, celebrities and influencers without payment. In this way, ordinary users are not only advertising these pages, but also the brands which are advertised by these pages.

5.5. Ordinary Users

To create an account on Instagram, a user must first choose between opening a commercial or a regular account. There are generally three kinds of Instagram accounts: personal, creator, and business. In creator and business accounts, users have features such as the possibility to share links in stories (if they have more than 10,000 followers) and access to detailed statistics about their followers' engagement which are not available to ordinary users. This initial difference forms the basis for our analysis of ordinary users on the Instagram platform.

We created a questionnaire. Its content was divided into two major categories: questions about users' unpaid labour, and questions about users' aims of participating on Instagram and the relationship between labour and pleasure/play. Questions of unpaid labour focused on users' participation on Instagram, the amount of time and money they spend on Instagram, the content they produce, their use of hashtags and

tags of popular users (influencers, celebrities, users who make shoutouts, brands), their following of popular users, and how they copy or share popular users' posts.

| Total number of participants	600	Ages	Percentage
Sex	**Percentage**	Under 18	1.34%
Woman	61.81%	From 18 to 28	46.64%
Man	37.19%	From 28 to 38	39.77%
Both	1%	From 38 to 48	8.56%
Martial status	**Percentage**	From 48 to 58	2.18%
Unmarried	62.48%	Over 58	1.51%
Married	35.34%	**Jobs**	**Percentage**
Higest educational achievement	**Percentage**	Unemployed	14.24%
Not graduated from highschool	2.35%	Housewife	7.71%
High school diploma	14.74%	Student	27.97%
Junior undergraduate	6.70%	Self-employed	17.09%
Undergraduate	34.34%	Blue-collar workers	2.52%
Graduate	30.65%	White-collar workers	23.95%
Ph.D.	10.39%	Public or private manager	3.52%
Post Ph.D.	0.84%	Others	3%

Table 2: Demographic features of the conducted survey's respondents

According to the results (table 3), among the 600 ordinary users who answered all the questions of the questionnaire, more than 30% of them do not know that they help popular users making profits by liking and commenting on such users' posts. About 80% of ordinary users follow popular users and visit them daily. About 50% of ordinary users repost or share popular users' posts. About 40% of ordinary users like these posts or leave comments on them. More than 10% of ordinary users use hashtags of brands. 55% of the respondents said that they use Instagram pages for shopping. Our results show that in comparison to many other demographic groups, the groups of unemployed and self-employed respondents more than others make use of hashtags for promoting their pages, referencing brands and celebrities and popular users in their postings. This means that it seems to be especially unemployed and self-employed users who have the idea of earning a living, becoming rich and famous, etc. on the Internet. This results shows that influencer capitalism is a manifestation of the neoliberal transformation of capitalism that has turned individuals into entrepreneurs of the self who often work as freelancers.

Category	Questions	Unemployed N=86	Housewife N=46	Student N=168	Self-employed N=102	Blue-collar worker N=15	White-collar worker N=144	Public or private manager N=21	Others N=18	All respondents
Unpaid Digital labour	Is your page public?	30.6	19.6	15.6	41.2	26.6	19.6	38.1	33.3	25
	Do you use hashtags to make your posts visible?	31.8	19.6	27.5	41.2	6	20.3	14.3	22.2	27.1
	Do you use hashtags of famous brands in your posts?	14.1	15.2	8.98	27.5	0	9.09	19.1	5.5	13.4
	Have you ever tagged popular pages in your posts?	22.4	23.9	18.6	26.5	13.3	13.3	9.52	11.1	18.8
	Have you ever posted a photo of a product you bought on your page?	27.1	10.9	9.58	26.5	0	14.7	23.8	16.7	17
	Have you ever used a specific commercial hashtag to get more followers?	18.8	4.35	7.19	31.4	0	5.59	9.52	5.5	12
	Do you follow popular pages?	61.2	50	46.1	49	26.7	46.2	38.1	38.9	48.2
	Do you view popular pages if you are not a follower of popular pages?	18.8	39.1	32.9	29.4	46.7	28	23.8	27.8	27
	Do you like and comment on popular users' posts?	58.8	56.5	44.3	57.8	20	43.4	47.6	22.2	47
	Have you ever sent popular users' posts to or shared their profiles with others?	60	47.8	58.7	52.9	20	50.4	38.1	44.4	53

Table 3: Unpaid labour on Instagram by job divisions (percentage share of respondents), number of respondents: 600

Our statistics show the high level of users' participation on Instagram, with 75% spending between 30 minutes to 4 hours of their daily time on the platform (table 4). By generating content, they produce commodities that do not belong to them and which Instagram sells to brands. Ordinary users also advertise brands' and celebrities' pages by hash-tagging, copying, tagging, and sharing. They not only advertise these popular pages but also the advertising content of these pages because the content of many popular posts is advertising. Users' attention is also commodified and is sold to brands by popular pages. Ordinary users in this cycle are constantly exposed to advertisements. Each of them is a potential customer of commodities that are advertised on Instagram.
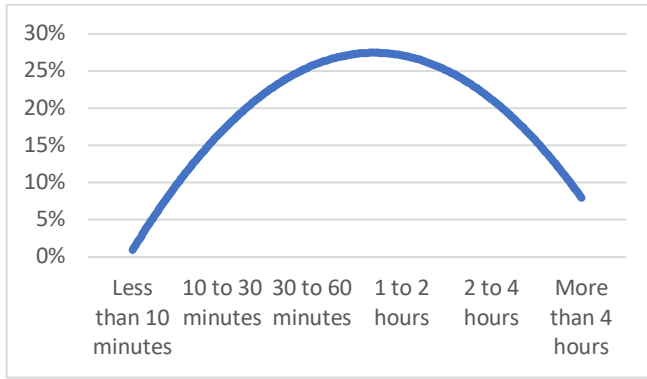
Average time spent on Instagram per day	Percentage
Less than 10 minutes	3.18
10 to 30 minutes	13.90
30 to 60 minutes	22.78
1 to 2 hours	32.33
2 to 4 hours	20.94
More than 4 hours	6.87

Table 4: Average time spent on Instagram by users per day (in percentage), number of respondents: 600

In the second part of the questionnaire, users were asked about their purpose for creating an Instagram page and were asked to tick up to three answers (see table 5). Two options, namely "for entertainment and leisure" (more than 60%) and "to communicate with others and accompany the community" (about 60%), were chosen significantly more than the other options. About 30% answered that they joined Instagram to be informed about brands and to purchase goods and services. These scores suggest that many users simultaneously work on Instagram as users who conduct unpaid digital labour and enjoy the entertainment, shopping and brands on Instagram. 31 percent of the respondents use Instagram as a news platform, so it has not simply a commercial but also a public purpose for them. Since Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram are filtered in Iran, it is understandable that many users who do not have access to these social networks turn to Instagram to get informed about political and social issues and news.

Why have you joined Instagram?	Percentage
For entertainment and leisure	63.17
To get to know brands and shopping	28.33
To communicate with others and participate in communities	59.50
To get informed about political and social issues and news	31.00
To make money	12.00
To become famous	4.00
Others	7.00

Table 5: The purpose of users joining Instagram
number of respondents: 600

The questionnaire also involved a series of statements about users' interests and assessments of Instagram. The statements were presented using a Likert scale (with answers on a scale between 1 for strongly disagree and 5 for strongly agree, see table 6). The results show that more than 72% of users consider Instagram to be precious and practical (rating their overall satisfaction with it at three or above), more than 70% of users like Instagram, and more than 68% of users become upset if it is filtered by the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Users enjoy spending time on Instagram and to participate on this social media platform.

Statements	Average
Instagram is part of my daily activity	2.8
I feel good about telling others that I am an Instagram member	2.5
If I leave Instagram, no one will know about me	2.4
I consider myself a member of the Iranian Instagram community	2.3
I will be upset if Instagram is filtered	3.5
I think that Instagram is a precious and practical application	3.4
I like Instagram	3.3

Table 6: Users' interests and assessment of Instagram
(Answers in a spectrum between 1 [strongly disagree] and 5 [strongly agree]),
number of respondents: 600

Based on Fuchs (2017b), we can say that Instagram users are socially coerced to use Instagram: they use Instagram because so many others do the same. They seek sociality and communication and want to avoid social exclusion and isolation. Instagram presents itself as a form of participatory culture. In advertising itself, it says that gives "people the power to build community", brings "the world closer together", allows users to express themselves "in new ways", helps them to "connect with more people", "build influence" and „share and grow" users' "brand with our diverse, global community"[2]. The consequence is the commodification of the self and of sociality on social media (Fuchs 2021, 2014a).

Our results show that low-income groups spend less time and produce less content on Instagram, with most workers spending 30 minutes to 2 hours per day on the platform. As a result, the lower class has less influence on other users on Instagram.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the online activities of four groups of Instagram workers were analysed: celebrities, influencers, users who make shoutouts, and ordinary users. The first three perform similar advertising functions and act as intermediaries between users and brands. The assets of these groups are their followers and audiences, including their attention. On social media platforms, the attention of users, followers, and audiences is transformed into commodities that can be sold to brands. Instagram users, followers, or audiences also become actual customers and realise the brands' profit by visiting brands' pages and buying their goods and services.

"Influencer marketing" uses social media platforms, particularly Instagram, to advertise and sell goods and services. A remarkable share of advertisements on Instagram is circulated by celebrities, influencers, and users who make shoutouts. Popular pages link ordinary users to brands' pages, which are advertised by them through tags (@) and hashtags (#).

While these first three groups earn money depending upon their number of followers and extent of influence, the fourth group (ordinary users) do not receive any payment and thus works on Instagram completely for free.

Ordinary users work for free and are exploited. As Fuchs (2014a) points out, these users do not own the money that they produce for others. Our analysis shows that

---

[2] https://about.instagram.com, accessed on August 27, 2022.

ordinary users work on Instagram and that a substantial portion of them copies, shares or comments on the pages or posts of influencers, users who make shoutouts, and brands. They also tag these pages and use their hashtags. In this way, users are promoting these pages which is a new form of advertisement and a completely unpaid activities.

Our results show that Instagram use is a combination of work and play/pleasure, which empirically validates. Fuchs' (2014a) argument that the use-value of social media use has to do with entertainment, sociality and the communication with others, while there is also an exchange-value that turns this sociality into a commodity. Furthermore, users are coerced routinely using these platforms in order not to be excluded from social relationships.

References

Abidin, Crystal. 2016. Visibility Labour: Engaging with Influencers' Fashion Brands and #OOTD Advertorial Campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia* 161 (1): 86-100. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177

Aires, Susana. 2020. Laboured Identity: An Analysis of User Branding Practices on Instagram. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 18 (1): 494-507. DOI: http://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v18i1.1142

Blaikie, Norman, and Jan Priest. 2019. *Designing Social Research: The Logic of Anticipation*. London: Polity Press. Third edition.

Borgatti, Stephen P, Ajay Mehra, Daniel J Brass, and Giuseppe Labianca. 2009. Network Analysis in the Social Sciences. *Science* 323 (5916). American Association for the Advancement of Science: 892–95. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1126/science.1165821

Bueno, Claudio Celis. 2017. *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Cleaver, Harry. 2000. *Reading Capital Politically*. Leeds: Anti/Theses.

Dadkhah, Kamran. 2003. From Global Capital to State Capitalism: The Evolution of Economic Thought in Iran, 1875–1925. *Middle Eastern Studies* 39 (4): 140–58.

Drenten J, Gurrieri L, Tyler M. Sexualized Labour in Digital Culture: Instagram Influencers, Porn Chic and the Monetization of Attention. *Gender, Work & Organization* 27(1):41-66. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12354

Duffy, Brooke Erin. 2017. *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*. London: Yale University Press.

Freberg, Karen, Kristin Graham, Karen McGaughey, and Laura A Freberg. 2011. Who Are the Social Media Influencers? A Study of Public Perceptions of Personality. *Public Relations Review* 37 (1): 90-92. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001

Fuchs, Christian. 2021. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction.* London: Sage. Third edition.

Fuchs, Christian. 2017a. Dallas Smythe and Digital Labor. In *The Routledge Companion to Labor and Media*, 51-63. NewYork: Routledge.

Fuchs, Christian. 2017b. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Fuchs, Christian. 2015. *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*. New York: Routledge

Fuchs, Christian. 2014a. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. New York: Routledge.

Fuchs, Christian. 2014b. Theorising and Analysing Digital Labour: From Global Value Chains to Modes of Production. *The Political Economy of Communication* 1 (2). DOI: https://www.polecom.org/index.php/polecom/article/view/19

Fuchs, Christian. 2010. Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet. *The Information Society* 26 (3): 179-196. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1080/01972241003712215

Fuchs, Christian. 2003. Globalization and Self-Organization in the Knowledge-Based Society. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 1 (2): 105-169. DOI: http://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v1i2.9

Gladwell, Malcolm. 2000. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*.

New York: Little Brown.

Grossman, Rachael. 1980. Women's Place in the Integrated Circuit. *Radical America Sommerville* 4 (1): 29-49.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2004. *Multitude*. New York: Penguin.

Harris, Kevan. 2013. The Rise of the Subcontractor State: Politics of Pseudo-Privatization in The Islamic Republic of Iran. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (1): 45-70.

Hearn, Alison, and Stephanie Schoenhoff. 2015. From Celebrity to Influencer: Tracing the Diffusion of Celebrity Value across the Data Stream. In *A Companion to Celebrity*, edited by P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond, 194-213. West Sussex: Wiley Online Library.

Hughes, Kit. 2014. "Work/Place" Media: Locating Laboring Audiences. *Media, Culture & Society* 36 (5): 644-660. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714532981

Hund, Wulf D., and Bärbel Kirchhoff-Hund. 1980. *Soziologie der Kommunikation: Arbeitsbuch zu Struktur und Funktion der Medien: Grundbegriffe und exemplarische Analysen*. Hamburg: Rowohlt.

Jang, Jin Yea, Kyungsik Han, and Dongwon Lee. 2015. No Reciprocity in" Liking" Photos: Analyzing like Activities in Instagram. In *Proceedings of the 26th ACM Conference on Hypertext & Social Media*, 273-282. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/2700171.2791043

Jhally, Sut, and Bill Livant. 1986. Watching as Working: The Valorization of Audience Consciousness. *Journal of Communication* 36 (3): 124–43. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1986.tb01442.x

Kennedy, Helen. 2012. *Net Work: Ethics and Values in Web Design*. NewYork: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kozinets, Robert V. 2015. Netnography. In *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society*, edited by P.H. Ang and R. Mansell, 1-8. New York: Wiley Online Library.

Lassus, Christel De, and N. Anido Freire. 2014. Access to the Luxury Brand Myth in Pop-up Stores: A Netnographic and Semiotic Analysis. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 21 (1): 61-68. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2013.08.005

Lazzarato, Maurizio. 1996. Immaterial Labor. In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, 133-147. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Leeuw, Edith De. 2008. Self-Administered Questionnaires and Standardized Interviews. In *Handbook of Social Research Methods*, edited by Pertti Alasuutari, Leonard Bickman, and Julia Brannen, 313-327. London: Sage.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1955. *Eros and Civilization*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume 1.* New York: Penguin.

Marx, Karl. 1973. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin.

Marx, Karl. 1861–1863. Economic Manuscripts of 1861-1863 http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/economic/index.htm

Marx, Karl. 1845. Theses on Feuerbach. http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm

Mies, Maria. 1986. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. California: Bloomsbury Academic. Third edition.

Negri, Antonio. 1988. *Crisis of the Planner-State: Communism and Revolutionary Organisation.* London: Red Notes.

Ritzer, George, and Zeynep Atalay. 2010. *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.

Smith, Adam. 1977. *The Wealth of Nations*. Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press.

Smythe, Dallas W. 1977. Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1 (3): 1-27.

Smythe, Dallas W. 1981. *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Terranova, Tiziana. 2000. Free Labor. *Social Text* 18 (2): 33-58. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-18-2_63-33

Toledano, Margalit. 2017. Emergent Methods: Using Netnography in Public Relations Research. *Public Relations Review* 43 (3): 597-604. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.03.007

Williams, Raymond. 1983. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society.* New York: Oxford University Press.

About the Authors

Forouzan Yazdanipour
Forouzan Yazdanipour is a master's degree researcher in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tehran. Her research focuses on the relationship between political economy and cultural studies. Other research interests include digital capitalism and the exploitation of digital labour.

Hady Faramarzi
Hady Faramarzi is a PhD researcher in the Department of Economic Development and Planning at Tarbiat Modares University. His research focuses on Marxist political economy and economic history and political economy.

Abdollah Bicharanlou
Abdollah Bicharanlou is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Tehran. His research focuses on cultural studies and communications.