



A Study on the Current State of Digital Labor among Small-Scale Influencers on Xiaohongshu: An Analysis Based on the Political Economy of Communication

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Abstract. With the rapid development of social media platforms, an increasing number of small-scale influencers are engaging in digital labor through content creation, yet their labor rights and economic security issues have not received adequate attention. This paper, grounded in the perspective of political economy of communication, systematically analyzes the current state of digital labor among small-scale influencers on the Xiaohongshu platform. It reveals the challenges they face, including labor exploitation, emotional labor burdens, and the lack of labor rights protections, and offers corresponding solutions and recommendations. Through this study, we aim to provide valuable insights for improving the working environment and enhancing the professional well-being of small-scale influencers.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu; small-scale influencers; digital labor; political economy of communication; labor rights

1 Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of the digital economy, social media platforms have become important spaces for users to create content and engage in interactions[1]. Xiaohongshu, as a leading social e-commerce platform in China, has attracted a large number of young users, particularly female users, making it a key

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venue for showcasing lifestyles and sharing consumer experiences. On this platform, content creators share their lives and recommend products to attract followers and generate traffic, thereby earning income. However, as the platform's commercialization and traffic-oriented mechanisms have intensified, content creators on Xiaohongshu, especially small-scale influencers, are increasingly facing labor-related challenges. These challenges include income instability, high labor intensity, and difficulties in achieving autonomy under the platform's control. This phenomenon has sparked widespread academic interest in digital labor and the power dynamics underlying it.

The concept of digital labor was first introduced by Tiziana Terranova, referring to the immaterial labor that users perform on digital platforms, such as content creation and information sharing[2]. While intangible, this labor is crucial to the economic value of these platforms. Terranova emphasized that the essence of digital labor lies in its ambiguous position between unpaid and paid labor, a labor form that is central to the development of digital capitalism. As research has progressed, scholars have begun to explore issues of labor exploitation and control within the platform economy. Scholars like Christian Fuchs have pointed out that digital platforms employ algorithms and data analytics to monitor and control user behavior and labor, thereby facilitating capital accumulation and maximizing profits. In this process, users act as "workers," contributing content and data, while the platform capitalizes on this content and data for commercial gain.

In the Chinese context, Xiaohongshu serves as a typical example of a social e-commerce platform, and its impact on content creators, particularly small-scale influencers, has attracted growing scholarly attention. Some researchers have analyzed the commercial operations of the Xiaohongshu platform and its effects on content creators, highlighting that the platform, through traffic allocation and content recommendation algorithms, reinforces its control over influencers. This control often results in a discrepancy between the labor intensity of these influencers and their financial returns, revealing their vulnerable position within the platform economy, especially for small-scale influencers whose creative flexibility and economic gains are often tightly controlled by the platform[3]. However, existing research tends to focus more on large-scale influencers and the overall operation of the platform economy, with insufficient attention given to small-scale influencers. Although these influencers may lack the significant influence of larger counterparts, they often constitute the backbone of content creation, bearing greater survival pressures and

labor exploitation. Therefore, this study aims to explore the current state of digital labor among small-scale influencers on Xiaohongshu, using the theoretical framework of political economy of communication. This research seeks to uncover the power relations and economic structures within the platform economy, providing theoretical support for understanding and improving the labor conditions of this group. This not only deepens our understanding of Xiaohongshu's operational mechanisms but also offers a theoretical basis for enhancing the protection of digital laborers' rights and promoting greater platform responsibility.

2 Theoretical Framework of Political Economy of Communication

2.1 Basic Concepts of Political Economy of Communication

The political economy of communication, as an academic discipline, originated from a critical analysis of the capitalist communication system, aiming to reveal the power relations between media and capital. One of the foundational figures, Dallas Smythe, introduced the concept of the "audience commodity," highlighting the role of audiences as commodities in the process of capital accumulation. The core concern of the political economy of communication lies in how capital achieves economic gains by controlling the flow of information and the production of content, and how this control impacts social structures and cultural production. With the rapid advancement of globalization and information technology, the political economy of communication has gradually expanded to include the analysis of new media platforms, with a particular focus on how capital operates within the digital economy. This theory emphasizes that communication is not merely the transmission of information but also a process of capital accumulation and power operation, where capital consolidates its dominant position in society by controlling information flows, production tools, and labor processes. In this context, the political economy of communication provides crucial theoretical tools for understanding the power structures and labor relations within modern digital platforms, especially social media.

2.2 Application of Political Economy of Communication to Digital Labor

With the widespread adoption of the internet and digital technologies, the concept of digital labor has gradually become a focal point of research within the political

economy of communication. Digital labor refers to the work that users perform on digital platforms, which typically includes content creation, information sharing, and data generation. Despite its diverse and intangible forms, this labor is critical to the economic value of platforms. In the study of digital labor, scholars in the political economy of communication have focused on how platforms use technological means such as algorithms and data analytics to control the labor processes of users in order to achieve capital accumulation. For platforms, users are not only consumers but also workers; every click, share, and piece of content they create provides the platform with monetizable data and traffic. Through this mechanism, platforms exploit the labor of users without compensation or with minimal compensation, a new form of exploitation within digital capitalism. This mode of unpaid or underpaid digital labor reveals new trends and strategies of contemporary capitalism in the information society[4].

2.3 Analysis of Xiaohongshu Platform through Political Economy of Communication

As a typical social e-commerce platform, Xiaohongshu fully applies the principles of the political economy of communication in its business model. Xiaohongshu deeply engages in the production processes of content creators through algorithmic recommendations, traffic allocation, and content review mechanisms, thereby achieving control and exploitation of influencer labor[5]. The platform controls the distribution of traffic through algorithms, making it highly uncertain for small-scale influencers to gain exposure and income[6]. Meanwhile, Xiaohongshu directly profits from the content production of influencers through its advertising and e-commerce business, while influencers often find themselves in a precarious position where their labor intensity does not correspond to their income[7]. This power structure not only reveals the economic relationship between the platform and influencers but also reflects Xiaohongshu's operational model within the framework of digital capitalism, where the platform maximizes its capital accumulation by controlling the content production process while shifting risks and uncertainties onto the influencers[8]. The perspective of the political economy of communication helps us understand how Xiaohongshu, through both technological and economic means, dominates content production and exposes the labor challenges and power imbalances faced by influencers in this process[9].

3 **The Current State of Digital Labor for Small-Scale Influencers on Xiaohongshu**

3.1 **Definition and Characteristics of Small-Scale Influencers**

Small-scale influencers on Xiaohongshu are typically content creators with a follower count ranging from 10,000 to 100,000. While they do not have as large a following as larger influencers, they benefit from higher engagement rates and specialized content in specific domains, which allows them to maintain a relatively stable audience. Their content primarily focuses on vertical fields such as beauty, fashion, and lifestyle, granting them significant influence within these niches. Compared to larger influencers, small-scale influencers tend to produce more personalized content, integrating their unique characteristics and life experiences to create a sense of authenticity and relatability. Additionally, small-scale influencers place great importance on interacting with their followers, maintaining close connections through comments, direct messages, and live streaming. This high level of interaction not only helps to strengthen follower loyalty but also boosts the visibility and engagement rates of their content.

Table 1. Comparison of Follower Count and Engagement Rate Among Different Types of Influencers on Xiaohongshu

Category	Follower Count	Typical Content Type	Engagement Rate (%)
Micro-influencers	< 10,000	Personal diary, niche hobbies	10-15%
Small-scale	10,000-100,000	Beauty tutorials, fashion tips	7-10%
Medium-scale	100,000-500,000	Lifestyle, fitness, travel	5-7%

As shown in Table 1, while small-scale influencers have fewer followers compared to medium or large influencers, their engagement rates are relatively high, particularly within vertical niches. This higher engagement rate provides them with a competitive edge in brand collaborations and advertising, as brands are more inclined to work with influencers who can precisely reach targeted audiences and generate high levels of interaction. Additionally, the content types that small-scale influencers often

produce, such as beauty tutorials and fashion advice, are highly practical and instructional, effectively attracting and retaining specific target audiences.

3.2 The Digital Labor Process of Small-Scale Influencers

The digital labor process for small-scale influencers can be divided into three main stages: content creation, social interaction, and meeting platform requirements. In the content creation stage, influencers need to engage in creative ideation, planning, shooting, and post-production, a process that often requires a significant amount of time and effort to ensure the quality and appeal of the content. In the social interaction stage, influencers actively engage with their followers by responding to comments, direct messages, and participating in live streams. This interaction not only strengthens follower loyalty but also enhances the visibility and engagement of the content. Regarding platform requirements, Xiaohongshu’s algorithm plays a crucial role in promoting influencers’ content. Influencers must continuously adjust their content strategies to adapt to changes in the platform’s algorithm, in order to maintain or even increase their traffic and visibility.

Table 2. Analysis of the Digital Labor Process for Small-Scale Influencers on Xiaohongshu

Stage	Activities	Challenges
Content Creation	Ideation, production, editing	High time investment, requires creativity
Social Interaction	Commenting, direct messaging, streaming	High emotional labor, time-consuming
Platform Requirements	Adapting to algorithms, tracking trends	Uncertainty, requires constant adjustment

Table 2 highlights the main activities and challenges faced by small-scale influencers in their digital labor process. The content creation stage requires influencers to invest considerable time and creativity to ensure that the output is attractive and of high quality. During the social interaction stage, influencers spend significant time engaging with followers, which is not only part of the emotional labor involved but also directly impacts content visibility and follower loyalty. In terms of

meeting platform requirements, influencers must constantly monitor changes in the platform’s algorithm and trending topics, adjusting their content strategies to secure more traffic and exposure. This process is filled with uncertainty, and the influencers’ efforts do not always result in returns commensurate with their investment.

3.3 Income and Economic Model of Small-Scale Influencers

The income sources of small-scale influencers can be divided into two main categories: direct income and indirect income. Direct income includes brand collaborations, paid advertisements, and fan donations, which are typically the primary sources of revenue for influencers. Brand collaborations and advertisements depend on the influencer’s follower count and engagement rate, while fan donations reflect the audience’s recognition and support of the influencer’s content. However, these income streams are often unstable, particularly when opportunities for brand collaborations decrease or when fan donations fluctuate. Indirect income includes revenue from traffic monetization and brand promotion. This type of income depends on the influencer’s content traffic and followers' purchasing power, typically achieved through platform revenue-sharing mechanisms or commissions. However, the uncertainty of indirect income is significant, especially when platform algorithm changes or content exposure declines, which can severely impact the influencer’s income.

Table 3. Analysis of Income Sources and Stability for Small-Scale Influencers

Income Source	Examples	Stability
Direct Income	Brand collaborations, paid ads, tips	Moderatevaries with partnerships
Indirect Income	Traffic monetization, brand promotion	Low, dependent on engagement metrics

As shown in Table 3, the income sources of small-scale influencers are diverse, but their stability is relatively fragile. Direct income is moderately stable, depending on the frequency and success of brand collaborations and the consistency of fan donations, leading to significant fluctuations in the influencer’s revenue. Indirect income is highly dependent on the influencer’s traffic performance and the ability to convert followers into buyers, further increasing the uncertainty of income. For

small-scale influencers, maintaining stable traffic and high engagement rates on the platform is crucial to ensuring sustainable income, making this one of their primary economic challenges.

4 The Digital Labor Dilemma of Small-Scale Influencers on Xiaohongshu

4.1 Labor Exploitation and Control

Small-scale influencers on the Xiaohongshu platform face significant challenges related to labor exploitation and control. The platform exerts strict control over the content creation activities of influencers through algorithms and content rules. For example, a beauty influencer with approximately 50,000 followers experienced a drastic reduction in her post's exposure to less than 20% of its usual reach due to her content failing to align with the platform's trending keywords, severely impacting her advertising revenue. Influencers often need to adjust their creative direction based on the platform's recommendation algorithm, compelling them to cater to the platform's preferences. In this context, despite investing substantial time and effort, the income of influencers is often disproportionate to the intensity of their labor. Approximately 50% of influencers earn between 0 and 1,000 RMB per month, while they typically spend over 60 hours per week on content creation and engagement. Only about 15% of influencers earn between 10,000 and 50,000 RMB per month[10]. The imbalance between income and labor reflects the exploitative nature of the platform's treatment of influencer labor, exacerbating their economic instability.

4.2 Emotional Labor and Psychological Pressure

Small-scale influencers are not only required to consistently produce high-quality content but also to maintain close emotional connections with their followers, which imposes significant emotional labor pressure. To retain follower loyalty, influencers spend several hours daily responding to comments and engaging in private messages. For instance, a lifestyle influencer with 80,000 followers spends 3-4 hours daily interacting with followers, experiencing constant anxiety about follower attrition. As the platform's algorithm frequently changes and the distribution of traffic remains uncertain, influencers' psychological pressure intensifies, particularly when their content fails to meet expected outcomes[11]. Many small-scale influencers have

reported experiencing severe psychological stress due to poor traffic performance, with some even considering abandoning their careers. This psychological burden not only affects influencers' quality of life but may also lead to burnout, further diminishing their creative motivation.

4.3 Labor Rights and Protection Issues

The lack of labor rights and social protection for small-scale influencers is also a critical issue that cannot be overlooked[12]. Despite the significant time and effort invested by influencers on the platform, their work is not legally protected. Xiaohongshu typically does not offer formal labor contracts or social security, meaning that influencers lack necessary financial support when facing health issues or unexpected events. For instance, a full-time influencer developed severe health problems from prolonged desk work and had to suspend content creation, during which she had no income. Influencers may also encounter copyright disputes and infringement issues in their creative process, but often find themselves at a disadvantage due to the lack of legal assistance[18]. Many small-scale influencers struggle to resolve copyright disputes through legal channels, further exposing their vulnerability in terms of labor rights protection.

5 Solutions and Recommendations from the Perspective of Political Economy of Communication

5.1 Enhancing Platform Responsibility and Transparency

To address issues of labor exploitation and control, the Xiaohongshu platform should assume greater responsibility and enhance operational transparency. The platform could optimize its algorithm to reduce excessive interference in content production, allowing a more diverse range of content to gain visibility. For instance, the platform could introduce more human-curated recommendation mechanisms, reducing the absolute control of algorithms and encouraging influencers to create content that reflects their personal style. The platform should make traffic distribution rules transparent and establish a traffic assurance mechanism to ensure that influencers receive traffic and income commensurate with their labor. Additionally, the platform could regularly release transparent reports on traffic and income, helping influencers better understand their content performance and revenue. These measures would not

only help mitigate income volatility but also enhance influencers' confidence in content creation, thus fostering a more equitable creative environment.

5.2 Psychological Support and Rationalization of Emotional Labor

To alleviate emotional labor and psychological pressure, the platform should provide comprehensive psychological support services to influencers. Regularly organizing psychological counseling and stress management courses could offer professional mental health assistance. The platform could also introduce "emotional labor management" tools to help influencers automate the management of certain engagement tasks, such as auto-responding to comments or sending periodic interaction reminders, thus reducing the burden of emotional labor. Automation tools can effectively lower the intensity of emotional labor, improving influencers' job satisfaction. Influencers should also set reasonable work goals and time plans to reduce psychological pressure stemming from traffic anxiety or negative comments, thereby maintaining mental health and enhancing career satisfaction.

5.3 Establishing Influencer Rights Protection Mechanisms

To safeguard influencers' labor rights, the platform should collaborate with the government and relevant institutions to establish a comprehensive social security system, including basic protections such as health insurance and unemployment insurance. These safeguards can provide necessary support for influencers when they encounter health issues or accidents during work. In some countries, the social security mechanism for digital laborers has already seen initial implementation, such as offering basic health and unemployment insurance for freelancers. Xiaohongshu could draw on these experiences to advocate for the enactment of relevant laws and regulations, clearly defining the labor relationship between influencers and the platform, ensuring that influencers' labor rights are legally protected. The platform could also provide standardized contract templates, ensuring that influencers enjoy their rightful benefits during content creation, and offer legal support in areas such as copyright protection and content review. Through these measures, not only could the platform improve influencers' job security, but it could also set positive norms and standards for the digital content creation industry.

6 Conclusion

This paper, through the lens of the political economy of communication, provides a comprehensive exploration of the current state of digital labor among small-scale influencers on the Xiaohongshu platform, revealing the challenges faced by this group within the platform's ecosystem. As platform economies continue to thrive, small-scale influencers are required not only to constantly adapt to shifting platform algorithms but also to contend with issues such as disproportionate income relative to their labor, heavy emotional labor burdens, and a lack of labor rights protections. These challenges not only exacerbate the economic instability of influencers but also negatively impact their mental health and career development. Against this backdrop, this paper proposes recommendations such as enhancing platform transparency and accountability, providing systematic psychological support, and establishing comprehensive labor rights protection mechanisms to foster a more equitable and sustainable environment for content creation. Through this study, we aim to draw greater attention from academics, platform administrators, and policymakers to the rights of digital laborers, encouraging the development of relevant policies and improvements in platform governance. Ultimately, this could promote the healthy development of the digital content creation industry and lead to more secure and mutually beneficial relationships between platforms and influencers.

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