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A Critical Examination of Emotional Labour and Emotional Capital in Social Media Interaction

Abstract: This study examines the concepts of emotional labour and emotional capital in the digital space. Drawing on Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labour, it discusses how users apply their emotional expressions in social networks as a performative act that produces social capital, economic value and algorithmic visibility. At this point, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theories provide a framework for analyzing the effects of digital emotional labour on field-specific power dynamics and social stratification. The study explores how emotional capital accumulates, circulates and transforms into other forms of capital in social networks. It examines how inequalities in the digital space are reinforced through algorithmic governance and capitalist structures, and critically evaluates the role of digital labour in the capital accumulation process. It is concluded that digital labour commodifies users and transforms them into a mechanism that reproduces social inequalities.

Keywords: emotional labour; digital labour; emotional capital; digital culture; digital sociology.

Introduction

Emotional labour was first conceptualised by Arlie Hochschild in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Hochschild discussed the service sector, particularly flight attendants and customer service representatives, as workplaces where courtesy is enforced and emotions are managed and suppressed to ensure customer satisfaction.[1] With digitalization, the domain of emotional labour has expanded beyond traditional workplaces to social networks, where individuals consciously or unconsciously engage in emotional labour to build social connections and increase their visibility. In networks such as Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok and LinkedIn, users adopt emotional expression not only as a form of personal interaction but also as a performative act that generates social capital, economic value and algorithmic visibility. This has led to the emergence of digital emotional labour, where emotions are commodified and sacrificed to digital capitalism.[2]

[1] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (University of California Press, 2003).

[2] Nick Srnicek, "The Challenges of Platform Capitalism: Understanding the Logic of a New Business Model," *Juncture* 23, no. 4 (2017): 254–57; Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Profile Books, 2019).

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As digital spaces continue to shape interpersonal communication and relationships, the ways in which emotions are expressed and maintained in online environments emerges as a new research topic. By introducing the concepts of 'emotional labour' and 'emotional capital', this study examines the accumulation and exchange of emotional capital in the digital space and addresses the digital emotional labour that users spend on networks. In addition, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theses are used to analyze emotional capital in social networks. During the analysis, it is critically examined how digital emotional labour is shaped by field-specific power dynamics and how emotional capital functions as a form of social stratification in the digital economy. The study adopts a theoretical and conceptual approach drawing on Bourdieu's sociology, contemporary critical theories on digital labour, emotional labour and digital capitalism. Within the scope of the study, the following basic questions are sought to be answered:

- How do social networks function as emotional spaces where emotional labour is performed and rewarded?
- How is emotional capital accumulated, circulated and transformed into other forms of capital in social networks?
- What are the power dynamics and inequalities embedded in the digital economy and how do they reinforce existing social stratification?

While seeking answers to these questions, the study is also aimed at presenting an innovative theoretical perspective on the commodification, regulation and consumption of digital and emotional labour in social networks. The study examines multiple social network examples and comprehensively analyzes the production of emotional labour, the accumulation and exchange of emotional capital in the digital sphere within the framework of Bourdieu's theories.

Labour of emotion

Emotional labour in social media refers to the conscious and subconscious efforts individuals make to express and react to their emotions in networks. It involves the creation of emotional expressions and the management of emotional responses to interactions in the online environment. At this point, Hochschild's theory of emotional labour provides a basic framework for understanding how emotions are regulated, performed and commodified. However, in the digital age, emotional labour has extended beyond traditional workplace settings into decentralized and algorithmically managed spaces.

Unlike traditional employment structures, emotional labour in social networks operates under informal economies where social media companies extract value without any remuneration (Table #1). This has created an unequal system in which users perform digital emotional labour for free, while the networks turn it into large-scale financial gain. Users perform unpaid labour for social media companies by producing all the content on the network, while emotional experiences are converted into data and

turned into economic capital. All commercial social networks, on the other hand, make financial gains from emotional interactions through the targeted advertising model.

Emotional labour is the effort applied to express emotions in interpersonal communication and the planning of this effort.[3] Hochschild defined emotional labour as the process of managing emotions and expressions to meet the emotional requirements of a job.[4] According to another definition, emotional labour is the act of expressing emotions appropriate to the situation.[5] In the 19th and 20th centuries, industrial labour was the dominant form of production. However, since the 1990s, as the importance of industrial labour has declined, the type of labour that produces intangible products such as information, communication and relationships has come to the fore.[6] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argued that this new form of labour involves the production of certain emotions.[7] In this process, especially in the service and entertainment sectors, the production of emotions such as comfort, satisfaction, excitement and passion was defined as emotional labour. Emotional labour has a decentralized structure that can be produced anywhere without being tied to a specific place. For example, flight attendants, call centre workers, fast food and supermarket workers are among the occupational groups that directly produce emotional labour. The most important qualities that employers expect from employees in such jobs are strong social skills, effective communication, a positive attitude and a smiling face.[8] Hochschild argued that with the decline of industrial production and the rise of the service sector, the ability to deal with people, the ability to manage and direct emotions has become more important for many professions.[9] Employees in the service sector have to convey positive emotions to consumers while performing their profession. If emotion management is carried out for a fee, this process is called emotional labour.[10]

Emotional labour in the digital space has also led to the emergence of emotional capital, where individuals accumulate value through emotional performances. Unlike face-to-face communication, social networks encourage emotional self-presentation by users. Deliberate management of emotions is required to create a desirable online identity. The competitive nature of social networks based on visibility often emphasizes emotional exaggeration and over-emotional performance. This raises the following questions.

- Is emotional authenticity possible in algorithmically managed spaces?

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[3] J. Andrew Morris and Daniel C. Feldman, "The Dimensions, Antecedents, and Consequences of Emotional Labour," *Academy of Management Review* 21, no. 4 (1996): 986–1010.

[4] Alicia A. Grady, "Emotion Regulation in the Workplace: A New Way to Conceptualize Emotional Labour," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 5 (2000): 95–110.

[5] Blake E. Ashforth and Ronald H. Humphrey, "Emotional Labour in Service Roles: The Influence of Identity," *Academy of Management Review* 18, no. 1 (1993): 88–115.

[6] Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, 2004).

[7] Negri and Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

[8] Negri and Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

[9] Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

[10] Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

- How do social networks condition users to produce emotional content for interaction?

For example, influencers constantly engage in emotional labour by not only producing content but also curating their online identities to develop social relationships with their followers. The expectation to be constantly engaging, positive and emotionally available increases the burden of emotional labour. Similarly, temporary workers, such as ride-hailing drivers and food delivery couriers, engage in emotional labour to achieve positive ratings that directly affect earning potential. The visibility of the number of interactions on networks inevitably pushes both influencers and ordinary users to receive more interactions, making it inevitable that content is produced with the concern for interaction.

Digital labour and targeted advertising policies

The main view in digital labour studies is that the capital accumulation model that dominates the internet exploits the unpaid labour of users. Nevertheless, two main perspectives have emerged in the field. The first perspective draws a rather optimistic framework, emphasizing the economic and social opportunities offered by digital labour. According to this view, digital labour allows individuals to spend their leisure time in a productive and enjoyable way.[11] Therefore, Shirky argued that digital volunteering is not a type of labour but a creative leisure activity.[12] This view positions users involved in the digital labour process as voluntary participants or 'micro-entrepreneurs'.

Christian Fuchs, a leading figure in the literature, draws attention to the fact that users, especially those engaged in content production in social networks, are not at the center of the profits generated by social media companies while creating value for these networks.[13] Digital labour is usually an unpaid activity performed by users of the internet and social networks, from which websites and social networking companies make profit.[14] According to Fuchs, the internet hosts different types of labour and these types of labour are based on various forms of exploitation.[15] While highly paid employees of Internet companies are defined as the 'digital labour aristocracy', low-paid precarious knowledge workers and Internet users who perform completely unpaid labour are also part of this structure. In addition, slave labourers who mine the minerals required for electronic devices stand out as the invisible labour force of the digital economy.[16]

[11] Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (Penguin, 2010).

[12] Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*.

[13] Christian Fuchs, "Labour in Informational Capitalism," *The Information Society* 26, no. 3 (2010): 176–96; Christian Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (Routledge, 2014); Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (Sage, 2018).

[14] Antonio A. Casilli, "Digital Labour Studies Go Global: Toward A Digital Decolonial Turn," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3934–3954.

[15] Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*; Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[16] Christian Fuchsand Sebastian Sevignani, "What Is Digital Labour? What Is Digital Work? What's Their Difference? And Why Do These Questions Matter For Understanding Social Media?" *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 11, no. 2 (2013): 237–93.

Digital communication is an important opportunity for marginalized subcultures that cannot find a place in traditional media to be seen by the wider society.[17] Social networks offer a new media environment for societies, especially in the face of government restrictions, censorship and commercial limitations.[18] Therefore, Manuel Castells argues that the architecture of the network enables widespread access for everyone.[19] According to Castells, social inequalities can be eliminated since everyone who can connect to the network can benefit from its power of expression.[20] Furthermore, the traditional media consumer model has been replaced by a new producer-consumer model through the internet and social networks.[21] This has enabled network users to interact with their social circles, form online communities, and access network-based resistance opportunities. According to Henry Jenkins, the main feature of social networks is their scalability,[22] and since the media flow is actively created by users, networks enhance participatory cultural opportunities.[23] Jenkins explains the participatory potential of networks as users interacting with each other, forming communities and creating content through the network. [24] However, Fuchs challenges Jenkins' claim, arguing that users have no say or rights in the ownership of social networks, the management of material interests, or economic decision-making processes, and therefore networks cannot provide a participatory platform.[25] John Hartley also argues that as the number of social networks increases, so will the opportunities for participatory democracy, since users can not only consume content on networks but also produce it.[26] Nico Carpentier states that full participation can be achieved regardless of ownership participation.[27] Fuchs, on the other hand, argues that fully participatory media democracy is only possible with property democracy.[28] According to Fuchs, an internet dominated by companies that accumulate capital by

[17] Andreas Oldenbourg, "Digital Freedom and Corporate Power in Social Media," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2022): 383–404.

[18] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[19] Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.

[20] Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.

[21] Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn, *Democracy and New Media* (The MIT Press, 2003).

[22] Henry Jenkins, "What Happened Before Youtube?," in *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, ed. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (Polity, 2009), 109–25.

[23] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in A Networked Culture* (New York University Press, 2013).

[24] Jenkins, "What Happened Before Youtube?"

[25] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[26] John Hartley, *Digital Futures of Cultural and Media Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

[27] Nico Carpentier, *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle* (Intellect, 2011).

[28] Christian Fuchs, *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (Routledge, 2008); Christian Fuchs, "Labour in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet," *The Information Society* 26, no. 3 (2010): 176–96; Christian Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies* (Routledge, 2011); Christian Fuchs, "Dallas Smythe Today – The Audience Commodity, The Digital Labour Debate, Marxist Political Economy and Critical Theory," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 10, no. 2 (2012): 692–40; Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*; Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

commodifying and exploiting users can never be participatory.[29] For the vast majority of users, social networks are monopolized by large companies that subject them to their own hegemony.[30] Due to the monopoly of social networks, users are dependent on the companies that own and manage them. This situation provides the companies in question with the opportunity for uncontrolled intervention.

The critical view bases its main argument on the economic infrastructure of the internet and social networks on the exploitation of the unpaid digital labour of its users. Dallas Smythe's notion of the spectator commodity has been transformed in the context of social media into a big data commodity produced by the digital labour of internet users.[31] Smythe introduced the concept of audience commodity to analyze the advertizing model in which viewers are sold to advertisers as commodities.[32] In the capitalist system, the media reduces the audience to the status of consumers of advertisements and commodities and creates the phenomenon of audience commodity by commodifying the audience. Audience commodity is formed by media companies selling the interest of the audience to advertisers. Smythe explains the audience commodity as follows: "You, the members of the audience, donate your unpaid working time and in return you receive programme material and explicit advertisements."[33] According to Smythe, mass media produce consumers for capitalism, and what the capital-owned media produce is not content but audience power.[34] The mass, which was considered an audience in the past, has become a part of a new form of exploitation called "prosumer commodity". Although the phenomenon of exploitation continues, its form and dimensions have changed over time.

In commercial social networks, users constantly create new content, interact with existing content, connect with other users and join various communities or create new communities. In this process, advanced artificial intelligence algorithms record and track users' personal data and online activities. The collected data is then analyzed and arranged into categories such as gender, age, interests, socio-economic status and financial purchasing power. While users leave digital footprints every moment they spend on social media, this data allows social media companies to obtain comprehensive information about them.[35] Therefore, commercial social networks are a system built on user labour, and the exploitation of this labour is one of the main elements that increases capital accumulation. The capital accumulation model adopted by corporatized social media operates by using the unpaid labour of internet users

[29] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[30] Beate Rössler, *Autonomy: An Essay on the Life Well-Lived* (John Wiley, 2021).

[31] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[32] Dallas Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977): 1–27; Dallas Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada* (Ablex, 1981).

[33] Smythe, *Dependency Road*, 233.

[34] Dallas Smythe, "Culture, Communication 'Technology' and Canadian Policy," in *Counterclockwise: Perspectives on Communication*, ed. Thomas Guback (Westview, 1990), 306.

[35] Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*; Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

and selling the data they produce, as well as information about their behaviour, as commodities to advertisers.

Algorithms contribute to the ability of social networks to publish personalized advertisements through targeted advertising and thereby generate revenue for the network. In addition, they record and analyze user data in order to provide personalized advertisements in line with users' emotions, preferences and behaviours. Network algorithms therefore play an important role in shaping users' emotional experiences by tailoring ads to individual preferences, behaviours and emotions. Advertisers effectively use targeted advertising to encourage users to interact with content. The emotional impact of targeted advertising extends to users' purchasing behaviour.

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology and emotional capital

Pierre Bourdieu defines the field as a structured social space with its own rules, power relations and forms of capital.[36] The field is an arena of struggle in which actors compete for specific resources, and the logic of each field determines who holds power, how resources circulate, and which forms of practice are rewarded or devalued. Fields serve as arenas where individuals and groups compete for different forms of capital. Social space consists of various fields; therefore, it is incorrect to speak of a singular social life. Fields are interwoven, interrelated, and interconnected. Bourdieu's metaphor of the game conceptualizes fields as structured like a game. The fundamental prerequisite for entering a field is that the individual perceives the game as valuable and adheres to its rules.[37] What determines the rules of the field is the dominant class's designation of whatever is most advantageous to itself as the legitimate way of life within that field. The rules of the game are not fixed; if an individual possesses the necessary competence, they can alter these rules. As one begins to ascend within the field, they gain the ability to shape it.[38]

Algorithms shape the flow of emotional capital through content moderation and interaction metrics. Emotional capital is not equally accessible; certain emotions and users hold greater legitimacy. Users within the field compete to accumulate emotional capital and convert it into social, cultural, and economic advantages. However, not all users enter the field with equal resources.

The concept of habitus refers to the internalized social structures that shape individuals' thoughts, actions, and emotional responses.[39] Habitus is a product of an individual's historical and social positioning and is shaped by the conditions in which they exist. It teaches individuals where and how to act. While habitus shapes individuals, it can also be shaped by their actions. Within habitus, there are predefined structures such as family, social environment, and the culture in which one is raised.

[36] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of the Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[37] Pierre Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[38] Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State* (Polity Press, 2014).

[39] Bourdieu, *Outline of the Theory of Practice*.

However, individuals can add to these structures themselves. The ability to intervene in existing structures lies within the individual. Bourdieu argues that individuals engage in actions aimed at increasing their power and influence in every field they inhabit.[40] Even if this field is the family, an individual's actions aimed at increasing their power and status within the family are driven by the need to maintain their position in that field. The individual is constantly in pursuit of power and prestige, but the way in which they engage in this pursuit is shaped by habitus. In a sense, it is determined by the structures and patterns acquired through family and education.

Individuals do not enter the emotional field as neutral agents. Instead, they are predisposed to act, feel, and express their emotions in specific ways based on their social background. Therefore, we can speak of the presence of habitus in digital spaces as a set of internalized dispositions that shape how individuals engage with emotional labour and emotional capital. Just as habitus is shaped by past experiences, users can also internalize platform-specific emotional approaches. Those who successfully adapt to the trends and tendencies of the network are more likely to accumulate emotional capital.

One of Bourdieu's most influential contributions to the field of sociology is his expansion of the concept of capital beyond economic resources to include cultural, social, and symbolic capital.[41] Bourdieu did not define capital solely in material terms, as Marx did. In addition to his critique of political economy, he incorporated the cultural elements possessed by individuals into his theory, formulating the concept of cultural capital.[42] Bourdieu's fundamental paradigm is based on the idea that individuals act in pursuit of their interests. Their primary goal is to enhance their social status. From a Bourdieusian perspective, if an individual cannot convert the cultural elements inherited from their family into capital and thereby increase their social standing, this cannot be considered cultural capital. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is primarily acquired through family and education. The combination of material and cultural capital determines whom an individual knows and the extent of their social network, which corresponds to social capital. The recognition of an individual's material, cultural, and social capital by others constitutes symbolic capital. Fundamentally, individuals acquire material and cultural capital within habitus.

According to Bourdieu, capital exists not only in economic form (money and property) but also in social form (resources provided by long-term relationship networks), cultural form (education, knowledge, skills) and symbolic form (respect, prestige, honour).[43] Bourdieu states that economic capital is the fundamental source that generates the other three types of capital, and that each type of capital aims at

[40] Bourdieu, *On the State*.

[41] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (Greenwood, 1986), 241–58.

[42] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."

[43] Tasawar Hannan, "Facebook 'Selficide': Are They Modern-Day Tragic Attempts of Our Symbolic Capital?," *European Journal of Sociology* 3, no. 1 (2020): 22–35.

generating profit or efficiency through accumulation.[44] Social capital, on the other hand, is the sum of actual or potential resources arising from ongoing acquaintance and recognition relationships.[45] An individual's position and status in social networks are the determinants of social capital. Symbolic capital, on the other hand, is the legitimately accepted form of other types of capital. In other words, as the types of capital one possesses are socially approved, they become visible as 'honour' or 'prestige.'

Emotional capital, derived from Bourdieu's conceptualization of various forms of capital, is based on accumulated emotional resources that individuals and groups use to gain influence, status, and material benefits. In social networks, emotional capital has transformed into a new tool of power, where emotional expressions, interactions, and relationships are converted into power and money. Bourdieu defined social capital as a network of relationships that provides individuals with advantages within social structures.[46] Emotional capital is based on this concept and emphasizes the role of emotions in shaping social ties, influence, and status. Helga Nowotny, building upon Bourdieu's conceptual framework, introduced the concept of emotional capital.[47] While considering this concept as a subcategory of social capital, it has been defined as a characteristic of a private sphere rather than the public sphere.[48] Emotional capital is generally shaped within the framework of emotional bonds formed with family and friends and includes the emotional resources an individual transfers to those they value. First introduced into discourse by Nowotny, emotional capital has been defined primarily in the context of the social and cultural resources produced by women through emotional relationships within the family.[49] Subsequently, Patricia Allatt further developed the concept in her study, where she examined how privilege is reproduced in middle-class families.[50]

Maria Merisalo and Teemu Makkonen argued that different types of capital are both necessary in the use of digital technologies and that various forms of capital emerge in the process of digitalization.[51] This view, in fact, constitutes a contribution to Bourdieu's approach to the concept of capital. Bourdieu focused on the processes of transformation and change of capital, particularly explaining how economic capital evolves into cultural capital through examples related to educational institutions.

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[44] Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

[45] Tristan Claridge, "Bourdieu on Social Capital – Theory of Capital," accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/bourdieu-on-social-capital-theory-of-capital/#:~:text=Bourdieu%20framed%20social%20capital%20as,1.

[46] Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

[47] Helga Nowotny, "Women in Public lLife in Austria," in *Access to Power: Cross-National Studies of Women and Elites*, ed. C. Fuchs, Epstein and R. Laub Coser (Allen & Unwin, 1981), 147–56.

[48] Nowotny, "Women in Public Life in Austria."

[49] Nowotny, "Women in Public Life in Austria."

[50] Patricia Allatt, "Becoming Privileged: The Role of Family Processes," in *Youth and Inequality*, ed. Inge Bates and George Riseborough (Open University, 1993), 139–59.

[51] Maria Merisalo and Teemu Makkonen, "Bourdieusian E-Capital Perspective Enhancing Digital Capital Discussion in the Realm of Third Level Digital Divide," *Information Technology and People* 35, no. 8 (2022): 231–52.

However, with the today's rapid development of digital technologies, this transformation occurs through digital environments. Emotional capital in social networks can also be theorized as a distinct but convertible form of capital that carries social, economic, and symbolic value. Like other forms of capital, emotional capital can be transformed into economic, social, and symbolic capital:

Material Capital: emotional capital can be converted into economic value through sponsorships, advertisements, and money-making models provided by the network (e.g., YouTube ad revenue, Patreon memberships, etc.).

Social Capital: emotional capital can enhance networking opportunities, thereby increasing visibility, collaborations, and social influence.

Symbolic Capital: emotional capital can create opportunities for greater recognition and enhance an individual's authority within digital communities.

Emotional capital refers to the ability to create, manage, and use emotions to achieve social, cultural, and economic gains. It can be defined as an accumulation of emotional experiences, expressions, and reactions through users' interactions in social networks. Unlike economic capital, emotional capital is intangible; it affects a user's online presence, interaction metrics, and economic opportunities. Emotional capital does not exist in isolation; it functions within a broader system of exchange, allowing users to transform it in various ways. Those with higher emotional capital can attract more followers, thereby increasing their power and visibility within the network. Therefore, while emotional capital becomes a significant force in determining who gains visibility, influence, and economic rewards in digital economies, not all emotional expressions can be equally converted into material value. Users contribute to emotional capital by interacting with content in the network, and in doing so, emotional capital becomes a determinant of status within the network. Users with higher emotional capital may be seen as more effective, more visible, or more popular. Social status, in turn, influences network dynamics by triggering users' visibility and attracting attention.

While some users are able to successfully convert emotional labour into economic gain, the majority face digital labour exploitation without receiving the economic rewards for their emotional capital. This structural inequality highlights the insecure and unequal distribution of emotional resources within digital labour economies. Unlike traditional labour, emotional labour in digital spaces typically does not have a material counterpart for ordinary users and is often expended voluntarily. Emotional labour is algorithmically directed and commodified within the network economy. Social networks are emotional spaces shaped by power dynamics and digital hierarchies. Emotional labour is conditioned by habitus, and emotional capital is a stratified resource unevenly distributed among social, economic, and cultural forms of capital.

Emotional labour and emotional capital in social networks

The "Like" button on Facebook revolutionized social network interaction by offering users a simplified way to express approval of content. In a short period, the "Like" button became a central element of the user experience on the platform, redefining digital expression and interaction. Over time, Facebook expanded the scope of the "Like" button, allowing users to provide a range of emotional responses beyond a simple like. The most significant feature of the "Like" button is its measurability. The visible number of likes on circulating content provides users with information about the visibility and approval of their posts. The measurability and visibility of likes influence users' perceptions of social approval and shape their online actions. Additionally, it has created a phenomenon of social comparison, where users measure the success or acceptance of their content in relation to others.

The visibility of likes has revealed emotional labour driven by the desire for approval and validation, creating an environment where users can customize their content to receive positive responses. This situation highlights the tension between the desire for social approval and the individual's wish to express themselves authentically, raising concerns about the originality of content circulating online. Users carefully select the content they share due to the desire for likes, indicating that they engage in strategic efforts to gain social approval, with emotional expressions on the network being the result of performative actions. The accumulation of likes significantly shapes users' online reputation, with a high number of likes potentially boosting a user's status within the network and increasing their visibility in the online community. A lack of likes or negative interactions, on the other hand, can adversely affect an individual's online reputation.

Social networks can be defined as structured environments reminiscent of Bourdieu's concept of field. For example, on Instagram, various actors such as companies, advertisers, influencers, and ordinary users pursue economic interests by increasing the number of users and interactions. In these media, users are in the position of 'producers' (both producing and consuming content).[52] From Bourdieu's perspective, all forms of capital are significant in this competitive field. Gaining a large following and high engagement leads to the accumulation of symbolic capital and social capital, which determine one's position within the network. Network shares and likes reveal a user's cultural tastes, social network, and the symbolic capital they possess. When a regular user's shared content is liked, it provides that user with a certain prestige (symbolic capital) among their friends; it also triggers the sharing of information and resources within the friend network, thereby nurturing social capital.[53]

High-reach content shared on the network by influencers can be converted into sponsorship deals and advertizing revenue. Ordinary users do not have this opportunity. Instead, their likes and followers indirectly generate capital. For example, an

[52] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[53] Claridge, "Bourdieu on Social Capital – Theory of Capital."

ordinary user watching videos on YouTube can gradually increase their symbolic/social capital through the content they produce and the comments they make. However, the interaction numbers achieved by ordinary users can generate more symbolic capital and social capital. According to Bourdieu's definition, social capital consists of the potential resources offered by others in the network to which it is connected. Having a large number of followers on social media does not, in itself, constitute significant capital. What matters are the opportunities offered by the people in the network.[54] For example, being connected to well-known individuals or institutions can provide far more advantages than ordinary friendships. Therefore, the interactions obtained by ordinary users can be interpreted as symbolic recognition rather than direct material (economic) gain.

According to Bourdieu, capital is not merely personal pleasure, but rather recognition in the field and the possibility of convertible advantages.[55] Although this may not appear to be traditional (economic) capital, network interactions are indicators of value in the field that are accepted by others. With every like they receive, users accumulate a kind of prestige (symbolic capital) on the network.[56] Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as the perceived and legitimately accepted form of other types of capital.[57] Thus, as long as network interactions are considered 'prestige,' they become a real resource for users. When any content on the network achieves a high number of interactions, it is interpreted as recognition by others; this recognition can indirectly contribute to future job or collaboration opportunities. Additionally, social network relationships are based on direct power relations, similar to Bourdieu's concept of challenges. As users increase their accumulation (number of interactions), they are actually striving to strengthen their social position. Therefore, for an ordinary user, gaining likes is more than just psychological satisfaction; it is a concrete sign of their position within the network. From Bourdieu's perspective, network interactions can thus be considered capital. Interactions represent social value and, at least theoretically, can be converted into other gains (network activity or prestige accumulation).

In social networks, emotional value and emotional capital are quantitatively determined through indicators such as likes, shares, comments, and emoji reactions. The more emotional responses a user generates, the greater their visibility and influence in the network, as interactions increase accordingly. Thus, the process of quantification has made emotions measurable. Users consciously create emotional content to maximize engagement. Emotional capital, especially for influencers and digital content creators, can be transformed into economic capital. In social networks dominated by participation-based ranking systems, those who successfully develop their emotional capital have a higher chance of gaining more visibility and financial profit. Users who can effectively reflect their emotions onto the network can acquire cultural

[54] Claridge, "Bourdieu on Social Capital – Theory of Capital."

[55] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."

[56] Hannan, "Facebook 'Selficide.'"

[57] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."

and social capital and increase their visibility. Additionally, emotional interactions can be converted into economic capital through brand sponsorships, donations, and network partnerships.

Algorithms actively shape the content that users encounter in their social media feeds, determining the content with which users form emotional connections. The selection and prioritization of content based on user preferences, interaction history, and the network's advertizing policies affect emotional experiences in the digital realm. Algorithms use personalized recommendation systems tailored to user preferences. While personalization enhances the user experience, it also has the potential to create echo chambers. Users, guided by algorithms and trapped in limited information spaces, are only exposed to content that aligns with their own opinions and emotions, preventing them from gaining knowledge of different perspectives.

For example, TikTok's algorithm uses artificial intelligence learning and user behavior analysis to personalize content recommendations. The algorithm determines the content flow on the "For You" page by referencing individual preferences and emotional responses, presenting content designed to evoke specific emotions. It analyzes user interactions such as likes, shares, and comments to determine emotional preferences and then presents content that aligns with the user's emotional tendencies. As a result, the user experience is enhanced, long-term engagement is encouraged, and the network contributes to user addiction.

The intersection of emotional and digital labour raises concerns about labour alienation, network surveillance, and algorithmic governance. Drawing on Karl Marx's concept of "alienation," it can be argued that due to the fragmented nature of network-based labour, digital workers become alienated from their own labour. Furthermore, Michel Foucault's concept of bio-power highlights how networks control both emotional and digital labourers through constant surveillance and data collection. Workers are not only required to perform optimally within algorithmic constraints but also to emotionally construct their presence on the network in ways that maximize interaction.

Conclusion

Building on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, this study has demonstrated that emotional labour and emotional capital in digital spaces are neither impartial nor universally accessible. Digital labour has introduced a new form of class division in contemporary society, becoming a concept that explains how the productive activities of internet users are integrated into the process of capital accumulation. While users' interactions on social networks have become an element that creates value for capital owners, targeted advertizing has emerged as one of the key mechanisms influencing users' emotional and cognitive processes. Additionally, structural hierarchies that shape digital subjectivities and reinforce inequalities are embedded within algorithmic governance and the capitalist structure. In the digital realm, emotional capital

is not merely an accumulation of assets but a mechanism that structures power relations, digital influence, and social mobility.

In line with the perspectives discussed in the study, it has been demonstrated that digital labour is not merely a form of entertainment or leisure activity; rather, it occupies a central position within capitalist production relations. Following Fuchs' critical approach, the study analyzes how social media companies commodify user labour and the role of this labour in the process of capital accumulation. The big data generated through users' content production and interactions has become the primary source for targeted advertizing, which is then converted into economic value through algorithms.

The analyses based on Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital reveal how the digital space is structured as a new social field and how users accumulate emotional capital. In the realm of social media, individuals act in accordance with the opportunities provided by the digital environment to accumulate emotional capital; however, it is emphasized that this process is not equitable. Algorithms highlight certain types of content and interactions, directing the flow of emotional capital and thereby shaping the power relations within the network. Digital habitus is directly related to the processes through which users internalize the rules of the digital space and emerges as a key factor determining individuals' behaviors on online platforms.

Emotional capital is more easily accumulated by individuals who possess pre-existing forms of privilege, such as celebrities, influential figures in society, or corporate-backed personalities. The ability to express, manage, and accumulate emotions is distributed unequally among social groups, which results in digital workers being exposed to network-based emotional exhaustion, labour exploitation, and the pressures of branding. Social networks influence users' emotions through real-time notifications and engagement metrics, shaping how emotions circulate and accumulate value. In this process, emotions are no longer personal or societal; they are increasingly shaped by capitalist demands and profit-driven motives. Therefore, in order to mitigate the exploitative dimensions of digital labour, there is a need for emotional labour and emotional capital accumulation to become more transparent and user-controlled. Additionally, while users' digital labour is presented as a seemingly free activity, it actually serves directly in the process of capital accumulation. The increasing monopolization of digital spaces has turned them into mechanisms that further control and direct users' labour and emotional capital. In this context, it has been concluded that digital labour and targeted advertizing policies create a structure that reproduces social inequalities, and that the digital space is increasingly becoming more capital-driven.

Table 1. The main differences between traditional and digital emotional labour (created by the author).

Feature	Traditional Emotional Labour	Digital Emotional Labour
Work Environment	Physical workplaces (e.g., airlines, call centers)	Digital spaces (e.g., social networks, other online communities)
Control	Institutional control	Algorithmic management
Expectations	Customer service norms	Target audience interaction metrics
Material Gain	Salary	Interactions converted into economic capital (likes and views)
Regulation	Face-to-face interaction	Written and visual social network content

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