

CHAPTER 10

AN ASSESSMENT BASED ON THE SIEGE OF DIGITAL LABOR AND GENERATION Z

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ABSTRACT

Developments in Internet technologies and the emergence of new media environments have significantly transformed the concept of audience. New media users have become not only users, but also prosumers contributing to the production cycle in the new media environment. The increase in such content contributed by users to the production process has also led to a proliferation of user data circulating in the new media environment. Marketing of such data to advertisers, which is extremely easy to control, necessitates rethinking the developments in communication technologies within capitalist relations of production. This study, which aimed to address users' participation in the new media environment from a "digital labor" perspective, aimed to read the siege of digital labor through Generation Z, which was born into new technologies, and uses these technologies in the most intensive way. In line with this aim, 12 people selected through the convenience sampling technique were interviewed and the data collected were analyzed through a descriptive approach. The results obtained at the end of the study showed that while the participants were close to identifying their activities in the new media in the form of content creation and time spent on labor, they did not consider themselves digital workers. The participants' emotional motivations and social expectations were found to be more effective in their content creation and contribution to the content created.

Keywords: New media, digital labor, cognitive capitalism, prosumer, user data

1. Introduction

With the development of Internet technologies, the emerging new media technologies have significantly influenced social life. People who spend most of their employment and entertainment time on the computer can easily access news, gaming- and entertainment-based sites, and television broadcasts. New media has become the most significant mass media by strengthening its power every day. The emergence of new media environments has enabled users to go beyond being consumers alone, creating an environment in which users also contribute to content. The discovery and sharing of such user-generated content has thus brought out the “participatory media culture” (Dijk, 2016). The onset of discussions on “participatory culture” has led to the start of discussions about whether participation in the field of communication is going to have a democratic effect.

With the advancements in information and communication technologies, computerization has caused the concept of “labor” to lose its material appearance and take on an abstract form. The authenticity of commodity generated by means of this immaterial labor is based on the creation, expansion and transformation of the ideological and cultural environment of the consumer, rather than being exhausted through the act of consumption. Immaterial labor produces a social relationship (Lazzarato, 2005). Hardt and Negri (2018, p. 298), have said that one aspect of immaterial labor is the affective labor in human relationships and interactions. Such labor, exchange and communication, which are based on the creation and manipulation of emotions, usually arise through human contact.

Christian Fuchs, one of the new media thinkers, has described users in the new media environment as “creative, efficient, and networked digital workers,” and pointed out that content produced by such users has become immaterial labor. Fuchs (2015) has also stated that the data generated by means of such content are sold to targeted advertisers who offer customized ads to users by accessing their preferences and data by paying money.

In the capitalist system, cultural products are also a commodity, and the media serves to ensure that capital makes profit and the supervision of power continues (Bulut, 2009, p. 7). The difference in quality between the audience commodity in the media and the audience commodity on the Internet is the fact that the Internet audience is also in a position that produces content and is involved in the process by keeping it in circulation (Fuchs, 2017). This argument supports the assumption that being a content producer does not prevent commodification, but rather expands it in a different dimension. The user who produces certain content shares a visual product or text with other users through the new media. This is

also followed by the process of interaction with other users' feedback, such as likes or dislikes. Data are inputted to a network system through the function of content generation, which is open to all users during the process of interaction.

This study aims to assess the siege of digital labor through Generation Z, which was born into new technologies and uses these technologies in the most intensive way. In in-depth interviews with Generation Z users (also termed as the digital generation), a user's alienation to his own content, where the user positions himself in the digital production cycle, his thoughts on the use of his personal information and all his labor-oriented behaviors were researched. The lack of a comprehensive study examining users' labor-oriented relationships in the new media environment paves the way for the contribution of this study to the field.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Digital Labor and Users' Content Generation

The science of political economy deals with the production and transformation of instruments necessary for the continuity of human life. From the beginning of human history to the present, there have been unique forms of production and division specific to each period, including communal, proslavery, feudal and capitalist forms, and there have been power relations based on those forms (Yaylagül, 2016, p. 144). Marx emphasized that the way material life is produced conditions the course of social, political and intellectual life (Marx, 2011, p. 9). Political economy has consistently given particular importance to understanding social change and social transformation (Mosco, 2009, p. 3). It is not possible to discuss the discipline of communication, an important branch of social sciences, independently of social and economic variables either.

At the heart of political economic criticisms is the understanding that social consciousness is also shaped by the economic and consequently strong factors in terms of power, depending on the property–ownership structure of media institutions. Political economy — which focuses on the possession and ownership structure of mass media and their instruments, their modes of production, what is produced, and to whom/to what extent they give profit — is interested in the development process of capitalism (Güngör, 2016).

Understanding the relationship between communication and commodification as well as property–ownership relations in approaches to political economy of communication is also a very important issue (Özçetin, 2018). Kıyan states that Dallas Walker Smythe, who aimed

to analyze the economic functions of mass communication systems and the role they play in the reproduction of capitalist production relations in his study titled “Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism,” has been a pioneer of studies addressing communication in the context of political economy (Kıyan, 2015). Smythe has conceptualized the “audience commodity” approach, which is the main discussion of political economy studies, as the “sale of the audience to advertisers in exchange for advertising revenues.” Smythe has argued that one of the commodities produced by the mass media industry is an audience and claimed that the main function of the mass media industry is to sell the audience to advertisers instead of selling ideological packages (Smythe, 1977; Yaylagül, 2016).

With the advancement of communication technologies, users have become content producers, and user information has been marketed to advertisers, intensifying the discussion on audience commodity in the field of communication in different dimensions (Kıyan, 2015). Rapid developments in communication technologies have created new areas of consumption and lead to significant convergences in the relationship between production and consumption. The audience commodity that we encounter in traditional mass media has been transformed in the Internet environment, and a “digital commodity” has emerged. In the audience commodity on the Internet, users are also content producers and are constantly engaged in creative activity to build a community (Saraçoğlu, 2015). Unlike the audience in traditional mass media, the audience in the Internet environment can show presence in this environment and generate content without any restrictions of time or space.

Such users, who have emerged with the introduction of the Web 2.0 environment, are called “prosumers” (producer-consumers) and “creators” who both produce and consume (Alikılıç, 2011). Prosumer users of the new media environment produce content, circulate it by sharing it, and continuously consume it. With the advent of the Internet, the spread of production through networked portable devices has created new possibilities for large-scale Internet companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram with regard to user activities. What users produce on these social networking platforms is everything they do in that environment, and the digital labor rhetoric makes sense in this context (Kıyan, 2015).

The concept of digital labor focuses on the analysis of unpaid user labor and other forms of labor that are necessary for accumulation of capital in the field of communication technologies (Fuchs, 2014). The free labor model of Web 2.0 capital has increased the intensity of circulation of commodities, and transformed contributions that cultural workers offer through unpaid content on social media into a form that functions on a voluntary basis (Witthof, 2019, p. 122). Fuchs (2015) states that the labor object of Facebook is “human experiences,” and that

Facebook has earned the right to use representations of these experiences for accumulation of capital. Users' content production in the new media environment creates a value for companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These communication environments, which users consider completely free and entertainment tools, make a profit based on their voluntary "labor" behavior.

Users create two distinct values of use based on digital labor behavior (Fuchs, 2015):

1. The value of use for users themselves and others.
2. The value of use for users' capital.

Fuchs's first point of attention focuses on users' content production. The content produced and circulated creates a network of sharing, a common ground, where users meet in the new media environment. The second point draws attention to the aspect of selling users' information to advertisers and targeted advertising. All data entered by users on the Internet to create a profile and the likes they share help create a comprehensive database about them. Companies that use this situation get a second value of use by selling information about users to advertisers.

The content produced by users within the structure of the new media environment suitable for the culture of participation is increasing every passing day. A great deal of reasons such as recognition, prestige, self-expression and communication with other people are motivators for users to produce content (Aydođan, 2016). Paralleling this situation, many concepts such as class relations, trust relations and recognition are being reconstructed within social networks. Outcomes of "labor" in the new media environment are now seen as intangible products such as "emotion." Cote and Pybus (2014, p. 242) have stated in their study that people respond quickly to calls for them to become subjects on social networks. In the new media environment, the way individuals exert labor is reciprocated with the production of emotions. The concept of social labor supports this approach. The concept of "social labor" is defined as a tool in which consumers add value to their identity and social relationships by producing and sharing cultural and emotional content (Anderson et al., 2016). In this regard, the act of creating content on social networks by people can be seen as an investment in their personal capital and personal-group relationships.

2.2. Theory of Generations

The advancement of new communication technologies affects every generation in society in a different way, resulting in significant differences in lifestyles. German sociologist Karl

Mannheim, one of the first researchers to study the concept of generation, has argued that the following five elements should be formed in order to claim the existence of a generation (Mannheim, 1952, p. 292):

- The emergence of new participants in the cultural process,
- In this process, the constant disappearance of the former participants,
- The ability of members of any generation to participate timewise only in a limited part of the historical process,
- The need for sustained reasons for transferring cultural heritage,
- The continuity of the transition from generation to generation.

The studies on the theory of generations gained momentum with the studies conducted by Strauss and Howe, and this theory has also been called the “Strauss-Howe Generational Theory” by some researchers (Arslan & Staub, 2015, p. 5). The foundation of generational classifications is based on political, economic and social events that have a profound effect on a society and its being linked to people born during such events (Şahbaz, 2019, p. 81).

Based on the results of different research studies, and by taking into consideration certain historical periods, generations have been classified as “Traditionalists — Silent Generation (1925–1945),” “Baby Boom Generation (1946–1964),” “Generation X (1965–1979),” “Generation Y (1980–2000),” and “Generation Z (people who were born after 2000)” (Göksel & Güneş, 2017, p. 810).

Generation Z represents a group who were born in the 2000s and who like to use Internet technologies and learn fast (Güzel, 2019). The general characteristics of people in Generation Z are listed as follows (Seymen, 2017):

- They use technology extremely well,
- They keep five windows open at the same time and are ready to share,
- They work actively and voluntarily,
- They communicate with images/videos and graphics,
- They focus on the future,
- They work to succeed and win.

People of Generation Z, who can sustain a very good position in the virtual world, can access information through the virtual environment very quickly, be educated at an earlier age, and grow and develop more quickly (Akdemir et al., 2013). According to a US-based study that gives important insights into Generation Z's view of the digital world, Youtube is one of the most widely used media by Generation Z. Youtube is followed by Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, in the order given (Hadimli, 2017).

3. Methodological Design of the Study

3.1. Purpose and Significance

Communication tools like Facebook and Google, which have come into our lives with the advent of modern communications technologies and the Internet, actually serve as a sort of means of production (Hebblewhite, 2019, p. 209). As discussed in the theoretical section, the process of content creation and dissemination in such means of production is defined as "labor" in this study. How the resulting user data in this creation process are used in targeted advertising studies and the concept of audience commodity on the Internet are discussed. When collecting the data in the research section of the study, an attempt was made to determine how all these definitions discussed in the theoretical section corresponded to users. The aim of this study was to examine the digital labor behavior of people of Generation Z who actively used Internet technologies and to understand where and how users positioned themselves within the production cycle in the new media environment. Within the framework of this aim, answers to the following questions would be sought:

- Do Generation Z users consider their participatory activities in the new media environment to be "labor"?
- Do Generation Z users identify themselves as digital workers?
- Do Generation Z users expect a financial return in return for their participatory activities in the new media environment?
- What are the motivations emotionally and socially behind the content produced by Generation Z users?
- How do Generation Z users evaluate the use of the data they enter on the Internet for commercial purposes by different sources?

The transition to the network-based manufacturing model with the advent of the knowledge economy has also changed communication methods at intra- and inter-production sites (Hard & Negri, 2018, p. 300). Information technologies have overcome all the constraints produced by elements of time and space. The contribution to the production cycle and the sort of labor exerted in the new media environment does not necessitate people's being together spatially. With this aspect, production continues uninterrupted, regardless of whether people are currently working or on their own free time. In this respect, this study has significance in terms of two outcomes: (1) it examines how the concept of "labor", which has undergone a significant change with new technologies, is besieged by cognitive capitalism, and (2) it demonstrates the level of awareness of Generation Z users who are the most significant contributors to the production cycle by using these technologies intensively.

3.2. Method and Sample

A literature review was conducted in the field when establishing the theoretical framework of the study. Books, theses, and articles written in this field were examined. The data obtained using the in-depth interview technique were analyzed by using a descriptive approach. A semi-structured interview form approach was adopted during the study. In the semi-structured interview form approach, the interviewer is free to ask previously prepared questions and to ask additional questions to obtain more detailed information on these questions by adhering to the subject he is studying (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016, p. 132). The information obtained from the literature review was used to prepare the questions in the interview form, and the aim was to answer the research questions prepared in accordance with the end goal of the study. Depending on how the interviews proceeded, when necessary, the participants were also asked some questions that were not on the form. The new questions at the time of the interviews were determined based on the participants' explanations. Attention was paid to ask easily understandable and focused questions, and reactions that could misdirect the participants' responses were avoided.

In this study, the convenience sampling technique was preferred from among the purposive sampling methods, and users from Generation Z were reached in this way. Within the scope of the study, a total of 12 participants, including 7 women and 5 men from Generation Z, were interviewed. The names of the interviewees were used in the study after they were coded. During coding, a two-digit coding consisting of a digit and a letter was used. The first digit in the code indicates the order of the participant (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), and the letter next to it indicates the gender of the participant (F for Female, M for Male).

Table 1. Information about the sampling unit		
The order of the participant	Gender	Age
1	Male	19
2	Male	18
3	Male	19
4	Male	16
5	Male	16
6	Female	19
7	Female	16
8	Female	16
9	Female	19
10	Female	17
11	Female	16
12	Female	16

3.3. Limitations of the Study

The major limitations of the study were reliability and generalizability. The fact that the research population was Generation Z, which was quite large, reveals the smallness of the sample. Moreover, the choice of convenience sampling and the fact that the results in research using this type of sampling method are less reliable and less generalizable are some other limitations.

3.4. Analysis of the Findings

In this study, an attempt was made to determine whether the participants considered their activities in the new media environment as labor, and if so, how they explained this labor behavior. To that end, the participants were first asked if they defined their activities in the new media environment as labor.

From among the participants, 10 people defined their activities in the new media environment as labor. It is noteworthy that when making definitions of labor, the users emphasized their desires such as to increase the number of followers and get likes from other users. The users who emphasized their active behaviors on the new media as labor expressed that they only saw the content production phase as a labor process, and their actions such as liking, sharing and commenting were only reactions to the labor produced by others. Two of the people who participated in the study stated that activities in the new media environment could not be defined as labor.

“I think there’s labor only in the phase of producing content. In other cases, there is a case of responding to labor already present. Therefore, the effort, time, cost, etc. that are exerted are part of this effort.” (1M)

“I’m describing it partly as labor. My process of creating followers and keeping them in my account at all times can be considered labor. I can also describe the effort to increase the number of likes as labor.” (2M)

“I don’t define it as labor. No one who doesn’t actively work in the media should say they’re media users.” (5M)

“In the new media environment, I see only the behavior of content generation as labor. Liking, sharing, and commenting on a content are just a reaction to the labor that has been put forward. In terms of sharing content, you must first think about some content, find products that will reveal it, and then create and share the content. I see each of these processes as labor.” (6F)

Fuchs (2015) has stated that users in the new media environment are not just information consumers and has identified users as creative, effective, and digital workers who create content, connections and social relationships of value and use. It was aimed, within the scope of the study, to reveal the users’ opinions about whether they would identify themselves as digital workers. In this context, only 2 of the participants stated that they considered themselves digital workers, whereas the other 10 participants stated that they could never identify themselves as digital workers.

“I don’t consider myself a digital worker because I don’t make money.” (7F)

“I don’t define myself as a digital worker because I use the digital media for my own wishes and benefits.” (10F)

The results with regard to the fact that the majority of the participants did not identify themselves as digital workers show that the value of use of social media is thus alienated from users themselves (Fuchs, 2015). The participants were unable to clearly see how their labor had been exploited as they had used new media for personal reasons and to communicate with their social environment. In fact, who makes a profit from this interaction is the social networking platform company in question (Netchitailova, 2017).

In another question, an attempt was made to understand whether the participants expected a financial return as a result of their contributions on the new media. It was observed that the participants expected emotional and social returns instead of a financial return in each form of their participation.

“I don’t expect a financial return in return for what I share. The reason I share stuff is to make my memories permanent and to be able to include my loved ones in them.” (6F)

“I don’t expect a financial return. I use it to have fun and have a good time.” (7F)

“I don’t expect to get a financial return. I see it purely as a place to communicate with my own environment and share my memories.” (9F)

It was seen that emotional and social motivations lied behind the contributions made by the participants to the new media environment in all of their answers. During the interview, this topic was further pursued, and more detailed questions were asked to identify the motivations that led them to exert labor in the new media environment.

“I’m gaining respectability, people are able to get to know me better, and when something important happens, I can reach a broader audience. More practical solutions can be found when I need help or when someone needs help. As I produce content, I get happy that my social circle treats it nicely and congratulates and appreciates me. It also makes me think positively about life.” (1M)

“I’m only gaining a sense of spiritual satisfaction on social media. My friends’ comments on what I share make me feel valuable. Besides, it can be a pleasure to see what my friends, who I haven’t seen in a long time, do.” (6F)

“I like what I share to be liked, commented on, and appreciated. For instance, I’ve been playing volleyball professionally for many years. I like to share my accomplishments, the games I’ve won, the teams I’ve played with, the people there. It also allows my circle of friends to expand. I’m meeting people with common interests on a common platform.” (9F)

“My activities in the new media environment and what I share on social media are expanding my social circle. Besides, people know me better.” (12F)

The vast majority of the participants stated that the new media environment helped them be known better and more closely by people. It is worth noting that Generation Z maintains and develops their social relations in the new media environment through different variables such as being an individual, feeling valuable and being appreciated.

Within the scope of the study, an attempt was made to determine the opinions of Generation Z users with regard to the sharing of the data they entered into the Internet environment with other institutions and the use of their data for commercial purposes. Of the 12 participants interviewed during the study, 6 stated that they did not know that their personal data was used

for commercial purposes by other institutions. It was stated by 5 participants that they thought this would not cause great distress.

“This situation doesn’t bother me. This is because we live in a consumer-based society, and the seller considers this as the most viable way to reach the consumer. As long as I am a conscious consumer, I’m unlikely to be fooled by manipulation techniques used against me based on the information that I share.” (6F)

“I don’t think it’s going to be much of a problem if you’re in a circle of friends and have a private account unless you have a very large account. However, this can be unpleasant if you appeal to a large audience and use social media more actively.” (8F)

Of the research participants, 1 person considered the acquisition of personal data and the sharing of it for commercial purposes as labor.

“We are the ones who produce content, share it and contribute comments and likes in the new media environment. However, when we look at it, we do not make a financial profit. I don’t want to make it anyway, but it’s ridiculous from such an angle: We’re the ones who do everything, we make up the whole system, but we don’t get any profit. Other institutions, with our help, come out on top and make a profit.” (7F)

On social media, labor is like household chores, and there is no pay in return for it. Such activities, which are often held in leisure times, do not have union representation and are difficult to consider as labor (Fuchs, 2015). The Generation Z participants born into digital technologies and using the new media most effectively did not define their activities in the new media environment as labor and did not consider themselves digital workers. Social motivations of the participants, such as prestige, being appreciated and feeling of value, which they obtained from such environments, constituted the idea that there should be no material equivalent to this participation. The results match Fuchs’ view that digital labor is an alienated digital work and that new media users are exploited digital workers who generate added value and pecuniary profits. Users’ emotional gains from such environments are also becoming capital within cognitive capitalism.

4. Conclusion

The advancement of new communication technologies is affecting all areas of social life and the creation of new media environments have caused significant changes in the processes of production and consumption in the media. While advances in technology have

significantly changed the concept of labor, the new media environments have also brought forth a need to rethink labor activities in this field.

The audience commodity approach introduced by Dallas Smythe (1977) has reached different dimensions with the emergence of new media environments. In such new environments, the audience has begun to actively contribute to the production of content. The audience of the new media environments is constantly producing for such environments without any time constraints. Users who do not get any financial compensation for such production see it as a recreational and leisure activity only, while producing continuously as a digital worker. The user, on the other hand, makes his interests and tastes available to the system with the information he or she enters into the system and with his or her reactions to other pieces of content. Users constantly see advertisements tailored to them depending on the data obtained from this information during their stay in the system.

New media users enter platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter more than once during the day. This behavior serves different purposes for users, such as relaxing/letting go at work, spending time on the road, relaxing/having fun at home. In this study, an attempt was made to determine how Generation Z, who uses the Internet and new media most actively, interprets all these participatory activities of them as labor. Most of the participants described their activities on such platforms as labor, and similarly, a majority of the participants stated that they did not consider themselves digital workers. Even though the users acknowledged that they were exerting labor in the process of producing content, this was not a job for them, and they did not expect a financial return.

Although the users did not expect a financial return based on their labor behavior, the emotional and social gains they achieved appear to be the primary reason for their contribution to such environments. Many different reasons such as gaining prestige, being appreciated, feeling valuable, and forming a social circle are the major sources of motivation for the Generation Z users in all their labor-oriented behaviors in the new media environment. In the study, an attempt was made to identify the Generation Z users' opinions on the use of data they entered into the new media environment for advertising purposes by other institutions. While half of the participants did not know that the data they entered into the system were used for commercial purposes, the vast majority did not consider it a problem.

New media has now become part of users' daily lives. Users continuously contribute to such environments by producing content. However, this creates value for new media companies. It is not only the exploitation of users' labor which poses privacy issues but also

the use of lots of data entered into such environments and their sale to advertisers. Users' contribution to the production of content will increasingly continue in the long run. They achieve different emotional gains as a result of their labor behavior on the new media. They will keep taking part in this cycle of production as long as they use new media tools with certain emotional and social motivations.

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