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AUDIENCE COMMODIFICATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A STUDY OF AUDIENCE LABOUR ON YOUTUBE PLATFORM

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: July 1, 2025	Social media has changed the way users interact with content, from passive
Revised: July 10, 2025	to active content production and promotion. This paper explores YouTube
Published: August 1, 2025	as a platform that illustrates how digital work is performed through user
Volume: 8	involvement in consuming, creating, and sharing content. Through the
Issue: 1	application of desk research as well as Eran Fisher's framework for
DOI:	audience labor, the study unveils the way in which YouTube takes
https://doi.org/10.33019/0hvd8607	advantage of users as voluntary digital laborers. Findings indicate that
KEYWORDS	YouTube takes advantage of users' behavior to generate economic value,
	typically without the users' knowledge of having a commodified function.
audience labour,	This study contributes to a greater understanding of labor relations in the
YouTube, prosumer, commodification	digital economy.

1.INTRODUCTION

The expansion of the internet has created new spaces for audiences to continuously adapt and evolve, one of which is the emergence of user-generated content (UGC). Social media represents one of the most prominent forms of UGC platforms, distinguished by the central role played by audiences themselves. The characteristics of social media users are commonly described as engaged, expressive, and collaborative, reflecting their active participation. In other words, unlike traditional media, social media empowers audiences to produce their own content. This empowerment is reinforced by platform features that facilitate and accommodate user activity, making social media highly popular among netizens.

In Indonesia, where the number of internet users has reached 221.5 million, social media ranks as the most frequently accessed content category, with YouTube occupying the second position (APJII, 2024). This figure highlights the widespread popularity of social media among internet users, particularly as internet penetration now exceeds half of the national population. Among the most widely used platforms, Facebook remains the leading choice, followed by YouTube, which nonetheless ranks as one of the most popular platforms globally (Gray, 2017). With the continuous development of its features, YouTube's user base is expected to grow further. By 2018, YouTube claimed to have surpassed one billion users and had launched localized versions of its platform in more than 88 countries (YouTube, 2018a).

From an economic and business perspective, YouTube's vast user base represents significant value. Recognizing this potential, YouTube launched the Partner Program and adrevenue sharing in 2007 (Huddleston Jr., 2017). These initiatives signaled the platform's commitment to leveraging its data, features, and user activity for economic purposes, a process commonly referred to as monetization (YouTube, 2018b). Monetization has been a



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driving factor in the rise of YouTubers and vloggers, whose growing visibility and influence have made content creation not only a pathway to personal recognition but also a viable career. In Indonesia, for instance, becoming a YouTuber has emerged as a common aspiration among Generation Z and is increasingly regarded as a legitimate profession (Gerintya, 2018).

This transformation has simultaneously given rise to the phenomenon of digital labour, defined as the unpaid work of users that generates economic value for digital platforms (Fuchs, 2014). Within this framework, Eran Fisher (2015) introduces the concept of audience labour, emphasizing how platforms mobilize users through three dimensions: consumption, production, and marketing. This article applies Fisher's framework to analyze YouTube's mobilization strategies and their implications for the digital economy and popular culture.

The case of YouTubers is particularly relevant for exploring audience commodification, as YouTube's monetization features distinguish it from other social media platforms. While prior research on audience labour has focused primarily on Facebook's sponsored advertisements (Fisher, 2015), and studies on YouTube have often examined its institutionalization (Hou, 2018) or the professionalization of amateur content (Kim, 2012), this study shifts the lens toward understanding audiences as commodities within YouTube's economic model.

Accordingly, this paper examines how YouTube commodifies audiences through its features and monetization strategies. The discussion begins with an overview of Fisher's Audience Labour Theory, followed by an analysis of how its modified application can be observed in the practices of YouTube users in Indonesia. On one hand, social media users interact and produce content as part of documenting their everyday lives; on the other hand, these activities are simultaneously transformed into commodities that fuel YouTube's business model.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid development of digital media has prompted scholars to revisit classical theories of media audiences and labour. As platforms increasingly rely on user-generated content, the boundaries between media producers and consumers have become blurred. Users are no longer passive recipients of media messages but active participants whose activities generate cultural and economic value. This shift has stimulated renewed debates within the field of media and communication studies, particularly around the concepts of digital labour and audience commodification. These debates highlight how the political economy of media is being reshaped in the digital era, where audiences simultaneously occupy the roles of consumers, producers, and marketers of content.

2.1. Digital Labour

Beyond questions of exploitation, scholars have also debated the ambivalent nature of digital labour, emphasizing how it simultaneously enables empowerment and subordination. On one hand, platforms provide opportunities for self-expression, community building, and even entrepreneurial ventures (Terranova, 2000). Influencers, for





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instance, often transform unpaid content production into forms of monetized labour, blurring distinctions between exploitation and opportunity (Abidin, 2016). Yet, as Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) argue, such cases remain exceptions within a broader system where most users' unpaid activity sustains corporate profit without equitable redistribution. This paradox reflects what Hesmondhalgh (2010) terms the "commodification of creativity," where personal and cultural expression is absorbed into market logics.

Critical approaches have further linked digital labour to broader regimes of surveillance capitalism. Zuboff (2019) highlights how platforms extract behavioural surplus—data beyond what is needed for service provision—and channel it into predictive and commercial systems. This framing situates digital labour not only in relation to content production but also within infrastructures of algorithmic monitoring and behavioural control. Such dynamics underscore how users' activities are disciplined, nudged, and optimized to maximize engagement, thereby reinforcing the cycle of value extraction (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Studies also show that algorithmic recommendation systems amplify users' compulsion to produce content, shaping not only participation but also cultural norms of visibility and self-worth (Stepanović, 2024; Gran et al., 2020). Importantly, this algorithmic governance illustrates how platform economies operate as cultural intermediaries, determining which voices gain prominence and which remain invisible, thus exercising both economic and symbolic power (Bucher, 2018).

Moreover, digital labour intersects with global inequalities. While Western users' activities are often foregrounded in theoretical accounts, research into content moderation and click-work highlights the hidden labour of workers in the Global South, who perform low-paid or precarious tasks to maintain the seamless functioning of platforms (Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2019). This unequal distribution of digital work is reinforced by new forms of platform dependency, where creative labourers and micro-influencers are bound to volatile income streams and algorithmic precarity (Duffy, 2017; Jin & Ramaswamy, 2020). These practices illustrate the stratification of digital economies, where visible creative participation coexists with invisible, outsourced labour under exploitative conditions.

Taken together, the literature suggests that digital labour cannot be understood solely as hidden exploitation of user activity, but as a complex assemblage of affect, creativity, surveillance, and globalized inequalities. It represents both a new frontier of capitalist accumulation and a contested space where users negotiate meaning, value, and agency in their everyday digital lives.

2.2. Audience Labour Theory

Building on the concept of digital labour, audience labour theory refines earlier critiques of media's political economy by focusing on the ways audiences themselves constitute a form of productive force. Traditional Marxist perspectives often portrayed audiences as passive consumers of ideological messages, emphasizing the transmission of dominant ideology while neglecting the interactive and generative dimensions of audience activity. Dallas Smythe (1977, as discussed in Fisher, 2015) made a decisive intervention by redefining audiences as commodities, arguing that their attention was sold to advertisers.





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Importantly, Smythe suggested that audiences should also be understood as labour power, as their engagement contributes directly to value creation in the media economy.

In the context of digital platforms, this insight has been significantly expanded. Fisher (2015) identifies three mechanisms through which audiences are mobilized as labour: **a. Consumption** – Social media merges commercial and social communication, ensuring that users encounter advertisements as part of their everyday online interactions. **b. Production** – Users generate content and data, which platforms monetize by selling targeted advertising opportunities. **c. Marketing** – Users actively promote products, trends, and media within their networks, amplifying corporate messages far beyond traditional broadcast reach.

Contemporary scholarship extends these insights by showing that audiences are not only passive recipients of commercial messages but are also encouraged to act as entrepreneurial subjects. Social media fosters cultures of self-branding, where users commodify their identities and visibility for potential social or economic gain (Flisfeder, 2015; Duffy, 2017). This self-commodification blurs the line between personal identity and market value, producing what Andrejevic (2013) and Fuchs (2014) call the prosumer commodity—a hybrid entity where self-presentation, data production, and commercial labour converge.

Platforms such as YouTube illustrate these dynamics vividly. Users not only produce massive quantities of video content but also act as unpaid marketers, embedding, tagging, and circulating content across networks (Postigo, 2016). At the same time, their consumption of targeted advertisements ensures a continuous feedback loop of value creation. The rise of YouTubers and vloggers demonstrates how some users transform audience labour into monetized influence, yet most remain unpaid contributors whose cultural participation sustains the platform's profitability (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Similarly, TikTok exemplifies algorithmically intensified audience labour, where visibility depends on relentless content production aligned with platform logics (Stepanović, 2024).

Taken together, audience labour theory highlights how digital media extend Smythe's original insights into new terrains of commodification. Today, audiences are not merely "sold" to advertisers but actively perform labour in the form of attention, content production, data generation, and promotional activity, making them central to the political economy of digital capitalism. While audience labour theory provides a powerful framework for understanding the commodification of digital participation, critics argue that it risks portraying users as wholly exploited and overlooks the agency, creativity, and pleasures embedded in digital culture. Jenkins (2006) emphasizes the concept of participatory culture, where audiences actively shape media narratives through practices like remixing, fan fiction, and community building. From this perspective, user activities are not reducible to corporate exploitation but also constitute forms of cultural production that generate meaning and solidarity.

Similarly, Terranova (2000) introduced the idea of free labour to describe the voluntary and affective dimensions of online participation. While such labour is appropriated by corporations, it is also motivated by enjoyment, recognition, and community ties, which complicates purely economic readings. This aligns with Banks and





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Deuze (2009), who highlight how creative labour online often combines professional, social, and personal motivations.

Moreover, some scholars caution against overstating the totalizing power of platforms. Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2018) argue that users frequently resist or subvert platform logics, developing alternative practices that cannot be fully captured within the framework of exploitation. Thus, while digital labour remains central to platform economies, users' creative agency ensures that digital participation is also a site of cultural innovation and resistance.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach using desk research, which involves the collection and analysis of data through literature reviews, previous research reports, scholarly journal articles, and relevant digital documentation. Desk research is particularly effective for examining complex phenomena within digital media contexts, as it is not constrained by geographical or temporal limitations (Van Thiel, 2014). As a literature-based method, it allows for the mapping of theories, comparison of findings, and identification of research gaps through systematic engagement with existing scholarship.

The validity of this method depends heavily on the credibility of the sources employed. Bowen (2009) emphasizes that document analysis achieves high reliability when it draws upon peer-reviewed academic publications, reputable research institutions, and verified secondary data. In this study, priority is given to literature from established journals, academic monographs, and official reports related to digital economies and platform-based labour practices. Consistent with Flick (2018), source triangulation is applied to ensure interpretive reliability, while thematic analysis is used to categorize key concepts such as audience labour, prosumer activity, and data commodification.

Desk research also enables a critical exploration of systematic platform practices on YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, particularly in mobilizing users as digital labourers through monetization mechanisms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and content distribution processes. As Snyder (2019) notes, this method does not merely review theory but also bridges scholarship with the practical realities of contemporary digital economies.

Despite its strengths, desk research has limitations. First, it relies on the availability and accessibility of existing literature, which may exclude emerging studies not yet published or indexed (Snyder, 2019). Second, while it provides rich conceptual insights, the method does not capture lived experiences or primary empirical data that might deepen understanding of user practices. Finally, findings are mediated by the interpretations of existing authors, which introduces the risk of bias or over-reliance on dominant perspectives (Bowen, 2009). Recognizing these constraints, the study positions desk research as a robust but partial approach that is best complemented by future empirical investigations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 YouTube - Audience Labour in Social Media





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A central question arises in this study: How does YouTube exploit its audience as social media users in ways that are overt, yet largely unrecognized by the users themselves? To address this, the analysis draws on Fisher's (2015) framework of user commodification, which identifies three dimensions of audience labour—consumption, production, and marketing—originally conceptualized in the context of Facebook's Sponsored Stories.

The term social media first emerged as a categorization for internet-based platforms such as the World Wide Web, blogs (e.g., WordPress, Blogspot), wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), microblogs (e.g., Twitter), user-generated content platforms (e.g., YouTube, Vine, Vimeo), and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram). A defining characteristic across these platforms is their reliance on content created, contributed, and circulated by users. It is precisely this characteristic that has given rise to the concept of digital labour, which describes the unpaid and often invisible work of users that sustains profit-driven digital platforms (Fuchs, 2014).

Debates surrounding YouTube illustrate how a platform initially associated with participatory culture and user-generated content has increasingly shifted toward a commercialized business model. This transformation has been described as the institutionalization of YouTube, wherein the platform formalizes and systematizes user activity into a source of commercial profit (Hou, 2018).

Consumption

As previously discussed, in the process of consumption, YouTube positions the audience as passive actors who are "forced" to view and consume advertisements displayed on the platform. Although there are certain types of advertisements that can be skipped by users while watching the main video content, the overall placement of these advertisements contributes significantly to YouTube's added value in the eyes of marketers and advertisers. Indirectly, these advertisements also stimulate audience curiosity about the promoted products, since many of the video advertisements displayed on YouTube are designed with aesthetic appeal and are visually engaging. This reflects the argument that, within social media, commercial messages are often blended seamlessly with social interactions. In the case of Facebook, for example, this integration occurs through Sponsored Stories, which merge user experiences with advertising content (Fisher, 2015). YouTube, however, adopts a different approach.

Although some advertisements can be closed or skipped by users, the majority of advertising formats offered by YouTube do not provide such options. YouTube offers six primary types of ad placement for marketers: *Display ads, Overlay ads, Skippable Video ads, Non-Skippable Video ads, Bumper ads, and Sponsored Cards* (YouTube, 2018c). *Display ads,* for instance, are banners sized 300x60 or 300x250 that appear on the right-hand side of the video player and above the suggested video list when accessed through the desktop version of YouTube. This type of advertisement can also appear beneath the video player when users choose to watch content in larger formats.





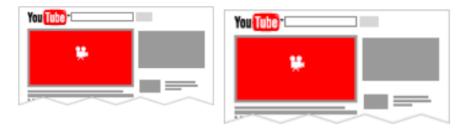
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Overlay ads are relatively small, semi-transparent advertisements that appear across the lower 20% portion of a video being watched. These ads are typically dismissible by viewers. *Skippable Video ads*, by contrast, are video-based advertisements that allow viewers to skip after five seconds. This format may appear before, during, or after the main video content, and is accessible not only on desktop or laptop devices but also on mobile phones, internet-connected televisions, and even gaming consoles. *Non-Skippable Video ads* resemble this format but differ in that they cannot be bypassed, compelling viewers to watch the advertisement in its entirety, usually lasting between 15 to 20 seconds.

Bumper ads are shorter video advertisements, generally six seconds long, that must be viewed before users can access their chosen video content. Meanwhile, Sponsored Cards present content that is potentially relevant to the video being watched, such as products featured in the video itself. These cards appear as short teasers for a few seconds, and viewers may click the icon in the upper-right corner of the screen to explore the content further. Among these diverse formats, only one—Skippable Video ads—positions audiences as active participants by allowing them to choose whether to continue watching. The remaining formats effectively compel users into passive roles, obligating them to consume advertising content. In some cases, these advertisements are even designed to resemble regular user-uploaded videos, further blurring the boundary between commercial and user-generated material.







Pict.1. Examples of Youtube Ads (Source: personal documentation)

Production

The concept of user-generated content has been widely adopted by social media and internet-based platforms, where the content presented originates from and is produced by users themselves. Within this category, audiences are not merely passive consumers of content but also active participants in its production (Fisher, 2015). YouTube capitalizes extensively on this dynamic by positioning users as the primary labor force responsible for generating content. The platform itself does not produce original material; rather, it functions as a host that provides the infrastructure for users to upload and distribute video content.

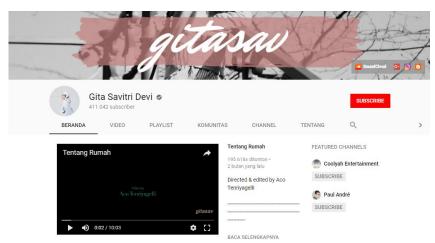




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With the growing popularity of online video and YouTube's rapid expansion, the platform has sought to maximize the value of user-generated content through the introduction of its Revenue Ad Sharing program. This initiative offers users the opportunity to earn income from advertisements displayed alongside their uploaded videos (YouTube, 2018b). YouTube refers to this process as the monetization of user-generated content. However, access to revenue is contingent upon meeting specific eligibility criteria, thereby incentivizing creators to continually produce content, attract subscribers, and engage wider audiences. This monetization model has given rise to the phenomenon of YouTubers or vloggers, who use the platform as a source of livelihood across the globe (Putri, 2016b), including in Indonesia (Putri, 2016a).



Pict.2. Gita Savitri, one of the most prominent YouTubers from Indonesia (Source: personal documentation)

Marketing

At this stage, users play a more active role in the dissemination of content. To facilitate this process, YouTube provides a range of features that support content sharing. Users can distribute links to their YouTube accounts and videos across multiple platforms, including websites, newsletters, emails, and other social media accounts such as Facebook and Instagram. In addition, YouTube offers APIs that allow users to create badges which can be embedded into personal websites, functioning as direct links to their YouTube channels. The platform also provides an embedding feature that enables users to generate links for others to share or insert videos on external sites (YouTube, 2018b). Furthermore, the tagging function serves as an important marketing tool, ensuring that videos appear in search results when other users type relevant keywords in the YouTube search bar.

Through these processes, audiences are not only positioned as content producers but are also compelled to consume advertisements and participate in YouTube's marketing mechanisms. Importantly, all audience activities within these three dimensions—consumption, production, and marketing—are meticulously tracked by YouTube, with this





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user data subsequently commodified. Since its founding in 2005, the platform has amassed a vast amount of information regarding its users, transforming such data into a highly valuable commodity that attracts advertisers and simultaneously incentivizes creators to continue producing content for monetization. This dynamic has ultimately contributed to the emergence of YouTubers and vloggers as a global phenomenon (Huddleston Jr., 2017; Putri, 2016a; YouTube, 2018b).

These developments reinforce the argument that social media platforms like YouTube mobilize audiences for their own economic gain. While it is true that audiences also benefit from using YouTube—often guided by personal motivations (Arthurs, Drakopoulou, & Gandini, 2018)—the phenomenon raises a persistent dilemma concerning the notion of audience labour and the concept of free labour. As Arthurs et al. (2018) argue, vlogging—literally a remediation of blogging (itself a remediation of the diary)—has evolved out of prosumerism and user-generated content, which have now become central to YouTube's identity. This phenomenon further intensifies the ongoing debate surrounding the role of audience labour in social media platforms.

5. CONCLUSION

The internet has created new spaces for audiences to continuously adapt and evolve, one of which is the emergence of the phenomenon of user-generated content. A defining feature of social media is the central role played by audiences within it. Technological developments have supported changes in audience behaviour, shifting from passive to increasingly active—or even hyperactive—forms of engagement (Carpentier as cited in Picone, 2017).

This shift has given rise to the concept of the **prosumer**, where audiences are no longer merely consumers of media content but also serve as producers. Fuchs (2012) refers to this as **prosumption**, a hybrid activity that combines both production and consumption of data, commonly occurring on platforms based on user-generated content. Social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have further reinforced this transformation by providing the space and tools necessary for audiences to engage in content production.

YouTube's features, in particular, facilitate the mobilization of audiences by positioning users as a form of digital labor. This perspective conceives audiences as a workforce that produces and generates content, which in turn adds value to social media platforms. Fisher (2015) categorizes the ways in which social media mobilizes audiences into three processes—consumption, production, and marketing—a framework that can be applied to YouTube in order to examine how the platform capitalizes on its users.

In the **consumption** process, YouTube situates audiences as passive actors who are "compelled" to view and consume advertisements. This not only increases YouTube's value to marketers and advertisers but also, indirectly, stimulates audience curiosity toward the advertised products. Although some advertising formats are skippable, audiences are still





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subjected to ad exposure during video consumption. In the **production** process, audiences unconsciously involve themselves in content creation, which YouTube leverages as added value for advertisers. The platform further encourages users to produce increasingly appealing and high-quality content (Hou, 2018), a development Kim (2012) refers to as the **institutionalization of YouTube**, whereby creators strive to improve both the technical aspects and substantive quality of their videos.

The **marketing** process, by contrast, places audiences in an even more active role as they disseminate the content they produce. YouTube enables multi-platform connectivity, allowing integration with other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (YouTube, 2018b). Through these cross-platform linkages, users can distribute their YouTube content across various networks, thus extending the reach and circulation of their work.

The debate surrounding **audience labour** has therefore become increasingly complex. On one hand, audiences who use user-generated content platforms benefit from them, particularly when their engagement is driven by specific motivations (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). On the other hand, new concepts have emerged, such as **influencers** and **microcelebrities**, who seek to monetize their activities on social media. With the continued expansion of platforms like YouTube and the development of new features supporting content creation and sharing, it is likely that the mobilization of audiences will persist in the digital sphere, further fuelling the rise of cultural phenomena such as YouTubers and vloggers

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