

**Kaynak Gösterimi:** Çalgüner Kılınç, E., Şahinkaya Ermiş, A. (2023). A Netnographic Analysis Of The Concept Of Creative Labor In Digital Media Through The Interviews Of The Influencers. Egemia Ege Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Medya ve İletişim Araştırmaları Hakemli E-Dergisi, (13), 22-44.

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### Keywords:

Creative Labor, Digital Labor, Social Media,  
Influencer, Netnography.

### Anahtar Sözcükler:

Yaratıcı Emek, Dijital Emek, Sosyal Medya,  
Influencer, Netnografi.

DOI: 10.56075/egemiadergisi.1255064

Egemia, 2023, 13: 22-44

## A Netnographic Analysis Of The Concept Of Creative Labor In Digital Media Through The Interviews Of The Influencers

Dijital Medyada Yaratıcı Emek Kavramının Influencer Röportajlarıyla Netnografik Bir Analizi

Alınış (Received): 22.02.2023

Kabul (Accepted): 16.06.2023

### ABSTRACT

With the increasing importance of cultural industries in the global economy, communication and media studies started to consider creative labor as an important concept to focus on. However, there is an ambiguity about where exactly this concept is positioned within capitalist relations. This study, in which the autonomy conditions of creative labor are discussed, examines the position of the concept of creative labor in digital capitalism in the context of critical political economy. In the study, the debates about the utopian "creative class" are critically examined and the ability of creative labor to isolate itself from the wheels of the capitalist system in the digital world is questioned. In this context, a discussion is carried out on how creative labor can be analyzed within the the thoughts of Marx, Smith and Fuchs. In this research, the concept of social media influencer, which is analyzed as a type of creative labor, has been discussed within the framework of creative labor, Fuchs' digital labor theory and Marx's labor theory of value. In light of this discussion, a netnographic analysis is made on the creative workers who take place as "influencers" in the digital media, in order to question their awareness, evaluation and comments about the position of their labor in the system. Using this analysis method, the interviews of the social media influencers selected have been watched on Youtube and an interpretation have been made within the framework of the study questions. In the findings of the research, influencers are unaware that they are under the exploitation of the labor processes and the small group that owns the means of production.

### ÖZ

Kültür endüstrilerinin küresel ekonomideki öneminin artmasıyla birlikte iletişim ve medya çalışmaları yaratıcı emeği üzerinde durulması gereken önemli bir kavram olarak görmeye başlamıştır. Ancak bu kavramın kapitalist ilişkiler içinde tam olarak nerede konumlandığı konusunda bir muğlaklık vardır. Yaratıcı emeğin özerklik koşullarının tartışıldığı bu çalışma, yaratıcı emek kavramının dijital kapitalizmdeki konumunu eleştirel politik ekonomi bağlamında incelemektedir. Çalışmada, ütopyik "yaratıcı sınıf" tartışmaları eleştirel olarak incelenmekte ve yaratıcı emeğin dijital dünyada kapitalist sistemin çarklarından kendini soyutlama yeteneği sorgulanmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, yaratıcı emeğin Marx ve Fuchs'un düşünceleri çerçevesinde nasıl analiz edilebileceği üzerine bir tartışma yürütülmektedir. Bu araştırmada, yaratıcı emek türü olarak incelenen influencer kavramı, yaratıcı emek, Fuchs'un dijital emek teorisi ve Marx'ın emek değer teorisi çerçevesinde ele alınmıştır. Bu tartışma ışığında, dijital medyada "influencer" olarak yer alan yaratıcı emekçiler üzerinde, emeklerinin sistemdeki konumu hakkındaki farkındalıklarını, değerlendirmelerini ve yorumlarını sorgulamak için netnografik bir analiz yapılmıştır. Bu analiz yöntemi kullanılarak seçilen sosyal medya fenomenlerinin röportajları Youtube üzerinden izlenmiş ve çalışma soruları çerçevesinde yorumlanmıştır. Araştırmanın bulgularına göre influencerlar, emek süreçlerinin ve üretim araçlarına sahip olan küçük grubun sömürsü altında olduklarının farkında değildirler.

\* Bu çalışma 10-12 Eylül 2022'de "MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES ON BLUE & GREY COLLAR WORKERS INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS" de ARE INFLUENCERS AWARE THAT THEY ARE THE CREATIVE WORKERS?: A NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS" başlığıyla özet bildiri olarak sunulmuştur.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Creative labor, which is conceptualized by the creative industries approach, is idealized with its unique autonomous character and defined independently of capitalist production relations. Critical approaches oppose this definition and argue that creative labor is not independent of production relations. On the contrary, it integrates with them and is included in the system, losing its autonomy potential and becoming available for exploitation. Although there are studies that contribute to the critical approach to the problematic aspects of creative labor, it still remains unclear how this criticism can be made applicable and how the conditions can be improved. As a matter of fact, efforts to create a critical infrastructure are still continuing in order to reveal how and under what conditions creative labor can be defined as positive or negative.

Media texts, can be considered as a cultural commodity, independent their medium. As a matter of fact, social media that emerged with new communication technologies and the internet also mediates the transformation of concepts and values with its effects on all life practices (Gürel & Yakın, 2013: 203). In this context, it can be argued that not only traditional media but also social media is a good research object when it comes to digital labor and creative labor concepts.

Social media contents are in a structure where the labor process becomes invisible or even worthless. As in Marx's (2011: 65) metaphor, as there is no concrete output like a shirt in this case, the value produced by social media content is also invisible.

Aiming to contribute to these efforts, in this study, the concepts of labor and creative labor are introduced, the concept of creative labor in digital media is examined together with the concept of digital labor, the research design and method were explained and finally, the results are discussed.

## **THE CAPITALIST MODE OF PRODUCTION AND THE LABOR PROCESS**

Examining the labor relations in the capitalist mode of production, Marx aimed to reveal the role of production relations in the formation, organization and control of the labor force. Marx focused on the exploitation of labor, especially underlining ownership and property relations, and criticized classical political economy for legitimizing this order.

Marx presented the labor process primarily as a relationship between man and nature. According to Marx, work is above all a process between man and nature; in this process, man conducts, regulates and controls the material exchange between himself and nature with his

own effort (Marx, 2011: 283). In this context, labor is a process that takes place between humans and nature, planned and controlled by humans, and has always been an important element in meeting human social needs (Marx, 2011: 283). Concisely, the labor process can be expressed as the conscious actions of people (Yeşilyurt, 2015). Basically, it is aimed to produce use values to meet people's needs.

When describing the labor process, Marx also used the term "immaterial labor". However, Marx used this term which he considered as a part of the labor force within the scope of capitalist production relations, as a term describing the workers employed in that field. In the following periods, the term was introduced by Lazzarato from a different perspective and became widespread with the work of Hardt and Negri. While "immaterial labor" term corresponds to a postmodern, hegemonic and key concept in Negri and Hardt; in Marx, it is an instrumental concept that refers only to those employed in that field (Koşar, 2017: 205).

Lazzarato, Hardt, and Negri agreed that immaterial labor is the new hegemonic force of global capitalism and that immaterial labor exerts a strong influence on other types of labor (Gaudio; 2011: 123-124). What they meant by this term, is the labor force that produces intangible products or services such as information, symbols, codes, information, communication, or emotional expression (Hardt & Negri, 2011). Lazzarato (2005: 132) defined immaterial labor as "labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity". According to Lazzarato (2005: 132), who first used and formulated the concept of immaterial labor in its current form; capital has accepted the centrality of labor and included its subjectivity in the production process (Koşar, 2017: 207). In this context, immaterial labor is not only a simple function of the post-fordist stage of capitalism, but also the subject of this evolution.

With the immaterial type of labor, it is difficult to make a clear definition of the "worker" today, as currently labor and work exists even in non-work life. Exploitation is hidden behind the widespread use of flexible working through digitalization. In addition, the blurring of the boundary between work and life caused the failure of the employees to cooperate, who are no longer together (Kılıç, 2019: 64). This situation inevitably caused the destruction of the consciousness of the working class and thus the emergence of the distinctions such as blue collar and white collar.

Affective labor, which is a type of immaterial labor, roots from this transformation of the society. Unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects express a certain state of thought along with a certain body state. Therefore, affective labor is the labor that produces or

processes feelings such as comfort, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion (Hardt & Negri, 2004: 122-123). In its simplest form, it is the employees' exhibition of the emotions expected by the organization (Robbins, 2005: 109). This means regardless of the real feelings of the employee, affective labor makes it mandatory to comply with the rules of behavior determined by the organization (Yürür & Ünlü, 2011: 85). Connecting emotional behaviors to certain rules causes emotions to become commodities (Özkan, 2013: 69). The common point of emotional labor definitions is that they point out that the regulation of emotions is done for a certain fee. For this reason, "emotional labor causes the employee to see his emotions as a part of his/her work and to instrumentalize his emotions in order to successfully perform his/her work" (Özkan, 2013: 66). Therefore, it would not be wrong to state that this type of immaterial labor also points to hidden exploitation.

### **CREATIVE LABOR AND THE CREATIVE CLASS**

Creative labor is defined by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011:9) as "works that have the act of producing symbols at their center". The worker who responds to the demand for labor by "selling their creative skills and products" will be considered as the subject of creative work (Demir, 2018: 178). The concept of creative labor is at the center of the knowledge-oriented economic structure based on immaterial production and ideas. Creative production style is an important component of labor production due to its unique features (Demir, 2018: 177).

Creative class refers to the class formed by the workforce who use their creative labor. The distinctive feature of the creative class is that its employees perform work whose function is to "create meaningful new forms." Scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects, as well as creative class members consisting of nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think tank analysts, and other opinion leaders who are the "thought leadership" of the modern age produce new forms or designs that are easily transferable and widely useful (Florida, 2012: 8-9).

The unique characteristics of creative labor make it difficult to control labor in terms of management and commercialization (Demir, 2018: 177). Its autonomous character, which is described by these features, has led to the idealization of creative labor and to the wrong assumption that it is independent of capitalist production relations. The fact that this concept could not be clearly identified due to the low visibility of its connection with capitalist relations resulted in ignoring the negative aspects of creative labor and making it utopia. On the other hand, McRobbie (2002) and Ross (2003) were critical of the positive narratives and institutional policies of creative labor, suggesting that creative labor is also exploited, the creative class is

victimized by the more irregular and unstable working conditions compared to other types of work, and therefore it is not independent of the wheels of the capitalist system. Indeed, because of the positive connotations it created, exploitation in creative work remained invisible. Since creative products and production areas contain emotional and aesthetic dynamics that affect workers' opinions, workers can be fascinated and deceived by false promises to give unpaid labor (Holt & Lapenta, 2010: 224).

## **FUCHS AND DIGITAL LABOR**

While conceptualizing digital labor, Fuchs has made an analysis based on Marxist theory. With his thinking system, Fuchs aimed to reveal the connection between big data, digital surveillance, commodification of user data, digital labor and digital exploitation.

In his studies, Fuchs continued Smythe's audience commodity thesis as a theoretical stance and applied it to digital media analysis. According to Smythe, audiences are actually marketed to advertisers in their consumption-oriented socialization. In this context, it can be argued that the audience's act of watching is the meta form in the mass media (Smythe, 1977). Fuchs used this argument of Smythe in his analysis of the meta form in digital media. According to Fuchs, users create content that finds expression in the form of information by using digital media. In this context, online platforms classify the data reflected on the interface, which is gathered from the users' practices such as profile creation, click, post, retweet, and likes, and market the demographic information of this data to their advertiser customers. In other words, According to Fuchs, “the meta-format in digital media is user data marketed to advertisers” (Fuchs, 2015). In this context, Fuchs' approach is important as it claims that data is a new meta-form.

The main element that distinguishes Fuchs' approach from others is the relationship he establishes between labor and the digital dimension of capitalism. In Fuchs' approach, the main question is “what form does labor take in the contemporary world, in the conditions of participatory and collective production with the producing consumers?”. Fuchs “considers contemporary phenomena such as free social media platforms, the commodification of life itself, the playbour, with the digital dimensions of contemporary capitalism” (Fuchs & Fisher, 2015: 4). In this way, trying to find the equivalent of labor in the network society, Fuchs aims to question the evolution of labor from the past to the present by a holistic perspective.

Production in the digital environment does not require physical labor in the known sense. Information production is a form of mental labor. According to Fuchs, information is a

product that can be converted into a commodity and has the potential to be converted into the common good by resisting commodification. This is because information is not a commodity that wears out as it is used. As a matter of fact, in the age of big data, information differs sharply from other products with its features and therefore should be evaluated in a separate context.

Because of all these features, the exchange value of the information produced in the digital medium is not directly visible. According to Fuchs' approach, the exchange value and abstract labor dimensions of social media platforms direct the concrete work and use value dimensions. Neoliberal capitalism has led to the commodification of almost everything, especially communication. In the digital commodities universe, it is possible to talk about the commodification of digital technologies, digital labor and online users (Fuchs, 2014: 138). In the age of big data, the meta format is not directly visible to the user who directly experiences how personal data is exchanged as a commodity. This is because the process of commoditizing user data is hidden behind socialization.

### **APPEARANCES OF CREATIVE LABOR IN SOCIAL MEDIA**

The media, which is the most important carrier of the cultural industries, can be considered as one of the actors that strengthen the capital in terms of their content and production processes. Adorno, while describing the culture industry, refers not only to industry in the literal sense, but also to the rationalization of standardizing and disseminating techniques. As Adorno also states (2014: 113), media products that operate as if their production processes are mechanized by capital, and that a technological and rational production is being done, tend to see their producers as a part of this machine. However, it should be remembered that media producers are also media consumers.

In this context, not only traditional media but also social media is a good research object when it comes to digital labor and creative labor concepts. In fact, while the workforce and labor processes in traditional media are more concrete and visible at some points, they are much more invisible in social media. By dividing space and time, digital media platforms have also blurred the visibility of labor. To recall Marx's (2011) metaphor, a shirt consists of both the fabric, which is the raw material of the shirt, and the labor of the worker who gives the shirt its formal form. However, the shirt itself hides this labor process even though it carries it on. Social media contents are similarly in a structure where the labor process becomes invisible or even worthless. At this point, devaluation means that the value produced by social media content is invisible, as there is no concrete output like a shirt.

When digital labor in social media is examined, it is seen that users and influencers who have the potential to influence their followers with the content they create fit the definition of prosumers and actively participate in both production and consumption processes in social media. An influencer can be defined as a person who has a significant following on social media or other platforms and has the ability to influence the opinions and behavior of their followers. They are often seen as experts in a particular field or niche and are sought after by brands and businesses to promote their products or services to their followers. Influencers can be celebrities, bloggers, vloggers, social media personalities, or anyone with a large and engaged following.

According to Freberg; influencers are the “next generation independent third-party” endorsers who shape the attitudes of the target audience through social media channels (Lou, Yuan 2019: 59). Influencers act as a bridge between the brand and the consumers. Their followers represent a niche audience, and the candid communication they establish with this audience makes them trustworthy.

Social media influencers can be considered as digital labor because they create content and engage with their followers, which takes time and effort. They also often work with brands and businesses to create sponsored content, which can be seen as a form of advertising. In exchange for their work, influencers are compensated either through monetary payment, free products, or other incentives. Influencers also have to constantly work to maintain and grow their following, which can be seen as a form of self-promotion and marketing. Being an influencer requires a combination of factors such as having a strong social media presence, a niche or area of expertise, and the ability to engage and connect with their followers. They must also have a clear understanding of their audience and be able to create content that resonates with them. In addition, they need to be able to build relationships with brands and businesses, negotiate deals, and maintain their authenticity and credibility with their followers. It takes time, effort, and dedication to become a successful influencer.

As social media, influencers and labor keywords have recently become the focus of research, some theses that theoretically discuss the changing labor approach with the changing production processes in this process are as follows: Yıldırım (2020) looks at production in social media from a critical theoretical perspective. It deals with reading the concept of "fluidity", which has become the symbol of Zygmunt Bauman and used to define today's society, through the processes of labor, production and consumption, and to clarify their projection in the field of communication. Aslan (2021) discussed the concept of digital labor theoretically in his thesis titled “Beyond Digital Labor: A Theoretical Inquiry into Value and Abstraction in

Communication". Another theoretical study on digital labor belongs to Yanık (2019). Approaching this issue from the point of view of the field of economics, Yanık argued that it is still early to make a definitive assessment on the exploitation of the productive labor of active social media users in Turkey. However, considering the distinction between work and leisure time in the cultural industries, it can be concluded that the leisure time spent by active social media users in Turkey is exploited by commercial social media (2019: 86). Kılıç (2019) turned to social media workers in the context of intangible labor in his thesis. Since the purpose of his study was to investigate the awareness of producers, Kılıç's findings were remarkable. Kılıç (2019: 119) states that awareness is low as a result of his study. Apart from this, it has been determined that Youtube is not a good job provider, those who earn income from Youtube earn this income as additional income, but the rate of those who do not see Youtube as a good job provider is low.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, the selected online interviews of the influencers are examined netnographically within the framework of the determined limitations. The data has been collected by watching influencer videos that have already been published on Youtube and Google. In other words, no new interviews were conducted with influencers specifically for this study. Data collection has been carried out by directly copying the members of the virtual community from computer-mediated communications instead of a direct interaction which contains the risk of leading the sample and avoiding receiving a sincere answer.

This study is based on the assumptions that the content produced by social media influencers, who are considered as digital workers, can be included in the scope of creative labor and that the content produced by social media influencers does not remain independent from capitalist conditions, on the contrary it rebuilds the order of commodification and exploitation.

In this research, the concept of social media influencer, which is analyzed as a type of creative labor, has been discussed within the framework of creative labor, Fuchs' digital labor theory and Marx's labor theory of value.

The research is about creative labor that makes a living by producing creative content on digital platforms. Therefore, the social media influencers that make up the sample have been selected from among those who attracted their audience not with their efforts in another sector where they worked professionally, but with the creative effort they put forward digitally on social media platforms.

Since the research requires extensive digital data analysis, the research population consists of the social media influencers with the highest number of followers and connections in Turkey. The selected social media influencers earn all their income from this medium and therefore owe their recognition completely to their digital productions. It is assumed that they consider their social media work as a professional job rather than a hobby, as they have more followers and earnings. The ranking is based on the number of Instagram followers.

In the research, based on the social media influencers' own statements, answers are sought to the following questions, below the basic question "Are influencers aware that they are the creative workers of the soul of the capitalist system?" : (1) For what purpose did social media influencers start producing digital content? (2) Do they find themselves successful in this business? How do they define success and describe the conditions required to be considered as a successful person? (3) According to what criteria do social media influencers prepare the content they offer? How do they define digital channels and interpret them not only economically but also culturally? (4) How do they describe the working conditions? (5) How do social media influencers position themselves in the chain of production? Do they have a class consciousness in this context?

In the context of the ethics of the research, the names of the influencers are not disclosed and codes are used instead of their names.

Code Number of The Influencer	Number of Followers
INF01	Instagram Followers: 10 M Youtube Followers: 16,3 B
INF02	Instagram Followers: 7,1 M Youtube Followers: 6,27 M
INF03	Instagram Followers: 6,7 M Youtube Followers: 1,3 M
INF04	Instagram Followers: 6 M Youtube Followers: -
INF05	Instagram Followers: 5,9 M Youtube Followers: 232 B
INF06	Instagram Followers: 5,1 M Youtube Followers: 15,7 M
INF07	Instagram Followers: 2 M Youtube Followers: 1,42 M

**Table 1.** Sample List of The Study

The expressions of the influencers selected in accordance with the determined criteria are interpreted with a netnographic analysis approach. Netnographic analysis is defined in the Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods as “a qualitative and interpretive research methodology that adapts traditional and face-to-face ethnographic research techniques of

anthropology to the study of virtual cultures and communities created through computer-mediated communications” (Jupp, 2006: 193). The research field is internet in this particular approach, and this is the feature that distinguishes netnography from other approaches (Dahan & Levi, 2012: 34). In addition, netnography is a faster, simpler and less costly method than traditional ethnographic methods (Kozinets, 2006). In netnography method, the researcher can obtain data either from computer-mediated communications by directly copying virtual community members or from his own observations of interactions and meanings with community/community members (Kozinets, 2002: 68).

With the netnographic analysis method used in the study, the interviews of the social media influencers selected have been watched on Youtube and an interpretation have been made within the framework of the study questions. The interviews of the top 20 of the most followed (Instagram followers over 2 million) social media influencers have been viewed from a total of 45 sources (36 visual, 9 written sources), and only 7 names who attracted more attention have been selected for netnographic analysis among 20 social media influencers. After the names of these 7 influencers obtained was typed on the Google search engine, all the youtube interviews that came up have been watched and all the written interviews that came up have been read. In this process, 25 sources (22 visual and 3 written sources) belonging to 7 influencers have been scanned and examined in depth. Within the scope of netnographic analysis, the statements of the influencers were text analyzed in the axis of both the main and sub-questions of the study and the theoretical framework of the study.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The expressions used by the influencers for the 1st, 2nd and 5th questions are numerically close to each other. There is an imbalance between the 3rd and 4th questions. Influencers talk a lot about how they produce their content, but they use limited expressions when it comes to working conditions. From this point of view, it is possible to express that the influencers tend to define themselves more with the content they produce, and consider their experiences less relevant to the subject. To put it more clearly, influencers prioritize their product and the medium that product circulates, not their labor processes. If these results are evaluated in scope of Marx's concepts, it can be argued that influencers, who are digital workers, cannot separate themselves from their products. Every time they talk about themselves, they describe what they actually do. These people, who are assumed to have low awareness of labor processes, consider themselves as a part of their products and they are detached from labor processes. At this point, it is possible to allege that they are alienated from their own labor and

that they commodify themselves through the contents they produce. For example, one of the influencers who were not selected for in-depth analysis thinks that he exists not with his own identity, but with the funny videos he shares and states that he prefers to stay like this. INF06's "Youtube is just a platform and I do good things on that platform, but as INF06 (he says his name here), I am not just a YouTube person. When we look at the expression "I exist in every channel in social media", it can be said that there is an integrated identity perception not only with the content produced but also with the channels.

Undoubtedly, creativity and the created content cannot be separated from the identity of the person, but identification with the production of the person to the point of self-destruction can be considered as a real commodification. At this point, as Fuchs theorized, factors such as the disappearance of exchange value and the abstraction of labor have commodified digital labor power and online users. The reason for this is that the content produced by the influencers comes to the fore and the effort is hidden behind socialization. This finding of the study can be considered as one of the strategies that hide the exploitation of digital labor.

It has been observed that influencers generally use positive words when they talk about their working conditions. They have mentioned that they generally work as a team, not as a single person. This shows that there is even more labor in the background of what is actually visible. At least 3 people work in the creation stages of the content that appears as the production of only one person. INF02, one of the influencers examined in the research, describes the working conditions as "Too fast and fun" and then adds that they spend a lot of effort for each video. He explains all the production processes and compares it to the production processes of television and cinema. He uses the phrase "We spend a lot of performance". Another person talking about working conditions is INF03. INF03 explains that although the content he produces is funny, the production process was not fun. He states that he tries very hard to differentiate his content and puts a lot of effort to produce an original content. In fact, this statement of INF03 gives information about the real face of labor processes. It reveals the existence of an intense, tiring and dull labor process behind a very funny and entertaining content. When it comes to working conditions, it is possible to say that the two influencers that use the terminology and have some awareness are INF02 and INF03. While considering the reason for this, one detail common to both influencers has been found extremely interesting. INF02 is a Radio and Television Programming student, while INF03 is a Public Relations graduate. At this point, it may be possible to express that cultural capital can be an important variable in awareness, again with a Bourdieust way of thinking.

INF04, on the other hand, while talking about working hours, states that he works very hard for two days a week, while other days he is very relaxed. He adds that he sometimes works very hard for five days, but he does not work strictly from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. He seems amused and even content while using these expressions. Considering this situation, it can be stated that he evaluates the imbalance and intensity of flexible working hours as a positive feature. He does not associate this with insecurity and exploitation, on the contrary, he tries to explain that it is more fun compared to the traditional “9 a.m. to 5 p.m.” way of working. Exactly for this reason, it can be concluded that he does not have an awareness or even a perception about flexible working hours and the compellingness of digital labor processes.

Another outstanding finding is that all the influencers surveyed perceive what they do as a job and themselves as a working person. INF07 describes himself with the words “I am a digital content producer.” According to him, naming what he does as “work” makes people angry, but he thinks the narrow mindedness of the people cause this. INF01, on the other hand, uses the following expressions, evaluating the subject from a different point of view. INF01: “I've always been working”, “Men who doesn't work are equal to garbage”.

The statements of INF01 can be considered as harmonious with the romantic discourse of modernity and the capitalist system that glorifies work. Because, after these statements, he adds: "Even though I never work, I am able to take care of my children's children". In that case, INF01 does not need to work in terms of its economic capital, so working is a choice for him, not a necessity. It can be deduced from the expression "I am not an influencer, I am a known person" that he aims more recognition rather than money. INF06 also uses similar expressions. INF06: “And I may not work at all. Why do I have to produce? I can live the life I want, wherever I want in the world, with my current savings. But that's what I think is crazy, because I'm still trying to achieve something”, “Before I leave this world, I want to leave a mark”.

The very feeling that they are not compelled to work may be related to their thinking of work only in relation to the economic capital they have. But contrary to what they say, they continue to work. Then, the goal they want to reach is a different goal, which positions above making money. For this reason, they consider themselves not as workers who produce capital for the means of production, but as the boss of their own business, working for their own pleasure and high goals.

In this respect, the awareness they have about the fact that social media channels are now business platforms does not enable them to position themselves as workers. Because almost all of them associate their working style and position in the production chain with being

a boss. INF02: "I am a content producer. I am my own boss. I hang out on Instagram, YouTube, social media." This can be seen as a factor that hides the fact that they are workers in the system.

On the other hand, when describing their own work or positioning themselves, they often talk about other 'traditional' professions and compare themselves with them. In these comparisons, it has been noticed that they always position other occupations at a lower point hierarchically. INF01 sarcastically used the phrase "I am not an assistant driver at Kamil Koç, I live my life". This sentence alone is a very good indication that he has positioned himself sharply in opposition to the working class. This speech of INF01, who before stated that he would die if he did not work, actually reveals his perception clearly. In his statement, there is an assumption that a bus driver can not live his life, but a social media influencer can earn money while living his life. INF02 states that he used to work as a porter, clerk, middleman, waitress, saying "I did everything, I will do everything". He is assured that he can continue to earn money even if the social media channels he is famous for disappear one day. By saying "I was here, now I am here", he makes a hierarchical comparison between his previous life and his current life, and places the life he is living now at a higher point than the previous one. INF04, "Since my childhood, I felt that whatever I did, I would do more than what was expected. Any profession, whether I was a small grocer, a psychologist, a hairdresser..." "They always compare us to doctors, if the doctor can't get his due, what's my fault?" he says, this time he establishes the comparison at the level of gain. At this point, it is possible to deduce from this sentence that he also has a perception that he has received his right. INF07, "People think of me as someone who doesn't know the real meaning of making money at all. I also made tea, took photocopies, bought my editor's clothes from the dry cleaner... I just didn't want to do those, that doesn't make me a criminal." With his expression, he again belittles his previous works, romanticizes his past, and shows that he lives the life he prefers, that he thinks life as something that can be determined just by making a choice. When it comes to financial gain, he distinguishes himself from physical workers by saying "We are doing a job in the entertainment industry, we do not carry horses and camels, we do not carry stones on our back". And then by asking "Do only Youtubers make easy money?" he expresses his reaction about this issue.

Considering these findings, it is possible to evaluate that the influencers whose interviews were examined, do not position themselves in the working class and do not define themselves as a worker. Almost all influencers used the term "work" while describing what they did and even stated that they thought the society underestimated this job, although they did

not consider themselves as an employee who serves the system or whose creative labor is exploited.

In addition to all these, it is possible to say that they have absolutely no awareness that they have opened their entire lives to exploitation within the system. They entrust not only their labor but also their presence to the system. It is an interesting finding that the importance of the self is emphasized more precisely, in this process of commodification in which the production of the individual disappears. INF06: The biggest problem of people influencers who are content producers is that they are lynched for being themselves. Actually, that shouldn't happen. When people are lynched for being themselves, they change themselves in this industry, but I'm not a big fan of this.

As can be understood from the expressions, INF06 states that he did not change himself to get more likes. So, he believes that changing himself will change his content, and therefore his likes will also change. However, in another context, he says, "I changed my life and I am very happy, I made a movie so that people who take me as an example can see my life as well." At this point, even stating the importance of being himself and then expressing that he has changed can be considered as a method of self-destruction by equating himself with his product. Being yourself means distinguishing yourself from your work. Trying to exist on these platforms as yourself means that they already exist with their own identities or the identities they create.

On the other hand, whether they find themselves successful and what they associate success with is one of the important issues that this study seeks to understand. Here they provide good data on how they see themselves and how they think they got to this point. First of all, it should be mentioned that all seven of the influencers stated that they found themselves successful and expressed their general situation with the following positive words: INF01: "I am very happy and satisfied to be standing on my own feet", "I would be very unhappy if I failed". As the reason for his success, he points that there are many people who do what they do, but there is no one who does it like him. He claims to be unique in Turkey. INF02: "Success is not far from me, how much difficulty can I experience while doing something I enjoy?" He associates his success with love he has for his job. He attributes his initial success to luck. He says that in order to have a better life, it is necessary to work hard and take action, and that those who complain about their situation do not do this. INF03: He says that he didn't believe he would be this popular at first and states that he became successful because he did something unique. On the other hand, he says, "You have to be one of them, you have to be an ordinary

person in public". INF04: He says he is successful because he has a style that has never seen in Turkey before, and he attributes his initial success to luck. INF05: He defines success by entering the hearts of its followers and states that he has succeeded. INF06: He says he has achieved quadruple of his aim. "The secret of my success is perseverance, work and happiness. Happiness is the main element here, you have to work and be determined to be happy, that's it". "I think I have proven to myself that I can be whatever I want in my life". INF07: "I fulfilled myself, I got where I wanted to be." "My aim was to have my economic freedom and support my family. Providing myself a good life was a success criteria and I succeeded" As for traditional professions, I am unsuccessful. But this is not the case in the new world order." As seen in the last sentence, there is a comparison with other professions.

Analyzing these statements, it can be deduced that they are all very satisfied with their current situation and that they even feel at the top. They never talk about the difficulties of the job they do, they only say that they have difficulties in the period of being lynched from time to time. These positive feelings of satisfaction are the ones that they often talk about while producing the content. Almost all of them stated that they were always free and did whatever they were happy with while they were producing. For example: INF02: "I speak to my own audience in my own medium" "I do things in my own way, as I have fun, I do whatever I want", "But actually I am not doing anything special. I am addressing people within a platform that I enjoy...", INF04: "I publish what I want, it's up to me to publish what I want". INF05: "I change my style whenever I want. Fear triggers me and makes me more determined." INF06: "My plans are always clear, I know what to do, I learned this during my experience on Youtube, at a young age. It's about investing in what you love, it's a skill gained while doing what you love. When I was creating the content, I was a kid, I was having fun and there was sincerity." INF07: "We didn't need anything, we didn't need to get approval from anyone, we freely shared what we wanted to share, so we created ourselves."

As it can be seen in the examples, the influencers constantly emphasized that they freely do a work that they love and have a lot of fun while doing it. However, since the importance of the popularity and viewing rates of the majority in terms of advertising revenues is so high and the algorithmic pressures imposed on producers by the media is inevitable, influencers are actually not that free while creating their content. At this point, the emotions they add to their work while doing their job prevent them from seeing the pressure they are exposed to or from realizing the harm of it even if they see it. It can be stated that the system created a perception on social media content producers as if they are free, and created an illusion of happiness and

freedom with the lifestyle it provides. This situation, which we can consider as an example of affective labor, causes digital workers to be manipulated more easily and become more open to exploitation. This acts as a curtain against them, preventing them to realize there are obligations, binding situations and repressive directives in their lives.

However, at many points, the influencers give clues that they are not as free as they tell. By saying, “You think you have to be neater as the audience increases,” INF01 actually implies that he is restraining himself. INF02, “My thing is social media. I try to do interesting work on social media. Today it will be a song, tomorrow it will be something else”, and he adds that he actually determines his content with the concern of being liked. INF03 explained that he struggled for days to find new and different content, even though he said “Whatever I do is watched now”. INF04, “As the number of followers increases, your responsibility and the number of the things you need to pay attention increases. At first, I thought how fast the posts I share are consumed, but then I felt that my responsibility has grown, the pressure to please people has increased. I thought that once I would please them, they would always come.” He adds, “I have to please both the brand and the audience so that I can preserve my place”. INF07 says that he rejects a lot of work and adds, “I have to maintain this image, so I have to do sustainable work”. He tells that he had to do the jobs he never wanted in his first years, he cried while doing those jobs, and then he quickly deleted the content.

On the other hand, a further point of this commodification is that they evaluate their lives as an object of admiration, independent of their work and production process. Referring to Bourdieu, they believe that they have acquired these networks with a digital reflection of their habitus in life. For example, an influencer who gained a number of followers by shooting a make-up video stated that he felt the need to change his physical and personal existence in reality, regardless of the make-up video he made. INF04 explained this by saying, “I had plastic surgery so I could be more accepted and so I could feel better.” However, while INF04 was talking about a different subject, he also said that his user name and profile image on his social media account is a created character. Both the emphasis on the importance of being yourself and in contrary to this, the awareness of the fact that this identity was a created identity, emerges as an interesting schizoid quality. At this point, a deep alienation occurs between labor and laborer. This alienation disperses and fragments the worker's own existence.

INF04: I give people whatever they want, I make them laugh when they want to laugh, I get angry when they like my angry self. (He doesn't talk about the difficulties of creating content) He states that the identity he creates has to be always cheerful, but he is not always

like that and the most difficult thing is that he has to act. He adds, “Everyone does not have to produce or invent something, some people should loose”. In fact, this fragmentation can be seen more clearly with these sentences. In fact, this person states that this identity with many followers, which he claims to have created, plays a role in real life for his stance on social media. He expresses that he does not see himself as a producer and a laborer, right after he states that he is there with his own life, thinking that he does not produce anything. Again, INF04, "This is my job, no one follows me because I solve a math problem, they follow me for what I bought, what I wore, what i ate." In his expressions, he says that he exists only with his life, separating himself from traditional occupational groups. At this point, the creative worker's statement that he exists with his life, right next to the fact that he has established his existence with an identity that he has created, again opens a deep rift on the producing self. Similarly, INF05 attributes the reason for being loved on social media to being very natural. However, he produces content as an actor. Therefore, although the first reason for his existence and popularity was not his personal characteristics, he attributed his success to his naturalness.

Finally, almost all influencers have stated in different ways that they make good money, have the power of influence, that anyone can do this job if they want, and that those who can't accomplish these make negative comments on those who can do, are incompetent. They also state that in the chain of networks they are in, they actually have a lot of functionality for the production system. As INF04 puts it, this digital world is “such a big cake that I can't eat it all, we all have our pieces to eat”. Although they are aware of all cultural and economic influences to a certain extent, they do not consider themselves a permanent part of this system. They say that they feel happy and safe. However, from a different perspective, these multi-follower influencers work in various jobs in different fields outside the digital world. They maintain their presence in many sectors such as cinema, television and advertising. At this point, it is possible to conclude that although they are in the position of creative workers who have to perform in different branches, they do not actually trust the digital medium as much as they say. As INF05 clearly states: “I think social media, like television, always needs to get improved. Social media is also not a permanent value, so I started taking acting classes to avoid relying on it. I write screenplays, i write books, i write in magazines, i do comedy shows, i do improvisational theatre, etc. to constantly remind myself of the real world.

## **CONCLUSION**

Almost all of the influencers examined: State that what they do is a job; feel successful and accomplished in their work, even if their success criteria and reasons are different; have a

satisfied and happy profile; do not use terminologies such as labor, worker, labor force, class and corresponding expressions; use positive words when describing their working conditions; distinguish their profession from traditional professions; express that they feel free in their work.

When it comes to production in digital media, an intangible labor is doomed to be invisible. The concepts of use and exchange value are blurred. The mode of production, which Marx evaluated in the non-productive labor class, constitutes the primary source of exchange value in today's world. Every day, millions of people voluntarily produce an economic wave and culture in digital media, where production and consumerism are intermingled, and where consumption, as Fuchs expresses, enables exploitation. The intangibility of labor, the operation of algorithms in deep layers, the virtual reconstruction of socialization tools and the main spaces of communication have provided an environment for “prosumers” to produce with their affective labor. Thus, the subjects have become the surplus value producer of a sector without being aware of it, and play their part in the system with a sense of happiness in the context of their ideals of fulfilling and/or creating themselves.

The influencers who are the most followed and therefore the most influential, who stimulate the consumption sector most and the who are most aware of this market were selected for analysis in this study as the research sample. However, despite having all these features, as can be evaluated in the findings of the research, even these people are unaware that they are under the exploitation of the labor processes and the small group that owns the means of production. Because the promise of gifts, promise of a lavish life full of vacations, expensive pleasures and the leisure time that the system assures for them, provides a powerful motivator. As Bourdieu states, people classified by taste are blinded to their position in the production chain and are armed with false consciousness, to put it in a Marxist term.

The influencers examined in the study mostly describe themselves as consumers and do not talk about their producer qualities. Although they know that what they do is a job, they are not aware that they are creative workers or digital workers. They define themselves mostly through the contents they produce, and they talk less about their production processes. At this point, it is possible to say that they are alienated from their own labor and thus become commodified by integrating with the products they produce. Moreover, contrary to the bad experiences of the proletariat in heavy industry, who are expected to become conscious one day as Marx mentioned, today's digital workers consider their lives and working areas with a perception of entertainment and pleasure. This causes them to produce under the influence of

affective labor with a false illusion of happiness towards their lives. While they see themselves as bosses who make money by having fun, they are not even aware that they are dedicating their lives completely to the system. It has been one of the most important findings evaluated within the scope of the study that influencers with different cultural capitals are more aware than others, at least they talk about their labor processes and make them visible.

These people, who are so alienated from the labor processes, are aware of their power rooting from the network they have. The most fundamental determinants of today's consumption culture are indeed influencers. However, in addition to their economic power, it is possible to say that their acculturation power is equally high. The lack of awareness of even these people who produce content on social media for profit, and also for great earnings, may also be an indication that this awareness cannot be sought in any way in other social media users. These people, at least, receive adequate or insufficient wages for their production. The remaining users, on the other hand, ensure the continuity of this culture, feed the system by buying and producing, and do not realize the effort they give.

For this reason, conducting such studies more frequently can be considered as a step towards this awareness. While the literature was being scanned, no study was found in Turkey about multi-follower influencers in the context of digital and creative labor. It is aimed to pave the way for more comprehensive studies with such a start, in order to inspire the upcoming studies.

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## GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

### Giriş

Yaratıcı emeğin özerklik koşullarının tartışıldığı bu çalışmada, kavramın dijital kapitalizmdeki konumunu incelenmektedir. Araştırmanın amacı, sosyal medya influencerlarının birer dijital emekçi olduklarına dair farkındalık düzeylerinin izini sürmektir.

Araştırmanın eksenini oluşturan Fuchs'un dijital emek konusundaki görüşleri, çalışmanın amacına en uygun yaklaşım olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Fuchs'un yaklaşımının araştırma için elverişli görülmesinin sebebi, Fuchs'un, büyük veri çağının güncel dinamikleri ile tarihsel materyalizmin kavramları arasında bağ kurma ve ilgili kavramların kapsamını dijital teknolojileri içine alacak biçimde genişletmedeki başarısıdır. Fuchs, çalışmalarında Marx ve Marx'ın emek değer kuramından önemli oranda beslenmektedir. Bu nedenle çalışmada, emek sürecini kapitalist değerlendirme süreciyle birlikte inceleyen Marx'ın düşüncelerinden de yararlanılmıştır. Çalışmanın ana eksenini oluşturan yaratıcı emek kavramı, sosyal medya çerçevesinde alınarak dijital emekle bağı kurulmuş ve böylelikle çalışmanın teorik kısmı hazırlanarak, uygulama kısmının altyapısı oluşturulmuştur. Bu bağlamda, dijital medyada "influencer" olarak yer alan yaratıcı emekçiler üzerinde, emeklerinin sistemdeki konumu hakkındaki farkındalıklarını ve değerlendirmelerini sorgulamak için bir analiz yapılmıştır.

### Yöntem

Araştırma, geniş kapsamlı dijital veri analizi gerektirdiğinden, araştırma evrenini Türkiye'deki en fazla takipçiye sahip sosyal medya influencerları oluşturmaktadır.

Araştırmada; seçilen sosyal medya influencerlarının kendi açıklamalarından yola çıkılarak "Influencerlar kapitalist sistemin ruhunun yaratıcı işçileri olduklarının farkında mıdır?" temel sorusunun alt başlıkları olarak influencerlar hakkında beş ana sorunun cevabı aranmıştır: (1) Dijital içerik üretmeye başlama amaçları (2) Mevcut popülaritelerini nasıl değerlendirdikleri (3) Sundukları içerikleri hangi kıstaslara göre hazırladıkları (4) Çalışma koşullarını nasıl niteledikleri (5) Üretim zinciri içerisinde kendilerini nasıl konumlandıkları.

Araştırmada, konuların özü sebebiyle nitel ve nicel araştırma yöntemleri birlikte kullanılmıştır. Nicel veri toplama tekniğinin uygulama biçimlerinden bu çalışmaya en uygun analiz türü olarak belirlenen içerik çözümlemesi tekniği ile nitel veri toplama tekniğinin uygulanma biçimlerinden bu çalışmaya en uygun analiz türü olarak netnografik analiz tekniği kullanılmıştır. İçerik çözümlemesi tekniğiyle, seçilen örneklemin farkındalığı iş ve işçilik hakkında kullandıkları terminolojiye bakarak nicel düzeyde değerlendirilmiş, ardından amaca yönelik olarak seçilen kişilerin ifadeleri netnografik analiz tekniğiyle yorumlanmıştır.

Çalışmada netnografik analiz yöntemiyle, içerik çözümlemesi sonucunda seçilen kişilerin Youtube üzerinden yayınlanan röportajları izlenerek çalışma soruları çerçevesinde yorumlanmıştır. En çok takip edilen (Instagram takipçi sayısı 2 milyonun üzerinde) sosyal medya influencerından ilk 20'sinin toplam 45 kaynak arasından bulunan röportajları izlenmiş, netnografik analiz için 20 kişi arasından dikkat çeken 7 isim seçilmiştir. İçerik çözümlemesi yöntemiyle seçilen bu 7 influencerın Youtube'daki röportajları izlenmiş, Google'daki yazılı röportajlar okunmuş ve veriler bu teknikle toplanmıştır. Seçilen 7 influencera ait 25 kaynak taranmış ve derinlemesine incelenmiştir. Taranan 25 kaynak içinde birtakım ortak noktalar keşfedilmiştir.

## **Bulgular ve Tartışma**

Influencerlar, emek süreçlerini değil, ürettikleri ürünü ve o ürünün dolaşıma girdiği mecrayı ön planda tutmaktadırlar. Dijital işçiler olan influencerlar, Marx'ın kavramları kapsamında değerlendirildiğinde, kendilerini ürünleriyle ayrı düşünmemektedirler. Bu noktada kendi emeklerine yabancılaştıkları, ürettikleri içerikler üzerinden kendilerini metalaştırdıklarını söylenebilir. Fuchs'un da kuramsallaştırdığı gibi, değişim değerinin silikleşmesi, emeğin soyutlaşması gibi faktörler dijital emek gücü ve çevrimiçi kullanıcıları metalaştırmıştır. Bunun sebebi, influencerların ürettikleri içeriklerin ön plana çıkması ve emeğin sosyalleşmenin arkasına saklanmış olmasıdır. Çalışmanın bu bulgusu dijital emeğin sömürülmesini gizleyen stratejilerden biri olarak değerlendirilebilir.

Influencerların çalışma koşullarından söz ettiklerinde olumlu sözcükler kullandıkları tespit edilmiştir. Esnek çalışma saatlerini ve çalışma sürelerinin yoğunluğunu olumlu değerlendirmektedirler. Bu nedenle, dijital emek süreçlerinin zorlayıcılığı hakkında bir farkındalığa sahip olmadıkları sonucu çıkarılabilir.

Bir diğer öne çıkan bulgu, incelenen tüm influencerların, yaptıklarını bir iş olarak, kendilerini de çalışan bir kişi olarak görüyor olmalarıdır. Ancak kendilerini kendi işlerinin patronu olarak konumlandırmakta, yaratıcı emeği sömürülen bir çalışan olarak görmemektedirler.

## **Sonuç ve Öneriler**

İncelenen influencerların kendilerini başarı anlamında nasıl konumlandıklarına bakıldığında, buldukları durumdan çok memnun oldukları, kendilerini zirvede hissettikleri görülmektedir. Tümü, üretimlerini gerçekleştirirken özgür ve mutlu olduklarını ifade etmişlerdir. Ancak hem çoğunluğun beğenisinin reklam gelirleri açısından önemi hem de mecraların üreticilere dayattığı algoritmik baskılar nedeniyle içerikler konusunda bu kadar

özgür olmadıkları bilinen bir gerçekliktir. Bu noktada, işlerini yaparken, emeklerinin üstüne ekledikleri duygular, arka plandaki baskıları görmelerine engel olmaktadır. Sistem sosyal medya içerik üreticileri üzerinde özgür olduklarına yönelik bir algı yaratmıştır. Duygulanımsal emek kavramına işaret eden bu durum, dijital emekçilerin daha kolay manipüle edilmesine ve sömürüye daha açık hale gelmelerine neden olmaktadır.

Bu çalışmada araştırma örneklemini olarak etki alanı en güçlü, tüketim sektörünü en çok canlandıran kişiler belirlenmiş olmasına karşın, araştırmanın bulgularından yola çıkılarak, bu kişilerin dahi emek süreçlerinin ve üretim araçlarına sahip olan küçük kesimin sömürsü altında olduklarının farkında olmadıkları sonucuna varılmıştır. Sistemin onlara sağladığı, hediyeler, şaşaalı yaşam ve aylak zaman vaadi çok güçlü bir motivasyon aracı sağlamaktadır. Bourdieu'nün ifade ettiği gibi, beğeni üzerinden sınıflandırılan insanlar, üretim zincirinde buldukları konuma karşı körleşmişler ve Marxist bir terimle ifade edilecek olursa yanlış bilinçle donanmışlardır.

Marx'ın sözünü ettiği bir gün bilinçlenmesi beklenen proleteryanın ağır sanayide yaşadığı kötü deneyimlerin aksine, dijital emekçiler çalışma yaşamlarına eğlence algısı içinde bakmaktadırlar. Bu da yaşamlarına yönelik sahte bir mutluluk illüzyonuyla duygulanımsal emeğin etkisinde üretim yapmalarına neden olmaktadır.