



# "Generating power with love": an exploration of the emotional labour process of junior bloggers on the Little Red Book platform

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**Abstract.** The development of social networks and digital platforms has stimulated the public's desire for participation and expression, making emotional labour play an increasingly important role in China's media industry. This paper takes junior bloggers on Xiaohongshu platform as the research object, and through the research methods of participatory observation and in-depth interviews, and based on the theory of emotional labour since Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, we re-examine the labour process of junior bloggers as emotional labourers. The study finds that while junior bloggers conform to the control and regulation of the platform, they also continue to grope for dynamic resistance strategies. Emotional factors are the main motivation for junior bloggers to continue to actively engage in creative production, in which the platform and junior bloggers are not in a zero-sum game of incompatibility, but on the contrary, junior bloggers can obtain positive emotional experiences and self-consistent recognition of their interests.

**Keywords:** emotional labour; bloggers; little red book.

## 1 Introduction

At present, online social media platforms have gathered a large number of users who voluntarily "labour" for the platforms, and the impact of this labour behaviour on the platforms has become increasingly obvious, with many scholars finding that there are a large number of emotional factors involved. However, in recent years, much of the research on "labour" has focused on the exploitative mechanisms behind the phenomenon, while ignoring the spontaneous motivation of the labourers themselves. This study focuses on the phenomenon of non-employed emotional workers who choose to engage in emotional labour even after they have been freed from mandatory labour rules. Exploring how primary bloggers' emotions are mobilised? How does the operating mechanism of the Xiaohongshu platform shape the "active consent" of junior bloggers? How is the individual subjectivity of junior bloggers brought into play in the process of emotional labour?

## 1.1 Theoretical Review and Research Methodology

### Conceptual Scope of "Emotional Labour"

With the development of the mode of production, the form of labour has changed from industrial production and employment to labour in which knowledge, information, communication and emotions are the main contents and products of exchange. Based on this, Maurizio Lazzarato proposed the concept of "immaterial labour", which refers to the labour involved in the production of the informational and cultural content of goods [1]. Negri and Hart further developed the theory of affective labour as a new application of Marx's labour theory in the age of information capitalism to describe the affective practices of human beings in the process of real or virtual exchange and communication[2]. They argue that among immaterial labour, affective labour is the main and most important component of it, which includes the production of emotions, the control of the production process, and the products of which are also emotions - the underpinnings of a state of life, the generation of a sense of connection with the outside world and a sense of belonging. This study focuses on exploring the labour initiative and purpose of non-employed emotional labourers as opposed to traditional employed labourers.

### Research Methodology and Sample Selection

Xiaohongshu Darren hierarchy is roughly divided into four levels mainly according to the number of followers: head Darren, waist Darren, tail Darren, and vegetarian bloggers (junior bloggers). This study focuses on the emotional labour of junior bloggers on the Xiaohongshu platform, so this study mainly focuses on junior bloggers with less than 5K followers and continuous content output. This study mainly employs the research methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews in order to deeply explore the characteristics and dynamics of this group.

Using targeted sampling from personal attention, the author screened out 50 junior bloggers and conducted in-depth participatory observation of their works at different stages, and at the same time, the author conducted in-depth interviews on relevant topics with 16 junior bloggers who passed the screening. This study mainly used three interview forms, including direct face-to-face communication, WeChat voice call interviews and WeChat text communication interviews. The basic information table of the interview subjects is as follows:

**Table 1.** Interviewer Information Sheet

serial number	(a person's) age	distinguishing between the sexes	educational attainment	careers	Length of time as a blogger	fan base
A1	22	women	undergraduate (adjec-tive)	schoolchildren	2 years	4849
A2	21	women	three-year college	profession	1 month	2190
A3	19	women	undergraduate	schoolchildren	1 year	3482

			(adjective)			
A4	20	women	undergraduate (adjective)	schoolchildren	6 months	4275
A5	32	women	undergraduate (adjective)	staff member	1.5 years	9530
A6	26	women	undergraduate (adjective)	staff member	1 year	637
A7	30	male	Undergraduate (adjective)	cameramen	1.5 years	4406
A8	22	women	postgraduates	executive (adjective)	biennial	1190
A9	27	women	undergraduate (adjective)	staff member	half a year	909
A10	24	women	bachelor's degree	schoolchildren	1 year	3758
A11	22	women	undergraduate (adjective)	schoolchildren	2 years	2511
A12	25	women	doctoral	schoolchildren	6 months	1011
A13	27	male	undergraduate (adjective)	staff member	2 years	2379
A14	26	women	undergraduate (adjective)	staff member	1 year	637
A15	28	male	undergraduate (adjective)	executive (adjective)	2.5 years	4763
A16	32	women	postgraduates	rendering	2 years	4442

Note: Interviewee A5's followers met the screening criteria of <5K followers at the time of the interview, and the number of followers rose to 9,530 by the time the thesis was completed.

## 2 "Power for Love": Active Consent Under Emotional Labour

The emotional creativity and professionalism pursued by junior bloggers is not only reflected in the expression of their personality and the content of their work, but also in the fulfilment of their own emotional needs and values[3].

### 2.1 Identity: Labour Shapes the Satisfied Self

The control of the online environment over the ideology of junior bloggers allows them to actively engage in production even in the face of uncertain remuneration. In order to realise their dream of becoming a "NetroStar", junior bloggers focus on self-cultivation and self-improvement, ranging from the shaping of their external image to the output of their professional qualities[4]. In the process of continuously improving their external and internal qualities, they gradually build up a more enterprising self, thus enhancing their sense of value and self-identity. This self-identity, in turn, will form a strong push force to make bloggers actively identify with and rely on the platform[5].

At first, I didn't want to do it, and I was posting randomly and inadvertently exploding. Then it is constantly learning to post in a regulated manner, and in the process it is quite an achievement. (See Table 1, A1)

## **2.2 Habits: Emotional Adaptation and Emotional Play in Bloggers**

Emotions in the context of the Marxist concept of freedom are people's direct judgement and lyricism of their thoughts about what they perceive, and are direct, authentic, and internal expressions without the process of rethinking[6][7]. However, when emotion itself becomes the central object of emotional labour, emotional workers tend to use strong emotions to attract audiences in order to broaden the scope of influence of their emotional labour. They will embellish and package their emotions to highlight their unique personal style and charm, effectively attracting and impressing the audience.

Aside from the emotional interaction of fans and making money, one of the major reasons for maintaining this account is that I'm a person who wants to talk a lot, and I need to write to express my feelings and then use a platform to show them. (See Table 1, A1)

## **2.3 Imagine: the Labour of Hope of "Wannabe Netizens"**

Kathryn Kuhn and Thomas Corrigan have proposed the concept of 'hopeful labour' as a motivation for voluntary online social production, which explains the motivation of affective workers to actively participate in the platform's labour[8]. The Xiaohongshu platform continues to paint a rosy vision of becoming an online celebrity, achieving wealth freedom and class advancement for junior bloggers, and helps them achieve their goals by providing traffic support and rewards. Driven by both the dream of fame and financial gain, junior bloggers are motivated to participate in the creation of content on the platform[9].

# **3 "Inequality is Not an Issue": Dynamic Resistance in the Context of Emotional Dissonance**

In order to safeguard the interests of the platform and its funders, the Little Red Book platform has exerted a certain degree of control over junior bloggers[10]. Junior bloggers endeavour to defend their rights and interests by adopting flexible strategies within the limited living space, looking for the possibility of "resistance" in compromises[11][12].

## **3.1 "Playing With the Rules"**

On major social media platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu, bloggers are having in-depth discussions about the labour rules of the platforms. Questions such as "Which field is easier to achieve commercial realisation?" And so on. These discussions not

only help eliminate the career risks faced by inexperienced workers due to information asymmetry, but also help them make more rational career decisions.

At the same time, bloggers who are familiar with the "rules of the game" will cleverly leave their personal co-operation email address on the homepage to ensure that the brand can privately get in touch with the main body of the account, avoiding the payment of service fees for the co-operation notes to the Dandelion platform while successfully collecting the co-operation fees from the brand.

### **3.2 Consultation With Brands**

Advertising co-operation is an important part of junior bloggers' income[13]. When faced with a brand's demand for co-operation, if a Little Red Book blogger finds that the creative framework in the co-operation is not reasonable enough, they usually take the initiative to communicate with the brand as a way of protecting their own interests and ensuring that their work can achieve good results in terms of data performance.

Additionally, some bloggers may take advantage of loopholes in the platform's system to maximise their personal benefits. For example, they may choose to hide bad data by setting poorly performing notes to "visible only" or deleting them outright, thereby misleading brands who are looking for opportunities to work with them.

## **4 "Manufacturing Consensus": a Two-way Race to the Bottom in a Mutually Beneficial Win-win Situation**

"While affective labour can also be a process of self-satisfying enjoyment for the labouring subject, it is still essentially digital labour in the service of digital capitalism[14]."

### **4.1 "Empowered Job" Attracts Two-way Rush**

According to Marx, labour is essentially positive, and it is not rejected by workers, but rather the alienation of capital has a negative impact on labour, resulting in psychological damage to workers, which in turn diminishes their enthusiasm for labour. On the contrary, if a labour identity can be constructed for workers to identify with, it will effectively stimulate their enthusiasm and motivate them to actively participate in the labour process. The Xiaohongshu platform is precisely dedicated to presenting users with an attractive picture of fame. Initially, I also watched the dressing videos of other bloggers and felt that they were both glamorous and multi-golden, so I wanted to give it a try. (See Table 1, A9) Attracted by this illusion, junior bloggers, as subjects of emotional labour, actively commit themselves to the platform and spontaneously engage in emotional labour[15].

## 4.2 "Imaginary Gains" to Stimulate Sustainable Labour

Nowadays, the attraction of Xiaohongshu platform is no longer limited to the fun of self-expression and sharing, but relies more on the profit-sharing mechanism, which covers multiple forms of income such as more work, more pay, marketing competition, etc. However, junior bloggers on Xiaohongshu usually do not enjoy a fixed remuneration, and their income is mainly dependent on the performance of the data of the operating account, which is highly fluctuating. Therefore, the platform will initially keep fueling the positivity and enthusiasm of junior bloggers so that they can maintain a high frequency and quality of labour[16]. Newcomers will be given more exposure opportunities, and more businesses may come to you for cooperation if you meet explosive articles. (See Table 1, A11) In the Internet era, the methods of capital exploitation have become more subtle, and the seemingly fair and reasonable "value feedback" is still a means for platforms and capital to take advantage of and exploit emotional labourers[17].

## 4.3 "Selling Attention" to Complete the Transformation of Commodity Symbols

Capital operation has led to the close connection between emotional labourers and platforms, among which junior bloggers, as an important emotional labourer, not only provide content creation for platforms, but are also regarded by platforms as a kind of commodity to be operated. However, while platforms are satisfied with the basic value of emotional labourers, they further seek to explore their added value to maximise their benefits.

"We 'generate power with love' and they (the Little Red Book platform) make a lot of money, we all know it." (See Table 1, A7)

As the platform's user base continues to expand, more and more emotional labourers have come to rely on and be bound and guided by the platform. Such a *modus operandi* not only reveals the dual use of emotional workers and their information by the platforms, but also reflects the expansion and penetration of capital in the digital economy.

## 5 Conclusions

This study focuses on non-employed emotional labourers: junior bloggers on the Xiaohongshu platform, and conducts in-depth interviews and participatory observation of junior bloggers' emotional labour practices. The preliminary findings of this study show that the platform hides the essence of the exploitation through various means in order to sustain the exploitation, create a utopian illusion of being a blogger for the emotional labourers, attract more junior bloggers to join the platform, maintain the number of daily active users on the platform, and further expand the emotional relationship and build a unique platform culture. The process of junior bloggers' emotional labour is also the process of their adaptation to commercialisation. In the process of emotional labour, they achieve self-identification, relationship connection and value

imagination. At the same time, they themselves will resist the oppression and exploitation of the platform or capital.

In the end, however, the power of the individual is still limited, and more and more junior bloggers are still caught up in the sophisticated cage of control created by their employers. If we want platforms to bring more social value for the better, we need to understand the platform labour practices of junior bloggers and, on this basis, formulate practical mechanisms to protect their rights and interests, so as to curb irregularities in the labour market[18]. In this way, we can more effectively protect the rights and interests of junior bloggers in the era of digital economy, and make the emotional labour of junior bloggers more full of happiness.

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