



# A Study of Digital Labor Alienation in Keep's "Cloud Fitness"

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**Abstract.** In the era of media socialization, digital technology penetrates all levels of social life, and the structure and mode of online fitness value creation are supplemented and developed. As a new type of labour, cloud fitness forms a composite of body, technology, and media and is set in the post-epidemic era. Using a combination of interviews and participatory observation, and combining digital labour theory and alienated labour theory, this study finds that the bodies of "cloud fitness practitioners" encounter the double alienation of being disciplined and consumed after becoming labour products and that labour behaviours face the danger of "reverse domestication" under the coercion of technology and media, and that capital, technology, and media are in danger of "reverse domestication." "The labour behaviour faces the threat of "reverse domestication" under the coercion of technology and media, and the labour relationship between capital, bloggers and fans is commodified into the relationship between numbers and figures, and the essential characteristics of human beings are consumed in the digital exchange.

**Keywords:** digital labor; alienated labor theory; Keep; cloud fitness.

## 1 Introduction

"Cloud fitness, also known as "online fitness," "live fitness," and "Internet + fitness," is a new fitness scene built by new media technology, including live fitness, fitness apps, wearable device fitness and other types of fitness, integrating fitness teaching, fitness consultation and fitness condition detection. According to the China Fitness Industry Data Report 2022, produced under the guidance of the China Fitness Association, the number of people working out in offline fitness gyms decreased in 2022 due to the impact of the epidemic, while the number of people working out online rose sharply, with youths aged 18-30 years old predominantly accounting for 52.6% of the total. In the post-epidemic environment, people's health awareness has increased, and fitness has become an alternative to cope with the uncertainty of the risk of national policy encouragement and capital into the accelerated development of "cloud fitness."

At present, the research on "cloud fitness" focuses on the analysis of communication effect, interactive scene construction and expression of body vision, such as Shi Yinyue using literature analysis to explore the reasons for the explosion of "live broadcasting

+ fitness," the problems, and put forward suggestions for the future development [1], Wang Shanshan based on scene theory to analyze the impact of "cloud fitness" scene on viewers' behaviour [2], Ge Shifan takes Keep female users as an example to discuss women's body training in the context of digital fitness. However, she only discusses the labour relations between platforms and bloggers and between bloggers and their fans in the third part of the paper [3] and doesn't systematically sort out the heterogeneity that fitness users suffer from in the whole practice.

Generally speaking, academics have paid less attention to the "cloud fitness" group, mainly focusing on the communication effect from the macro level and the lack of research on the power structure and psychological mechanism in cloud fitness. Therefore, based on digital labour theory and alienated labour theory, this paper looks at "cloud fitness" from the perspective of digital labour and tries to answer the following questions: How does the behaviour of cloud fitness practitioners constitute digital labour in this complex field? What is the power mechanism of cloud fitness practitioners in the fitness process?

## 2 Research Methodology

This paper takes the Keep platform as an example and adopts the in-depth interview method, including both offline and online forms; the researcher interviews 8 fitness practitioners online and 2 offline fitness practitioners from July to December 2023, with the interview time ranging from 20-35 minutes. Combined with participatory observation, cloud labour psychology and the labour process of cloud fitness practitioners on the Keep platform were excavated. The basic information of the interviewees is as follows:

**Table 1.** Basic information of respondents

Name	Gender	Age	Career	Type of fitness	Gym time	Fitness frequency
Wen Jun	male	20	university student	Running, playing table tennis	biennial	once every two days
Xiao Ke	male	23	postgraduate student	Running, badminton	third year	Five times a week
A Chu	male	24	media worker	Jumping rope, running, riding	half a year	Twice a week
Zhi Qiang	male	30	electronics manufacturing	Running, push-ups, sit-ups	biennial	once every two days
Bu Yang	male	36	Keep domain expert	Running, cross-country, stretching	six years	everyday
Si Ying	women	21	postgraduate student	Jumping rope, running	four-year	Seven times a month
Cao Shuai	women	20	university student	Running, jumping rope, climbing, yoga	a year and a half	everyday
Peggy	women	19	university student	Running, cycling, badminton	first year	everyday
Fan Fan	women	31	Corporate Vice President	Keep Course Follow-Up	four and a half years	everyday
Fei Di	women	32	Teacher and fitness blogger	Yoga, jump rope, calisthenics	four-year	everyday

### **3 Analysis and Findings**

#### **3.1 Alienation of the Product of Labour: the Constructed Standard of Physiological Numbers**

An examination of the history of fitness reveals that the concept of the body in our fitness movement has long been profoundly by social structures and circumstances. With the establishment of the market economy, the state has reduced its direct intervention in sports; however, with the gradual development of a consumer-oriented society, commercial capital has become a hidden disciplinary force behind the fitness movement.

#### **The Manufactured Body: A Perspective on Capital-Dominated Space**

As a critical site for generating discourse and enforcing discipline, space is important in Foucault's power analysis. Foucault borrowed the British utilitarian Bianchin's idea of the "panoramic open prison" and imagined it as a universal social structure, and it is in such a landscape where "everyone is watched" that a new system of social surveillance is established [4]. In Keep's cloud fitness scenario, the power of spatial discipline comes from two main aspects: ambiguity and transparency.

With the development of digital information technology and new media, "cloud fitness" is not subject to spatial regulation, and as a result, the digital fitness medium has gradually invaded the private sphere of daily life - the community, the office, the home, and even the bedroom has become a common place for people to work out. The unlimited extension of fitness space is accompanied by the diffusion of fitness time, gradually blurring the boundaries between fitness, work and rest. On the other hand, the recording function and social attributes of digital media have enhanced the transparency of personal space, users are recorded in cyberspace, and the "panoramic prisons" in the traditional media era have shifted to a brand new state of surveillance: opposite-view prisons (where the majority watches the minority) and all-view prisons (where the majority oversees the majority) [5]. In the "community" section set up by Keep, ordinary individuals have the power to observe others, and at the same time, they also become the objects of gaze so that the tentacles of discipline reach all corners of life and people's most profound experience of heart flow in the name of fitness.

#### **The Consumed Body: A Symbol of Beauty and Health**

Jean Baudrillard, keenly observing that the body has become a more beautiful and precious commodity in the consumer package, proposes a double practice of the consumer social structure and the dissonance of its bodily manifestations: the practice of the body as capital and the practice of the body as an object of consumption [6]. By manipulating symbols, capital accomplishes the double exchange of body and object: the body realizes the pursuit of beauty and health, and the object opens the production-consumption chain. The body and the sign constitute a homogeneous symbolic network, i.e., the "objectification of the body" and the "objectification of the body," mediated by the produced symbols of beauty and health.

Beauty and health have become the absolute law of the body. On the one hand, the mermaid line, waistline, waist of a male dog, and swan arms have become the pursuit goals of modern people's bodies, and the abdominal muscle tearing program and the whole body assault dyeing program in the Keep course, as well as the precise control on the intake of carbohydrates, proteins, and fats in the dietary guideline, are the symbolic feasts for people to choose from to realize the standardized pursuit of the body. On the other hand, especially since the post-epidemic era, people have shifted the focus of medical care from treatment to prevention, focusing on improving the quality of personal health and decentralizing health practices to daily life. Health is detached from the expensive medical and cosmetic fields, but the individual's daily practice creates a broader range of non-freedom, and the obligation of health is borne by the individual alone. "The main reason for fitness is to lose weight; when I was fat, I was not confident and had a bit of an inferiority complex, so I made up my mind to change, and I wanted to see what my slimmer self looked like." Cao Shuai said, as depicted in Table 1. This construction of the mainstream social fashion and the practice of health de-charming individualization makes people focus on the consumption of goods to achieve the redemption of their bodies, which is the appropriation of symbols by the logic of capital to reach a kind of benefit economy program.

### **3.2 The Alienation of Labor Behavior: Physical Figures Held Hostage by Technology**

The use of media technology in the practice of "cloud fitness practitioners" optimizes fitness practices, but on the other hand, the media devices embedded in the body create a "human-computer symbiosis" in which the user's body is recorded, quantified, and evaluated. While fitness practitioners appear to be actively choosing technology, they are in danger of being "reverse-trained" by it. The time of use can be expressed in terms of quantifying the self during the workout and sharing the self after the workout.

#### **Self-quantification: Exploited Self-tracking Techniques**

With the in-depth development of media technology, the relationship between human beings and technology has become increasingly close, and the data presented by media technology has become an essential reference for quantifying the individual, leading to the rise of autism. Dataism refers to how an individual's social practices can be symbolized through quantification and numbers. The development of wearable devices allows individuals to understand their physical indicators with precise quantitative data, and the "natural person" becomes the "data person."

In the practice of running and fitness, wearable devices can record the user's data such as running track, distance, time, step frequency, heart rate, etc., and generate a map of the user's exercise data after the exercise, which on the one hand enriches the database of the platform, and on the other hand, the user can have a clearer understanding of the self through the quantification of the self's data. To achieve the ideal data created by scientific knowledge, the user imagines it as the "idealized self" and constantly motivates himself to go beyond the limits of his body towards the data, which

realizes the alienation of human beings at the physical level; at the psychological level, "The ideology of an external data processing system that understands our existence better than we can understand it ourselves disintegrates the space of subjectivity in which the individual can enjoy freedom [7]." When an individual falls far short of the target data, they become psychologically anxious [8], begin to doubt the self, the sense of self-identity decreases, and the mind becomes alienated. Reserve mentions that A Chu, a person in Table 1, turns his exercise bracelet on in advance every time before he goes downstairs to exercise, and for him, recording data is like the subconscious behaviour of dressing and eating. "You will feel a twinge of happiness when you reach today's training goal, and you will feel a bit lost when you don't, and strive to surpass yourself in the next workout."

### **Self-exhibition: "digital competition" in Multimedia**

Complex media is a new media ecosystem established in the context of media convergence, and some researchers have categorized the use of complex media into three scenarios: inter-multi-platform, intra-single-platform, and inter-platform swing across network boundaries [9] and this paper focuses on the use of media between multi-platforms based on the functional focus of keep.

The previous section discussed that users internalize social values to strengthen self-identity, a domestication path from the outside in. In addition, users also display their self-image and perform impression management to gain the recognition of others to strengthen their self-identity, which is a performance path from the inside out. Based on the weak social relationship on the Keep platform, users will choose to share their fitness photos, data, and experiences on social media platforms such as WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Tik Tok. However, in the social environment of "involution" everywhere, fitness is also heading towards vicious competition. Peggy mentioned in the interview that she had been injured many times, with periostitis, left gastrocnemius muscle strain, etc., but as long as you can lift his legs, she will still go running; she wants to run that knot in the heart of the unveiling. What's more, to achieve a faster pace and more running volume, at the expense of the body, in the case of knee injuries and bleeding toes, still insist on running.

This is the idea expressed by Foucault that the soul is a representation of the inner psychic space inscribed in the body, that the soul confines the body, and that the body develops itself by the demands of the soul. The body of the gym-goer becomes a victim of the digital competition between the gym-goers to realize the unity of the "real me" and the "performative me" and to achieve psychic attunement.

### **3.3 Alienation of Labour Relations: Capital Figures Under Invisible Control Mechanisms**

With the accumulation of experience, interest boosting and economic demand, some ordinary fitness practitioners advanced to become fitness bloggers, and the relationship between them and platform founders became increasingly close. As flexible employ-

ment, fitness bloggers are squeezed by the platform's traffic mechanism; in their interactions with their fans, they need to make both intellectual and emotional contributions, and the degree of connection between bloggers and their fans has been externalized as the amount of commodity exchange. As a result, the relationship between platforms and bloggers, and between bloggers and their fans, is alienated into a relationship of "data" and "data."

### **Data Baiting: Soft Exploitation Under the Cover of Traffic**

Michael Burawoy put forward the "rush game" to explain the labour process research in the "labour consent" of the important theory [10]; in addition, "gender game," "grab the chair game," "boss game" and so on all reflect the characteristics of "labour gamification" [11], that is, adding game elements in the labour process, making workers voluntarily work hard for specific goals. Adding game elements to the labour process makes labourers voluntarily work hard for specific goals. On the Keep platform, fitness bloggers engage in a "digital game."

"I need to reach more than 10,000 dynamic views in the field I'm applying for to fulfill the conditions to become a field master, and I can only apply for it if the platform invites me to do so; I can't apply for it on my initiative," As shown in Table 1, BuYang said. The domain expert is a user who contributes a lot of high-quality content to the Keep community and has higher visibility within the platform to get more traffic. Traffic is not just a string of numbers but can be transformed into an equivalent amount of monetary capital, accumulating social resources, contributing to the emergence of "traffic people" [12]. With the promise of capital, individuals become captives of traffic, both creating it and being controlled by it. However, as an unstable and temporary occupation, domainers do not have a traditional labour-management relationship with the platforms and thus lack the necessary labour protection. Besides, the labour practices of bloggers, content creation, course production, and community sharing are monopolized by the platforms for no or a small amount of money. The platforms have unlimited access to the residual value of the fitness blogger's labour, which has been the subject of an ongoing "digital game." In this "numbers game," labourers only receive unstable traffic filtered by the employers and meagre compensatory benefits.

### **Emotional Labour: Misaligned Relationships Between Fitness Bloggers and Their Fans**

Fitness bloggers need to perform emotional labour acts in addition to intellectual labour practices. Emotional labour, proposed by Arlie Russell Hochschild, refers to "the control of the mental, emotional, and verbal aspects of a service worker, such as a flight attendant, to perform emotional work that satisfies the customer," and employee management strategies are mainly divided into surface performances and deep performances [13].

First, Keep bloggers must pay attention to their language, facial expressions, body movements and so on during live broadcasts, recording sessions and posting dynamic videos, such as encouraging users to stick to their punch cards and face their fans with a smile from time to time during breaks between action modules, to convey optimistic

attitudes to the audience. Second, online emotional labour can strengthen the emotional relationship and further extend it in various forms, and this labour is continuous rather than one-time [14]. After developing a certain degree of favorability and trust in the blogger, the user will join the fan base and become a loyal follower of the blogger. This also puts higher demands on bloggers, who are required to answer fans' questions in a timely manner within the group and sometimes need to play the role of a listener to fans' emotional outpourings. This requires bloggers to take the initiative to mobilize their inner emotional feelings and convert them into appropriate externalized emotions to convey to their followers to meet users' psychological expectations. Emotions are sold as commodities to customers for potential profit-seeking - fans become active consumers of the blogger's paid courses and promotional merchandise - yet this labour may cause the labourer to groom or alienate himself from an aspect of the self-mind. FeDi's words bear this out, "Under the dynamic, sometimes I see some negative comments from others, I need to hold my emotions down and use some polite words to communicate with the person in a friendly manner; in the fan group, even my failure to reply to the fans in a timely manner can be disconcerting, and I have to maintain a positive image at all times to do so."

## 4 Conclusion

According to Aishik Saha, when studying digital labour, it is essential to focus on the type of labour that users actually engage in rather than simply categorizing them into existing labour categories [15]. Combining the digital practices of "cloud gym users" with the theory of digital labour alienation, it can be found that as digital labourers, they face three aspects of alienation, namely, the alienation of labour products, the alienation of labour behaviours, and the alienation of human relations, which together point to the alienation of the essence of the human. These three aspects together point to the alienation of the human class essence - the gradual loss of autonomy and freedom, as well as the increasingly symbolic, hidden, everyday, and in-depth character of capital's discipline of the body.

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