Digital Labour In The Live Streaming Economy: A Thematic Literature Review

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Abstract.

This article undertakes a systematic literature review using a qualitative descriptive method to synthesise existing evidence on digital labour in the live streaming economy. Data were retrieved from the Scopus database on 15 June 2025 using focused Boolean search terms related to digital labour, platform labour, and live streaming. Of 116 initial records, 29 articles published between 2020 and 2025 met the inclusion criteria and were screened based on PRISMA 2020 standards for methodological rigour.The results show that live streaming creators labour under unstable and typically exploitative conditions imposed by platform algorithms and managerial authority. Despite these tensions, creators demonstrate agency through building peer networks,leveraging authenticity,and using community-based strategies of negotiating sponsor and audience expectations. Brokerage strategies, family solidarity, and mutual support serve to cushion precarity and enable autonomy. These findings suggest that creator agency is not an outcome of platforms as such, but of creators' adaptive strategies and social resilience. This review contributes to a larger understanding of the ways in which digital labour is organized, experienced, and contested on live streaming platforms.

Keywords: *Digital Labour; Live Streaming; Platform Economy; Content Creators and Systematic Literature Review.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the internet has significantly transformed the nature of work in the 21st century [1]. Most dynamic development in this regard is live streaming, a live content broadcasting that has evolved from being an expert entertainment activity to a lucrative economic [2] and a cultural phenomenon [3]. Platforms such as Twitch, YouTube Live, TikTok Live, and Facebook Live have enabled millions of users to undertake new forms of digital labour [4], selling their performances [5], engagements [6], and personal identities [7], [8]. Such a shift marks the emergence of a live streaming economy[8]—a regime in which work, exposure, and income are determined not only by creativity and fan engagement but also by platform algorithms [9], modes of monetisation [10], and social media politics [11].Here, the concept of digital labour has come forward with more significance [12]. Unlike traditional modes of labour, digital labour in live streaming often does not possess defined boundaries between work and leisure [8], [13], self and professional [14], autonomy and algorithmic management [15]. Streamers, influencers, and online performers are forced to stay ever-present, emotionally engaged, and attentive towards viewer demands, often with very little institutional support [16], irregular payments [17], and greater mental pressure [18].

These characteristics place live streaming work at the intersection of the gig economy, platform capitalism, and affective labour, making it an interesting and dense but also complex object of academic inquiry.While academic interest in digital labour in the live streaming economy has increased over the past

years, the literature remains scattered across disciplines such as media studies, sociology [19], communication studies [20], and labour economics [21]. This paper transcends these disciplinary limitations by conducting a thematic literature review of digital labour in the live streaming economy. More specifically, it aims to examine how platform algorithms and features condition creator labour, agency, and well-being; explore how relational and social dynamics mitigate precarity for online influencers; and look at how creators interpret and act upon exploitation within and across platforms. In doing so, the research offers a more complete view of how digital labour is organized, lived, and negotiated in live streaming environments.

Research questions:

RQ1: How do creator labour, agency, and well-being get shaped through platform features and algorithms?

RQ 2: How do relational and social aspects alleviate precarity for online influencers?

RQ 3: How do creators understand and respond to exploitation on and across platforms?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Digital Labour

Digital labour refers to work undertaken for or via digital technologies, often mediated by sites such as YouTube [12], Twitch [22], TikTok [23], and the like. Digital labour may include productive work that generates economic value (such as streaming content, moderating chat) [24] and immaterial labour, such as emotional investment [25] and brand building [25]. Labour in live streaming is often self-timed, public, and highly integrated with personal identity [26], [27] and community involvement [9], [16].

2.2. Platform Economy

Live streaming is part of the platform economy [28], where digital platforms act as intermediaries for workers/users [29], audiences [30], [31], and advertisers [32]. The platforms profit from user activity and information, and exert asymmetrical relations of power with workers [33]. In the case of streamers, the governance of the platforms influences discoverability [34], monetization streams [35], and community norms [36]. This results in a labour dynamic where visibility and income are heavily contingent on opaque algorithms and shifting platform policies [37].

2.3. Emotional Labour and Affective Labour

Affective labour is the production and regulation of emotional feelings [38]. Creators must continually interact with the audience, be authentic online characters, and cope with parasocial relationships for live streaming [39]. Emotional labour theory by Hochschild is also relevant [40], as streamers consistently perform emotional control to express enthusiasm, empathy, or enjoyment in the present moment, oftentimes at the expense of personal health [41].

2.4. Gig Economy and Precarity

Live streaming shares the characteristic of the gig economy in that work is task-based, flexible, autonomous, but precarious [15]. Unlike traditional gig work, however, live streamers are entrepreneurial workers, taking charge of their schedules [15], sponsorships [14], and self-promotion [42]. But they also face precarity, including earnings uncertainty [43], lack of labour protections [44], and performance pressure [45].

2.5. Algorithmic Management

Algorithmic management is the use of data systems to manage [46], evaluate [47], and shape labour activity [48]. In live streaming, algorithms determine what is promoted [49], to whom recommendations are made [50], and how success is ranked (e.g., views, likes, watch time) [51]. This builds a competitive system in which workers are incessantly optimising their content to satisfy unseen metrics called "platformed visibility" [52].

III. METHODS

This study employs a systematic literature review approach to synthesise [53], [54]the existing evidence based on work done online in the live streaming economy. The data were extracted solely from the Scopus database on June 15, 2025, which boasts extensive coverage of peer-reviewed scholarly literature. To determine relevance to the topic, the search was conducted using the following Boolean keyword search term in the title, abstract, and keywords (TITLE-ABS-KEY) fields:

("digital labour" OR "online work" OR "gig work" OR "platform work") AND ("live streaming" OR "livestreaming" OR "streaming platform" OR "content creator").

The initial search yielded 116 records. Filters were then applied to restrict the records to appropriate, high-quality studies: open access, document type 'article', publication stage 'final', and language English. 81 records were eliminated using the filtering process, leaving 35 articles to screen. Another 6 records were excluded as they fell outside the five-year publication date range (2020–2025). The remaining 29 articles were systematically assessed for full-text availability and appropriateness to the research question. All 29 records were deemed eligible and included in the final review. This method follows PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines [55], [56], [57], [58], [59], [60] to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological quality in identifying trends, gaps, and thematic conclusions in academic discussion of digital labour in the live streaming context.

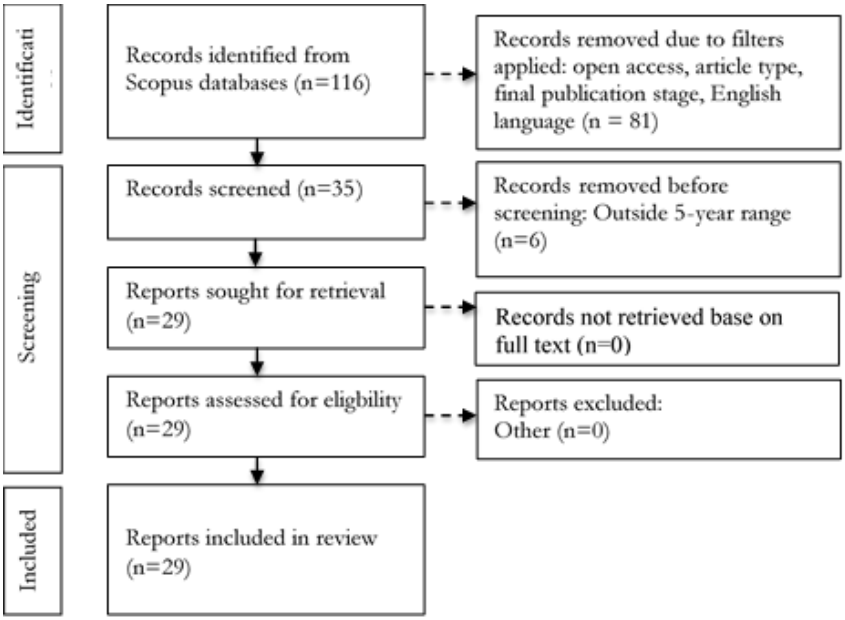

Fig 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram

Source:[53], [54], [55], [56], [61], [62], [63], [64]

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This strong set of studies, as submitted in Table 1 from diverse global contexts, investigates the conditions, identities, and tensions of digital labour and content creation on platforms. Methodologies range from qualitative interviews and ethnographies to surveys, theoretical essays, and media analyses. Concerns running through them are platform precarity, algorithmic control, racial and gendered inequalities, and commodification of identity and emotion. Influencers and producers negotiate autonomy and exploitation through relational work, audience engagement, authenticity strategies, and support networks. Findings emphasise that platform architectures regularly undermine creators' well-being, but that there is agency formed in community, diversified earnings, and counter-platform struggle. The collection of works as a whole contributes to a deeper understanding of digital work as shaped by sociotechnical, economic, and cultural forces.

Table 1. Scopus Insights of Influencer Economy and Digital Work (2021–2025)

Author (Year)	Country	Method	Findings
[65]	Indonesia	In-depth interviews (n=10)	Creative digital workers face precarity, short contracts, informality, and hustle culture under flexible labour rhetoric.
[66]	Global	Literature review + interviews	Platforms serve as infrastructure connecting actors, enabling monetisation, and shaping the ecosystem.
[67]	Global	Literature review + 8 expert interviews	Conceptualises content creators as "creatrepreneurs"; offers a success framework with environmental and personal factors.
[68]	USA	Critical media analysis (TV shows)	Tween shows depict girl content creators as neoliberal, post-feminist subjects, obscuring labour and gender inequality.
[69]	UK	Ethnography (2017–2023)	Marginalised creators face higher emotional labour, relational harm, and use tactics like disengagement or private spaces.
[70]	USA	Interviews (n=12, Black TikTok creators)	Black creators face racism, algorithmic bias, and platform discrimination; content moderation and monetisation issues.
[71]	Global	Grounded theory (qualitative interviews)	Tensions between autonomy and platform control are driven by algorithmic influence and monetisation structures.
[72]	Global	Theoretical + propositions	Viewer engagement and creator journey are interdependent; interaction outcomes affect both.
[73]	Germany	Content analysis +	Content creators construct "professional creator narratives" to reconcile audience,

Author (Year)	Country	Method	Findings
		interviews	sponsor, and platform demands.
[74]	China	Survey (n=763 digital workers)	Perceived platform exploitation ↓ subjective wellbeing via ↓ work gain & ↓ work security.
[75]	USA	Case study (YouTube analysis)	Decluttering videos involve home/data/waste labour; showcase digital self and domestic affective work.
[76]	Argentina	Virtual ethnography + interviews	Fit-influencers legitimise body/emotion control as moral labour; link to "political economy of morality."
[77]	Global	Interviews (n=20)	Strategies include authenticity, topic sensitivity, fact-checking, and privacy sharing; influencer wellbeing is at risk.
[78]	China	Observational case study	Kuaishou's jiazus as relational entrepreneurs navigating state, platform, and followers.
[79]	Slovenia	Interviews (n>50)	Influencer agency stems from income diversity & personal support, not platform usage.
[80]	USA	In-depth interviews (n=19)	Streamers respond to hate raids via ad hoc support networks; the platform lacks adequate support.
[81]	Iran	Content analysis (2,130 IG stories, 71 influencers)	Influencers exploit followers for fame/monetary gain without compensation; audience labour is identified.
[82]	Brazil	Theoretical essay	SMPs manage creators via the hope of visibility and the fear of invisibility; SMPs as organisational forms.
[83]	UK	Interviews (n=19) + platform observation	Platform affordances dynamically shape labour valuation; sex workers engage affordances to resist devaluation.
[84]	UK	Content analysis (Instagram posts)	Baking content reflects gendered, racialised digital labour and aesthetics of whiteness.
[85]	Philippines	Observation, content analysis, interviews	Digital labour bayanihan helps mitigate precarity through community strategies.
[86]	Philippines	Digital ethnography (4 years)	Brokerage processes mediate control and mobility in online freelancing.
[87]	USA	Content analysis, media	Instagram facilitates the commodification of Black identity in influencer culture.

Author (Year)	Country	Method	Findings
		discourse	
[88]	USA & Canada	Ethnography, interviews (n=12)	Twitch Spouses contribute through space management, intimacy, and timekeeping.
[89]	Germany	Mixed methods (discourse & interview)	FairTube achieved creator protections through hybrid governance and union alliances.
[90]	Germany	Empirical (COVID-19 natural experiment)	Newcomer streamers increased activity during low opportunity costs, sustained by successful ones.
[91]	Iran	Netnography, survey (n=600)	Unpaid digital labour on Instagram is commodified for corporate profit.
[92]	China	Digital ethnography	Livestreaming constructs commodified rural identity and invisibilizes affective labour.
[93]	China	Labour process theory, conceptual analysis	Identified fragmented control in platform game work via intermediaries, relationship labour, and platform diversity.

Source: Compiled from Scopus-indexed articles as of June 15, 2025

4.1. RQ1: How do creator labour, agency, and well-being get shaped through platform features and algorithms?

Platform design and algorithmic configuration powerfully influence creator labour, agency, and well-being. Algorithmic systems organise visibility, monetisation, and work conditions in many studies, tending to produce precarity, emotional distress, and decreased subjective well-being [65], [74]. Platforms serve as powerful infrastructures [66], exerting economic and social forces by oppressive algorithmic bias, audience pressures, and exploitative monetisation [70], [71]. While some creators write professional scripts or strive for authenticity to navigate such pressures [73], [77]Others—especially marginalised communities—deploy resistance tactics like disengagement or support networks [69], [80]. Influencer agency does not originate from the platform but instead derives from diversified sources of income and social support [79]. Moreover, viewer interaction is intertwined with creator experiences (Hollebeek et al., 2024), and creators often perform invisible affective and domestic labour [75], [92]. Overall, platforms both enable and constrain creator agency, often reproducing unequal labour relations in the guise of entrepreneurial freedom.

Table 2. Platform-Driven Creator Labour, Agency, and Well-being (Scopus, 2021–2025)

Theme	Key Insights	Supporting Authors (Year)
Precarity and Well-being	Platform design leads to precarity, emotional labour, short-term contracts, and reduced well-being.	[65], [69], [74], [77], [91]
Platform Infrastructure & Algorithmic Control	Platforms act as infrastructures that shape labour through algorithmic visibility, monetisation rules, and content moderation.	[66], [70], [71], [87], [93]

Theme	Key Insights	Supporting Authors (Year)
Creator Agency	Agency is constrained by platforms but strengthened through diversified income and community support.	[79], [80], [85], [86]
Narrative & Identity Management	Creators construct identities to reconcile pressures from platforms, sponsors, and audiences.	[67], [68], [73]
Affective and Invisible Labour	Influencers perform hidden labour (emotional, domestic, aesthetic), often unrecognised and unpaid.	[75], [81], [84], [92]
Strategic Resistance & Coping	Creators resist exploitation via disengagement, collective strategies, or support networks.	[69], [80], [83], [89]
Creator–Viewer Dynamics	Viewer engagement influences creator well-being and content strategies; both parties are mutually affected.	[72], [77], [88]

Source: Compiled from Scopus-indexed articles as of June 15, 2025

4.2. RQ 2: How do relational and social aspects alleviate precarity for online influencers?

Relational and social dimensions are also important in reducing precarity among online influencers because they provide emotional, structural, and economic nourishment beyond platform borders. Peer networks facilitate collective resilience through measures such as mutual support, as in the example of "digital bayanihan" among Filipino content creators [85]. Brokerage networks, also, mediate control and mobility within freelance ecosystems by connecting creators to opportunities and buffering platform dependence [86]. Partners and family members perform essential backstage work—such as time management, emotional labour, and household logistics—to uphold influencer productivity and well-being [88].

Social solidarity among streamers offers protective responses to discrimination and harassment via the formation of grassroots support networks [80]. Influencers also rely on personal safety nets, including income diversification and strong social support, to maintain autonomy from capricious platform policies [79]. In contexts like China, relational entrepreneurship allows creators to navigate the complex relations among state regulations, platform expectations, and follower demands [78]. Finally, coordinated governance initiatives, such as the FairTube campaign, demonstrate how hybrid regulatory strategies and union coalitions can mobilise for the labour rights of creators [89]. Together, these relational formations underscore the value of social infrastructure for resisting the rampant precariousness of platform work.

Table 3. Scopus-Based Review of Relational Strategies Addressing Influencer Precarity (2021–2025)

Relational Type	Function	Key Practice	Study / Context
Peer Community	Collective resilience	Mutual aid ("digital bayanihan")	[85] – Philippines
Brokerage Networks	Mediation of control/mobility	Freelance intermediation	[86] – Philippines
Family/Partner Support	Emotional & logistical backstage labour	Spousal time, space, and emotional regulation	[88] – USA & Canada
Social Solidarity	Anti-discrimination response	Streamer-created support groups	[80] – USA
Personal Safety Nets	Independence from	Diverse income sources,	[79] – Slovenia

Relational Type	Function	Key Practice	Study / Context
	platform risks	social backing	
Relational Entrepreneurship	Negotiating multi-actor influence	Engaging state–platform–follower dynamics	[78] – China
Collective Governance	Labour rights advocacy	Union alliances and hybrid regulation	[89] – Germany

Source: Compiled from Scopus-indexed articles as of June 15, 2025

4.3. RQ 3: How do creators understand and respond to exploitation on and across platforms?

Producers identify and resist exploitation between places through a range of strategies based on lived experience, identity, and platform-specific contexts. Commonly, producers identify platform dynamics such as algorithmic control, monetisation pressures, and biased moderation as manifestations of labour exploitation [65], [70], [75]. Black and marginalised creators, generally speaking, suffer from algorithmic bias and emotional harm, and often use disengagement or personal space as a coping mechanism [69], [80]. Some, such as streamers and influencers, build peer networks or engage in collective action, such as unionising [89]. Some others counteract by developing "professional creator stories" or emphasising authenticity and verification to deal with platform, sponsor, and viewer expectations [73], [77]. Theoretical work [82] At the same time focuses on how platforms regulate control as a function of hoped-for visibility and feared obsolescence. In nations like Iran and the Philippines, influencers rely on relational entrepreneurship, shared support, or brokerage to navigate precarious platform economies [78], [81], [86]. Collectively, these articles show that creators are neither passive recipients of platform logics nor passive victims of exploitation but actively negotiate labour value, visibility, and well-being in complex digital ecologies.

Table 4. How Producers Identify and Resist Exploitation Across Platforms

Theme	Description	Key Authors (Year)
Recognition of Exploitation	Producers identify algorithmic control, monetisation pressures, and biased moderation as exploitative dynamics.	[65], [70], [75]
Impact on Marginalised Groups	Black and marginalised creators face emotional harm and algorithmic bias; disengagement is a common coping strategy.	[69], [80]
Peer Support & Collective Action	Some creators form peer networks or engage in unionisation to challenge platform power.	[89]
Professional Identity Strategies	Creators develop professional narratives or focus on authenticity and verification to manage expectations.	[73], [77]
Platform Control as Governance	Platforms regulate labour via visibility promises and fear of invisibility; creators are governed through affect.	[82]
Local Navigation of Precarity	In contexts like Iran and the Philippines, creators rely on brokerage, relational entrepreneurship, and support.	[78], [81], [86]
Agency in Digital Ecologies	Overall, creators actively negotiate value, visibility, and well-being, not passive victims but adaptive agents.	All sources collectively

Source: Compiled from Scopus-indexed articles as of June 15, 2025

V. CONCLUSION

Overall, digital content creators navigate a complex relationship of algorithmic control, precarious employment, and platform authority through an array of tactics that are grounded in identity, social networks, and lived experience. Both algorithms and platform functionalities enable and constrain employment conditions that typically result in exploitation, emotional suffering, and damaged health, especially for marginalised populations. However, producers exercise firm agency by forging peer networks, group action, and invoking authenticity or professional narratives in negotiating audience and sponsor demands. Relational devices like brokerage, family solidarity, and community-based solidarity are important tools to resist precarity and reassert autonomy. These findings demonstrate that creator agency is not derived from platforms per se but from the adaptive working practices of creators, their diversified means, and collective resilience in various social and national settings.

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