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YouTubers' labor process and autonomy in Taiwan

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Abstract

In 2017, YouTuber channel has achieved tremendous growth in Taiwan, driving YouTuber as a popular career choice, but YouTuber's labor situation has not been well-known by outsiders. Therefore, this study uses the concept of immaterial labor to examine the labor process of YouTuber, analyzing how the autonomy works on the labor process. In this study, through in-depth interviews, the selected subjects mainly have subscribers higher than 10,000 and their types are DIY and entertainment. This study finds that creators maintain the autonomy of their creations through their works and fame, but the characteristics of the platform and the non-compete contracts are the major causes of controlling the creator's creative freedom. In addition, the management agencies, such as management companies, can be found as one of the factors that limit YouTubers' autonomy.

Keywords

YouTube, YouTuber, product placement, immaterial labor, autonomy

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Introduction

Since YouTube was launched in 2005, may have heralded the video-sharing website as a democratizing media platform that would convert media consumers into producers and reshape the entire landscape of media (Wasko & Erickson, 2009:372) . In October 2006, YouTube was purchase by Google, then announced that the acquisition combined “ one of the largest and fastest growing online video entertainment communities with Google expertise in organizing information and creating new models for advertising on the Internet”(Arthurs, 2018). From then on, YouTube seems no longer just a video-sharing website with user-generated content, but get involved in commercial purpose.

With the advancement of mobile technologies, the proportion of internet users has been increasing year by year and this has also propelled the development of online streaming video platforms. In particular, YouTube is currently a major streaming video platform in Taiwan. In September 2017, Ipsos conducted a survey on YouTube Usage Behaviors, pointing out users on average spend 14.6 hours watching YouTube weekly, and with 21% of subscribers subscribing at least one YouTube creator (YouTuber) channel (Google Taiwan – official website, 2017). The user’s behavior change leads to YouTubers’ channel subscribers increase rapidly, and it can be seen YouTuber get more attention in 2017.

Recently, YouTuber Xiao-Yu revealed his income approximately one hundred thousand dollars from January to September in 2017, so many people consider that YouTuber is an easy and fast way to get paid, ignoring the labor process behind. According to the critical theory, emphasize on the industry structure, ignoring the subjectivity of creators, and previous academic research focuses on the effect such as the impact towards the youth on watching YouTuber’s channel or the advertising effect on the YouTube. That is, the research on YouTuber has not gotten much attention, but YouTuber as an emergent career, which is important to do a research to understand the working situation of YouTuber.

In short, this study try to examine the labor process of YouTuber by immaterial labor theory, understanding how YouTuber works between YouTube and the owner of product placement. Knowing how YouTuber to balance the creativity of video and the requires from product placement, and how the autonomy of YouTuber can show up on YouTube on labor process.

Immaterial labor

Immaterial labor is advanced by Lazzarato in 1996, revealed factory labor transformed to immaterial labor from Fordism to post-Fordism. Lazzarato expressed manual labor is increasingly coming to involve procedures that could be defined as “intellectual,” and the

new communication technologies increasingly require subjectivities that are rich in knowledge. The concept of immaterial labor refers to two different aspects of labor. On one hand, as regards the "information content of the commodity, it refers directly to the changes taking place in workers' labor processes in a big companies in the industrial and tertiary sectors, where the skills involved in direct labor are increasing skills involving cybernetics and computer control (and horizontal and vertical communication). On the other hand, as regards the activity that produces the "cultural content" of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work" –in other words, the kinds of activities involves in defining and fixing culture and artist standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion (Lazzarato, 1996).

In the book of *Empire* published in 2004, Negri and Hardt classify immaterial labor into three types. The first is involved in an industrial production that has been informationalized and has incorporated communication technologies in a way that transforms the production process itself. Manufacturing is regarded as service, and the material labor of the production of durable goods mixes with and tends toward immaterial labor. Second is the immaterial labor of analytical and symbolic tasks, which itself breaks down into creative and intelligent manipulation on the one hand and routine symbolic tasks on the other. Finally, the third type of immaterial labor involves the production and manipulation of effect and requires (virtual or actual) human contact, labor in the bodily mode (Negri & Hardt, 2000:293).

It follows from what has been said that the concept of immaterial labor is to response the change of labor process by the development of technology. The labor process get involves in intellectualization, labor produces not only the material product but also the symbolic product by computer technology. YouTube as a borderless streaming video website, enabling YouTuber to upload their content which is cultural content with symbolic meaning. Thus, from the discussion of the three scholars, it can be clearly seen that the content of YouTube is a kind of immaterial labor.

The character of Immaterial labor can be marked by flexible, mobile, precarious. Flexible is because workers have to move frequently between jobs, and precarious because no contracts guarantee stable, long-term employment (Nergri & Hardt, 2004:112). In addition, the characteristic of immaterial labor emphasized the communication relationship by horizontal and vertical, so Lazzarato proposed the concept of the interface to illustrate this phenomenon. Lazzarato(1996) expressed that a worker's work increasingly involves, at various levels, an ability to choose among different alternatives

and thus a degree of responsibility regarding decision making. The concept of the interface of the activities of this kind of worker – as an interface between functions, between different work teams, between different levels of the hierarchy, and so forth (Lazzarato, 1996).

From the past studies, speak of the autonomy of immaterial labor, no matter neoclassical analysis or system theory both considered workforce as an instrument for the capitalist. But Lazzarato (1996) viewed a polymorphous self-employed autonomous work has emerged as the dominant form, a kind of “intellectual worker” who is him or herself an entrepreneur, inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space. Namely, the concept of immaterial labor by Lazzarato can present autonomy through labor process in different projects by their intellectual, and take back autonomy by doing self-employment work. Even if Lazzarato put forward a comprehensive explanation of immaterial labor, he did not do an empirical research to examine his argument. So this study tries to undertake a research based on immaterial labor with detail empirical investigation.

The business model of YouTube

The main business model of YouTube is advertisement and subscription. The subscription service called YouTube Red is now running out few of countries, such as America, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand and Korea (Vermeulen, 2018).

There is three type of making a profit by advertisement: providing live streaming, partner, and advertisement layouts. The live streaming provides international events or sports games. Partnership are the content creators of the YouTube, and the video content provided by the creators is based on the video traffic distributes the advertising revenue. The advertisement layout sale is providing the layout to the advertisers on the homepage (Lawler, 2012).

The advertisement formats on YouTube

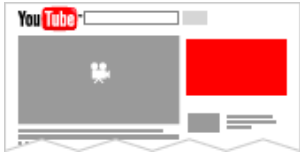


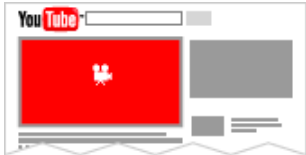
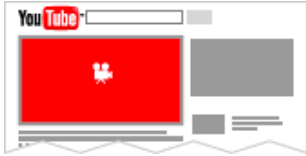
The advertisement divides into 7 categories: display ads, overlay ads, skippable video ads, non-skippable video ads, mid-roll ads, bumper ads, native mobile ads. The layout of advertisement, the device, the ad format, the watching time of audience affects advertisement revenue (YouTube, 2018).

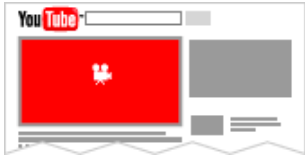
In the case of display ads and overlay ads show up next to the video or on the bottom of the video window, both of them only display on desktop and laptop computers. The skippable video advertisement is the most common ad format and is the only ad format

allowed to display on any device. The mid-roll ads and non-skippable ads are force viewer to watch full ad, the difference between mid-roll ads and non-skippable ads are the time of ad showing. Bumper ads are mainly videos that last more than ten minutes, but YouTubers usually produce videos that are shorter in duration. Most of this type of ads are videos uploaded to YouTube by media companies.

Finally, we must discuss the audience's advertising viewing behavior, because the amount of profit comes from the audience's viewing time and the times of clicking on the advertisement. The advertising revenue depends on the time of audience watching, and whether or not click the ad. Most of the ad need to watch 30 seconds or click the ad expect non-shippable ads, then YouTuber can get paid by the advertisement revenue.

Table1. the format of advertisement layout

Ad format	Display	Device	Monetization
Display ads		Appears only on desktop and laptop computers.	Viewer sees the ad or if the ad is clicked on.
Overlay ads		Appears only on desktop and laptop computers.	A viewer clicks on the overlay to expand and view the full ad.
Skippable video ads		Appears on any viewing device.	A viewer watches 30 seconds or to the end of the video ad.
Non-skippable video ads		Currently appears only on desktop and laptop computers and mobile devices.	A viewer watches the ad.
Mid-roll ads		Available for videos over 10 minutes. appears only on desktop and	Skippable ad user must watch 30 seconds of the ad or the entire ad. If it's a CPM-

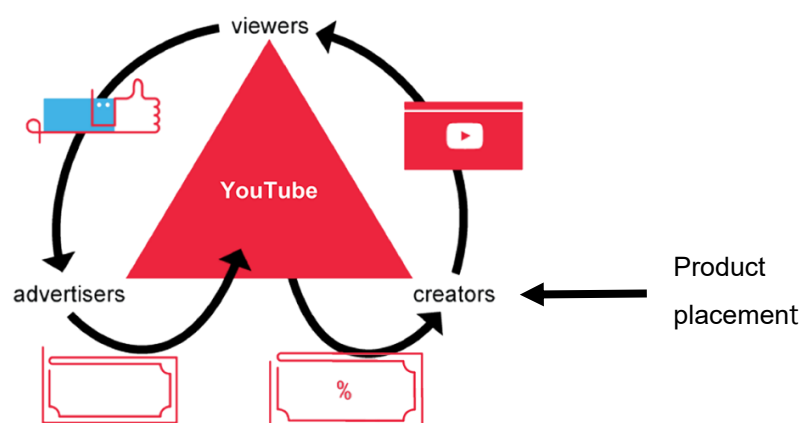
		laptop computers and mobile devices.	based ad, then a user must watch the entire ad regardless of length.
Bumper ads		Optimized for viewing on mobile.	Viewer watches the ad.
Native mobile ads	A display ad that appear below a video's metadata.	Only available on mobile.	there are 2 type: CPM (cost-per-mille) basis or CPC (cost-per-click) basis.

Note. YouTube. (2018) YouTube Creator Academy.

How do YouTubers make the profit

The YouTuber's revenue can be divided into two parts: product placement revenue and advertising revenue on the YouTube.

Figure1. The revenue mode of YouTuber



Note. YouTube. (2018) YouTube Creator Academy.

As YouTubers, there are some qualification restrictions of getting advertising revenue on YouTube. They need to open the profit function and the channel has to accumulate 4000 hours of watching time and 1000 subscribers in the past 12 months, enable to activate the profit function (YouTube, 2018).

The advertisement revenue is based on CPM (Cost Per 1000 impression), and YouTube will take away 45% and the rest is to the YouTuber. However, the CPM is a floating value, which is based on the advertising market and value of each country in a different value. CPM in Taiwan is approximately around 0.6-1 dollar (Chen, 2018). YouTuber's advertising revenue is calculated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{CPM} \times (\text{profitable number of credits} / 1000) &= \text{YouTube advertising revenue} \\ \text{YouTube advertising revenue} \times 0.55 &= \text{channel owner's advertising revenue} \end{aligned}$$

We can understand what industrial environment YouTuber faced by introducing the business model of YouTube. The industrial environment is the effect on how YouTuber produce videos. Namely, because of the advertisement scale is too small in Taiwan to get money from YouTube, so that is why YouTuber need to work for product placement.

Method

This study tries to figure out the relationship of YouTuber between YouTube and product placement, understanding how YouTube and product placement influence on the labor process. The method to carry out this study was conducted the in-depth interview.

The participants in this study are chosen by the subscription, it can be divided into 4 categories:

Table2. Level of YouTuber

Graphite	Opal	Bronze	Silver and up
1–1k	1k–10k	10k–100k	100k up

Note. YouTube (2018) YouTube Creators

However, the eligibility requirement for the YouTube partner program that the channel needs to reaches 1000 subscribers, the YouTuber of the graphite level is not qualified for it. The level of opal has a weak influence to audience, so get few of product placement.

This study focus on the level of Bronze and Silver, which subscribers range from 62,198 to 711,666 (MAY.23, 2018). Choosing the category of DIY and entertainment as main participants. This research totally interviews six YouTubers and two of them have two YouTube channels.

Table3. The sample channels

channel	category	Subscription	view
EVALIN	DIY	88,426	6,148,596
Shopaholic KellyEva	DIY	123,206	9,596,965
Ksnancy	DIY	96,741	7,081,825
Little song time	Entertainment	75,011	7,406,851
Miss crazy	Entertainment	62,198	4,113,378
HowFun	Entertainment	711,666	178,278,905
NSFW (Not Suitable For Work)	Entertainment	300,798	47,820,992
Froggy	Entertainment	188,481	17,957,650

Results

The labor process of YouTuber

The different purpose of the video makes different labor process if the video is produced for product placement the schedule of making the video will during approximately 3-4weeks. Because of the request in the video need to more time to negotiate with the partner of product placement. In addition, the different category of YouTuber experience different labor process, for example, a YouTuber of category DIY needs a product trial period and the entertainment YouTuber need more time to create a script.

It usually takes 1-2 weeks to conceive a plan and then another one week to film the video, including the preparation and filming. The length of preparation period varies depending on the needs and goals of the video. For example, some need specific props that we have to make it ourselves. Filming can be done within a day for the most of time, followed by another week to edit the video to provide our partner the first vision.

(Interview NSFW, Froggy)

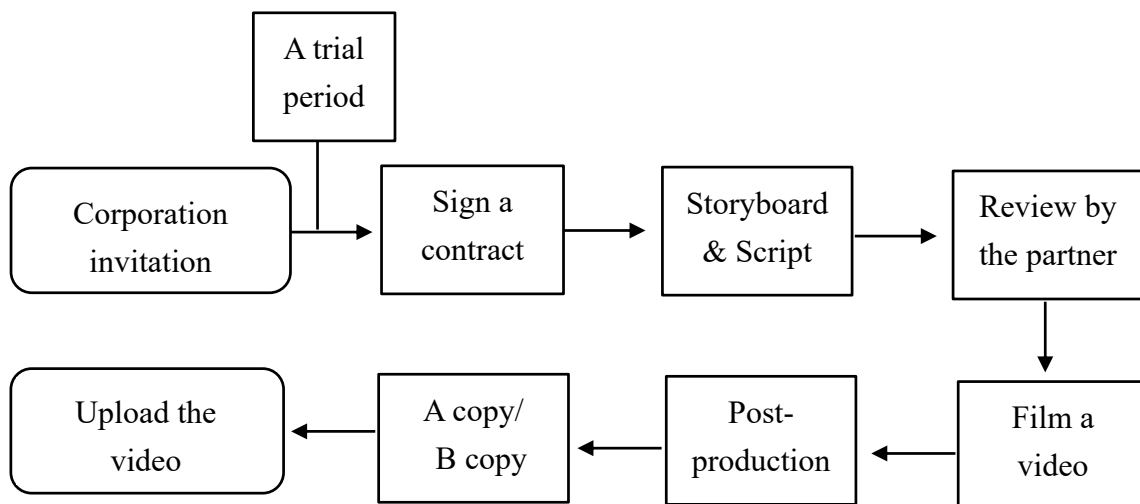
I only partner with companies after I try their products myself. Before

cooperating with companies, the agreement of the length of the trial period is made between both sides. For example, cosmetics usually take up to two weeks, while skin care products take a month or so.

(Interview EVALIN, Shopaholic KellyEva)

Generally, the detail of labor process of YouTuber can state as the blow:

Figure2. the flow of YouTuber's labor process



Labor process with the agency

MCNs

Multi-Channel Networks (“MCNs” or “networks”) are third-party service providers that affiliate with multiple YouTube channels to offer services that may include audience development, content programming, creator collaborations, digital rights management, monetization, and/or sales (YouTube, 2018). A common business model for MCNs is to sign a large number of popular YouTubers, to sell advertising space in the channels and to organize other brand integration opportunities, while also working with YouTube celebrities ‘to develop them into fully-fledged video brands’ (Lobato, 2016; Gerhards, 2017).

The multi-channel networks obtains revenue by assisting creator channel planning and providing creative resources, which mainly through getting commissions from creator channel ads. The ratio is set according to different creators, but for creators who are already well-known, then once can find better creative resources or cooperation opportunities by himself, and the benefits from the network can be reduced. At this time,

the network would need the fame of creator to help the company attract more new creators to join, so the network would be willing to reduce the commission rate to retain more creators.

The only reason that I join their multi-channel network is used the music in their library—for example, movie soundtracks. Then this music library has set up a new membership mechanism in which the members are given rights to use their music as long as they pay the monthly fee. This gets me to think if we should keep our partnership going especially when the membership fee is lower than the commission they get from me per month. After I argued with them, they adjusted the proportions of commission from 30% to 1%.

(Interview HowFun)

Management company

In distinguishing bureaucratic from technical control, Edwards argues that above all else it made workers' behavior more predictable, and predictability brought with it greater control for the corporation. It institutionalized the exercise of capitalist power, making power appear to emanate from the formal organization itself. Hierarchical relations were transformed from relations between (unequally powerful) people to relation between jobholders or relation between jobs themselves, abstracted from the specific people or the concrete work tasks involved (Edwards,1979:145; Ryan,1992:147).

As Edwards said, although the management company works for the creators and helps creators carry out their idea, in order to maximize the profit, the company must make the behavior of creators predictable by formulating the policies. However, this kind of management has infringed the autonomy of creators.

We had a contract for about two months before we stopped working together. There was a probation period, after those months I found out it wasn't suitable for me then I stopped the cooperation. Their company has decisions about what to do and what not to. Sometimes, they would do without asking opinions from creators, that was the reason I stopped the cooperation. Yes sometimes I can do even without paid, but I found there wasn't commission for me, so why should I do it. I wasn't happy about this. I said I can do it, then I found they wouldn't let this happen at all, because there are no reasons to spend time on these things.

(Interview Miss crazy)

The relationship with YouTube

Format as a creative limitation

The feature of media influences creators about how to make videos. YouTube always uses image as the main way to present ideas, but this characteristic doesn't benefit the other types of creators, who don't use the image as the main creation form. This characteristic causes creators to change their mind of producing videos.

In the beginning, my intention was to set up a radio broadcast, so our channel "Girl Friend Talk Show" was very simple, with only a picture and sounds. It was a simple project that recorded the talk show from beginning to end without editing. At that time we did not film like video, the number of viewers in each episode was 2,000 to 3,000 maximum. Although we prefer to do radio broadcasting, having videos on YouTube is important as it is not possible to use services on YouTube if you leave the homepage on the mobile.

(Interview little song time)

The contradiction between commercial and art

Cultural work is routinely presented as an arena of political struggle, principally in terms of how artistic desires for creative autonomy and independence exist in uneasy tension with capitalist imperatives of profit-generation and controlled accumulation (banks, 2007:6). When the cultural work embedded in the capitalist, the contradiction is inevitable to happen in the creative process. In this case, if the artwork can't make money once, their work eventually compromise with the commercial.

There was one video that I personally think was a very great work with good content but that didn't reflect on the number of viewers. In fact, this wasn't too surprising for me because I knew what would go wrong at the very first place. The problem was the title of the video which they named and spelled in Japanese because they wanted to form a sense of vintage film like in 50s and 60s. However, in reality no one knows how to pronounce it, let alone understands the meaning behind it. No one would ever click a video with the title that is not understandable, nor interesting. I made no attempt to prevent this, because I knew they were upholding the artistic spirit. However, I won't make the same mistake given the present result.

(Interview NSFW, Froggy).

The relationship with product placement

Set up a sub-channel

To struggle with the commercial, the creator will figure out the solution to balance the relationship between art and commercial, stopping the business infringe the creativity. In the case, the creator set up a sub-channel as a way to prevent influenced the autonomy of creativity.

I set up another channel for business if you want to watch the video of advertisement you can subscribe that channel. When the first time I negotiated business with them, I would clearly told them the video upload on the advertisement channel. After being explained to them, they were accepted mostly. Perhaps the purpose of that channel is for advertisement, they may not worry about it.

(Interview EVALIN)

Works as a chip to prevent the requirement from the product placement

Industrial laborers' production tools and produced products are held in the hands of capitalists. However, in the case of immaterial labor, laborers have their own production tools and the products they produce are still their own works, which enables labor to be in the process. It regained autonomy and gained more bargaining chips with the capitalists through the works.

Right now we try to negotiate with the company, that we wanted this video to be the best among all groups, because if the result doesn't turn out well, it would be harmful to us. We want to let them have faith in our specialty. We think some company understands us as: we want the result like this because we like it this way. And they think what will turn out more attractive... then we will try to let them understand, the reason we think it's not good enough, because, it's going to be on our platform.

(Interview Miss crazy)

Resist on the unreasonable requirement

In this case, when the creator thinks their rights and ideas had been infringed, they stand up to resist the unreasonable demands of the companies, and they are even willing to give up the opportunities for business in order to resist the unequal treatment from the companies.

There has been once I was really pissed. Like I said before, a good communication and a mutual respect are important to keep a good partnership going. So when a partner does not respect this, I would just decide rather not to upload the video. For example, they (the partner) always demand some changes in the video after the discussion and after I re-edit it, meaning I will have to spend another time on rendering video again. Such a situation could sometimes happen more than just one time. They may not understand why wouldn't I make the changes, but they also fail to understand how I feel. It is disrespectful to me and it could possibly waste a lot of my time. So the thing is not because of all the changes but because of the process which we could have done only one time to reach the same result.

(Interview Ksnancy)

The form of contract

Contracts can be roughly divided into two types, general contracts, and copyright contracts. The situation of each creator is not the same. Some creators will sign two contracts together and some will separate. Authorization period is mostly a quarter of a year. Authorization is a way that creators pay attention to and avoid the infringement of rights.

Another non-contractual form which commonly appears in the advertising market is the advertisement order. The order isn't complete enough comparing to the advertisement order but still has legal effect. However, it would be better to protect the creator's rights if they sign a formal contract.

A lot of time we don't have any contract with our partners because it is time-consuming to complete the process, especially when the invitations from companies usually come pretty late. Alternatively, we often signed an advertisement order which is commonly seen among ad agencies. Similar to

that of having a contract, the obligations and rights of both sides, such as the deadline of handing in videos and the methods of payment, are documented in an advertisement order; however, it is not as comprehensive as a contract and it only has little legal effects.

(Interview NSFW)

The limitation on the contract

Even the contract is a way to protect both rights, companies still will limit the creators in some ways. One of those is a non-compete clause, limiting the creator's freedom of creation. In other words, business matching towards consumer can combine the creator image with the company, by restricting the freedom of creation, it can be another capital form for the capitalist.

the non-compete means that: if I help Samsung film a video, I may not be able to accept product placement advertisement for mobile phone brands for the next three months. I think this is very unreasonable. Because there is no conflict, you can download two mobile games at the same time. So I think this is unfair, so I told him that I could not accept this condition. Then they say, they're related to gaming. So you can't accept the mobile phone games which relate to gaming. I can accept this condition.

Control by the flexible way

In the case of immaterial labor, the creator's creativity is the greatest economic value, so the capitalist does not have much control over the creator, but when the idea does not meet the expectations of the capitalists, it becomes the reason for the capitalist to exploit the creator, which leads to the creators to redo and remake the film.

At that time, he didn't have too many restrictions on the video content, so I thought it was fine to contract with him. But the product on the video was not so clear that he asked us to redo it. So I told him I could introduce the product when doing live streaming, and fortunately he agreed with the idea.

(Interview little song time)

I was communicated with a commercial agency once, then the contact person of brand want to attach information that we didn't communicate before. The

commercial agency didn't stand up for me, so I had no choice but remake the video.

(Interview EVALIN, ShophilicKellyEva)

Discussions

YouTube is a place where advocates can be creative, but when business and creativity comes together, does creativity itself be an infringement or an alternative?

Lazzarato view that the communication relations established by the immaterial labor with intelligence can help creative workers regain their subjectivity and autonomy. This study finds that immaterial laborers use their own works and fame as chips to support their own rights to achieve the possibility of autonomy. However, when individuals join the bureaucratic system, such as multi-channel networks or management companies, immaterial laborers must be obedient to institutional policies and fall into unequal power relations. At this time, autonomy is difficult to show.

In addition, YouTube's platform features affect the YouTuber's creative thinking. In the long run, the YouTuber's creative autonomy obeys YouTube's platform value, and the original platform that encourages creators to develop their creativity may eventually become the battleground of winning click rates.

Speaking about product placement, creation is the most important economic capital. In the beginning, advertising companies will not limit the creativity of the creators. However, when the creative and market expectations are not in compliance with each other, the advertising companies would use this as an excuse to exploit the YouTubers. The form of the contract is generally the protection of the content of the creator, especially in the authorization. The advertising company also restrict the creator's freedom of creation through the terms of the non-compete clause.

In general, the autonomy of immaterial labor in this study is manifested in the creator's work itself, because the production is produced by itself, which works as the largest bargaining chip can achieve the possibility of negotiation. This perception conforms to the modern cultural industry discourse. Creativity as the framework of the largest economic capital exposition, the fame accumulated by the works can create a wall of autonomy for the creators, and the creators themselves can exert their autonomy in the walls.

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