

The Algorithmic Assembly Line: How YouTube Shapes Thai YouTubers' Career Trajectory into More Disciplined Work

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Abstract

YouTubers are often viewed as exemplars of work autonomy and creative freedom, making this career very popular among young adults in Thai society. This perception has positioned YouTube as a dream job that enables individuals to earn income while staying true to themselves. The present study explores the career trajectories of Thai YouTubers, from their initial period of autonomy to becoming more disciplined workers in response to the platform's evolving nature. Drawing on in-depth interviews with eight long-experienced YouTubers, it finds that platform capitalism significantly influences career trajectories, identity, and social status within the digital production system. The findings suggest that Thai YouTubers navigate the complexities of entrepreneurial labor, balancing brand image, follower relationships, sponsorships, and self-identity within the constraints of an unpredictable and evolving digital labor market. Challenging the romanticized view of YouTube as pure creative freedom, this study argues that the sustained autonomy of Thai YouTubers is paradoxically achieved through self-imposed discipline and self-exploitation. This reveals how platform capitalism subtly transforms creative pursuits into demanding entrepreneurial labor, where "freedom" necessitates constant adaptation to algorithmic pressures for visibility and income.

Keywords: digital labor, entrepreneurial labor, platform capitalism, YouTuber, Thailand

Introduction

In Thai society, becoming a YouTuber has rapidly gained popularity (StarNgage, n.d.) It is viewed as a dream job (Institute of Trade Strategies, 2024), in which individuals can build personal brands and achieve financial independence, while maintaining desirable working conditions. As an occupation, it fits within the emerging new form of work, understood as platform labor, digital labor, and the gig economy (Scholz, 2013; Srnicek, 2017; Woodcock and Graham, 2020). Working as a YouTuber requires one to manage new work-related relationships beyond traditional employment, such as with sponsors, platforms, team members, audiences, and intermediaries. This situation creates different conditions for negotiating work relations as they extend beyond traditional employment relationships, within which employers are concrete entities. YouTubers, despite their career trajectories differing from their initial expectations, are deeply invested in their careers and feel the need to constantly adapt to platform algorithms and work situations.

YouTuber work occupies a gray area between entrepreneurship and labor; YouTubers are entrepreneurs who employ others to work for them and manage working time schedules by themselves. At the same time, they produce content for many businesses to earn wages to pay to their employees or their workforce. Those businesses, including platform companies, are often overlooked as employers of these workers, even though they exploit profits from the content and data that these workers produce on the platform. This ambiguity is partly driven by technological advances and platform business models that entice users to become producers, blurring the lines between work and leisure (Poell et al., 2022). On the positive side, it democratizes media production and opens up new opportunities. However, it also promotes unpaid labor and the rise of precarious work by obscuring the hierarchical power relationship of such work. In addition to ambiguity in relationships, YouTubers often feel they contend more with changing algorithms than would be the case with traditional capitalist forces. As a result, adaptation becomes a key strategy over bargaining, shaping their working lives and career trajectories. This article traces the four phases of YouTubers' career trajectory.

The article employs the concept of the "work situation" (Lockwood, 1958) to analyze the complex social relationships inherent in platform labor. It explores the working conditions of platform workers, its new form of management control resulting from the invisibility of employers, and the significance of self-exposure in order to gain and maintain admiration from their audience. This constant self-exposure can lead to emotional fatigue, as they must always present certain facets of themselves for judgement by the audience. Additionally, their work is heavily dependent on fluctuating digital metrics, such as the number of subscribers and views. To boost those numbers, YouTubers have to produce their content frequently and continuously, aligning with what they believe the YouTube algorithm favors. Thus, they have demanded heightened self-control. This reality significantly changed the initial expectations they had when they first joined the platform.

This article's central proposition addresses a critical paradox in platform-driven careers: while technology offers empowering professional paths, it simultaneously engenders new layers of precarity and sophisticated control mechanisms, fundamentally reshaping work.

Through in-depth interviews with Thai YouTubers, the article contributes to research on social media platform labor, exploring how identity, work, and platform governance intersect. The findings show how YouTubers balance personal expression with the commercial realities of platform capitalism, working within an environment that both enables and limits their professional growth.

Thailand's YouTuber Phenomenon and Platform Capitalism

The primary emergence of Thai YouTubers occurred after 2007, when Google acquired YouTube and developed it from a computer-based website to a mobile application. This same year, the launch of the first iPhone (Leskin and Altchek, 2024) facilitated this transition. After 2011, the launch of the 3G internet in Thailand allowed mobile users to access high-speed internet, boosting access to online content (Tortermvasana and Leesa-Nguansuk, 2012). The same year, the development of YouTube Live (McMillan, 2011) saw the rise of Thai gaming (Net Worth Spot, 2024).

The launch of "YouTube Thailand" in 2014 marked a turning point that led more Thais to join YouTube. This initiative allowed Thai creators to join the YouTube Partner Program to earn ad revenue (Russell, 2014; Sakawee, 2014). By 2015, Thailand was among the top 10 YouTube markets. Between

2015 and 2016, YouTube changed its content recommendation algorithm from the number of video click counts to viewer engagement behaviors in the video, such as shares, likes, and dislikes (Macready and Cooper, 2024). This algorithmic change was aimed at promoting user participation, and such encouragement effectively increased Thai YouTube users. By the end of 2018, there were 150 YouTube channels with over 1 million subscribers, up from 100 channels at the beginning of the year (InfoQuest, 2019:15). This growth coincided with the launch of a Facebook feature called “Watch,” which allows users to create videos and receive a share of ad revenue on Facebook (Toonkel, 2017). This support boosted video content sharing across both platforms.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a notable increase in internet usage in Thailand, with 57 million individuals, representing 82 percent of the population (Kemp, 2019). This increase also favorably influenced the expansion of YouTube usage for both users and YouTubers. During that time, YouTube launched programs like “YouTube Shorts” to compete with TikTok in addition to features to support creator monetization from viewers with channel membership (The Story Thailand, 2021; YouTube Help, 2024b). As a result, YouTubers continually grew in numbers. By 2021, YouTube usage among Thai internet users reached 94.2 percent, surpassing Facebook, which had long been the top social media platform in Thailand (Kemp, 2021). Additionally, Thailand had 7,000 channels with over 100,000 subscribers and 650 channels with over 1 million subscribers (Hankunaseth and Nadee, 2022: 27).

The phenomenon of Thai YouTubers can be understood through the perspective of platform capitalism, which explains that platforms like YouTube operate as infrastructure in the digital society.¹ First, platforms serve as intermediaries, connecting various groups and facilitating real-time communication. Second, they offer benefits, such as free services, to users because the number of users affects the quality and value of the platform. But they compensate by generating advertising revenue on the platform. Third, they rely on network effects. The more users a platform has, the more potential benefit it has for different groups, and this leads to the last, the potential to attract diverse groups to engage with the platform. However, this dynamic also positions platforms to be able to access user data and sometimes act as “game masters,” who can adjust platform rules or even manipulate dependent groups to align with their interests (Srnicsek, 2017: 41-47).

Platform capitalism explains how YouTube’s infrastructure enables people to become YouTubers while shaping their work lives and identities. Platforms employ evolving governance strategies to manage and regulate various users. Rietveld, Ploog, and Nieborg (2020) describe three phases of governance changes along the platform lifecycle. The first stage of platform development, or “early phase,” involves structural governance changes to improve market conditions and includes new revenue streams, pricing restructuring, and enhancements in data collection analytics to make the platform more appealing and attractive to multiple user participants. The second stage is the “expanded phase,” which involves governance changes by simplifying entry processes for the new platform participants, such as lowering market entry barriers or new categories to attract a diverse audience. The third stage, the “dominant phase,” involves redistributive governance changes. This change has improved search and selection tools curating content to make it easier for users to discover and select content and provide detailed insights into user behavior for YouTubers and advertisers. However, it has overshadowed user discovery and decision-making. Thus, the demand for content consumption is often distributed unequally on the platform,

¹ The term “digital society” in this article refers to a social and economic environment shaped by the infrastructures and logics of digital platforms (Poell et al., 2022).

and consequently, only a few content creators can attain visibility and succeed significantly. This impact underscores the disproportionate nature of platform economies (Rietveld et al., 2020: 14-19).

Although the platforms initially benefit various user groups, they have evolved in their governance and capacity to selectively collaborate with certain groups when they mature. This often negatively impacts creators who rely on the platform (Rietveld et al., 2020). Therefore, the evolution of platforms is a dynamic process in which creators have to continually adapt to follow algorithm updates. These changes often lead to job insecurity, income instability, and increased pressure to succeed. Thus, the platform lifecycle significantly impacts content creators who are dependent on the platform (Poell et al., 2022).

The coming of cross-border digital platforms like YouTube has disrupted traditional media and highlighted competition in the digital market in Thailand. Advertising spending on conventional media decreased, while internet advertising increased by 0.28 percent in 2020 (Dataxet, 2021). It has also created alternative opportunities for individual economies due to a new form of work occurring through a share of ad revenue on the platform and wages of producing branded content from sponsors and intermediary companies. In Thailand, YouTubers are also referred to as influencers who work across multiple platforms. YouTube was the most popular platform among Thai influencers, accounting for 41.17 percent of users, followed by 26.66 percent of Instagram and 26.12 percent of Facebook users (Dataxet, 2021). Moreover, the media websites revealed the economic success of top YouTubers such as zbing z., who boasts an estimated net worth of approximately \$18 million, My Mate Nate, with an estimated net worth of around \$7.3 million and Bie The Ska, whose net worth is estimated at \$4.05 million (Bhattacharya, 2024). Such success stories make YouTuber the fourth most desired job among Thai Gen Z (The Nation, 2024). This shift has impacted not only the economy but also the practice of cultural production. YouTubers have to pursue identities that enable them to achieve economic and social status through their association with viewers and brands, while the freedom and timeline of production are manipulated by the conditions of the invisible employer, like the platform.

Methods

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with eight Thai YouTubers. They were selected based on content types and meeting the YouTube Partner Program criteria: that is, at least 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours in the last year (YouTube Help, 2024c). Additionally, sponsored content was a significant factor, the focus being on Mid-tier and above, which includes YouTubers with at least 50,000 subscribers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

In 2018, YouTube introduced more stringent guidelines for the YouTube Partner Program, which included a shift in monetization requirements from 10,000 total video views to 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours (Macready and Cooper, 2024; Mohan and Kyncl, 2018). In 2023, YouTube reduced monetization barriers with features like Super Thanks and updated its algorithm for personalized video suggestions based more on individual interests and viewing history, along with video performance and quality (YouTube Help, 2024a). The selection process also considered changes to YouTube's governance rules, focusing on YouTubers who joined before or during 2018, which implemented tightened eligibility criteria, as previously mentioned. This approach helps illuminate the dynamic nature of YouTuber career trajectories as they are shaped by the platform's evolution.

Table 1 Interviewee details (Data for YouTube channels as of 23 July 2024)

YouTuber	Subscribers	Views	Videos	Joined	Period	Core content
Interviewee 1	71,500	5,541,753	193	2018	6 years	Vlog
Interviewee 2	1,150,000	109,615,503	1,195	2016	8 years	Cooking / food
Interviewee 3	1,030,000	120,125,828	408	2016	8 years	Tutorials / lifestyle
Interviewee 4	1,060,000	379,173,473	1,036	2007	14 years	Culture
Interviewee 5	571,000	49,641,258	690	2011	13 years	Beauty
Interviewee 6	399,000	32,900,174	367	2014	10 years	Tutorials / lifestyle
Interviewee 7	1,410,000	254,936,689	548	2017	7 years	Travel
Interviewee 8	2,050,000	607,999,943	1,337	2016	8 years	Variety entertainment

This research involved conducting interviews with participants about their experiences as YouTubers. Publicly available information, such as subscriber counts, years of joining, and total views from their YouTube channels, was collected and referenced. To ensure confidentiality, personal details were not disclosed. All participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2) when presenting interview data. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study in compliance with ethical research practices.

YouTuber Career Trajectories and Platform Governance

Traditional career structures in Thailand tend to follow clearly defined hierarchies and tenure-based progression. Careers in the public or private sectors mostly follow a position structure or length of service format. According to Adecco (2024), salary rates for more than 900 positions in Thai companies are cursorily categorized into three groups by tenure: Junior (0-3 years), Middle (3-7 years), and Senior (more than 7 years). These salary rates typically increase with years of service and experience. However, YouTubers' career paths are not bound by such positions or tenure frameworks. Extensive experience or tenure as a YouTuber does not guarantee higher or even consistent income since their professional growth depends largely on their popularity. Thus, career growth for YouTubers refers mostly to the number of subscribers and the view counts, which themselves fluctuate based on social trends and the platform's algorithm governance mechanisms. Consequently, YouTubers often find their future career progression uncertain. This research identified four phases within the career trajectory of YouTubers, each shaped by platform governance and subject to upward and downward mobility or even occurring simultaneously. These phases include the following: inspiration, exploration-development, growth-expansion, and defence-resistance phases.

Inspiration Phase

The beginning often occurs when inspired by watching earlier YouTubers, and this phase marks the transition from passive “viewers” to active “content creators.” For instance, Interviewee 1, who makes productivity lifestyle vlogs, was inspired by Korean YouTubers and was driven to create similar content because of a perceived gap in Thai content. Similarly, Interviewee 2 started her channel after observing

various YouTubers. In addition to the motivation from the channels they watched, they critically assessed the types of content that were popular or attracted a substantial audience, which often spurred their own creations.

As one of the interviewees explained, “At that time, I noticed beauty bloggers were thriving and very popular. Everyone seemed to be doing it, so I thought, if they could do it, so could I. So, I decided to give it a go” (Interviewee 3 [pseudonym], 2023).

This phase is not just limited to the start of a YouTuber’s own career. Becoming a creator does not mean leaving the viewer role behind; they can and do coexist. Thus, YouTubers often continue to draw inspiration from other channels throughout their careers. This inspiration extends beyond content production techniques, and includes new skills from their experiences as viewers. Therefore, in this initial phase, YouTubers frequently demonstrate a certain amateurism, beginning their production journey through self-learning.

Observing successful or pioneering YouTubers often inspires others to join the platform. Platform businesses support this by providing infrastructure and tools, particularly in the early phase. This cross-subsidization blurs the line between end-users and creators, making it easy to view, create, and share content. Advancements in digital technology—such as better internet systems, editing applications, and high-quality mobile phone cameras—have made it easier to emulate established YouTubers. The platform’s open boundaries and technological advancements facilitate the transition from viewers to creators. However, there are other motivations, including the desired “lifestyle” and “work style” perceived from both creating and watching YouTube content.

The interviewees valued a free and flexible lifestyle, allowing them to manage their own schedules. For example, Interviewee 3, who began producing videos while studying at university, found that YouTube provided her with both income and the freedom to organize her own time. This led her to devote herself to creating videos on YouTube and become a full-time YouTuber after graduation. Similarly, Interviewee 2, a trained nutritionist, preferred the autonomy of working from home over fixed hospital shifts.

When discussing the possibility of their viewership and income declining to the point where they could no longer continue as YouTubers, the interviewees expressed a desire to pursue their own business ventures. Their ideas included opening a planner shop, writing online books, creating podcasts, and starting a bakery. One of the interviewees explained, “A traditional job does not align with the lifestyle I want. If a company fails, I would be left with nothing. I prefer to create something myself. If it fails, I will still gain skills that could open new opportunities, rather than being left with nothing” (Interviewee 2 [pseudonym], 2023).

Exploration-development Phase

As YouTubers gain experience, they enter the exploration and development phase, where they focus on refining their personal branding and enhancing channel content. They aim to carve out a unique identity or niche to boost subscribers and views. This phase involves adapting their personal attributes to fit their envisioned position on YouTube, learning through trial and error, with audience feedback playing a crucial role.

Metrics like the numbers of “views” and “subscribers” indicate popularity and are derived from the platform’s algorithm. “YouTube Analytics,” often called “*Lang Bang*” (the backend), converts user activity data into insights, such as audience engagement, watch time, and demographic information. These analytics help YouTubers refine their branding and content strategy to better match audience preferences: “It provides demographic details of our audience, akin to running a business. Analyzing data like viewer age groups informs the type of content we should produce and the products we should feature, aiding in appropriate product selection” (Interviewee 6 [pseudonym], 2023). Another explained, “We started looking at feedback to see what type of videos viewers liked, which ones got a lot of views and comments. We focused on that style” (Interviewee 4, 2023).

During this phase, the line between “amateur and professional” or “hobby and work” blurs. Increased viewership, higher view counts, and monetary rewards like ad revenue and sponsorships drive this transition. As followers grow and economic considerations become significant, YouTubers start to see their leisure activities as potential careers. However, not all YouTubers achieve immediate success; many invest considerable time and effort without initial compensation, essentially performing free labor. This emphasizes the argument of Jane Parry and Brian J. Hracz that globalization has rapidly expanded the market for social media work, pressuring workers to accept low wages or even unpaid labor to maintain their positions (Parry and Hracz, 2020). One interviewee elaborated,

I have been doing this as a career for nearly eight to nine years, though I have been at it for over 10 years. Initially, I did not have monetization enabled on YouTube, and I was unaware that it could generate income. My perspective changed when sponsors began offering me 5,000 THB (Interviewee 5 [pseudonym], 2023).

During this phase, YouTubers’ incomes come mainly from two sources, with many reporting that YouTube ad revenue is significantly lower than earnings from sponsorships. Moreover, ad revenue is unpredictable, often fluctuating due to changes in the platform’s algorithm governance. One of the interviewees explained,

In the early stages, I had substantial earnings, despite posting only one or two videos weekly. However, as the number of my views declined, so did my income, which now averages around 15,000 baht per month. Currently, most of my income originates from sponsorships (Interviewee 2 [pseudonym], 2023).

The indistinct boundaries between non-work and work are further blurred by the intermediary role of platforms. YouTube distributes content from YouTubers to advertisers and investors, generating economic value for both. Since platforms do not produce their own content but rely on user-generated material, they must implement various strategies to boost user engagement (Srnicsek, 2017). These dynamics drive changes in platform governance, significantly impacting the professional lives of YouTubers. As the user base grows, some YouTubers may lose visibility. Regardless, YouTubers are compelled to continuously innovate and adapt, especially as the platform matures and asserts greater dominance over them.

The growth-expansion Phase

When YouTubers identify their platform position, they initiate more focused development of their content, thereby transitioning into the growth and expansion phase. For YouTubers, growth is an increase in subscribers and the establishment of a distinctive identity that resonates with their audience. In addition to the fact that the platform's algorithm governance significantly influences the growth of a YouTube channel, there are also socio-environmental factors at play. For instance, Interviewee 2 experienced a notable increase in subscribers during the early COVID-19 pandemic, which she attributes to her baking tutorial content. As people were confined in their homes, they explored new hobbies or side jobs. Conversely, Interviewee 5, who focuses on beauty content, saw a decline in viewership. She observed that fewer people needed makeup since they stayed home more. This prompted her to diversify content to attract new audiences.

The importance of channel growth, particularly in terms of subscriber base, lies in its ability to attract more sponsors and result in higher wages. Nearly all interviewees emphasized that sponsorship income is greater than ad revenue. Sponsorship rates are based on follower count and are divided into tiers as displayed in Table 2 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

Table 2 YouTube influencer rates by tiers

YouTuber tiers	Number of subscribers	Earn per post
Nano	1,000-10,000	\$20-\$200
Micro	10,000-50,000	\$200-\$1,000
Mid-tier	50,000-500,000	\$1,000 -\$10,000
Macro	500,000-1,000,000	\$10,000-\$20,000
Mega	1,000,000 and over	\$20,000 and above

In addition to sponsorship income, CPM (Cost per thousand impressions) refers to the calculation of the bid price that advertising companies are willing to pay for every 1,000 ad impressions or views. RPM (Revenue per Mille), on the other hand, determines how much YouTubers earn for every 1,000 views of their videos, after deducting YouTube's share. YouTubers receive 55 percent of this revenue, while the remaining 45 percent is retained by YouTube. Consequently, YouTubers' ad revenues depend on the market conditions within each country. In Thailand, CPM is approximately \$0.27 (The SR Zone, 2024).

In summary, the growth-expansion phase occurs when YouTubers gain enough followers to generate consistent revenue from ads and sponsorships. During this phase, they invest in their channel by maintaining a regular content schedule, expanding their team, and creating diverse content to appeal to a broader audience.

In their pursuit of viewer and sponsor engagement, YouTubers must also cater to the platform's algorithms. Many interviewees initially embraced YouTube for the autonomy that they thought it offered; however, they soon recognized the need for self-discipline, especially as YouTube gained more creators and its visibility algorithm began favoring those who maintained consistency and frequency in content creation. Upload frequency varies among YouTubers based on content type, filming style, team size, and sponsorships. To sustain this rate and ensure consistency, many rely on "invisible labor" to support their operations. As an interviewee explained,

We employ a large team because, first, there are many steps involved; second, we need to upload consistently; and third, we have limited time to complete the work . . . Maintaining a consistent upload frequency is crucial for optimizing our visibility across various platforms' algorithms (Interviewee 7 [pseudonym], 2023).

The narrative by this YouTuber underscores the complexity of achieving true autonomy. In practice, it requires rigorous self-discipline to manage both oneself and a team. Social media personalities are often portrayed as self-reliant, whereas in fact, content creation frequently involves collaboration and external support (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017: 4661). Interviews confirm that most YouTubers rely on teams to manage various tasks. "Without a team, uploading lengthy videos consistently becomes difficult. You need at least a team of four people—filming, editing, at least one editor, and someone to help brainstorm content. It's a job that's difficult to do alone" (Interviewee 8 [pseudonym], 2024).

YouTubers' internal hiring practices deviate from traditional business employment. Unlike typical "boss-subordinate" relationships, these engagements often resemble collaborative "team" or "assistant" roles. As YouTube content creation represents a "work of the self," YouTubers prioritize team members who resonate with their persona, who share similar traits and visions. Concurrently, these individuals must possess specific skills crucial for tasks such as video editing and content creation, making the recruitment process particularly challenging. Consequently, the composition of the team becomes integral to a YouTuber's success. As one of the interviewees put it, "We seek individuals whose style harmonizes with our channel's ambiance. It is pivotal to find someone who can embody the vibe we aim to project, given our content's heavy focus on atmosphere" (Interviewee 3 [pseudonym], 2023).

Beyond their teams, YouTubers must navigate external factors, particularly changes in the platforms' governance upon which they rely. The growth of YouTubers mirrors that of the platform, which undergoes cycles. According to the "platform evolution," mentioned above, in their initial phases, platforms offer incentives to users and contributors, including free access to advanced tools, and enhanced visibility on the platform (Helmond et al., 2019; Poell et al., 2022: 40). However, once platforms engage a substantial number of users, they enter a phase of "maturity" (Rietveld et al., 2020), becoming fully developed and able to be more selective in choosing those they will collaborate with. Consequently, the lifecycle of the platform directly influences platform-dependent cultural production, making individual content creators economically less significant as the platform matures (Poell et al., 2022; Rietveld et al., 2020).

The maturation of the platform presents both opportunities and challenges for YouTubers. It attracts larger audiences and facilitates channel growth, but it also introduces threats from new creators. To navigate these complexities, YouTubers focus on retaining their existing fan base and forging new opportunities with their loyal followers. They utilize their accumulated resources to establish a presence on additional platforms, developing a "cross-platform identity" that enables them to secure varied sponsorships and venture into other physical realms. Some go into freelance work, while others take the route of independent entrepreneurship.

The Defence-resistance Phase

A key survival strategy for YouTubers is to establish a presence across multiple platforms. Each YouTuber who was interviewed has profiles on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. They tailor their content and posting frequencies based on their strengths, personal preferences, and potential for follower engagement and sponsored opportunities on each platform. For instance, Interviewee 3, excelling in video production, focuses on YouTube and TikTok. Similarly, Interviewee 5, who prefers videos and narrative writing as opposed to photography, engages more on YouTube and Facebook rather than Instagram.

YouTubers are not simply “laborers” engaging in content creation; they strategically enhance their online presence by matching their own traits and preferred activities with each platform’s potentiality. They act as “entrepreneurs of the self,” developing a cross-platform presence that has several advantages.

First, this strategy helps YouTubers promote content and engage with followers. While YouTube excels at distributing long-form videos, other platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are better at facilitating quick, dynamic interactions. Second, being active on multiple platforms broadens their follower base, as user preferences vary, enhancing visibility and attracting a diverse audience. Third, a wider platform presence increases sponsorship opportunities as each platform’s specific user demographics attracts brands targeting those groups. Platform-specific content restrictions and formats affect both visibility and production costs. Sponsors with limited budgets and the need for quick turnarounds may prefer platforms like TikTok over YouTube, as long-form videos on YouTube are more time consuming and costly compared to text, images, or short videos. This highlights YouTube’s vulnerability to TikTok’s growing popularity in Thailand and reflects the broader competition between platforms. Thus, a multi-platform strategy also mitigates the risk of losing followers if a platform suddenly shuts down.

TikTok is incredibly popular, but my specialty lies in long-form videos rather than short-form content. I have been attempting to adapt, and I noticed YouTube evolving with “YouTube Shorts” to keep up with the trend. This transition has posed challenges for established creators who may struggle to adapt swiftly; some channels have even ceased production or disappeared altogether due to the impact. People are dedicating more time to watching short clips, and the competition for users’ attention has intensified—“like a war to consume time in each person’s life” (Interviewee 2 [pseudonym], 2023).

To manage the challenges they face, YouTubers often reconcile their identity with audience preferences. They may create content that diverges from their own personal tastes or strengths to align with popular trends. While platforms encourage diverse content, interviews indicate that YouTubers who align their content with trends in Thai society—such as “lifestyle vlogs,” “traveling,” and “entertainment”—typically see more subscriber growth and channel development compared to those focusing on niche areas. As a result, those creating content outside these categories often adapt by integrating the popular content trends, even if it does not resonate with their own interests or areas of expertise. For example, Interviewee 5 incorporated travel and lifestyle segments into her primarily beauty-focused channel, despite a personal reluctance to share her personal life in the public sphere and a lack of expertise in travel videos.

To preserve their identity, YouTubers continue producing their primary content while integrating new forms to meet audience, platform, and sponsor demands. This can be seen as a type of voluntary “self-exploitation.” YouTubers are driven by the need to expand, transform, and “self-reinvent” in order to meet expectations and embrace a wider range of products. In a society obsessed with success, individuals who are flexible and adaptable are in demand, a consequence of which is heightened productivity (Han, 2015: 44). This situation presents a paradox for YouTubers, who must continuously evolve and adapt, while also striving to maintain core aspects of their identity and consistency.

Ultimately, as success on the platform wavers, YouTubers often explore new opportunities outside of YouTube while continuing to operate in both arenas. Some use off-platform ventures as a backup career to generate additional income, whereas others see these avenues becoming their new primary income. Therefore, for some, their struggle involves not only earning a living but also sustaining their status as YouTubers. The remarks of one of the interviewees illustrate their situation.

At this point, I am not hoping to rely on sponsorship or YouTube revenue anymore. I need to find other ways to support myself moving forward. I might have to start selling my own products. Recently, I launched a pre-order for some baked goods. If it really takes off, or if I can save up enough, I might even open a café. It is about finding something that does not make me dependent on them to earn money. I still take sponsored content if it comes my way. It used to be my main source of income but is no longer stable enough to be my primary revenue stream (Interviewee 2 [pseudonym], 2023).

The dynamic changing professional lives of YouTubers demonstrate fluid and overlapping interactions across boundaries in three key areas: between content creators and viewers (producers and consumers), between hobbies and careers (leisure activities and regular economic endeavours), and between online and offline spaces (platforms and physical locations).

Conclusion

This study revealed a new set of relationships of YouTuber work that differ from traditional employer-employee and co-worker dynamics. In particular, platforms exert subtle control through technological infrastructure while distancing themselves from the role of employer. Crucially, the relationship impacts the working life and identities of YouTubers throughout their career trajectory. Their careers are shaped by the ever-evolving governance of platforms, which dictate not only their economic opportunities but also their creative output. Algorithm changes alter their visibility and wage potential, forcing constant adaptation. Initially, YouTubers in this study enjoyed freedom, but as platforms evolved, they had to balance their passion and identity with the demands of the platform, audience, and sponsors. This change resulted in greater discipline and self-restraint rather than the anticipated autonomy and it underscores the precarious nature of platform-based work in contemporary society. The present study challenges the romanticized view of YouTube as autonomous and glamorous. Unlike typical platform labor discussions focusing on gig workers, this research highlights content creators’ inherent precariousness and vulnerability. By demonstrating how these seemingly “high-status” digital workers face self-discipline and self-exploitation driven by algorithmic demands, we show that vulnerability in platform economies extends beyond blue-collar gig labor. The allure of digital fame often masks a

demanding, unstable, and psychologically taxing reality. The increasing pursuit of such careers carries profound societal implications, impacting mental health, work-life integration, and career sustainability. This research opens new sociological avenues to understand the complex impacts of contemporary digital work.

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