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# RECIPROCAL PLATFORM LABOUR IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIAL MEDIA VIDEO INDUSTRY

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## Introduction

This paper explores the platformization of labour in the Nigerian social media video industry. The sector emerged around 2013 through the activities of social media content creators, who produce short-form humorous and socially conscious video clips distributed via apps, such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. The contents are consumed by millions of domestic and diasporic African users, and content creators earn revenue from generating ad revenue. Within its first decade, the industry has become a dominant cultural form in Nigeria's media ecosystem. For example, as of 2022, its revenue rose to N50 billion (US$39 million), employing thousands of workers, thereby making it the third largest entertainment industry alongside incumbent sectors, such as film and music (Business Day, 2022). While extant scholarship has acknowledged the sector's continuous growth within the Nigerian entertainment space and its reconfiguration of the modes of video production and consumption (Idowu & Ogunnubi, 2023; Ojomo & Sodeinde, 2021; Okadigwe & Ebekue, 2023), less attention has been paid to the sector's labour relations, particularly how those relationships are shaped by interactions with US- and China-based platform companies. Accordingly, this paper examines how Nigeria-based content creators become "platform-dependent" by negotiating the business models, infrastructures, and governance frameworks of the video sharing platforms they use to distribute their content (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2022).

Drawing on 10 semi-structured interviews with Nigerian content creators and analysis of the domestic trade press, we observe that creators struggle to generate visibility in a highly saturated social media landscape. The imperative to gain visibility is far from unique to Nigeria, as all creators engage in various kinds of "visibility labour" (Abidin, 2016), or similar work meant to gain more attention (Bishop, 2019; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). What sets Nigeria apart, however, is the local political economy of video production, which translates into high production costs, which, we argue, are offset by

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orchestrating practices of informally organised reciprocal labour. Nigeria thus provides a relevant perspective to ongoing debates in platform research that seek more regional specificity and seek to decentre the Global North as their point of reference (Bouquillion, 2023; Zhang & Chen, 2022). To heed that call, the specific labour practices we highlight, those of reciprocal labour, reflect the broader informal economies and traditional kinship norms in Nigeria. Exploring this mode of work showcases the intersections among creative labour and cultural dynamics in a given national context vis-à-vis the unifying business models and centralized governance frameworks of platform companies.

**Theorizing platform labour**

The rise of the platform economy has engendered diverse forms of labour for "platform-dependent" workers (Poell et al., 2022). Following Fuchs (2013, p.236), we understand platform labour as all kinds of labour by digital platform users and gig workers that are harnessed for the "existence, production, diffusion, and use" of digital platforms. The multi-faceted labour relations in cultural production have been discussed using concepts such as "relational labour" (Baym, 2015), "aspirational labour" (Duffy, 2016), and above all "precarious labour" (Alacovska et al, 2024). We contribute to these debates by providing the complementary analytical lens of *reciprocal labour*. We understand this as a form of non-monetary, voluntary exchange, or work done by members within a community usually for the benefits of one community member with the expectation that participating members enjoy similar benefits whenever the need arises. This kind of labour is often motivated by collective benefits accruable from such community work, rather than individual effort as well as the reinforcement of a sense of community identity (Vasco, 2014). For example, in Nigerian rural areas where agriculture is the major economic practice, farmers often engage in reciprocal labour during seed planting, weeding, and harvesting (Adefila & Madaki, 2014). Notably, while labour reciprocity cuts across many contexts across the globe, the form it takes is shaped by specific regional and cultural contexts. As we observe in this paper, labour reciprocity among Nigerian content creators is entrenched in existent cultural capital of communal and relational norms that are pervasive in African traditions.

**Living in a rented home: Platform logics and labour reciprocity**

What we found in our interviews is that many Nigerian content creators moved into the social media video industry mainly as a means of survival in a context characterised by a retreating welfare system and poor fiscal conditions (Okadigwe & Ebekue, 2023). Amidst the dilemma of earning a living and the difficulty of gaining foothold in legacy media industry sectors, such as film and television, social media creation features lower barriers to entry and an imagined zone of free expression of creativity. Indeed, access to the social media video industry was relatively easy for some creators, but their expectations of maximum creativity have proven more elusive. Creators often describe their working relationship with platforms as "living in a rented apartment." As one interviewee succinctly put it, "you must understand that you are not in your house. You are in a house owned by somebody. Most times, you must adhere to the rules of the landlord even when they are not comfortable." A variety of strategies are deployed by Nigerian content creators to navigate the challenges associated with platform-dependent cultural production; a crucial one is seeking out reciprocal labour relations.

What emerges from our fieldwork is that Nigerian content creators practice reciprocal labour for two key reasons. One, it serves as a strategy to mitigate the platforms' opaque monetization models, which often snowball into reluctance to invest too much in productions. Two, creators understand "getting the audience eyeballs" as central to their own monetization strategies. Navigating these two conditions catalyses practices of reciprocity. That is, creators leverage informally organised social networks and personal relationships to offset production costs. For example, creators work for free or at discounted rates for one another. Our interviewees articulated these shared relationships as "a form of currency" that has purchasing power just like national currencies. It is through this *currency of relationships* that the economic risks of algorithmic opacity are navigated. Reciprocal labour is also deployed to orchestrate content visibility. Globally, in the overcrowded platform market, competition for audiences is fierce (Stokel-Walker, 2018). Similarly, in Nigeria, creators have trouble attaining and sustaining their desired visibility. In this condition, reciprocal labour is deployed to achieve what we conceive as "composite visibility." This occurs when two or more creators agree to feature (most times at no cost) in the productions of another creator to boost the visibility of the beneficiary creator. This is often attained by exposing the beneficiary creator to the fanbase of the volunteer creators. Such gestures are often reciprocated among the creators involved. Through this, the beneficiaries attract more ad revenue for their content. In the end, the reciprocal and relational nature of work among Nigerian creators reflects the communal practices in African traditional culture wherein people are oriented to be their "brothers' keepers" (Akanle & Olutayo, 2011). Creators leverage this cultural capital as a means of getting by rather than despair or resign. In sum, reciprocal platform labour provides a more granular case for how platform-dependent workers leverage relational practices to navigate the unstable economic and contingent infrastructural logics of platforms.

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