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# General and Gendered Aspects
# of YouTubers as Case Study

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━━━━━━━━━━ ABSTRACT ━━━━━━━━━━

This paper examines and conceptualizes the economic aspect of young people's activities on the network, focusing on YouTube. We will present YouTube activity and explore how the young population active on the platform perceives it: Is the dominant element in this context play and self-expression for its own sake or generating financial gain? Or is it a hybrid form of activity that embodies both elements? Are there distinct characteristics that define the play/labor of girls on YouTube and if so, are specific protections needed? We will argue that, YouTubers' activities resemble a type of platform work that indeed involves an aspect of potential exploitation of minors, and has a gendered dimension – a situation that calls for reforming existing child labor norms to address it. We propose that two principles must be recognized to promote a solution. First, it is important to acknowledgee that YouTuber activity is not just leisure but also work, even when the participants are children and youth below the legal employment age. Second, since this is a form of work,

children should not be excluded from participating in these platforms, but should be provided with fair employment conditions and wages. This two-staged recognition could not only address the economic exploitation of children and youth on platform work, but also untangle the connections these platforms create between the economic aspirations of girls and traditional gender norms.

**Keywords**: gender stereotypes; digital platform; YouTube; child work; platform work.

# Child work on Platforms - General and Gendered Aspects of YouTubers as Case Study

## 1.      Introduction

This paper examines and conceptualizes the economic aspect of young people's activities on the network, focusing on YouTube. We argue that although YouTube has introduced a profit-sharing mechanism with age threshold, young users who do not meet this threshold, or those active on channels managed by parents, are left out.  Even when financial profit is allocated, it is often inadequate. The result is free labor, disguised as leisure activity or child's play. Additionally, the phenomenon of free or undercompensated work, disguised as leisure or play, raises important issues related to gender equity.

 One issue is the creation of gendered paths and occupations within the YouTuber activities of young people. Another is the gendered worldviews and perspectives embedded in the discourse of intimacy that emerges from YouTuber activity driven by economic motives.

The paper begins with a description of how leisure and work are integrated in YouTubers activities. It then presents findings from a study on the YouTuber activities of children and youth in Israel, covering both the various fields of activity and the methods of performance. Next, we elaborate on how these findings align with two aforementioned gender aspects. The paper concludes with preliminary proposals for regulatory changes, suggesting key principles that we believe should be considered in light of these issues.

## 2.      Online activities: leisure and play or labor?

The subject of work in the digital arena is an integral part of a broader discourse concerning the tension between work and leisure. This tension is not new. *The New York Times*, for example, has addressed the impact of technological developments on the division between work and leisure in every decade since 1920[1].

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[1] D. Suskind, *A world without work: technology, automation, and how we should respond* (First Picador paperback. Edition), Picador, 2021, 15-21.

As indicated by Rose, «the anticipation of momentous technological change has brought much wider and more urgent attention to issues of work and leisure»[2], which is evident in the recent surge of literature on the interrelations between these concepts[3].

The discourse spans diverse fields, addressing questions about work and leisure through the lens of political philosophy[4], philosophy of work[5], and the blurring of work and leisure boundaries through gig work[6].

One common question across these issues, as put by Appiah, is: «How should work be constructed or reconstructed by law and other social norms, and how should opportunities and rewards for work be distributed?»[7]. A complementary question is also called for: How should leisure be constructed or reconstructed by law and other social norms in the current technological condition?

The scope on which these issues span creates a rich fabric that includes many threads, that can be optimally understood by examining the future of work and the future of leisure in an integrated manner, focusing on various contexts and the specific needs and desires of different populations[8].

The thread we wish to shade light on in this paper is some particular question that platform work raises regarding children and youth, and especially girls. Let us start with understanding what digital work is.

First it would be useful to identify the 'employers' in the digital arena and those who 'work' for them. Scholz, describing the exploitation of network users, cites major corporations such as AOL, Apple, and Facebook among the exploiters[9]. These companies own the technological tools, services, and platforms that facilitate the Internet. AOL (America Online) provides Internet services; Apple designs electronics and software; Facebook operates social networks. Other major players include Microsoft, Google, YouTube, Amazon, and various technology communications and digital commerce giants.

These companies, which have gained access to the most valuable resources of the network economy, are often equated in academic discourse with the old-style

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[2] J. L. Rose, *The Future of Work? The Political Theory of Work and Leisure*, in *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2024, 2.

[3] J. L. Rose, *The Future of Work? The Political Theory of Work and Leisure*, *op. cit.*, 2.

[4] J. L. Rose, *The Future of Work? The Political Theory of Work and Leisure*, *op. cit.*, 1-18.

[5] K. A. Appiah, *The Philosophy of Work*, in D. Sobel, P. Vallentyne and S. Wall (eds), *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy Volume 7*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

[6] F. Bieber, J. Moggia, *Risk Shifts in the Gig Economy: The Normative Case for an Insurance Scheme against the Effects of Precarious Work*, in *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2021, 29, 3, 294.

[7] K. A. Appiah, *The Philosophy of Work*, *op. cit.*, 10.

[8] J. L. Rose, *The Future of Work? The Political Theory of Work and Leisure*, *op. cit.*, 13.

[9] T. Scholz, *Uberworked and underpaid: How workers are disrupting the digital economy*, Polity Press, 2016, 88.

'capitalists' of the industrial age. Now a days they are the few who reap the profits from the work of the 'proletariat' – that is, the masses of the network users([10]).

As is already apparent, the enormous profits of these large corporations are derived primarily from users' presence on the Internet; Everyday activities like browsing websites, using e-mail, managing correspondence, participating in conversations (chats), consuming various services, and uploading content are the lifeblood of websites, applications and social networks([11]).

The large corporations derive financial profits from network activity in several additional ways. One source of profit comes when site owners monetize user attention. This attention can be sold to advertisers, who pay for advertising slots on the site. According to Dallas Smythe, mass media 'creates audiences' for advertisers that are relevant to their products([12]). In this sense, audiences become 'commodities' that can be produced and sold, and the attentiveness provided by audiences is a form of 'audience work'([13]).

Corporations also generate profit through data mining. The terms of use and licenses for end users on social networking sites often grant website owners the right to use, sell and transfer information collected online([14]). For example, Facebook provides free access to its site, with the costs involved being negligible compared to the enormous marketable value it gains from the daily presence of audiences([15]). According to Mark Andrzejvic, the fee we pay for using the network is the relinquishment of control over our personal information([16]). This is a considerable and sometimes disproportionate price, imposed through the unequal power dynamics between users and network owners. In this sense, there is a structural similarity between the exchange of personal information for network access and the exchange of work for wages([17]).

Additional financial gains comes from so-called 'knowledge work', 'creative work', 'fan work', 'modding' and more([18]). These terms refer to forms of non-material

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([10]) W. McKenzie, *Consideration on hacker manifesto*, in T. Scholz (ed.), *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

([11]) A. R. Galloway, *We Are the Gold Farmers*, Interviewed by Pau Alsina, September 12, 2007, https://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/interview_barcelona_sept07.txt.

([12]) D. W. Smythe, *On the Audience Commodity and its Work*, in M. G. Durham, D. M. Kellner (eds.), *Media and cultural studies*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.

([13]) See also A. Fumagalli, S. Lucarelli, E. Musolino, G. Rocchi, *Digital labour in the platform economy: The case of Facebook*, in *Sustainability*, 2018.

([14]) M. Andrejevic, *Estranged Free Labor*, in T. Scholz (ed.), *Digital labor: The internet as playground and factory*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

([15]) A. Ross, *In search of the lost paycheck*, in T. Scholz (ed.), *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory*, New York: Routledge, 2013; see also A. Fumagalli, S. Lucarelli, E. Musolino, G. Rocchi, *Digital labour in the platform economy: The case of Facebook, op. cit.*

([16]) M. Andrejevic, *Estranged Free Labor, op. cit.*

([17]) M. Andrejevic, *Estranged Free Labor, op. cit.*

([18]) A. De Kosnik, *Fandom as free labor*, in T. Scholz (ed.), *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory*, New York: Routledge, 2013; J. R. Kücklich, *Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry*, in *Fibreculture Journal*, 2005; A. Ross, *In search of the lost paycheck, op. cit.*; T. Scholz, *Uberworked and underpaid: How workers are disrupting the digital economy, op. cit.*

work carried out via the network, ranging from the direct contribution of knowledge, such as sharing travel routes for a navigation app, to network activity that produces, preserves or increases the value of a product. According to Tiziana Terranova, with the development of digital technology, non-material goods have become more impermanent than in the past, and rather than expressing a finished product, they express a process[19]. Under these circumstances, the non-material work of network users – constant, creative and innovative – has become essential to the digital economy[20].

The main argument against this background is that the non-material productive activity of the general public is translated into material value that benefits only a few, constituting 'free labor'. In other words, the problem lies in the fact that profits do not go to the content producers but to the content hosts and data miners who use the information for their own gain; the wealth created by the users becomes private, reflecting asymmetry in the transaction between network users and network infrastructure owners[21].

The solutions proposed in the research discourse to address 'free labor' include suggestions for a more equitable redistribution of the wealth generated by the network, such as guaranteeing a basic income for all, as well as investments in housing, health, education, knowledge, technology[22].

However, this solution does not seem to address some of the more complex aspects of the problem. Much of the complexity stems from a kind of vicious circle: on the one hand, the use of the Internet cannot exist without the platform provided by the large corporations. The value of this use depends on the recognition and distribution capabilities these corporations offer. On the other hand, the value generated by users does not belong to them but becomes the private property of the corporations[23].

According to Yochai Benkler and Abigail De Kosnik, network productivity is based on forms of work that are inherently free[24]. De Kosnik notes that fan community activities, which generate significant monetary value for commercial corporations, involve the investment of time, effort and resources. However, the fan communities themselves typically do not perceive this activity as 'work' deserving of

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[19] T. Terranova, *Free labor*. in T. Scholz (ed.), *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

[20] T. Terranova, *Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy*, in *Social Text* 2000, 63, 18, 2; T. Terranova, *Free labor, op. cit.*

[21] J. R. Kücklich, *Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry, op. cit.*; W. McKenzie, *Consideration on hacker manifesto, op. cit.*; A. Ross, *In search of the lost paycheck, op. cit.*; T. Terranova, *Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy, op. cit.*; T. Terranova, *Free labor, op. cit.*; also see at J. E. Cohen, *Between truth and power: the legal constructions of informational capitalism*, Oxford University Press, 2019, 32-33 and at T. Gillespie, *Custodians of the internet: platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*, Yale University Press, 2018, 65.

[22] W. McKenzie, *Consideration on hacker manifesto, op. cit.*; T. Terranova, *Free labor, op. cit.*

[23] W. McKenzie, *Consideration on hacker manifesto, op. cit.*

[24] Y. Benkler, *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*, Yale University Press, 2006; A. De Kosnik, *Fandom as free labor, op. cit.*

monetary reward, because they see it as contrary to the very idea of commercialization(25). According to Benkler, in certain situations, offering a monetary reward for an activity that the participant intended to carry out may be seen as an expression of patronage and, under certain conditions, may even diminish the motivation to perform the action, and thus the productive quality of its products(26).

It should be noted that not every online activity, even one with market value that deserves remuneration, necessarily establishes an employer-employee relationship. The performers may be self-employed or act voluntarily, as argued by De Kosnik and Benkler above. Notwithstanding, the question remains as how to perceive concepts such as volunteering or self-employment in the network economy. Julian Kucklich for example, argues that in the present era, the main source of oppression is not the institution where the work is performed, but rather self-policing and self-discipline, which lead us to conceptualize work for the information corporations in terms of freedom(27).

The variety of opinions described so far is summarized by Hector Postigo as a debate between two critical approaches. The first sees digital labor as a process undertaken by media consumers, configured within digital networks as inherently 'productive'. The second views digital activity not necessarily as labor but as participatory culture, whose dynamics and meanings are subject not only to the rationale of capital accumulation, commodification, and profit but also to internal moral economies and self-defined value systems(28).

Nevertheless, the discussion reveals a disturbing paradox. Only when an individual is a free, autonomous, and equal productive subject (i.e., free from any labor relations with others) does his/hers productivity generate financial gains for others (i.e., he/she becomes one who works *for them*). In other words, the digital economy relies on concepts of work and leisure or play (in the sense of 'non-work') that coexist

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(25) A. De Kosnik, *Fandom as free labor, op. cit.*; see also T. Scholz, *Uberworked and underpaid: How workers are disrupting the digital economy, op. cit.*

(26) Y. Benkler, *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom, op. cit.*

(27) J. R. Kücklich, *Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry, op. cit.* According to K. Fast, H. Örnebring, and M. Karlsson, the growing body of literature that theorizes free labor in relation media activity tends to use the concept of free labor too indiscriminately, without distinguishing between different forms of unpaid labor, such as pressing the "like" button on Facebook and developing a new electronic game. They argue that it is essential to recognize that many forms of free labor may not always be voluntarily given, nor necessarily always enjoyed. Moreover, the level of autonomy of the laborer can vary significantly. Some forms of free labor are indeed "free" in the sense that there is no employer supervision, while others are closely monitored, structured, and managed according to the employer's interests. In other words, determining whether a specific activity is truly labor or non-labor requiers a more analytically nuanced understanding of the term "free labor" (K. Fast, H. Örnebring, M. Karlsson, *Metaphors of Free Labor: a Typology of Unpaid Work in the Media Sector, Media, Culture & Society,* 2016, 38, 963).

(28) H. Postigo, *The Socio-Technical Architecture of Digital Labor: Converting Play into YouTube Money, New Media & Society* 2016, 18, 2; For more on whether the sharing economy is a 'good story' of technological and economic innovation leading to a better economic model or merely a way for platforms to shift risk onto users under the guise of 'sharing' see J. Schor, *Debating the Sharing Economy,* in *Great Transition Initiative,* 2014.

simultaneously. The hybrid term 'playbour', coined by Kucklich to describe modding activities(²⁹) in the digital game industry(³⁰), captures the difficulty of separating 'play' from 'work'. It reflects how social life in virtual worlds intertwined with economic production, and how economic production becomes integrated into social life(³¹).

With leisure and work co-existing, it becomes challenging to satisfy both the desire for concrete compensation for these activities and the need to maintain its perception as 'non-work'. This tension between the wish to maintain leisure and the need to recognize productive activity as deserving of monetary reward is directly related to the perception of childhood. During the industrial age, childhood was removed from the economic-productive sphere and placed into realms of leisure and education, distancing it from concepts of 'materialism' and 'money'(³²). However, in the digital age, through online leisure activity, childhood returns to the core of the new productive space, challenging the attitudes that originally led to its exclusion.

### 3.     YouTube activity of children and adolescents in Israel

In our research on the YouTube activity of boys and girls in Israel(³³), we explored how this activity reflects the combination of work and leisure. As will be elaborated, our findings relate both to the nature of the activity as work and to the gender aspects inherent in it.

In a review of 36 active YouTube channels operated by boys and girls in Israel, we classified the channels according to two main criteria: one was the area of activity of each channel, and the other was the manner in which the channel was operated, whether independently by the child or with parental involvement.

The areas of activity included: 1) presenting toys, games or experiential activities (four channels); 2) presentation of fictional or realistic content (four channels); 3) creative activity (mainly making slime – a flexible viscous material used for play) (two channels); 4) makeup, fashion and design (five channels); 5) general content and general knowledge on various topics ranging from history and science to current events and gossip (seven channels);  6) Gaming (13 channels); 7) Mixed genres (e.g. slime and gaming) (one channel).

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(²⁹)  "Modding" (from *modifying*) is the act of modifying hardware, software, or anything else to perform a function not originally intended by the designer, or to achieve bespoke specification or appearance. The term is often used in reference to video game modding particularly in regard to creating new or altered content and sharing that via the web (*Wikipedia* at:  https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modding).

(³⁰) J. R. Kücklich, *Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry*, op. cit.

(³¹) J. R. Kücklich, *Virtual worlds and their discontents: Precarious sovereignty, governmentality, and the ideology of play*, Games and Culture, 2009, 4, 4; see also Y. Benkler, *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*, op. cit.

(³²) V. Zelizer, *Pricing the priceless child: The changing social value of children,* Basic Books, 1985.

(³³) S. Feldman, S. Almog, *YouTube Childhood: The Incarnations of Tom Sawyer in the Third Millennium* (Hebrew), *Mifgash*, 2022, 55.

Regarding the second characteristic, among all the channels examined, it was possible to distinguish between those operated independently by children and those that showed overt and significant parental involvement in initial setup of the channel, in filming or operating, and sometimes in participation in videos. These two categories were related to ages of YouTubers and their areas of activity. In channels with parental involvement, YouTubers' ages usually ranged from approximately 3 to 10 years old, and they mainly focused on the first two areas of activity: displaying toys or presenting fictional or realistic content. In the other channels, YouTubers were about 10 years old and older (usually 12 or 13 and up) and engaged in all the other occupations listed above (slime, gaming, fashion, makeup, design and general content).

An examination of the videos, focusing on the monetary and economic aspects, revealed common characteristics across most channels, along with unique features in each category mentioned above.

Below, we address only the channels operated independently without overt parental involvement. Within this category, we will focus on two main themes relevant to gender aspects, which are the *burden theme* and the *YouTuber jargon theme*.

## 4.     a) Creating YouTube content as a burden – "Offer me ideas, I really don't have the energy" (high-school boy's YouTube video dated November 2018)[34]

A recurring characteristic in independent YouTube channels, unique to this category, is the intense (and sometimes frustrating) endless preoccupation with searching for content and ideas for videos. This is evident in frequent promises by YouTubers to upload more videos or "videos every week", apologies for not posting for a while, and explanations about the stress at school and the difficulty of balancing school work with maintaining the channel.

In an effort to find content for videos, YouTubers have taken various measures. One approach is to present trivial details of everyday life. For example, in videos uploaded by two makeup and fashion YouTubers at age 12, one can be seen displaying the items in her makeup corner one by one, including the table, mirror, paper holder and hooks on which brushes are hang[35]. In the other video, the YouTuber demonstrates her night routine, showing how she enters her room when she gets home from school, hangs up her bag, takes off her shoes, goes to the shower, ties her hair into a ponytail, brushes her teeth, and so on[36].

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[34] The research was approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Experiments at the University of Haifa, approval No. 308/21. For privacy reasons and according to the terms of the approval, the details of the channels and videos mentioned in connection with the research, are not for publication.

[35] A 12-year-old girl's YouTube video dated January 2013.

[36] A 12-year-old girl's YouTube video dated November 2014.

Another way to 'fill screen time' is by using marketing content. In simple cases, the marketing content aligns with the YouTuber's genuine interests. For instance, a YouTuber who owns a creative-materials business displays her products on her channel(37).  In more complex cases, marketing content of one product, which fits the YouTuber's authentic area of activity and interest, can serve as video content intended to promote another product, for a fee. For example, in a video by a high school fashion YouTuber, who received payment from a media company to advertise a certain product, she mentions struggling to find an idea for a video content, until she remembered a clothing company that had sent her a gift for review a while ago. Measuring and reviewing the clothes became the video content, creating the opportunity for paid promotion by the media company. This also helped market the YouTuber herself as having an active channel, potentially attracting more advertisers in the future(38).

## b) Monetization and jargon - "I love you", "Follow me"(39)

A common characteristic that crossed the vast majority of YouTube channels surveyed, was monetization and jargon. Most channels featured advertisements (banners or videos) during the content. YouTube shares its ad revenue with creators sometimes when their channels meet the threshold of 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 hours of viewing. In addition, some channels extended monetization through the sale of products, marketing brands of other companies or offering audiences to join the channel's membership club(40).

However, YouTube stipulates the participation in its revenues by the cooperation of a parent who will be able to receive the profits offered by YouTube in his/hers Google AdSense account. The reluctance to pay young creators directly suggests that YouTube perceives their activity more as leisure then work.  Yet, as will be seen below, the youth YouTuber jargon indicates otherwise: it reveals an economic interest of creating audience's commodities for YouTube.

The style of jargon used by young YouTubers is primarily aimed at encouraging audience involvement. This jargon includes: requests for feedback – "Subscribe to the channel" (or just "Sub"), "Give a like", "Press the bell" (to receive notifications of new videos), "Comment below";  service statements – "I hope you enjoyed", "Tell me what you want to see on the channel";  attempts to excite audiences – "Wow", exaggerated physical gestures, extended word endings, loud voice; offering incentives  –  promises of frequent videos, sweepstakes and perks; and creating a personal connection – "I love you", marking a heart shapes with hands, blowing kisses, "Write to me", "Follow me".

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(37) A 15-year-old girl's YouTube video dated March 2019.
(38) High-school girl's YouTube video dated August 2020.
(39) A 15-year-old girl's YouTube video dated March 2019.
(40) Data on YouTube channel monetization policies were retrieved from YouTube policies published in Israel during the study period.

This jargon is characterized by intense repetition and a rapid pace of speech, accompanied with exaggerated physical gestures (wide smiles, waving hands, head shaking, loud voice). The aim is to create a sense of urgency, reflecting an attempt to excite the audience and drive them to action.

Examining YouTube jargon reveals several common techniques. These include emphasizing the efforts and investment of the YouTuber on the one hand; presenting audience engagement as a light and enjoyable game on the other hand; and linking the existence of the channel to audience involvement and participation.

Typical examples of the first technique (emphasizing the efforts made by the YouTuber) include: "I really, really invested in the channel, thinking and coming up with ideas about this channel [...] I bought a camera and lots of things to make you all kinds of [...]  I'm really very, very invested"[41]; "I plan to upload videos daily during the summer vacation  [...]  I really want to invest a lot in the channel [...] I know that during exams [...] I really didn't have time [...] so that's why, I'm like, I actually want to upload on a daily basis [...] and my goal is actually to try to reach 10,000 subs by the end of the summer vacation"[42]; "I've been really investing a lot in the channel lately, so I'd really love it [...]  (if you could give a) Like to the channel with the bell and just, oh, enjoy this video"; "Even though I have a final exam tomorrow [...] I decided to make you a live video [...] Give me likes [...] Say 'good luck' five times in the comments"[43].

As for the second technique, of emphasizing the playful nature of audience participation - it was reflected in offering raffles and prizes, challenging viewers to reach high numbers of views and likes, and describing how easy it is to press the Like button. Typical examples of offering awards in exchange for audience attention and engagement include: "For every like, you're one percent more likely to win the new character. Yes, yes, one percent more!"[44]; "Comment below in the comments now – say what would you like to call (this creation) [...] whoever gives the name I like best I will indulge with [...] a gift [...]"[45]; "We'll spoil you [...] make a raffle for 50 among us [currency]. Friends, it's 1000 shekels! [...] So really, if you want to win... all you have to do is subscribe to the channel and follow us on Instagram"[46].

Presenting audience engagement as a competitive challenge includes typical phrases like: "Wow, we're growing insanely fast...We're already approaching 7,000 (subs), which is a huge number. [...] Basically, I'm really aiming for 10,000 and at 10,000 I will make a big 'special'."[47]; "We have a goal of 140,000 subscribers. Yes, it's really a lot" […] "Friends, by the way, we've really been flying lately so I'd really love for you to subscribe to the channel" […] "Our goal this time is 17,000 likes [...] Last time we

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[41] An 11-year-old girl's YouTube video dated March 2017.
[42] A 13-year-old boy's YouTube video dated June 2017.
[43] A 17-year-old boy's YouTube video dated June 2021.
[44] A 19-year-old boy's YouTube video dated January 2021.
[45] A 15-year-old girl's YouTube video dated March 2019.
[46] A 15-year-old boy's YouTube video dated January 2021.
[47] A 13-year-old boy's YouTube video dated June 2017.

reached it easily... so I believe we can do it again."(48); "Friends [...] give Likes [...] Let's get to 1000 likes"(49).

Typical examples of imparting a playful character to the viewers' engagement include: "Why not? It's free, just flipping a button [...] give a like"(50); "So yes, friends, subscribe to the channel, turn the button from red to gray. Come on, let's start the video", "Turn the button from red to gray, very simple"(51).

The third persuasion technique involves linking between the audience engagement and the very possibility of the channel continuation and existence. In a typical example: "Don't forget to like, it can really, really help me [...] Please subscribe to a channel - it can really, really help me", "If you want more videos like this, don't forget to leave a like and subscribe – this is very important, we have to reach at least 1,000 likes so that in the next update I'll be here to explain to you"(52).

The marketing style and the prominent persuasive techniques identified in the videos, attest to the commercial way this activity perceived by the young YouTubers performing it.

While the jargon theme is relevant to both male and female Youtubers, the two other themes to be discussed next involve gendered aspects.

## 5. Child labor on the digital platform - Gender Aspects
### a) Paving young population towards gendered occupations

The quantitative and thematic analysis of the videos revealed findings about the role of child labor on digital platform in setting stereotypical gender identities for young people. This aspect can be identified first and foremost in the types of activities featured on the channels.

The study analyzed 36 channels, comprising twelve female YouTubers' channels, twenty-two male YouTubers' channels, and two channels shared by a boy and a girl (gender identification was determined by how the YouTubers referred to themselves). Out of these, eight channels belonged to YouTubers up to the age of 10. These channels were operated with parental involvement and are not included in this discussion. The remaining twenty-eight channels featured teenage boys and girls aged 10-16 (at the time of channel creation). Of these, nine channels were girls' channels and nineteen were boys' channels.

The channels' areas of activity were categorized as follows: The boys' channels included thirteen gaming channels and six general content channels covering general knowledge on various topics - from history and science to current affairs and gossip.

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(48) A 15-year-old boy's YouTube video dated January 2021.
(49) A 17-year-old boy's YouTube video dated June 2021.
(50) A 19-year-old boy's YouTube video dated January 2021.
(51) A 15-year-old boy's YouTube video dated January 2021.
(52) A 19-year-old boy's YouTube video dated January 2021.

The girls' channels included five dedicated to makeup (beauty), fashion and design (lifestyle); two channels focused on "do it yourself" (DIY) activities (mostly the creation of "slime"); one combined mixed genres of slime creation and gaming; and one was devoted to general content.

The gender distribution was particularly evident in the fashion, beauty and DIY channels, which were exclusively operated by female YouTubers, while boys dominated the gaming and general content/knowledge channels.

As we put forward, this gender distribution of content aligns with the way YouTube's algorithm "punishes" creators who produce insufficiently commercial content, thus determines gendered content that is defined as having commercial value.

This "punishment" manifests in reduced visibility - a "death penalty" for visibility Labor. As Sophie Bishop explains:

«[…] I argue for vloggers to be noticed by 'prospective employers, clients, followers and fans'(53) requires being initially discoverable by YouTube's algorithm. Visibility labor thereby necessitates in-depth and timely comprehension of YouTube's algorithmic changes […] For entrepreneurial vloggers, algorithmic understanding will shape their practice, a process I term algorithmic 'self-optimization'. I argue that if vloggers desire visibility then they ultimately are pushed towards complicity with YouTube's enigmatic algorithmic signals.»(54).

Bishop's research, which examines vloggers' activities on YouTube in England, shows that out of the 50 most successful YouTubers in the UK, 43 are men who produce diverse content. Of the seven women on the list - six produce content on distinctly gendered topics such as beauty, fashion and lifestyle. Bishop calls this phenomenon the "glass ceiling" for women creating content on YouTube. In her apt words:

«The political economy of YouTube's algorithmic design has material consequences for both audiences and aspiring beauty vloggers and actively determines and limits what is seen and consumed by viewers, and carves narrow pathways to success for entrepreneurial young women on the platform.»(55).

From a gender perspective, the algorithm actually requires to compare content dealing with beauty and fashion to existing content on these subjects in youth magazines, reinforcing a narrow and limited depiction of the girls' activities, in contrast to the much broader range of topics accessible to boys(56).

Applying these insights to our understanding of the activity of young people, the problem intensifies as it signals potential future trends. The girls steered by YouTube's algorithm today into traditionally "feminine" limited content, may grow up to perpetuate

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(53) C. Abidin, *Visibility labor: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram, Media International Australia*, 2016, 161, 1, 86.

(54) S. Bishop, *Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm*, in *Convergence*, 2018, 24, 1, 73.

(55) S. Bishop, *Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm, op. cit.*,71.

(56) S. Bishop, *Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm, op. cit.*, 77.

these roles, shaping subsequent generations. A contemporary example of how online work norms may influence future trends can be seen in the emergence of the 'Tradwife' phenomenon.

The term 'Tradwife' (a blend of 'traditional' and 'wife'), refers to a growing trend in western culture that advocates for a return to traditional roles, with women as housewife, economically dependent on the husband, rejecting feminism altogether[57]. It is called for to imagine the link between reduction of female occupations to the fields of nurturing femininity and managing the household - mirrored in Tradwife bloggers' videos - and the algorithmic direction of girls and young women to such content online.

Another aspect that should be taken into account is the effect of these videos on their target audience. A German study of young viewers' reactions to YouTube videos revealed that the videos they watched presented a narrow range of stereotypical female images to identify with. These included portrayals of girls and women as either "permissive" or "rigid", compared to a more diverse set of images for boys[58]. As the researchers Merja Mahrt and Annekatrin Bock indicate:

«We found that the videos of both channels display a narrow range of desirable identities for young people. Girls and young women are expected to please or are reversely characterized as hard-to-please. For boys and young men, in contrast, the reproduced ideal is to be cool and confident and to stay on top of every situation. Both investigated channels create humor through affirming such well-established gender stereotypes and making fun of deviations from the norm. The underlying message is thus intensified: If you fail to conform to gender-stereotypical behavior, you risk ridicule and exclusion»[59].

The identification models play a crucial role in shaping identity during adolescence. In the cases discussed, the gender-stereotypical models are rarely challenged. Thus, algorithmic mechanisms driven by commercial interests contribute to the establishment of a youth arena characterized by the dominance of gender stereotypes. as Mahrt & Bock describe it:

«For the young audience, such clichés may possibly overshadow the inclusive and empowering messages of smaller online niches»[60].

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[57] "Tradwife", *Wikipedia*. Retrieved at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tradwife

[58] M. Mahrt, A. Bock, *'Okay, so I guess I'm not a girl then': Representation and negotiation of gender by YouTubers and their young audiences*, Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies, 2021, 18, 1, 132.

[59] M. Mahrt, A. Bock, *'Okay, so I guess I'm not a girl then': Representation and negotiation of gender by YouTubers and their young audiences, op. cit.*, 147.

[60] M. Mahrt, A. Bock, *'Okay, so I guess I'm not a girl then': Representation and negotiation of gender by YouTubers and their young audiences, op. cit.*, 147.

### b) Gender aspects pertaining to modes of performance in young YouTubers activity

One of the most prominent findings in our study concerned the YouTuber's style of speech. Their jargon included a clear commercial aspect, designed to encourage video viewing and audience engagement. In other words, it was designed to produce what Douglas Smith called an 'audience commodity' that young YouTubers could offer to YouTube, and which YouTube could then sell to advertisers for a fee[61].

The YouTuber jargon included various techniques to encourage viewer involvement, one of which was the use of words and gestures associated with emotional intimacy to evoke a sense of personal connection with the viewers. Common expressions included phrases like "I love you", "write me", making a heart shape with their hands, and blowing kisses in the air.

Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka refer to intimate discourse as an essential tool in the network economy in for producing engaged and dedicated audiences, noting that this intimate discourse is more prevalent among female influencers and vloggers than among male ones[62].

Another way to create intimacy with the audience, distinctly identified as a "feminine" method, is inviting the viewers into the vloger bedroom (online) and creating familiarity through showing personal items and daily routine. Berryman and Kavka describe this video genre by referring to the videos of leading English beauty and lifestyle influencer Zoe Sugg (Zoella)[63].

«Zoe's *60 Things* video operates upon a similar presumption, suggesting that by sharing knowledge about the items located in your bedroom, others can get to know you as well as – and perhaps even better than – they would through verbal introduction. In so doing, the video reaffirms the centrality of the bedroom as a 'personal, personalized and intimate' space[64] crucial to the formation and representation of (specifically) female adolescent identity[65]» [66].

In our study, we found similar styles of discourse and content choices common to videos of girls (and not boys). In one video, a 12-year-old beauty and fashion

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[61] D. W. Smythe, *On the Audience Commodity and its Work, op. cit.*
[62] R. Berryman, M. Kavka, '*I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend': the role of intimacy in the celebrification of beauty vloggers, Journal of Gender Studies*, 2017, 26, 3, 309-310.
[63] R. Berryman, M. Kavka, '*I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend': the role of intimacy in the celebrification of beauty vloggers, op. cit.*
[64] S. Lincoln, '*Teenage Girls' 'Bedroom Culture': Codes versus zones*, in A. Bennett, K. Kahn-Harris (eds.), *After subculture: Critical studies in contemporary youth culture*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 94-106.
[65] See A. McRobbie, J. Garber (1991). *Girls and subcultures*, in A. McRobbie (Ed.), *Feminism and youth culture*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991, 1-15 (reprinted from *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, S. Hall (ed.), 1978, London: Hutchinson); S. Lincoln, '*Teenage Girls' 'Bedroom Culture'* cit.
[66] R. Berryman, M. Kavka, '*I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend': the role of intimacy in the celebrification of beauty vloggers, op. cit.*, 312.

YouTuber filmed all the items in her makeup corner(⁶⁷). In another 12-year-old YouTuber's video, she shows her night routine at home and in her bedroom(⁶⁸).

However, we linked these contents not to the process of creating intimacy (which in itself supports the conclusion that there is a work-aspect involved in social activity online), but rather as an expression of the desire of young YouTubers to "fill screen time" no matter what, even when they have no original ideas for its contents, just to be able to meet YouTube criteria to generate visibility and possibly gain some profit.

According to our contention, in the videos we analyzed, what is actually presented is not intimacy but rather alienation. It seemed that the 12-year-old girls who made these videos may have used the same performance that is identified with creating intimacy (showing the bedroom and personal items) but in a way that preserves certain amount of privacy. This was very noticeable in the first video, where the 12-year-old presented all the items in her makeup corner one by one. Ostensibly, according to Berryman and Kavka, it involves revealing the self through details and objects related to it(⁶⁹). However, in practice, the mechanical and monotonous presentation of the objects, and the orderly presentation of the items one after the other, actually conveyed a sense of introversion rather than a sense of exposure.

In the second video, where another 12-year-old girl showed her night routine, it did include a visit to her bedroom and even her bathroom. Yet, it was done in the form of a well-organized lecture, that emphasized the pre-planning, rather than spontaneous exposure of 'behind the scenes'.

We claim that although these young girls adopted the practice of intimate discourse exemplified in Zoella's videos, they at the same time maintained a defense strategy against any authentic exposure of themselves.

Coming back to YouTube's algorithmic 'punishment mechanism', we suggest that this is a form of 'bypassing the system': the girls engaged in an activity that would be stereotypically recognized by the algorithms as meeting the requirement of female intimacy, but at the same time, they avoided creating actual intimacy. It is understood that such a 'defensive' approach is not optimal for creating as broad an audience as possible, which is achievable through total 'devotion' to the platform. But more than that, the way these girls performed may indicate that, if given a wider range of options than those defined as 'feminine and profitable', they might have chosen to create or mimic other types of content beyond those related to fashion, beauty, and intimacy discourse.

In other words, the platform's paving-power creates an inextricable link between its economic-commercial dimension and the gendered aspects of YouTubers' activities for both girls and boys.

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(⁶⁷) A 12-year-old girl's YouTube video dated January 2013.
(⁶⁸) A 12-year-old girl's YouTube video dated November 2014.
(⁶⁹) R. Berryman, M. Kavka, '*I Guess A Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Friend': the role of intimacy in the celebrification of beauty vloggers, op. cit.*, 312.

## 6. Child labor laws

In the current framework, we focused on two problems - the first is labor exploitation, and the other is the problematic gender stereotypes that this labor establishes.

Although it is possible to point to various directions for solving these problems (such as voluntary regulation that YouTube will undertake to lead, or raising awareness through education and information aimed at young people and parents), it seems that a more practical direction may be regulatory, as various types of exploitation could be addressed through reform of laws relating to child and youth labor.

Amanda Riggio, for example, claims that the existing child labor laws in the US regarding children working in the traditional entertainment industry, should be expanded to cover child labor in social media economy[70].

Admittedly, Reggio mainly refers to small children who participate in channels operated by their parents, and she mentions not only labor exploitation but also a variety of problems related to the activity of child vloggers, from data mining and privacy violation to damage to their self-image[71]. However, her recommendations are also relevant to protecting children from economic exploitation. The legislation she suggests aims not only to protect the psychological health of children involved in the creation of social media content, but also to establish guidelines for creating separate financial accounts for children, based on the income they generate from advertisements (accounts that they will be able to access when they reach the age of 18). Additional goals include setting guidelines on allocating a percentage of profits from sponsored social media content results from child labor [72]. Other solutions related to the harms caused to children from the use of social networks, involve raising the age limit for this use[73].

When examining these solutions, it must be considered that current legislation stems from older conceptions of childhood and work. It is necessary to recognize the emergence of a unique hybrid situation characterized by a combination of work and leisure and the blending of economic production into social life. It is also important to realize that forced separation between children and social media is not feasible, and beyond being difficult to implement and achieve, its harm might outweigh its benefit.

In our view, the guiding principle should be the one established in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). An addendum adopted in

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[70] A.G. Riggio, *The Small-er Screen: YouTube Vlogging and the Unequipped Child Entertainment Labor Laws*, in *Seattle University Law Review*, 2021, 44, 2, 493.

[71] A.G. Riggio, *The Small-er Screen: YouTube Vlogging and the Unequipped Child Entertainment Labor Laws, op., cit.*, 512-515.

[72] A.G. Riggio, *The Small-er Screen: YouTube Vlogging and the Unequipped Child Entertainment Labor Laws, op., cit.*, 516-517.

[73] S. Smart, *Florida House passes legislation that would prohibit kids under 16 from having certain social media accounts*, *CNN*, February 23, 2024.

March 2021 relates to applying children's rights under the Convention to the digital environment, recognizing that the creation and sharing of content can turn children into economic actors in the digital arena and may serve as a platform for their exploitation. Yet, at the same time, this addendum also realize that children's participation in the digital platforms is essential to their well-being[74].

Unlike the industrial age, during which the need to separate childhood from the economic-productive sphere was shaped, current protections must focus elsewhere. YouTube and her like have become an arena for self-expression, creation, sharing, experimentation, and building social communities around shared tastes and preferences. Young people should not be denied equal, creative and productive participation in this arena. The arrangements that need to be considered should not relay on excluding young population from the new economic space and the opportunities that allow them to be productive subjects in postmodern society[75]. The solution must lie in recognizing that children and adolescents have become productive subjects on the web, and providing the necessary protections and rewards accordingly.

For example, requiring YouTube to share fair wages with children and youth from all forms of profit (not just advertising) deridved from their channel, without age restrictions or conditions of a minimum number of views and followers, would be preferable to the current situation of unpaid labor. Such a solution will neutralize the demand for overwork currently required of YouTubers – that is, the need to produce 'audience commodities' in addition to video content – and would relieve audiences of the pressure to pay with attention and involvement.

Indeed, there may be an argument that such solutions could harm the nature of leisure or play in YouTube activity, turning it entirely commercial. Our response is twofold. First, the current study shows that YouTuber activity already has a strong commercial aspect. A regulatory directive that reflects this reality will prevent exploitation that occurs today. Second, this type of regulation could actually restore much of the voluntary leisure aspect to this activity. By removing the financial pressure to artificially generate audience attention, more authentic forms of play and leisure could emerge. On the gender aspect, it may reduce the dependency of the young YouTubers on YouTube's algorithms, which steer them towards stereotypical gender roles.

## 7.    Conclusion

This paper examined changing concepts of work and leisure in the social media platform economy and their consequences on children and youth, particularly regarding the assimilation of gender stereotypes.

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[74] The United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child 2021.

[75] H. Wintersberger, *Children`s Economic and Social Welfare: Locating Children Economically and Approaching Generational Distributive Justice*, Paper at COST A19 General Meeting, Trondheim, 2001.

In our research on the YouTuber activity of children and youth in Israel, we found that more than an expression of leisure or play, this YouTuber activity involves a significant aspect of work.

The economic significance of YouTuber activity among children and youth is derived from the desire to earn money, either through YouTube's profit-sharing mechanism or from external advertising bodies. In both cases, the economic possibilities are tied to increasing exposure on this platform. Therefore, this aspiration translates among YouTuber girls into complying with the requirements set by the YouTuber algorithm to maximize exposure. This, in turn, leads to a focus on areas of occupation considered 'more appropriate for girls and women', such as fashion and beauty, and to modes of performance considered 'feminine', like various expressions of intimate discourse. Thus, the result is not only economic exploitation but also the assimilation of gender stereotypes among the girls who operate these YouTube channels and among the girls who follow their activities.

The solutions often offered in these contexts range from applying youth labor laws from the traditional entertainment industry to children's activities on digital social platforms to banning children participation in these platforms altogether. We believe that in order to promote a solution, two principles must be recognized. First, it is important to acknowledge that YouTuber activity is not only leisure but also work, even when the actors are children and youth under the employment age recognized by law. Secondly, since this is indeed a form of work, children should not be excluded from participating in these platforms, but should be provided with fair employment conditions and wages.

This two-staged recognition could be a solution not only to the economic exploitation of children and youth in platform work but also to untie the connections the platforms create between the economic aspirations of girls and traditional gender dictates. There are already developments based upon the recognition of similar principles. In 2018, the Union YouTubers (YTU) was formed (https://youtubersunion.org/). According to research, the YouTubers Union can be seen as a successful step in challenging the issues that web-based platform workers on YouTube face[76]. Even more than most platform workers, YouTube's workforce of content creators face particular challenges[77]. In this highly fragmented work environment, the situation of child and youth YouTubers is even more precarious, as our research elaborates. In the future, hopefully, more attention will be devoted to such empowering activities that address the special interests of child YouTubers and the particular protections to which they are entitled.

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[76] V. Niebler, K. Annemarie, *Organizing YouTube: A novel case of platform worker organizing*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020.

[77] V. Niebler, K. Annemarie, *Organizing YouTube: A novel case of platform worker organizing, op. cit.* See also at: Unnamed, *Annemarie Kern and Valentin Niebler: The YouTubers Union – A Novel Case of Platform Worker Organising, Brave New Europe* (Finance), 2020.

To conclude, according to perception that guided us, 'childhood' is not just a cultural construct that symbolizes ideas of leisure and freedom; It is also a period of life in which initial notions and norms about work, fair wages, gender identity, rights, and freedoms are formed. We argue that the norms internalized among the young population today in this environment are not necessarily the norms that should be instilled in today's boys and girls who will become the adults populating the future labor market.

Against the background of an internet economy that depends on aspects of voluntary knowledge sharing and data mining, it can be assumed that the road to adequate regulation is still long. It seems that childhood, because of its unique cultural status, provides a unique opportunity to establish fair and protective arrangements, ones that may serve as the first steps on which it will be possible to build appropriate legislation in the field for us all.

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**Important note**

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Experiments at the University of Haifa, approval No. 308/21. As part of the approval agreement, the identifying details of the channels and videos examined should not be published for privacy reasons and will be shared only with the journal editors upon request.

The video materials are kept with the authors, and they will be given to the journal editors (not for publication) under the ethics committee's conditions.