Working in Chinese digital fitness companies: alienated labour in a state-led neoliberal economy

Yunrui Wu

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Sheffield, Department of Sociological Studies

Date: August 2022

Declaration

I confirm that I am the original author and this thesis is my own work. I am fully aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Copyright Materials (https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/code/thesis/preparation/copyright) and the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not previously been published.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, I must express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Helen Kennedy and Doctor Matthias Benzer. It is so fortunate for me to have them supervise my PhD research. It is known that a PhD is quite a challenging life project which requires one's comprehensive abilities. And my supervisors always provide exact help for me in various aspects. In terms of research, they give me very inspiring comments and recommend useful literature, helping me gradually form my arguments and also enhance my ability of critical thinking. Besides academic support, my supervisors give many concerns about my well-being and endow me with encouragement and comfort when I feel depressed and anxious. Without their help, it is difficult for me to keep on track and continue my research when I am trapped in frustration. From our regular supervision meetings, I am not only fascinated by their intelligence and wisdom but also touched by their patience and kindness. I confirm my determination to be an academic researcher and a tutor at university, to help more students just like my supervisors help me.

Then I need to give a big thanks to my parents, who always support my dream. As a single child, they spare no efforts to give me a better education. I have been an international self-funded student since my master studies in the UK. It is the family funds that enable me to continue my studies and maintain daily life overseas. Sometimes, I feel quite guilty and stressed once thinking that I have not been financially independent. But they never question my pursuit and plan. My parents do spend much money but what they give me is more than just financial support. They give me love, trust and confidence without any conditions.

My sincere thanks are given for all my participants here. Without their kindness and open mind, it is impossible for me to get access to the companies and finish this research. They share as much as they can when I collect my data. I feel very warm that they never show any impatience even when I turn to them for data supplement after my fieldwork. My PhD fieldwork is a very impressive and unforgettable experience in my life.

A special thank you is given to my best friends who offers support and help anywhere anytime. For example, Shuoshuo Wu and Lu Qin provided me with accommodation during my fieldwork in Shanghai. And so many of my peer PhD friends, such as Nan Zhang, Diandian Li, Han Jiang, Sharon Jia, shared valuable academic experience with me and endowed me with

confidence when I was trapped in self-doubt and frustration. Thank you very much for Lijiaozi Cheng and Jiaxun Li for the mock viva.

Finally, I also want to express my gratitude to my fiancé for everything he does for me. When I feel frustrated and depressed, he helps me rebuild confidence. When I am busy with my work, he can support my life and finish housework. As another academic researcher, he also shares with me experience in career development. It is good to have someone special in life.

Abstract

It is argued that the application of digital technologies to various industries have changed capitalist production models and corresponding working conditions. One such model is often characterised as digital labour. Scholars highlight the importance of analysing digital labour, with the two most influential frameworks, Marxist and Foucauldian theories. Yet the question of whether the two can work together to elucidate digital labour requires further investigation. To explore the possibility of combining the two scholarships, I introduce a new case study of the digital fitness industry in China and investigate the working conditions in two small entrepreneurial companies. To collect data, I carried out participatory observation over a period of four months, collected three-months' worth of social media content, and conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 participants.

My key argument is that employees' working conditions are characterised by alienation and neoliberalism, with the property relationship of means of production elucidating the co-existence of the two relationships. Both capitalists and workers can use means of production by paying the owners of those working tools, either through one-off purchase or rent. The payment to owners demonstrates that the rule of private property holds true. This rule means that employers can acquire employees' labour power as private property by paying salaries, which legitimises the former's private ownership of the products of the latter's labour. Thus, the workers experience alienation in an employment relationship. Simultaneously, the workers can choose self-employment, paying to use the means of production themselves. Their payment for working tools becomes a self-investment, involving them in a neoliberal social relationship. I contribute to combining Marxist and Foucauldian theories and demonstrate the neoliberal interpretation of labour as self-investment motivates propertyless workers to work hard proactively, which veils and consolidate the unequal relationship between labour and capitalism.

Table of Contents

A list of Figures

A list of Tables

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Digital fitness in the Chinese platform economy

It can be clearly observed that more and more aspects of daily life are being mediated by digital platforms, from shopping and accommodation to transport, entertainment, and beyond. Digital platforms have become an increasingly significant provider of public goods and services. Some researchers have characterised platforms as a "digital utility", the fifth utility after water, electricity, gas, and telephony (Qiu, Sun and Chen, 2021). Scholars have noted such platforms' core roles in everyday life and claimed that this mechanism fundamentally reshapes economic and social activities and relationships (Gillespie, 2014). Moore and Tambini (2018) note that today platforms have wider social and political implications beyond the market, for instance, influencing or even dominating how people understand the world. Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018) characterise today's life centring around digital platforms as the "platform society". The advent of the platform society is underpinned by technical software and hardware innovation. To understand such innovation, the term 'Web 2.0' is useful, although it is somewhat outdated in the latest research on digital society. But a discussion of Web 2.0 can help to highlight the changes of the online environment and provide a foundation for understanding today's platform society.

The term Web 2.0 was first used by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 to refer to a new Internet environment made possible by technological innovation. In the previous online environment, users could access the Internet only through static devices, namely personal computers (PCs). Portal websites prevailed, which users could browse, but without making much difference to the content. In the Web 2.0 era, users can access the Internet through both static PCs and web-enabled mobile devices, such as tablet computers and smartphones, thanks to the progressive construction of Internet infrastructure and manufacture of physical equipment. Besides the advancement of hardware, there have been software innovations. Various Internet applications (apps) can function on both static and mobile devices with users' data synchronised between them. With the development of Information and Communication technologies (ICTs), digital platforms gradually replace portal websites and become prevailing, enabling users to produce as well as consume content and engage in immediate communication with other users (Grinnell,

2009). This is known as the two most distinctive features of platforms, user-generated content and many-to-many communication.

China, as scholars have noted, has attached great importance to ICT advancement through the government's aim to achieve industrial transformation and economic reconstruction through technical innovation (Hong, 2017; Tang, 2020). Thus, China effectively had to play catch up to join the Web 2.0 era. In 2014, just a decade after the term Web 2.0 was first coined, The Internet Society of China made a statement to announce the starting point of Chinese platform society.

> China has entered the Web 2.0 era… We have made remarkable achievements in terms of infrastructure construction of the Internet. The Internet has brought about innovative business models… Every Internet user is both the user and the producer on social media platforms Weibo and WeChat, whereby they exchange knowledge, participate in social events and create content… (Internet Society of China, 2014).

This statement made two points: the development of domestic ICTs has driven this epochal innovation of the Chinese online environment, centring around digital platforms; and digital platforms have brought about new production and business models by allowing user-generated content and many-to-many communication.

The Chinese entry into the platform society was underpinned by the state's efforts to advance ICTs and represented the state's aspiration to build an 'innovative country', following the pace of other developed countries. China first accessed the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1994 (Liu, 2019, p. 4), three decades after it was created in the USA. Thus, China's engagement in the international digital economy happened later than that of other developed countries. China's early role in the global digital economy was as the world's hardware manufacturer (Yu, 2017). It had little power to determine production and had to obey the rules stipulated by developed countries, who mastered the key technologies (ibid.). To increase its international competitiveness and transform its role from the world's manufacturer to an innovative country that is technologically self-reliant, China has been striving to enhance its capacity for technical

innovation by both setting top-down political agendas and boosting bottom-up creativity. The government has put great effort into making the Internet accessible to more citizens, such as constructing domestic Internet infrastructure on a large scale and giving financial support or tax incentives to companies for faster communication or to produce smart devices. The past decade (2010-2020) has seen the percentage of Internet users among the whole Chinese population increase from 34% to 70% (China Internet Network Information Center, 2010-2020). Based on the expanded Internet user base, the state aimed to encourage bottom-up creativity to engage in ICTs advancement and conduct entrepreneurship with ICTs, with the two main policies in 2015: 'Internet plus' (China State Council, 2015b) and 'mass entrepreneurship, mass innovation' (China State Council, 2015a).

Keane and Chen (2019) claimed that the two policies indicate the Chinese government's tendency towards "entrepreneurial solutionism" because the central government planned to rely on innovation of ICTs and entrepreneurship to solve social and economic problems, such as a faltering economy and unemployment challenges (Yu, Xu and Sun, 2022). Simultaneously, these policies represent the state's aspiration to realise the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation (Keane and Yu, 2019), which means to gain more international competitiveness and strive to be a developed country. Umarovna (2021) noted that substantial measures were implemented by the government after creating these policies, such as giving financial support and tax incentives or subsidies to start-ups, enhancing education around science and technology and building a capital market with both foreign and domestic capital for investment. Tang (2020) investigated the historical process of how China attracted foreign capital to invest in its domestic ICT industry while also allowing local companies to be listed abroad, integrating China's digital economy with the global one. As Miao, Jiang and Pang (2021) contended, the state is at the centre for research funding, infrastructure investment, industrial development, and market regulation. Admittedly, to advocate entrepreneurship entails that the state must backtrack on some of its direct intervention in the market, allocate some freedom to corporations, and sometimes allow Silicon Valley-style neoliberalism to be celebrated in start-ups. As Hong (2017) observed, state power is decentralised to some degree, delegates some autonomy to bottom-up entrepreneurs and maximises their intelligence. However, it is impossible to deny that the Chinese digital economy, which shares some characteristics with a neoliberal economy, is generally state led. It can be defined as a state-led neoliberal economy based on ICTs.

Although government intervention takes an opposing role in state-led and market-led digital economies, the two economic models share some similarities. One of the most prominent and significant features is the core role of digital platforms, as noted above. User-generated content and many-to-many communication on platforms have both given rise to new business models. As Drahokoupil and Jepsen (2017) contend, platforms reshape how products and service are produced and delivered and they define the phenomenon whereby economic activities are mediated by digital platforms as "platformization of economy".

The birth of China's digital fitness industry owes much to the platform economy. Fitness has become a popular leisure activity following the influence of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. This international event held in the capital city inspired citizens' passion for physical activities and stimulated sports-related consumption (Liu, 2009; Xing, 2019). Two newly emerging social media platforms – Weibo and WeChat – helped to cultivate the fitness industry and a base of customers, and some fitness hobbyists became entrepreneurs. They generated content to attract followers and then monetised the audience's attention by selling paid fitness products and services (Chen, 2020). These fitness hobbyists have become Internet celebrities and their influence attracted venture capital investment to establish companies. Abundant capital flowed into this area and helped bottom-up creators with little substantial capital become businesspersons.

1.2 Understanding digital labour in the Chinese digital fitness industry

The newly emerging Chinese digital fitness industry and its products have attracted academic attention. Most studies about Chinese digital fitness have focused on fitness apps, which provide exercise timers and video fitness guidance (Xing, 2014; Zhang and Liu, 2017; Zhao and Yu, 2017; Liu, 2018). The digital fitness phenomenon has been studied from two perspectives: business and sports. In other words, academics have chiefly studied how to advertise and market digital fitness apps and how this industry improves citizens' health. There are, therefore, two gaps in existing research of this area. Firstly, studies only focus on fitness apps and neglect other business models of and other technological approaches to digital fitness, underrepresenting the complexity of this industry. Secondly, not enough attention has been

paid to the employees and their labour in this industry. The digital fitness phenomenon is chiefly understood as a matter of consumer choice. However, this area is also a career choice for the employees who work there. The two gaps result in partial understandings of this industry. In turn studying the digital fitness industry could help understand the contemporary Chinese digital economy more generally. It is therefore important to investigate and understand the production model and labour from a sociological perspective.

I started paying attention to labour in the digital fitness industry when I became a digital fitness customer in 2015 and made the acquaintance of some of the staff working in this industry. I joined an online training tutorial on WeChat chat groups, where staff guided and supervised our diet and exercise. All customers and staff in the group were women in their 20s and 30s. I clearly remember how my attitude towards online training changed, from feeling frustrated and impatient to having a sense of fulfilment and proactively training myself as required. When I lost some weight, I felt astonished about how the online training group made a difference to my physical condition without meeting customers in person. When talking to the three staff in my chat group, I was surprised to find that all of them had been customers The three staff told me similar weight-loss stories whereby they wanted to lose weight and shape their figures after giving birth. They started their training online because it was more flexible than offline courses in gyms, which required more time and had space limitations. Online they could complete training at home after finishing their daily care for their babies. They had been invited by the company staff to become waged part-time employees due to their diligence and self-control in online training groups. According to the three staff members' general observation of customers, they found more than 80% of their customers were women aged from 25 to their 40s, who had enough disposable income to consume paid fitness services and desired to shape their body figures. The staff continue to search for potential colleagues among their customers and then invited the most disciplined ones to join the company. I found those staff members who were customers of digital fitness products showed great passion for both physical training and their work in the company, and their passion motivated them to train and work hard. As a sociology student, I suspected that the sociologically most important theme in this setting was labour. Moreover, from my own experiences of consuming digital fitness products and the employees' intriguing stories I got the sense that human labour was intertwined with digital technologies,

disciplinary power, and human affect. Those key elements, which are highly relevant to Marxist and Foucauldian theories, inspired me to conceptualise labour in the Chinese digital fitness industry through these two frameworks.

1.2.1 Two dominant frameworks in digital labour debates

According to Marxist theories, one key framework in this thesis, human labour is an indispensable part of all production, creating products needed for human beings' survival and driving social development. As Marx noted in *Capital*, under capitalist production conditions in the 19th century, workers found they had to sell their capacity for labour to employers and obtain wages to purchase necessary products for survival (Marx, 1990 [1887], p. 131). The labour-income exchange mechanism shapes one of the most dominant definitions of work nowadays: selling labour power to earn a living (Berardi, 2009, p. 214). Since work is a source of income and requires so much energy and time every day, work strongly influences people's everyday life. It is therefore important to investigate working conditions and what work brings to people. According to Marx's categorisation, capitalist relations of production divide people into two groups: the sellers and buyers of labour power. Marx claims that since capitalism is a social relationship based on private property, buyers can use sellers' labour power during working time as private property (Marx, 1844, p. 1). This suggests that it is always the employers who determine the employees' working conditions in capitalist work. With the advancement of ICTs and their wide application to various industries, capitalist production models have changed, leading to corresponding changes of working conditions (Fuchs, 2014a; Zuboff, 2015; Scholz, 2017). The term digital labour became well-known owing to Tiziana Terranova's influential discussion in 2000. Inspired by French and Italian scholarship, she claimed that the Internet is intrinsic to capitalist production (2000), and human labour with the help of ICTs contributes to production.

Digital labour working conditions appear to contradict work under the industrial capitalist system, whereby factory employees work on an assembly line. The clear divisions between work and non-work, between production and consumption, break down in digital labour. Importantly, as mentioned above, users are also producers in today's platform economy; Bruns famously calls them produsers (2008). Technology also connects people remotely, increasing

the anticipation that workers can complete work outside office and work time. This phenomenon is described as flexibility (Sennett, 1998, pp. 109–110). Leisure activities are entangled with work and can even become work themselves. Kücklich describes this as 'playbour' (2005). Scholars argue that it is therefore important to investigate labour issues, such as the division of labour, means of production, labour content, and people's relationship with their labour, in the context of digital labour (Grinnell, 2009; Wittel, 2015). Many scholars criticise the unequal social relationship between the capitalist and the worker that characterises digital labour, arguing that Marxist ideas about alienation and exploitation endure in this context (Andrejevic et al., 2014; Fuchs, 2014a; Zuboff, 2015; Scholz, 2017; Srnicek, 2017; Fumagalli et al., 2018). Their critiques suggest that, although today's working conditions are different from those Marx studied, some of his theories are still helpful to understand digital labour. Their continued applicability underpins the influential position of the Marxist framework in digital labour studies.

As can be seen above, Marxist theory is highly influential in current debates about digital labour. Another theoretical framework which is also significant draws on the work of Foucault. Besides acknowledging some unchanged characteristics of labour, scholars have investigated how digital technologies' involvement endows work with new features. The Foucauldian framework is highly relevant to elucidating those features of work. According to Xia (2014), digital work can be generally categorised as hardware manufacturing work, software development, content creation, and service supply. The last three kinds of work are more relevant to my research than the first. While the first kind of manufacturing work based in factories still shares similarities with what is analysed in Marx's work, the other three kinds of digital work present features quite different to those of factory work. They align with what Bauman discusses with regards to work in the consumer society, which is different from work in industrial capitalism. In industrial capitalism, work is constructed as a public issue and a moral requirement, making workers obey the rule of the factory production model (Bauman, 2005, pp. 5–6). When the form of industrial work is dominant, society is, in Bauman's characterisation, a "producer society", since every member of society is first and foremost engaged in society as a producer (ibid.). By contrast, some digital work is constructed as a more private issue and similar to a consumption choice based on aesthetic values (ibid, p. 28), such

as personal affect, interests, feelings, and tastes. According to Weeks, privatisation of work not only makes more aspects of human life serve capitalist production, but also makes employees become self-reliant, which resonates with neoliberalism (Weeks, 2011). As Lazzarato claims, the management strategy in work with ICTs requires workers to internalise external requirements and conduct self-management (1996). These requirements align with Foucauldian concepts of self-discipline and biopolitics, both referring to internalised social imperatives and individualised responsibility. For these reasons, Foucauldian scholarship has also become an influential strand of theory to understand digital labour (Ursell, 2000; McRobbie, 2002b; Zuboff, 2015; Gregory and Sadowski, 2021).

Here I must clarify that I do not intend to simplify the historical stages of capitalism with historical dualism, although I will frequently use the terms industrial capitalism or Bauman's concept of "producer society" to describe the production model dominated by industrial manufacturing in this thesis. Nor did Bauman intend to hold a dualist historical perspective in discussing consumer society and producer society. It is also imprecise to suggest that the Chinese digital economy has entered a form of post-industrial capitalism, because manufacturing still plays a significant role (Chen, 2018). I use industrial capitalism or producer society as references to compare with the context in my research. I will use Julie Cohen's concept of "informational capitalism" to conceptualise the context of my research. As Cohen (2016) contends, informational capitalism refers to capitalism where development is driven by information and knowledge. Market actors use knowledge, culture, and networked information technologies to boost capitalist production (ibid.). I aim to emphasise how work is transformed and endowed with different features in informational capitalism. Following Cohen (2016), I try to present a transformation from an economy mainly oriented toward manufacturing to one oriented principally toward production underpinned by information. That does not mean that I understand the historical development of capitalism as a unidirectional linear process.

The process of how capitalism evolves is, to emphasise this, complicated, with different factors interplaying and different production models of capitalism co-existing. Nancy Fraser (2022) uses the term 'cannibal capitalism' to expand Marx's critiques of capitalism and moves beyond economic crisis or class struggles. She unveils four aspects or "hidden abodes", including

ecology, social reproduction, political power, and expropriation (ibid.). Due to the central position of the relationship between productive labour and capital in Marxist scholarship, hidden abodes do not receive enough attention. But those factors are the foundation of capitalism, "the very conditions of its possibility" (ibid.). According to Fraser (2022), capitalism's goal of endless accumulation "cannibalizes its own conditions of possibility" and destabilizes itself. Among the four aspects, social production is relevant to this research. Fraser noted that some social reproduction becomes a public service in Keynesianism but is privatized again in neoliberalism, becoming a method of accumulation. This formulation concurs with my discussion in Chapter Six about how non-work time and activities are instrumentalized to serve capitalism and how work is privatised.

Considering the influence of Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks in debates about digital labour, it is important to investigating the extent to which they help understand labour in the Chinese digital fitness industry. With the advancement of technologies, working conditions also undergo changes. This necessitates continued reflection on the applicability and limitations of Marxist and Foucauldian theories. In addition to the need to continue to review the usefulness of these two frameworks, there is a longstanding question about the extent to which they can effectively work together to elucidate new variations of digital labour. Some scholars have made efforts to combine the two frameworks to interpret labour. For example, some governmentality scholars combine the Foucauldian concept of self-discipline and the Marxist concept of exploitation and use the term 'self-exploitation' to elucidate cultural workers' labour (McRobbie, 2000; Ursell, 2000). Self-exploitation describes a phenomenon whereby workers are so enamoured with their work that they willingly tolerate bad working conditions, such as low pay, long working hours and uncertain futures and push themselves to physical and mental extremes. Some Marxist theorists, such as Gidaris (2019) and Zuboff (2015), connect Marx's theory of exploitation and the concept of surveillance from Foucault's theory of disciplinary power to conceptualise how users' labour is exploited by digital platforms. They contend that digital platforms monitor users' online activities, record their behaviour as data and sell users' data to third parties. The scholars argue that in this process, the platform takes the role of a capitalist who exploits users' labour of producing content and data, which becomes a commodity, and accumulates wealth.

As cited above, most scholars base their critique of capitalism on Marx's theory of exploitation and then incorporate some Foucauldian concepts to make a coherent argument. In this thesis, I will not engage in these debates in any depth, since my empirical data has led me to another important branch of Marxist scholarship, the theory of alienation. I find these current debates particularly inspiring in two aspects of my study: (a) they provide a comprehensive analysis of how information and technology have complicated the use of human labour in capitalist production; (b) they provide valuable insights into how Foucauldian concepts can be introduced in order to remedy the limitations of Marxist theories when attempting to clarify the working conditions in informational capitalism. In view of these studies, I have come to realize that inequality between labour and capital can become subtle and sometimes invisible, making it essential to expose the mask of inequality. In order to demonstrate the inequality between labour and capital, I present an empirical case study of the Chinese digital fitness industry, which combines digital technologies with fitness expertise and the Chinese context. Empirical data leads me to both Marx's theory of alienation and Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism, which will be discussed in detail later in section 2.4. I am able to explore the applicability of Marxist and Foucauldian theories to elucidate labour through this case and to find new ways to integrate the two scholarship in a new and consistent fashion.

1.2.2 Specificity of the Chinese context

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a single-party state under the rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The CPC, with its centralised authority, has planned to construct a country with both great national power and international competitiveness (Scobell et al., 2020, p. 24). In education and propaganda, the people are always told "If you fall behind, you will be beaten", which means they should never forget the recent history of being poor and weak and should work hard to compete with developed countries (Peng and Tang, 2007). A cultural atmosphere is created by the state to promote competition and fear of falling behind. Kipnis Andrew (2007) argue that this culture has supported the government to construct a neoliberal market that encourages competition, as introduced later in this section.

The CPC claims the Chinese government is based on a Marxist dialectical and materialist view of history. The party defines the state as a socialist country, a transient stage from the capitalist

society to the communist society. Zhang (2014) claims that the history of contemporary China is divided into two stages: from 1949 to 1978, and after 1978. Before 1978, only a planned economy guided by the government was allowed. Individual citizens' free exchange in the market was defined as capitalist behaviour and was forbidden (ibid.). This policy was replaced when the new policy of 'reforming and opening up' was implemented in 1978 with the purpose of stimulating domestic economic growth (ibid.). Reform meant that a market economy was permitted, while opening up meant that China joined the global economy and introduced foreign capital into the domestic market (ibid.). Thus, socialism in the PRC experienced a significant change in 1978. This policy presented an epochal change for the Chinese economy. It is argued that China transforms socialism to state capitalism (Yeh, Yang and Wang, 2015). To justify the state as a socialist country, CPC defined the ideology as "socialism with Chinese characteristics" in Constitution of the Communist Party of China (Communist Party of China, 2017).

Some scholars claim that "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is a form of Chinese neoliberal economy (Harvey, 2005a; Wang, 2008; Zheng, 2008; Luo, 2012). David Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2005, p.2). Luo (2012) argues that the neoliberal economy appeared in the 1970s, when economic growth encountered stagnation and Keynesian economics, with its strong government economic intervention, was questioned. With the privatisation policies adopted by Thatcher's and Reagan's governments, the neoliberal economy gradually began to expand globally from the 1980s. Hui Wang (2003) claims that "socialism with Chinese characteristics" refers to radical marketisation under the post-1978 guidance of the central authority, which has similarities with the neoliberal economy of other countries. The unique feature of the marketization process in China is the dominant role of the CPC. This characteristic is consistent with Foucault's and Davis's descriptions of how a strong government could guide a top-down neoliberal economy by intervening in the social conditions to construct a certain market to encourage competition (Foucault, 2008[1979], p. 119; Davies,

2016). The term "state-led economic liberalisation" was coined by Ji (2006) to characterise the Chinese economy after 'reforming and opening up' in 1978.

Nonini (2008) points out that the concepts of a national-led neoliberal economy and socialism with Chinese characteristics have been criticised by both conservative Marxist-Socialist critics and radical neoliberals. The former insist that the CPC betrays the discipline of socialism and leads China into capitalism. The latter think the CPC betrays the three basic principles of neoliberalism – private property rights, free markets, and free trade – by virtue of a strong government (ibid.). These critiques reflect how the Chinese economy has combined the government's deep intervention with a market economy. Chen (2019) thinks this combination is an advantage and says that socialism with Chinese specificity strikes a reasonable balance between market and government intervention and that this balance has contributed to China's considerable economic growth after 1978. Wang (2003) characterises neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics after 1978 "a combination of market extremism, neo-conservatism, and neo-authoritarianism." Wang (2003) contends that this composite model requires radical deregulation of market and power is decentralised from the central government to local governments and various corporations in the market when the economy is in a stable condition. When the economic situation is volatile, this model requires central authority to protect the market.

In the model of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', it is the central government under the leadership of the CPC that ultimately decides how much autonomy the entrepreneurs in the market could have. The CPC has maintained its determinant role in the national economy and guided a state-led neoliberal economy to encourage bottom-up creativity, competition, and entrepreneurship based on platforms, aiming to reconstruct production models, solve economic stagnation and unemployment, and increase China's international competitiveness. Admittedly, apart from the state's top-down guidance, development of the digital economy also relies on bottom-up creativity, which should not be ignored. When the central government delegates much autonomy to the market, entrepreneurs' creativity contributes to speeding up the advancement of Chinese digital economy. China's most influential digital platforms and Internet companies started by learning from predecessors in the USA and introduced their own

innovations (Liu, 2019). For instance, WeChat learned from Facebook, Baidu learned from Google, and Weibo learned from Twitter (Yuan, 2018). The Internet entrepreneurs' imitational behaviour is also followed by the research subjects in my study. The entrepreneurs who created the digital fitness industry learnt from Internet celebrities' business models on foreign social media platforms, such as posting fitness content and obtaining and monetising users' attention. Almost all such imitation behaviour involves some informal copycat culture. Keane and Chen (2019) contend that this informal culture represents innovation from below, which receives the government's acquiescence since informal grassroots innovation can help build an innovative country. This phenomenon and significance of innovation from below will be reviewed in detail in Chapter Two.

While allowing the Internet companies to imitate their counterparts abroad, the CPC realised that users' big data, generated and stored by the platforms, could be key elements for competing with developed countries in the platform society and in the wider global digital economy. The CPC has thus worked on preventing rivals, such as American companies, from taking Chinese users' data (Scobell et al., 2020, p. 34). The country claimed Internet sovereignty in the 2010s, building a national firewall and blocking foreign websites that refuse to obey Chinese Internet Security censorship, including Google, Facebook, and YouTube (ibid.). This firewall not only enables the CPC to keep Chinese users' data for itself, but also gives enough space and time for domestic digital platforms to develop, preventing them from losing in competition with strong competitors such as Google (Wang, 2019). As a space independent from the digital world dominated by the USA, the Chinese digital world represents another power that continues to grow and has become increasingly influential. Nowadays, the world's most valuable ten digital companies are found either in the USA or in China (De Kloet et al., 2019; Chen, 2020). Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018) contend that the power relations between the state and the Internet corporations appear to be in opposition to each other. According to them, since the Big Five companies' market value now can compete with the GDP of the USA, the companies now show less respect to the government (ibid.). The US government has even become increasingly dependent on platforms to provide public services to the citizens (ibid.). However, in China, the giant Internet companies' business must be conditioned to CPC's leadership and governance (ibid.). Digital platforms even help the government to impose

surveillance on citizens' online opinions and behaviour. Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018) characterise this kind of governance as an autocratic regime to control digital companies. This description may result in misunderstandings that the Chinese central government always engages in strict censorship and makes Chinese digital economy an insular island outside the international economy. However, that is not the case. Jia and Winseck find that Chinese Internet companies are actually deeply entangled with foreign transnational capital (2018). Internet companies are significant elements in helping the Chinese digital economy to keep 'going out' and engaging with the global economy. Xia (2018) contends that the companies and state have formed an alliance, with the latter creating policies that are business friendly and the former helping the state in terms of international competitiveness. However, no matter how much autonomy the government sometimes delegates to the corporations, there is no denying that the Chinese government does have a heavy hand in the market. Given all of this, it is important to understand digital labour in the Chinese context and to consider the ways in which such understanding contributes to current debates. The implications of the Chinese neoliberal economy in platform society will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

1.3 Research question and methodology

My research focuses on labour in the Chinese digital fitness industry. My overall research question is: what are the conditions of digital labour in two Chinese digital fitness companies?

The sub-questions are as follows:

(1) Whose and what labour are engaged in the digital fitness companies?

(2) How do workers interpret their labour?

(3) How is the body constructed in both offline and digital fitness contexts and how fitness trainings influence workers' labour?

(4) What specific elements of the Chinese context can enrich current understandings of digital labour?

(5) To what extent are Marxist and Foucauldian analyses helpful for theorising these conditions?

This thesis aims to describe and analyse people's daily work in digital fitness companies and to understand people's perspectives on their daily work. A qualitative methodology – which explores the depth, nuances and complexity of the researched phenomenon – was most appropriate for my research (Mason, 2018, p. 54). I selected two small-sized entrepreneurial digital fitness companies, FitGo and StartFit (these are pseudonyms), in Shanghai, China, as case studies. I have been consuming their fitness apps and online services since 2015. It is these companies that raised my research interest in the first place, and they are suitable for answering my research questions. I chose small-sized entrepreneurial companies to address the lack of attention paid to small companies in existing company-based studies of digital labour, which mainly focus on the most influential giant companies (Qiu, 2009; Xia, 2014; Chen and Qiu, 2019). According to Shen (2016) and Hong (2017), it is difficult to comprehend the Chinese digital economy and society without investigating the large Internet corporations, particularly the oligarchs Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (BAT). According to Jia and Winseck (2018), these entrepreneurs represent the most advanced level of Chinese Internet development, which they attribute to Chinese government support, internet companies, and international finance capital. The dynamic interaction between the state, corporations, and global financial capital market causes financialization in the Chinese digital economy, confirming Winseck's prediction from a decade ago that the internet would be one of the first sectors to experience financialization. In the context of financialization, Chinese internet oligarchs receive investments from foreign capital and are intricately entwined with capital accumulation (Jia and Winseck, 2018). Their close ties with international capital receive tacit sanction or support from the Chinese government, which seeks to increase its global influence and international competitiveness (Tang, 2020). On the other hand, gigantic corporations become their own capital and invest in other companies in a variety of industries to consolidate their influence (Jia and Winseck, 2018), including small entrepreneurial firms. To survive, entrepreneurial companies must endeavour to obtain financial investment from BAT; otherwise, they will struggle. I believe it is essential to investigate the situation of small entrepreneurial businesses, such as how their living space is constrained by oligarchs and how they face intense competition to enter the financialization game led by the international capital market. By analysing two small entrepreneurial companies, I will relate the story of Internet oligarchs' dominance from an alternative viewpoint, namely,

from the perspective of the small companies. This could supplement conceptualizations of the Chinese digital economy, which are typically based on the cases of large corporations.

To answer my research questions, I conducted a four-month participant observation in FitGo and interviewed 23 participants in the two companies (16 from FitGo and seven from StartFit). I also collected digital content from the companies' social media accounts on Weibo and WeChat and observed employees' labour in online training groups. My physical observation mapped out the division of labour, captured employees' daily work, and explored their relationships with their labour. In-depth interviews helped me investigate matters that were hard to observe, such as how employees interpreted fitness training and work. Sometimes, I found what employees said contradicted what they were doing, which proved fruitful for the analysis. Both virtual document analysis and online observation helped me describe how the fit body is constructed in a digital context. After finishing data collection, I conducted a thematic analysis following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytical approach allowed new themes to emerge through the data collection process (ibid., p.78).

1.4 Summary of the thesis

This thesis contains seven chapters, including this introduction chapter. In Chapter Two, I introduce my theoretical framework. I review Marx's theory of alienation and Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism to conceptualise workers' relationships with their labour. At the same time, Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is applied to understanding workers' physical training. I also review existing research about digital labour that uses a Marxist or Foucauldian analytical lens, which bridges my empirical data and Marx's and Foucault's theories. Through the literature review, I identify gaps and clarify the rationale behind my research. I then pose my research questions and describe my methodology in Chapter Three, presenting how the research was designed and conducted and how data was analysed.

From Chapter Four to Chapter Six, I analyse my empirical material. I first introduce the two companies, including their development in conditions of uncertainty, their business models, their products, and their divisions of labour in Chapter Four. This chapter familiarises readers with the research background and helps them better understand my arguments in the following

chapters. After introducing whose and what labour is involved, in Chapter Five I discuss the workers' hybrid identity as 'produsers', a term coined by Bruns (2008) to describe those who are both producers and users of a company's product. I argue that instead of challenging the unequal power relationship in capitalist production, as anticipated by Bruns when this concept was first created, produsage has become part of capitalism. The producers' consumption of products becomes labour that improves the quality of the product and creates value for the company. Ownership of the product and value created by workers are both still in the hands of employees as private property. Employees still experience alienated labour in an employment relationship. At the same time, the means of production is no longer monopolised by capitalists and becomes accessible to workers. Accessibility of working tools makes it possible for produsers to escape from alienation and realise their labour power through entrepreneurship. But entrepreneurship also involves workers in neoliberal competition. Workers need to choose either alienated labour or self-investment in a neoliberal social relationship. In Chapter Six, I investigate how the employees' work is entangled with two leisure activities, hinging on social media and physical training, and becomes what Kücklich (2005) described as playbour. I argue that playbour results in alienation of selfhood by making more aspects of human life serve capitalist production than Fordist work. At the same time, playbour also provides gratification for workers. I differentiate gratification resulting from digital media and fitness work and find both instant and delayed gratification. That means work embodies features of both "consumer society" and "producer society", as categorised by Bauman (2000, pp. 131–132). In companies that relate to fitness and entrepreneurship, delayed gratification is advocated and interpreted as more advanced than instant gratification. When delayed gratification is encouraged, employees are willing to bear current hardship, view their labour as self-investment, and adopt a neoliberal lifestyle. At the same time, emphasis on delayed gratification also vitalises moral work. Some employees insist on doing good work that benefits human beings and society at the cost of short-term business interests. Finally, I conclude my findings and make my final arguments in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This research adopts a Marxist and Foucauldian theoretical framework to conceptualise labour in the Chinese digital fitness industry. In this chapter, I review some key Marxist and Foucauldian concepts and current debates around them. In section 2.1, I review Marx's theory of alienated labour in capitalist production, which is underpinned by private property and the commodification of labour power. I then determine how this term helps understand the workers' relationship with their labour in working conditions involving digital technologies, known as digital labour. In section 2.2, I review Foucauldian categories. I summarise Foucault's discussion about neoliberalism and the concept of disciplinary power. I then consider how those Foucauldian theories help elucidate both for fitness trainings and fitness labour. For workers in the industry, fitness is both a personal lifestyle and a work demand, requiring them to be self-disciplined and self-responsible. In section 2.3, I collate studies about China's digital economy and digital labour. I discuss how the Chinese government has applied neoliberal principles to developing local platform economy. The state-led neoliberalism has encouraged bottom-up creativity to engage entrepreneurship, giving birth to new industries, such as the digital fitness industry in my research. After reviewing current studies about the Chinese digital fitness industry and Chinese digital labour, I identify some gaps and confirm that my case study, which combines elements of labour, fitness expertise and state-led neoliberalism, can contribute to making Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks work well together.

2.1 Platform labour and alienation

In this section, I first outline Marx's concepts of private property and the commodity, two key elements of capitalism, and how they result in alienated labour. I revisit his notion of how workers' capacity for labour, known as labour power, becomes a commodity that can be exchanged on the market. By paying for means of production and paying salaries to workers, the capitalists come to own the working tools and workers' labour power as private property. Private property legitimises the capitalists' private ownership of the products of the workers' labour and justifies the employees' control over the workers' labour processes. The rule of private property and the commodification of labour power underpins this unjust relationship, leading to alienated labour. After presenting the Marxist concepts of labour, the commodity, and private property, I determine how these concepts are mobilised for analysing working conditions involving digital platforms, giving birth to a new concept: platform labour. By

characterising platform labour, my thesis investigates whether alienation can elucidate platform workers' relationship with their labour.

2.1.1 Private property, the commodity and alienated labour

Human beings, Marx claims, survive by interacting with nature (1844, pp. 4–5). Besides relying on and adapting to nature, as other animals do, humans can also create something new for nature through their spontaneous labour. Labour is a process of adjusting natural materials to satisfy humans' specific requirements. Humans devote labour to creating tools for production and producing necessities for survival with those means of production (ibid, p.2). Producers are supposed to own the means of production and products of their labour for immediate use to make a living. But this relationship with labour is different and takes a very specific form in capitalist production. Labourers own neither the means of production nor the products of their own labour. And they can neither use means of production without constraints nor use these products directly for survival. The separation between workers and their labour was described by Marx as alienated labour (1844). Alienation cannot exist without the two main elements of capitalism: the rule of private property and the commodification of human labour.

To understand private property, it is important to clarify the connotation of property from a Marxist perspective. Wittel (2015, p. 96) summarises two key points that make Marx's understanding of property unique: (a) property is a historical product rather than a natural right; and (b) property refers to an interpersonal relationship rather than an object or a relationship between a person and an object. The concept of private property is historically constructed in a capitalist society. Wittel (2015, p. 97) contends that private property is not merely about claiming ownership of certain objects but is, more importantly, about having the exclusive right to determine whether others can use those things or not. In capitalist society, people can obtain that exclusive right and own certain products as private property through exchange in the market. This highlights the significance of introducing the concept of the commodity and of considering how the human capacity to labour is commodified.

Products are outcomes of human labour that satisfy human needs and serve social development (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2004, p. 14). The commodity is the particular form of products in capitalist society. Rather than for immediate use, the commodity is produced for exchange in

the market (ibid, p.14). This special feature presents the dual character of the commodity: use value and value (Marx, 1990[1887], p. 131). Use value refers to the usefulness of a product, which functions as the physical bearer of value. Value determines the quantities of the commodity in the exchange (ibid., p.137). The measurement of the commodity's value, as Marx states, is the amount of human labour needed to create certain products.

In a capitalist society, the utility of labour takes the form of the commodity (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2004, p. 16). A person's capacity to work, referred to as labour power, can be sold in the market (Marx, 1990 [1887], p. 131). People who sell their labour power for money become workers, while people who buy others' labour power become capitalist. As a commodity, labour power also has a dual character: use value and value. The use value of labour power apparently means that their ability to produce products. The value of labour power takes the form of wages that the capitalist pays to the workers. Since labour power can only exist in living people, wages are paid to guarantee workers' survival (ibid., p.274). After paying wages, the capitalist can own the workers' labour power as private property. That is to say, the employers have an exclusive right to determine the goal of the workers' labour and the way the workers conduct their labour.

At the same time, the capitalists monopolise the means of production as private property. The workers cannot use the essential working tools to produce living necessities for themselves without the capitalist's permission. The workers are coerced to sell their labour power to the capitalist. When the capitalist privately owns working tools and the use value of workers' labour power, the rule of private property legitimises that the capitalist takes the products of the workers' labour as private property. Thus, the workers are prevented from using the products or selling them in the market. Workers neither own, nor can they use, the products of their labour. They must exchange their labour power for wages and buy commodities in the market for survival. But the commodity is produced by and should have belonged to workers themselves (Marx, 1844, pp. 3–4). Simultaneously, Marx (ibid, p. 5) criticises that with labour power and means of production as the capitalist's private property, the workers' labour process is no longer spontaneous and free, but subject to the employers' will. He claims that human beings are supposed to conduct labour with full consciousness of the labour goal and the contribution of their labour to the human species (ibid, p. 5). But capitalist production reduces human labour to mere means of survival (ibid, p. 6).

Capitalism deprives workers of their products and spontaneity in the labour process, and this is the problem of alienated labour. The concept of alienated labour is a significant theme for Marx and for my research to criticise capitalism. It is argued that capitalist production makes human labour an alien and hostile power that controls the labourers (Marx, 1844, p. 6; Wood, 2004, p. 5). Workers are coerced to sell labour power for wages, without which they cannot buy commodities for survival. Thus, the workers become servants of their wages, with the only goal of labour to earn wages for a living. Once the capacity for labour is sold, the workers' labour process is subject to the capitalist's command. Being coerced to labour in certain ways, workers lose the power to determine what and how they produce. Marx criticises how this kind of labour process brings about not only physical torture but also spiritual harm to workers (1844, p. 6). Marx supposes that human is herd animal, building cooperative relationship and living interdependently (Wood, 2004, p. 18). Workers are not only aware of their own existence but also "conscious of the human species in the form of society" (ibid, p. 19). That is to say, they can realise they are members of the society and how their labour contributes to collective benefits. However, alienated labour in capitalist production make workers fail to realise how their labour contributes to the human species. Instead, it isolates workers as independent individuals (Marx, 1884, p. 5). Coerced repetitive labour make physical movements mechanical and dehumanise human nature. Labour is just to bear treadmill for individual's survival rather than collective benefits (ibid. p. 6).

The more workers are alienated from their labour, the more private property the capitalists own (Marx, 1884, p. 1). This unjust relationship between the workers and capitalists, according to Wittel (2015, p. 97), is maintained and reproduced by the rule of private property. Wittel's argument is based on Marx's early work *Estranged Labour.* I think it is important to combine the concept of commodity in Marx's more mature work *Capital*, with the concept of alienation, so that the cause of alienated labour can be clarified. Commodification of labour power is a prerequisite for transactions involving human's ability of labour and thus forms the employment relationship. In the employment relationship, the employer purchase both employees' capacity of labour and the means of production as private property, requiring the workers to produce commodity in certain ways. With the rule of private property, the employers also claim private ownership of the product of labour, depriving workers of the right to sell commodity for income and resulting in alienated labour. Alienated labour leaves the workers no choice but to sell their labour. It is both the private property and commodification of human labour that reproduce the labour relationship.

The rule of private property and commodification of labour power first appeared in industrial capitalist production in the 19th century, the time of Marx's analyses. The labour-wage exchange mechanism shapes one of the most dominant understandings of work. With the development of digital technologies and their wide application to various industries, working conditions also, of course, change when production is driven by ICTs. Is Marx's analysis of private property and alienation still helpful for understanding digital labour? Does alienated labour still exist and remain a significant issue in the context of digital platforms? If so, what is alienated labour like in that context? I will consider these questions in the next section.

2.1.2 Platform labour

The term digital labour has become well-known since Tiziana Terranova's influential discussion of labour in the digital economy, in which she claimed that the Internet is intrinsic to capitalist production (2000). When humans apply ICTs to contribute to production, the combination of human labour and ICTs is known as digital labour. With the development of software (e.g., algorithms, computing capacity) and hardware (e.g., mobile and wireless devices), ICTs are incorporated into an increasing number of facets of daily life. As new production models emerge, so too do new forms of digital labour, with ever-closer ties between human labour and ICTs. The digital platform is at the centre of the discussion as a mechanism. Digital platforms are an online environment in which users can access the Internet with fewer time and space restrictions via PCs and mobile devices, participate directly in content production, and engage in immediate many-to-many communication. People's online activities are simultaneously recorded as data that can be synchronised across devices and is stored and processed by platforms. I summarise the three aspects of the platform context that are most pertinent to this study below.

(a) User-generated content (UGC): platforms are not simply portals for one-to-many broadcasts, but allow users to participate in content creation directly.

(b) Datafication: users' online activities, such as browsing websites or clicks, are recorded as data which is processed and analysed by the platforms' algorithms. Algorithms sometimes determine whether a certain UGC could be exposed to audiences. At the same time, users' data is sold to third parties to launch targeted advertisements, inducing users' consumption activities.

(c) Networks: people are technologically linked with remote others. This phenomenon appeared before digital platforms appeared. Yet with web-enabled mobile devices and digital platforms, individuals are increasingly accessible with less temporal and spatial limitations, which intensifies this kind of networked connection.

Platforms have profoundly altered how people interact with one another, thereby reshaping people's daily lives. As more and more aspects of life are mediated by digital platforms, platforms, Srnicek (2016) argues, are "owners of the infrastructures of society" rather than information proprietors. This description aligns with the contention of some researchers that platforms are now just as capable as nation-states of providing essential public commodities and services to individuals (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018; Chen and Qiu, 2019). Platforms can simultaneously influence and even determine how people perceive and comprehend the world (Moore and Tambini, 2018). Poell, Nieborg, and Van Dijck (2019) define the platformization of society as the pervasive influence of platforms on various spheres of existence.

In a platform society, according to researchers, various economic and social relationships are reconstructed, including work and employment (Gillespie, 2010; Kenney & Zysman, 2016). A new form of digital labour emerges and is termed as "platform labour." van Doorn (2017) asserts that platform labour has more or less supplanted traditional employment relationship, contracted labour, in recent years (see De Kloet et al., 2019). According to Xia's review, platform labour consists of online users who perform unpaid tasks on social media platforms (Postigo, 2016), workers who participate in the process of datafication (Arvidsson, 2005; Manzerolle, 2010), on-demand paid labour mediated by platforms (Aytes, 2013; van Doorn, 2017), and gig economy workers who conduct labour on a contingent and piecework basis (Graham and Woodcock, 2019). Several characteristics of platform work are shared, including the zero-liability peer-to-peer model, algorithmic-based control and management, high flexibility, and fragmentation (van Dijck et al., 2018; Sun, 2019; Chen and Sun, 2020; Au-Yeung and Qiu, 2022). Among the different types of platform labour with diverse characteristics, I will examine those features that are my research subject embodies, the blurred divisions between producer and user, and accordingly, between work and non-work on digital platforms. Those increasingly indistinct boundaries have been noticed by Postigo (2016, see in Xia, 2018) in categorization above, who discusses platform users' online activities, posting texts, images, videos etc., become unpaid labour to produce content for platforms. Postigo finds

out how users become producers or platform unpaid workers. However, my empirical data present that sometimes waged producers also play the role of users, which is not included in Postigo's research and will be discussed in this thesis. I find Bruns's (2008) concept of "produser" helpful to describe the indistinct distinction between producer and user in my research. With the identity entanglement of producer and user, there is no obvious distinction between work and non-work either. Flexible work hours are expected of employees (Sennett, 1998; McRobbie, 2002a; Gregg, 2013). This mode of operation transcends time and space but requires employees to integrate their personal and professional lives. This is the third characteristic of platform work, which entails affective and emotional labour. To what extent have these characteristics of production changed workers' relationship with their labour? Is Marx's concept of alienation still helpful in the new context? In the following subsection, I review how the Marxist concepts of the commodity and property are mobilised to the platform society and thus help analyse digital labour in this context.

2.1.2.1 Sharing economy or not: user-generated content and datafication in platforms

It is worth noting that the internet is such fast-changing area that scholars constantly conduct new discussions. Admittedly, there's lots of recent studies about platform and digital labour (Scholz, 2017; Fumagalli et al., 2018; Gregory and Sadowski, 2021; Xia, 2021b; Dorschel, 2022), but sometimes I also need to turn to literature 15 years ago because some of them do the best job of addressing some issues that are core to this dissertation.

As a result of the fact that platforms enable users to generate content and participate directly in content production, the line between producers and consumers is broken. Thanks to this characteristic, according to De Kloet et al. (2019), platforms were initially lauded as "participatory society", "collaborative", and "sharing economy", but soon proved to be less liberating than anticipated. In early studies of this production model, some scholars celebrated this change, believing that users' participation in production entails individual empowerment and social democratisation (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008). Taking Wikipedia as an example, Bruns (2008) coined the term 'produser' to describe how users become producers. 'Produser' is one of the most influential concepts for understanding UGC. He claims that produsers are endowed with shared authorship and ownership of digital content, which transforms the user's position from passive receiver to active producer (ibid., pp.2-3). His discussion is criticised, firstly, for exaggerating audience passivity, since audiences have always been active in multiple ways (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Livingstone, 2018). Secondly, Bruns's and other

celebratory descriptions of participatory or sharing mechanisms of platforms are criticised for ignoring the market-led and profit-driven production model of platforms. In actuality, platform users are both consumers and producers, and their online activities are termed "prosumption" (Grinnell, 2009; Comor, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). The criticisms of the concept of the produser notwithstanding, this concept depicts a significant shift in which users participate directly in production. How might this modification occur?

The prerequisite of the produsage phenomenon is that users can access the instruments necessary for goingg online and participating in production. Here, a key element in Marxist theory is highlighted: the means of production. Bruns does not pay sufficient attention to this important element. He neglects the inequality among produsers because he presumes that every user could obtain equal access to the means of production. But this is not so. Brake interjects that the social divisions and inequalities that exist in the physical world prevent some people from becoming produsers due to a lack of access to technology or of the necessary skills (2014). Similarly, Schor (2017) argues that the "sharing economy" increases income inequality by analysing service providers on Airbnb, RelayRides, and TaskRabbit. Schor (2017) finds that platform service providers with a higher education and decent, well-paid, full-time employment typically earn more than their counterparts with a lower level of education. However, I would like to raise a somewhat different question. Even though some people can be produsers with access to the internet and to devices, does this mean that they experience less inequality? Do produsers commonly own the products of their labour, as Bruns anticipated? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look closely into the means of production and the property relationship behind the produser phenomenon.

Grinnell (2009) claims that the means of production in the Web 2.0 era seemingly belongs to not only platform owners but also to users, which is different from what happened in mass media era. Wittel (2015, p. 75) suggests that the means of production in mass media were expensive, and most people could not afford them. But technological innovation has made the means of production in digital media cheaper and accessible to more people, which was called by Wittel as distributed media (ibid). Although both Grinnell and Wittel acknowledge that the means of production have become more accessible, they admit that the platform owners always hold the dominant position to control essential tools for production. In contrast to Bruns's interpretation that products are commonly owned by all the produsers, Grinnell (2009) finds that the control and ownership of content are not totally in the hands of users but are still in the

charge of the platform owners. And Wittel (2005, p. 77) claims that producers in distributed media do not have instruments to store and distribute media content in the way that the producers want. Clearly, users' content production is just a part of the UGC story – a part that is on the front stage. It is important to investigate how the platform owners control the distribution of content and the flow of information, through property relationships on the backstage of platforms.

Fumagalli et al. (2018) claim that to fully understand the production model of digital platforms, it is not enough to focus on front-end users' labour, because the back-end professional programmers' labour is also significant. They design instruments for the platforms to control the distribution of the content and the users' personal data. When the users create content, data about their behaviour is generated, stored and processed in a process called datafication. Andrejevic (2009) makes a distinction between 'user-generated content' and 'user-generated data', claiming that it is the latter that becomes the commodity of the platform. His distinction tends to deny that user-generated content counts as a commodity of digital platforms, which is not a robust conclusion. There are studies about platform labour that present how UGC has become a resource for platform income. Scholars find that some content creators, such as authors and video makers, engage in entrepreneurship on platforms by attracting and monetising viewers' attention (Taylor et al., 2015; Jaakkola, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2021; Lin, 2021). Methods of monetising online attention usually include paid subscription, commercial advertisement insertion and viewer donations (Törhönen, Sjöblom and Hamari, 2018; Törhönen et al., 2020). The platforms share a certain percentage of content creators' income since they provide working tools for the content creators' entrepreneurship. There is no denying that UGC with the purpose of monetisation should count as a commodity.

Although Andrejevic does not realise that some UGC is also a commodity, he contributes to highlighting the significant role of data and drawing much academic attention to the back end of platforms. Some scholars suggest that datafication is the platforms' means of accumulating wealth and they apply a Marxist framework to this context and conceptualise it as platform capitalism (Zuboff, 2015; Scholz, 2017; Srnicek, 2017; Fumagalli *et al.*, 2018). In platform capitalism, the processed users' data becomes a commodity and is sold by the platforms to third parties. The third parties then launch targeted and personalised advertisements to users and attempt to manipulate their future consumption behaviour.

With Marxist analytical tools, those critiques of platform capitalism mainly address two themes: exploitation and alienation of digital labour. Although exploitation is a key concept in a Marxist framework, it is not the main topic of my thesis, and therefore I do not review studies about exploitation in detail here; I focus more on the discussion of alienation. Scholars have mobilised the concept of alienation to elucidate digital labour for over a decade. Among those scholars, two opposing viewpoints about alienation can be identified. One camp, such as Eran Fisher (2015), thinks digital media reduces the alienation of audience's labour because they have more autonomy in content production and develop a closer relationship with the products than in the mass media era. Scholars in the other camp do not agree with Fisher's optimistic view that alienation is reduced. Instead, they claim that alienation becomes more serious in platform capitalism than in industrial capitalism. For example, Andrejevic (2011) points out that UGC is out of the users' control and serves the wealth accumulation of the platforms, which means datafication becomes "an alienated dimension of their activities". Some scholars argue that besides commodification of data, commodification of UGC also results in alienation because posting content on platforms, which is supposed to be a hobby or leisure activity, is now instrumentalised to serve platform capitalism (Törhönen, Sjöblom and Hamari, 2018; Zhang and Wu, 2022). It is argued that capitalism now absorbs more aspects of human life than industrial capitalism to serve the goal of production, such as affective aspects of human beings (Berardi, 2009; Bulut, 2014; Krüger and Johanssen, 2014). Those human affects, such as likes, hobbies and interests, which are supposed to be an alternative to capitalist work, now becomes part of capitalism (Brown and Quan-Haase, 2012a). Harvey (2018) even claims that alienation has become universal, saying that alienation extends beyond production into almost every social relationship and instrumentalises human life.

I think the former camp, represented by Fisher (2015), simplifies the connotation of alienation and roughly equals anti-alienation with autonomy, control over products, and a close relationship with one's labour, which is neither convincing nor robust. The latter camp, on the other hand, tends to reduce the concept of alienation to instrumentalisation. And reducing the connotation may result in an overuse of the concept of alienation, as Harvey notes (2018). Exaggerating the applicability of alienation, according to Harvey (2018), weakens instead of strengthens the validity of this theory: any theory that claims to be omnipotent or universal, without considering specific context, cannot be valid.

Among the debates about alienation of digital labour, most scholars' attention is focused on digital platform users' labour and only few have investigated waged employees, such as Bulut (2014) and Beradi (2009). There has been a longstanding question about whether users' labour should be viewed as Marx's productive labour that generates the value of a commodity and should be analysed within a Marxist framework. Since this is not the main theme of my thesis, I am not going to expand on such debates here. But I agree with some scholars, such as Hesmondhalgh (2010), and argue that it is important to draw more attention back to waged workers in the employment relationship, whose labour power is commodified in the market and are central to Marxist political economy critiques. Simultaneously, when discussing alienation, researchers focus greatly on labourers' relationship with either products or the self. Few (Bulut, 2014; Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014) focus on the labour process, that is to say, how alienation takes place. Marx (1844) claims that alienation is not only presented in the relationship with the products but also in the process of labour. Analysing the process of alienation requires paying more attention to means of production. But existing in-depth discussions related to means of production are absent. Without a thorough investigation of means of production, some scholars fail to clarify the property relationship and fail to identify limitations of the Marxist framework in elucidating digital labour. In Marx's (1844) analysis of alienation based on industrial capitalism, means of production is monopolised by capitalists. However, that property relationship of means of production has changed in platform society, with working conditions different from that in industrial capitalism.

So, what is the property relationship of means of production like in platform capitalism? As discussed above, both UGC and user-generated data count as commodities on platforms. The former is produced by front-end users, who take platforms as working tools to create content. When the users create content, their online activities are recorded as data by the programmers, who use working tools provided by the platform owners to code algorithms and process data. So, user-generated data are co-created by front-end users and back-end programmers. However, the producers either have partial ownership or totally lose ownership of the commodity that they create. To be specifically, the content creators can sell their UGC for income, but they cannot own all the value of the income and need to share some of their income with the platforms. In terms of data, neither the users nor the programmers could sell data as commodity for income. Only the platform owners can sell user-generated data to the third parties and own the value of commodities.

The reason that the platforms can charge fees from UGC and sell user's data for income is that they own the necessary instruments for producing content, generating and processing data, as private property. Those instruments are the key means of production in the datafication process, which legitimates the platform owners' exclusive ownership of the value of the commodity. Those key means of production belong neither to the users nor to the programmers, but to the platform owners. That means the users and programmers lose control of the value they created in the products. They are unable to support a living by themselves without key means of production. This suggests that the rule of private property and alienated labour still hold true in relation to the produser phenomenon in the Platform society era. In this subsection, I review current debates about user-generated content and datafication, and alienation of digital labour in digital platforms. In the following subsection about how a networked workplace makes a flexible workstyle.

2.1.2.2 Flexible workstyle in networked workplace

The network is a useful concept to characterise the workplace in my research. This concept of the network has two connotations in my case: (a) socializing and building rapport with other people are vital activities in daily work; and (b) employees and employers are networked remotely with ICTs, which thus results in a flexible workstyle. Both of these features have been researched in the context of the cultural and creative industries (Florida, 2002; McRobbie, 2002; Blair, Culkin and Randle, 2003; Grabher, 2004; Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart, 2007; Banks, 2007; Christopherson, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013; Wreyford, 2015) and digital work (Sennett, 1998; Ross, 2004; Kennedy, 2011; Gregg, 2013), which I will review below.

Social networking with other people, referring to the first connotation of network, is an indispensable part of daily labour in the cultural and creative industries, such as film, TV, and social media. Scholars contend that creative workers' heavy reliance on social networking derives from specific working conditions, whereby work has splintered into short-term projects (Sennett, 1998; Christopherson, 2002; McRobbie, 2002; Blair, Culkin and Randle, 2003; Grabher, 2004; Wittel, 2015; Wreyford, 2015). According to Wittel (2001), in project-based work, the priority is to finish the project. With this shared goal, the workers will interact with each other intensively, but this cooperative relationship ends immediately after the project is completed (Wittel, 2001). At the same time, the working units are divided into small groups with a limited number of members, with every small unit directly linked with the top management; even a single person can be one unit (Sennett, 1998, p.110). Scholars claim that

this form of workplace organisation entails disaggregation of hierarchy (Sennett, 1998) and contrasts to bureaucratic procedures in formal organization arrangements (Ross, 2004; Grabher and Ibert, 2006). Several researchers have found that project-based work results in short-term employment, exposing workers to more uncertainties (Blair, 2003; Grabher and Ibert, 2006; Christopherson, 2008; Wreyford, 2015). For example, as Sennett (1998) observes, they need to be always ready for changes, leaving and joining different projects. To handle potential changes and uncertainties in project-based work, on the one hand, the workers need to proactively equip themselves with as many skills as possible and interpret their labour as self-improvement. To be flexible in the face of changes aligns with expectation of neoliberalism, which is discussed in section 2.2. On the other hand, the workers attach great significance to networks of personal contacts (Blair, 2003).

There are different kinds of networking with different characteristics and functions. Grabher and Ibert (2006) divide networking into three categories – *communality*, *sociality* and *connectivity* – according to intensity and duration. Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart (2007) categorise networks by their functions and degree of their openness and exclusiveness. No matter how a network is categorized, as Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart (2007) insightfully point out, networks refer to dynamic social relationships. That means one kind of network may convert or evolve into other types (ibid.). For instance, loose group of acquaintances may grow into formalized professional organizations (ibid.). Simultaneously, one type of network may have functions of other kinds of networks. Networks based on friendship can also improve professionalism (ibid.). Dynamism of social relations indicates that criteria to define or categorise networks are neither fixed nor totally exclusive from each other. Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart (2007) argue that people will traverse different types of networks and use different functions of the same networks in different contexts to realize their goals in the workplace.

What goals can employers and employees achieve through social networking? What are the implications of social networking for these two groups in the workplace? Blair, Culkin and Randle (2003) contend that employers can find qualified and reliable workers through networks of personal contacts in order to complete projects as soon as possible. They may conduct an informal process of recruitment and selection based on networks of acquaintances, who are familiar with potential workers' competency (ibid.). For workers, scholars find that they can both promote personal competitiveness and obtain peer support to handle uncertainties from networking (Blair, 2003; Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart, 2007). Interpersonal networks become

a necessary means of selling employees' capacity for labour and bringing about future job opportunities (ibid.). In this context, employees play the role of entrepreneur, viewing their capacity of labour as human capital and developing their career in a similar way to running a business. This corresponds with discussion about neoliberalism, which will be reviewed in detail in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.4. At the same time, the employees can seek peer support and cooperation from social networks, such as exchanging knowledge and experience to enhance professionalism or enhancing the capacity of negotiation with potential employers for proper payment (Christopherson, 2002). Scholars also note the 'dark side' of networking. Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart (2007) find that workers need to be obliged to network and must abide by the norms of the network, which is imposed by the powerful. Otherwise, they may lose employment opportunities. As they point out, "the same networks that can enhance employment prospects also have the potential to destroy them" (ibid.). Christopherson (2008) and Wreyford (2015) take a gendered perspective and claim that uncertainties in project-based work and social network have different outcomes for men and women. In some creative industries, social networking is very exclusive and dominated by white, middle- to upper-class men, which reinforces gender discrimination (ibid.). Despite those dark sides, social networks remain an important method of handling uncertainties and seeking support. Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart (2007) argue that workers will seek collegiality and help from the same networks that provide them with job opportunities, especially in the context of project-based work.

After reviewing some debates of the first connotation of networked workplace, I move to the discussion about the second connotation, people are networked remotely with ICTs. Castell (1996) defines the networked society as a phenomenon where people are technologically linked with remote others. Wittel (2001) claims that it is the innovation of communication technology that functions as the infrastructure of the network system. The network society emerged before the advent of platform society alongside the technical development of media and communication, such as the telephone, fax and Internet. The reason for re-visiting this term is that digital platforms has intensified connectivity. The advent of many-to-many communication and mobile devices makes people more accessible than ever before. Individuals have become contactable anywhere, anytime.

When ICTs are introduced into the workplace, it changes working conditions, enabling a flexible workstyle. Some researchers, such as Florida (2002), Benkler (2006) and Bruns (2008), celebrated that flexible work could let the workers arrange the pace of life and work as they

want and achieve work-life balance. Their interpretation was criticised by other researchers for too optimistic and celebratory. Some critiques about this workstyle point that it is the employers who control the pace of flexible work. And thus, employees have to be always available to work (Banks, 2007, p. 36), having hierarchical working arrangements (McRobbie, 2002a; Ross, 2004) and open to any changes (Berardi, 2009, p. 87). I will review those critiques in detail below. And I also use the term flexibility in a critical way in this thesis.

In industrial capitalism, the basis of Marx's analysis of capitalist society, routine work prevails because uniform and standardised human labour can maximise productivity in a factory assembly line. Workers must obey strict requirements for their physical movements and clearly divide work from non-work to make sure they focus on work without distraction. By contrast to routine work that imposes coercion on workers' physical movements, John Stuart Mill claims that flexibility begets freedom (see in Sennett, 1998, p. 92). Sennett (1998, p. 93) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p. 348) believe the advent of flexible work appeals to critiques of mechanised and dehumanised routine work and aligns with people's desire for freedom. However, they contend that flexibility, instead of freeing workers from capitalism, means that capitalism adjusts its production model and forms new structures of power to control workers. In this production model, productivity derives from human creativity. It is believed that freedom rather than coercion could maximise human creativity. Therefore, in regard to freedom, flexible work replaces routine work.

Flexible work entangles work with non-work in terms of time and space. McRobbie claims that new cultural work is lifted from the given workplace and time, characterised as "time and space dynamics". On the one hand, work enters the private space, which is characterised by Gregg (2013) as "work's intimacy". Workers are required to be contactable and expected to finish work out of office time and place. Scholars have criticised how this phenomenon subtly prolongs working time (Banks, 2007, p. 36; McRobbie, 2002a). On the other hand, some researchers find that leisure activities also enter the workplace. Ross claims that fun and play are now encouraged to be part of work, especially of creative work (2004). As researchers claim, employers believe that merging leisure activities with work could stimulate employees' creativity and boost their working motivation to result in better performance.

Julian Kücklich coined the term 'playbour' to present the entanglement between labour content and leisure activities, by studying game players who modify game content (2005). Players'

entertainment activities then become labour to serve the game companies. One typical example of playbour is social media work in the Platform society era. Social media platforms create a new leisure activity and a new space for digital work. Most corporations hire employees to keep their institutional social media accounts active for online marketing. Gregg claims that workers may not categorise this kind of work, such as "hanging around social media", as work at all (2013). Work does not feel like a compulsory assignment that is associated with boredom or suffering. Labour involves leisure activities, and the workers are 'paid to play' (Deal and Key, 1998). Scholars criticise how the fun of leisure activities induces workers to keep playing, which fuels their working motivation (Kücklich, 2005; Gregg, 2013; Kim and Lee, 2020).

When work becomes more intimate and flexible, it seems more challenging to identify which parts of our lives we are in charge of, and which parts serve the interests of our employers. McRobbie argues that work is more than earning a living but incorporates aspects of everyday life (2002b). Some aspects of our personal lives, including affects, tastes and feelings, are instrumentalised to serve capitalist production. Morrison criticises the way capitalism reshapes how people value themselves – they only feel that productive labour that can be exchanged for income is valuable (2006). Similarly, when affects and hobbies are involved in productive labour, this transformation enhances the alienation of private feelings, as discussed in the next subsection and in this research. At the same time, when more personal aspects of life are put to work, work becomes privatised. Work is more like a private business in the current context rather than a public issue under industrial capitalism. Workers find themselves being self-reliant, an issue discussed further.

2.1.3 Affective and emotional labour

Digital platforms have become a key mechanism that mediates different aspects of daily life and various social relationships. By transforming how humans contact and communicate with each other, platforms have also brought about new production and employment models, such as the "attention economy" discussed by Terranova (2012). The attention economy refers to content created by platform users to attract viewers' attention, which is then monetized in various ways, such as selling services or goods. This is a key production model applied by the two companies in this research. In this model, building affective bonds, such as likes and trust, with an audience is a crucial part of content creators' labour on the platform. Those bonds determine whether the creators retain viewers' attention and how much income they could earn

from it. Thus, two concepts – affective labour and emotional labour – are applied to discuss the affective aspects of platform work (Guarriello, 2019; Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020).

Admittedly, these two concepts share some similarities, so some scholars use them interchangeably to characterize live-streamers' platform labour (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). However, their differences should not be ignored and need to be clarified to better understand the labour involved. The two concepts derive from different scholarship. The concept of emotional labour was raised by Hochschild (1983) with a sociological perspective. Hochschild (1983) uses the examples of flight attendants, who are required to manage emotions and provide customers with qualified service; she defines emotional labour as "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others". Hochschild (1983) categorises two ways of performing emotions: surface and deep acting. These two kinds of acting are divided according to whether the internal state of mind aligns with outward performance. If a service worker shows patience and kindness but feels the opposite, they are conducting surface acting. If a worker emotionally agrees with the requirements that they should help customers as much as possible, they conduct deep acting (ibid.). Behind emotional labour, there are feeling rules, presenting proper feelings with certain strength and duration (ibid.). With this term, Hochschild demonstrates how the personal aspects of life, such as feelings and emotions, are commodified to serve capitalist production (ibid.). Generally, emotional labour is performative and aims to live up to certain social expectations.

Affective labour derives from autonomist Marxist scholars' discussions around immaterial labour, which refers to labour that "produces immaterial goods, such as service, culture, knowledge or communication" (Hardt and Negri, 2000). This may define cultural rules, consumer norms and public opinions (Lazzarato, 1996). Other Italian autonomist Marxist scholars, represented by Caffentzis (1998), have seriously criticized the discussion about immaterial labour for failing to realize gender issues and material forms of exploitation. Responding to these critiques, Hardt and Negri (2000) developed the concept of affective labour, including some highly gendered work, such as caring and service work. The product of affective labour includes social networks, forms of community, and biopower (ibid.). Hardt and Negri (2000) anticipated that affective labour could bring about cooperation among different kinds of labour and enable workers to struggle against capitalism. Their position has been criticized by scholars for being too optimistic and vague, neglecting diversity of labour and ignoring the potentially negative impact of human emotions (Gill and Pratt, 2008;

Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008). Scholars suggest the reason why the concept of affective labour lacks a critical edge is because the aim of autonomist Marxist scholars are to intervene in social relationships and explore political resistance rather than making academic critiques (ibid.). The different origins and purposes of these two concepts demonstrate how important it is to identify whether the concepts are applicable to certain empirical materials. Several scholars have contributed in so doing and I will review their studies below.

Media researchers have notably expanded the application of emotional labour beyond caring or service work to cultural and creative work. Such work is characterised as work that creates symbolic, expressive, aesthetic or informational products for distant others to consume (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008), which shares many similarities with labour of content production on platforms in my case. Media scholars note the key role of human feelings in doing such work. Grindstaff (2002) has applied the concept of emotional labour to characterise producers' labour on confessional talk shows, which elicits ordinary guests' appropriate emotional responses. To regulate guests' emotions, the producers also need to manage their own emotions, by "either pretending to care about guests or trying not to care too much" (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008). This kind of work requirement also appears in the production of TV talent shows – Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008) observed that producers need to maintain an emotional distance from contributors to the TV programme. Both studies found that workers allow their emotions to become an integral part of work rather than an expression of personal feelings (Grindstaff, 2002; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008) insightfully compared difference between affective labour and emotional labour, finding the latter, with more empirical specificity and more critical edge, was more helpful than the former to conceptualise workers' labour on TV talent shows. They also challenge Hardt and Negri's (2000) perception that cooperation is inherent to affective labour by analysing interpersonal relationship among colleagues (ibid.). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008) confirm that there are friendly and sociable aspects of daily labour, aligning with what autonomists see as a positive side of affective labour. However, the workers also need to make efforts to suppress negative feelings about colleagues in the name of maintaining good working relationships. A good work relationship is vital in project-based short-term employment, which emphasises personal contacts and social networks. In that context, work relationships determine a worker's professional reputation as well as future job opportunities. Rather than the optimistic expectation of cooperation through affective labour, Hesmondhalgh

and Baker (2008) conclude that emotional labour is more helpful to elucidate working conditions in the production of television programmes.

The discussion above is based on mass media, but what about creative work based on digital platforms? Do platform-based situations enrich existing discussions about affective labour and emotional labour? As I reviewed earlier in this section, platform capitalism firstly appears as sharing or participatory economy, gradually making users take the sharing of their personal lives on platforms for granted. Sharing is actually part of platform owners' business – they record users' sharing activities as data and sell it to third parties (Fumagalli et al., 2018), or allow users to engage in entrepreneurship through content creation and sharing revenues with them (Törhönen et al., 2020). Platforms have further effaced boundaries between work and non-work, absorbing more aspects of personal life in favour of capitalist production. Creators' spontaneous and emotional aspects of creative work based on platforms draw academic attention and enrich discussion about affective labour and emotional labour. Some scholars have turned to psychological definition of affect and emotion to differentiate affective and emotional labour (Liu, 2019; Zhang and Wu, 2022). They claim that emotion is a response to external stimulus and is always expressed in a specific context while affect emphasises humans' spontaneous productivity rather than reaction to external stimulus (ibid.). Affect is like part of human nature and instincts that always exist and usually refers to feelings that are stable, deep and enduring (ibid.). Based on different definitions of affect and emotion, Guo and Li (2019) differentiate affective labour from emotional labour. They argue that emotional labour is usually a result of external requirements from employers and customers, while affective labour is more spontaneous and conducted more willingly (Guo and Li, 2019). Similarly, Zhang and Wu (2022) investigated game-related video creators' labour and claim that it is affective labour that enables creators to transform their passion for games into strong desires to share games with audiences and spontaneous video creation. However, when creators interact with followers and manage a fan community, Zhang and Wu (2022) contend that that part of labour belongs to emotional labour to retain good relationship with the audience, which serves future monetization of followers' attention. These scholars see affective labour as having an optimistic role in platform workers' working conditions, as this part of spontaneous labour could reduce alienation to some degree and bring more autonomy back to creators compared with traditional service workers (Zhang and Wu, 2022; Zhu and Huang, 2020; Hu and Yu, 2019). The method of differentiating affective and emotional labour is somewhat problematic for several reasons: (a) emotional labour is viewed as a passive reaction. Hochschild (1983)

contends that people will also proactively construct new meanings or social rules through emotional labour; (b) that categorization seems to deprive any specific context from affective labour by emphasizing that only emotional labour is situated in the specific context. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008) raise concerns that a theory without careful definitions and sensitivity to specifics will not be good; (c) is it possible to clearly differentiate spontaneous affective labour from deep acting in emotional labour when personal life is increasingly blurred with productive labour? As Scholz (2017) contends, platforms make people think their platform-based labour is what they are keen to do. But sometimes, platform users just conform to and internalize the rules of this mechanism. I do not intend to totally deny platform workers' autonomy and spontaneity and claim that they are subject to platforms. Instead, I believe their autonomy and spontaneity must be intertwined with internalization of platform rules. To what extent the two poles could influence their situation of labour will be further discussed in this research.

2.2 Working for fitness: self-disciplined and self-reliant labour

The fitness industry, the context of this research, covers both physical training of the body and elements of business – selling, marketing, consumption. This encapsulates the dual identity of fit workers. They are both fitness consumers, whose bodies are trained, and waged workers, who create digital fitness commodity. The dual nature of their work means it could be characterised as 'produsage' and 'playbour', as mentioned above. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and his discussion about neoliberalism will be reviewed in this part to conceptaulise employees' body training and their digital labour. Fitness turns to be a lifestyle as well as a workstyle that both requires workers to be self-disciplined and self-reliant.

2.2.1 Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism

Blomgren (1997, see in Thorsen and Lie, 2006) characterises neoliberalism as "a political philosophy giving priority to individual freedom and the right to private property." This philosophy emphasises that the market is endowed with maximum freedom with limited government intervention. But this neoliberal principle does not necessarily mean that the government has a weak role. Foucault (2008 [1979], p. 79) discusses neoliberalism in Germany and America to highlight how governments intervene in social conditions to allow for the functioning of a market for competition, but without directly intervening in the market itself.

Foucault (2008 [1979], p. 80) claims that German neoliberalism aimed to both reconstruct the economy after World War II and settle the legitimacy of the state. To prevent the renewal of fascism and claim its right to represent the people, Germany gave responsibility and freedom to its citizens, especially in terms of economy (ibid, p. 81-82). For instance, private property is respected. And the state makes sure that citizens could have private ownership of some means of production (ibid. p. 89). That strategy encourages citizens to do entrepreneurship in order to construct a market for competition among numerous enterprises (ibid, p. 120). Foucault argues that competition is a significant neoliberal governmental strategy (ibid, p. 120), which both stimulates economic growth (ibid, p. 86) and legitimises the modern state's governance (ibid, p. 105). By encouraging competition, the state tries to show that it is a modern state that provides economic freedom to people (p. 82) and provides the same opportunities for diverse groups of entrepreneurs (Hartmann and Kjaer, 2015). By encouraging competition, the state tries to show that it provides the same opportunities for diverse groups of entrepreneurs. To guarantee that competition functions as anticipated, the state must prevent a monopoly of the means of production and make sure that the means of production is accessible to all potential entrepreneurs (ibid, p. 89). Making means of production accessible to individuals is a prerequisite of and a specific property relationship in neoliberal economy. This property relationship is also shown in my empirical data and will be analysed in detail in this thesis.

Luo (2012) reviews the development of neoliberalism in the world and contends that with the UK and the USA employing neoliberal governmental strategies, neoliberalism became an influential worldwide reality in the 1970s. Keynesianism was questioned, as substantial government intervention in the market was said to cause economic stagnation (ibid). Thatchers' and Reagan's governments adopted a privatisation policy to reduce public welfare and marketise some public sectors to stimulate economic growth (ibid). Taking the USA as an example, Foucault (Foucault, 2008 [1979], p. 217) analysed American neoliberalism and differentiated it from German neoliberalism. Germany needs to use the principle of neoliberalism to prevent the state from abusing power and legitimatise its governance by showing that it represents the people (ibid, 81). That is to say, in Germany, neoliberalism is applied to limit the state's power (ibid, p. 217). However, the USA does not need to justify itself in this way because the foundation of the country is based on the demand for liberalism (ibid, p. 217). Thus, American neoliberalism is more radical and thorough, meaning that the market rationality enters more aspects of human life in the USA (ibid, p. 219).

Foucault (2008[1979], p. 219) claims that workers are conceptualised as 'human capital' in American neoliberalism. Human capital theory views workers as active economic subjects rather than passive objects (ibid, p. 223). People are viewed as a sort of enterprise (ibid, p. 226). All individual behaviours, such as production or consumption, are conceptualised as enterprise strategies for investing in the self (ibid, p. 224). Any personal experiences, such as family life or education, are framed as investments in human capital (ibid, p. 230). Workers are encouraged to be self-reliant in daily work, to interpret their labour as self-investment and to engage actively in competition in the labour market. Some academics apply Foucauldian concepts of self-employment and the theory of human capital to the contemporary platform society and devise new terms to describe the labour of content creators on social media platforms. Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) investigate how platform users produce content online voluntarily, typically uncredited or underpaid, in the hope of obtaining future employment opportunities. The online social production that is typically uncredited or underpaid. They distinguish hope labour structurally from other forms of free labour by emphasising the temporal relationship between present labour and future employment (ibid). By developing this concept, they criticise how neoliberalism has normalised hope labour without adequate economic compensation and forced individual workers to endure structural uncertainty (ibid). Brooke Duffy (2017) investigates women bloggers on social media who produce content and monetize their audience's attention, describing their work as "aspirational work". Duffy (2017) reveals the working conditions of bloggers, namely that they must work long hours and maintain audience exposure and visibility but are typically uncredited or underpaid (ibid). Few bloggers accomplish significant success, while the majority endure hardship and anticipate future success while building their own brand (ibid). According to Duffy (2017), these women's entrepreneurial endeavours are motivated by their passion for creative self-expression, the "get paid to do what you love" culture, and their desire for success. Both the concept of hope labour and aspirational work refer to the future, leading workers to justify their current hardship as self-investment for the future and to endure poor working conditions.

A neoliberal social relationship advocates self-reliance, whereby the worker needs to handle both risks and uncertainty by themselves. Beck (1992) conceptualises modern society as a 'risk society'. He suggests that authorities and institutions have offloaded the responsibilities for handling risks to individuals (ibid, 131). However, it is difficult for individuals to find solutions to structural problems. When failure occurs, people fall into self-blame rather than challenging structures (ibid 137).

Unlike Beck's emphasis on risks, O'Malley (2000, p. 460) contends that uncertainty is central to neoliberal governmentality and will not be marginalised by risk management. He argues that risk management is based on a rational mathematical calculation of past data with the purpose of predicting the future. People are engaged in risk management as consumers of past knowledge and information to make decisions about the future (ibid, p. 469). Predictability through a model is underpinned by the assumption that the future is a repetition of the past (ibid, p. 460). Different from risk management, uncertainty is based on "a creative constitution of the future", which emphasises the "transformative power of the entrepreneurial spirit" (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993, also see in O'Malley, 2000, p. 469). People are encouraged to be entrepreneurs and maximally extract their creativity to reinvent themselves and their environment (ibid, p. 469). The governance centred around uncertainty aligns with human capital theory and motivates workers to take a self-enterprising perspective, viewing their labour as self-investment and becoming self-reliant in daily work. Below I further review how a Foucauldian analysis of neoliberalism frames labour in the fitness industry.

2.2.2 Foucault's concept of disciplinary power

In Foucault's analysis, power indicates the capacity to act on others' actions. For Foucault, power exists in an infinitely complex network that is all pervasive rather than being part of a unitary or binary relation. As the core element to construct a subject, power is not a thing that is possessed, but a process, something that is exercised. He argues that power should be conceived in productive rather than repressive terms. It produces "the reality, the domain of objects and rituals of truth" by working on the body (Foucault, 1979, p. 194).

Foucault chooses the body as a political field to clarify the exercise of power and how it shapes the subject. The body has been the object of power relations and the target of domination throughout history. In various societies with different targets of governance, the body is treated in various ways, such as torture, investment, and training (Sheridan, 2003). To achieve a specific aim, the body needs specific training. To make the body a useful machine – to achieve the docility and utility of the body – disciplinary power was developed (Foucault, 1979, pp.137-138).

Two characteristics of disciplinary power can be summarised as follows. First, this kind of power is exercised on the individual level and constitutes a political anatomy of the body. That is to say, the individual body is treated not as a unit, but as several useful segments. The segments can be rearranged in time and space in order to achieve the maximum efficiency and productivity of the whole body (Foucault, 1979, p.148). Another feature of disciplinary power is that this kind of power focuses on the process more than the results of activities (Foucault, 1979, p.137). To construct a useful body, disciplinary power influences every detail of behaviour and language. Observations and records of and interventions on the details of the body are required. Therefore, the practice of disciplinary power includes normalising judgement, constant surveillance (Foucault, 1979, p.175) and corrective training (ibid., p.184). These elements are briefly reviewed below.

When disciplinary power is exercised, a norm will be set as a standard that every individual is required to meet. Through constant surveillance, an authority can determine whether an individual needs corrective training. During this process, the performance of every individual is documented (ibid., p.192). A document is no longer a monument for future memory but a means of control and domination for any possible future use (ibid., p.193). Disciplinary power constructs a comparative system that measures the overall phenomenon and calculates the gaps between individuals. The individuals become describable and analysable objects in this system (ibid., 194). When individuals are under constant surveillance, they do not, as Foucault famously points out, know when they are supervised or not. Therefore, they need to behave as if they were under surveillance at all times. Gradually, they will internalise the external requirements imposed on them and may even conduct self-surveillance to meet the standard. If they fail to meet the norm, they will be required to conduct corrective training. A key feature of corrective training is repetition. Repetition of training confirms the value of disciplinary power and enhances the internalisation of external requirements. Additionally, when the whole system becomes too complicated to observe all the members simultaneously, specialised personnel appear to take this responsibility. Those supervisors become part of the division of labour in a disciplinary system (Foucault, 1979, p.175).

When Foucault's theory of disciplinary power is applied to the analysis of power relationships in the workplace, one of the theory's key components, surveillance, is highlighted and extensively used as a critique of power asymmetries between employers and employees. Ball (2010) defines workplace surveillance as the capacity of employers to monitor, document, and

track the behaviour and personal characteristics of employees. Rosenblat, Kneese, and Boyd (2014) assert that workplace surveillance stems from Taylorist scientific management, which achieves optimum productivity through performance monitoring and assumes that unobserved employees are inefficient. In pursuit of uniformity, rationality, and standardisation, the Taylorist system, according to the authors, removes employees' control over their work and assigns it to a manager. Work surveillance directly determines productivity in Taylorist work. Consequently, work surveillance is frequently justified as a necessary quality control and productivity tool (Stark, Stanhaus, and Anthony, 2020). And managers and employers can maintain control over the workplace and employee conduct (Rosenblat, Knese, & Boyd, 2014).

Levy and Barocas (2018), Rosenblat, Kneese, and Boyd (2014), and Zureik (2003) argue that as ICTs progress, workplace surveillance can be conducted with more methods and become more pervasive, invading more facets of workers' lives. Under surveillance, employees attempt to limit the monitoring procedure as much as possible to increase their work freedom (Ball, 2010). Workers will demonstrate "anticipatory conformity" (a form of self-discipline) if they are unable to avoid surveillance by adjusting their behaviour to their employers' expectations (ibid). Due to the hazy distinction between work and non-work, it can be challenging to precisely define workplace. Consequently, surveillance may extend beyond the workplace, posing ethical issues and threatening the human rights and privacy of employees (Ball, 2010; Rosenblat, Knese, and Boyd, 2014). In terms of broader social and political implications, such surveillance with ICTs that record the personal characteristics of employees may exacerbate existing social inequality based on race, gender, and class and even exacerbate social exclusion by reducing employment opportunities for certain individuals on the basis of discrimination.

Rosenblat, Kneese, and Boyd (2014) note that the emergence of the ""knowledge economy" has altered perceptions regarding workplace surveillance. The concept of "knowledge economy" and "informational capitalism" (Cohen, 2016) that I used to contextualise this study share similar connotations. Both terms emphasise the importance of information and knowledge to economic development and capitalist production. According to Rosenblat, Kneese, and Boyd (2014), the knowledge economy places greater emphasis on cognitive aspects of labour than on the physical movements of employers. When controlling workers' physical movements in a knowledge economy does not inherently increase productivity, overt surveillance becomes less relevant to production goals. Employers attempt to humanise the

workplace by providing workers with a sense of control and autonomy in an effort to enhance workers' creativity, which is a fundamental element of informational capitalist production (ibid). Saval (2014) argues that when work is not constrained by time or location, remote control and surveillance become more pervasive and invisible. As discussed in section 2.1.2.2, employees are expected to respond to employers' requests even outside the office and during non-working hours. Simultaneously, greater autonomy at work necessitates greater self-responsibility on the part of employees. The employees must therefore internalise the employer's expectations and act accordingly even in the absence of overt supervision. According to Lupton (2014), the monitored and quantified worker has been displaced by the monitoring and reflexive self. In the following empirical chapters, I will discuss how ICTs facilitate workplace surveillance in my research context and how surveillance influences employers' working conditions.

2.2.3 Consuming fitness as a lifestyle

The body is constantly subject to various external interventions – rituals, power, production – as well as self-intervention – the "technologies of the self" investigated by Foucault. Foucault (1988) argues that, in addition to external regulation, individuals can achieve self-improvement via self-concern about their soul, spirit and behaviour. The connotation of the body is constructed through negotiation between social regulation and self-concern. Giddens (1991) argues that in modern times the body is not a fixed biological fact but a flexible and malleable project that requires work to achieve improvement. Considering Simmel's (1950) claim that the body is the first and most unconditional possession, it is believed that working on the body equals working on the self. Giddens (1991) argues that the individual's responsibility for the body has been emphasised more than other interventions in modern society. This emphasis is present in the emergence of the fitness industry where people are encouraged to work on their own bodies. How the body is defined in the fitness context will be reviewed below and is investigated in this research.

Jennifer Smith Maguire (2008, p. 1) defines fitness as intentional work conducted on the body in pursuit of a desired shape. She argues that physical activities were once an integral part of daily life rather than a well-planned practice. It is the sedentary lifestyle alongside urbanisation and industrialisation, which results in obesity and related diseases, that makes intentional bodywork and fitness a specific phenomenon (ibid., p. 2). Interpretations of fitness vary in

different contexts and historical periods. In modernity, a fit body means health in a medical care context and indicates good population quality or competitive national strength for the government and state (ibid., p. 2-3). After World War II, fitness was commercialised as a leisure industry (ibid., p.3).

Smith Maguire (2008) argues that the birth of this leisure industry is a result of both self-responsibility of health and the rise of consumerism. On the one hand, the USA government offloads the responsibility for reducing disease caused by obesity and improving population health to individual citizens, which helps cut medical costs (ibid, p. 196). On the other hand, consumer culture also underpins the commercialisation of physical activities (ibid, p. 206). According to Turner (1982), consumer culture has emerged since the 1950s. This culture is characterised as mass commodity production, the rise of the service, consumption and leisure industries and the decline of the traditional working-class. In the consumer culture, fitness is promoted as an individual consumption choice for beauty and youth (Smith Maguire, 2008, p. 13). Both the government's advocacy of physical activities and the commercialisation of fitness emphasise the individual's responsibility to manage their own body shape. This phenomenon can be characterised by Foucault's concept of biopolitics (Foucault, 2003 [1975]), whereby people manage their own bodies, and the self-management of the body aligns with the state agencies' imperatives and the commercial institutions' objectives.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power are applied by scholars to elucidate body trainings in gyms (Sassatelli, 1999; Mansfield, 2005; Markula and Pringle, 2006; Carrasco San Martin, 2016). Carrasco San Martin (2016, p. 33) states that gyms make people more aware of their bodies. Sassatelli (1999, p. 232) states that the characteristics of Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, as mentioned above, are conveyed in the design of gyms. The facility trains different parts of the body separately in order to achieve the whole body's maximum productivity (Markula and Pringle, 2006, p. 33; Carrasco San Martin, 2016, p. 18). According to studies about digital fitness, this political anatomy of the body is also present in the domain of digital fitness, where video training guidance is always categorised based on different parts of the body (Lou and Li, 2018; Xie and Liu, 2018; Zhang, 2018a). Within the fitness domain, fit people consume and reproduce a specific discourse, such as "self-control", and relevant fitness expertise (Markula and Pringle, 2006, p. 60). They construct a knowledge-power control system. Then the rise of digital fitness expands the influence of this control system. Social media platforms in Web 2.0 allow user-to-user communication, providing a space for digital

fitness companies to launch marketing. The advancement of algorithms makes fitness advertisements more exposed and targeted to the users compared with those in the mass media age (Fumagalli et al., 2018; Scholz, 2017; Zuboff, 2015; Fuchs, 2014). When people are confronted with the fitness discourse daily, they tend to be the consumers of this industry. Digital fitness removes the location and time limitations of physical gyms and enables the disciplinary power to permeate into more private aspects of life.

Compared with other leisure activities, fitness, some scholars claim, is a special consumption choice. Fitness, which requires sweaty body work and strict self-discipline, is different from the common imagination of relaxing leisure activity and quite similar to work. Stebbins (1982) characterises fitness training as 'serious leisure' and a career conducted in free time. Parker (1976) claims that fitness makes people discipline their non-work time and extends the work ethic into non-work time. Consequently, the way that fitness brings pleasure is different from other consumption activities but similar to productive activities. Bauman (2000) differentiates gratification from consumption and production activities. He contends that production brings about delayed gratification after hard work (ibid, p. 158) while consumption provides instant gratification once payment is made (ibid, 159). Although fitness is a consumption choice, the pleasure and satisfaction from it is not instant but delayed, as I will review the scholars' discussion below.

Pleasure from fitness cannot be easily obtained, and consumers need to train themselves to enjoy physical training. Fitness consumers' pleasure comes after they have internalised the external training requirements, contributed endeavour and seen outcomes. Adorno (Adorno, 2005, p. 195) says that it is through sports that people impose social requirements on themselves and learn to enjoy it. Sassatelli (2010, p. 206) argues that consuming fitness is an ongoing learned social practice and the trainees create meanings of their practice by negotiating with fitness knowledge created by fitness experts (ibid, p. 12). Scholars find that fitness consumers' joy comes from certain interpretations of training, including the capacity to control their bodies, the freedom of responding to natural needs and presenting their true selves, and the fulfilment of living up to social expectations and becoming a moral subject (Sassatelli, 2010; Smith Maguire, 2008; Adorno, 2005). These interpretations define fitness as a rational self-investment rather than impulsive and irrational consumption. Understood as a means of self-investment, fitness resonates with the neoliberal social relationship that requires people to be

self-responsible and thus construct self-reliant labour to serve capitalism, which is reviewed in the following subsection.

2.2.4 Foucauldian analysis of work: a self-reliant labour situation

In the subsection above, I have reviewed how fitness is constructed as a moral responsibility of self-improvement and a consumption choice for self-investment. I present how Foucauldian discussion about disciplinary power and neoliberalism have been applied to interpret a fit lifestyle. However, Foucauldian analytical framework is helpful to elucidate not only fitness trainings, but also labour, especially in the context of a neoliberal economy. Since fitness involves individualised responsibility of self-investment, resonating with the human capital theory in neoliberalism, fitness labour also shares similarities with neoliberal work in terms of self-reliant labour situation. In this subsection, I will review how Foucauldian concepts are mobilised to the discussions about self-reliant labour, most of which is based on creative and cultural work and digital work in a neoliberal economy. Sorting out these studies would help me characterise fitness labour in my research.

The workers in the fitness industry, such as coaches, as Smith Maguire contends (2008, p. 192) are also fitness consumers who both buy and sell their lifestyles. With their hobbies transformed into work, fitness workers' daily work corresponds with playbour, as mentioned in section 2.1. When playbour is created to claim the end of boredom at work and the start of interest-driven jobs, this kind of labour also forms a new form of management. Playbour has instrumentalised people's passion for hobbies to serve capitalist production. Some scholars criticise that this kind of labour of love leads to workers being governed by their own passion (Rose, 1999; Ursell, 2000; McRobbie, 2002b). Kücklich (2005) argues that the primary source of coercion is no longer the institution but the individual workers themselves, making themselves engage in self-management of their labour.

When more intimate aspects of life are absorbed by capitalist production, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate work from non-work. Gill and Pratt (2008) refer to Tronti's 'social factory' (1966) and Negri's 'factory without walls' (1989, p. 79) to describe how capitalism puts more areas of society at its disposal for profit. Similarly, Gregg (2013) describes this phenomenon as 'corporatisation of intimacy'. Lazzarato (1996) characterises this production model as biopolitical production, whereby workers are anticipated to serve capitalism not only

with their body but also with their soul and subjectivity. Workers are encouraged to be active subjects to manage their own labour and work on the self in pursuit of self-improvement (ibid). Bauman (2000, p. 135) contends that modern life makes the matter of improvement in production not a collective but an individual task. Responsibilities for conducting management and making progress are delegated and offloaded, leading to what scholars call the depoliticisation and privatisation of work (McRobbie, 2002a; Bulut, 2014).

In biopolitical production, human subjectivity and the inner self become a key resource of productivity. McRobbie (2002b) says the inner self is not just there but needs to be worked on, and to uncover the ability of the inner self can be understood as Foucault's concept of 'the technologies of the self' (1988), forming an imperative of working on the self. She criticises how this imperative makes people seek self-improvement at work and in leisure time, ultimately creating a more efficient workforce for capitalism (ibid). This requirement of working on the self resonates with neoliberal principles, whereby workers' labour is interpreted as investment in human capital.

To fuel motivation for self-improvement, competition is also introduced to the workplace by gamifying work. Gamification of work indicates that work is designed like a game (Bauman, 2000, p. 138; Scholz, 2017). One the one hand, it is argued that gamification of work reflects the features of playbour, aiming to bring fun and boost employees' creativity (Ross, 2004; Oprescu, Jones and Katsikitis, 2014; Scholz, 2017; Johnson and Woodcock, 2018). On the other hand, as Deuze (2007, p. 10) argues, gamification encourages ranking and competition, with the purpose of stimulating workers' motivation for performance through peer pressure. Ranking, as Foucault (Foucault, 1979, p. 184) argues, is a significant element in disciplinary power and sometimes directly represents rewards and punishment. Employees care about their rank in work performance. They may celebrate when their rank is good or fall into self-blame when their rank is not ideal. Gamification of work can boost people's motivation to work better and potentially encourage them to conduct self-discipline.

Fitness, as a leisure activity requiring self-discipline and referring to means of self-improvement, resonates with self-responsible labour in the neoliberal social relationship. For fitness workers who are both consumers and producers of this industry, their experiences of consuming digital fitness productss determine that they are used to a self-responsible lifestyle, which may also influence their workstyle. When the working environment centres around

fitness, they may construct a mechanism to discipline both their bodies and their working performance. Fitness workers may increasingly conform to both a neoliberal social relationship and the disciplinary mechanism. How fitness training influences workers' labour is investigated in this research.

2.3 Cultural and creative labour

After reviewing Marx's and Foucault's theories and their application to platform work and the fitness industry, I review scholarship related to cultural and creative labour, with some of them mentioned in previous sections. Cultural and creative labour draws scholarly attention for their specific features, in opposition to the routine work of industrial capitalism. The most vital and fundamental feature of this kind of labour is that the conscious or mental aspect of labour outweighs physical movements (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Berardi, 2009). This feature corresponds with Cohen's (2016) concept of "informational capitalism", whereby production is driven by knowledge and information. Thus, scholars view cultural and creative labour as the future form of work in informational capitalism and their characteristics expand to some other industries (Kennedy, 2011; Banks, 2017). Due to this feature, methods of workplace organization and the model of capitalist production are transformed. For instance, daily work will involve more autonomy and freedom; play and work merge, while the clear boundary between work and nonwork is dissolved; networked workplaces dispense bureaucratic hierarchical organization (Sennett, 1998; Wittel, 2001; Ross, 2004; Banks, 2007; Kennedy, 2011; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). When discussing the social and political implications of such working conditions, scholars' positions can be generally divided into three camps: celebratory, critical, and a balanced position between the two. These positions will be reviewed in the following paragraphs, with the most attention paid to the third one as that strand usefully allows me to capture creative aspects of employees' labour in my case study. In this part of the literature, I explore whether this aspect enables employees' labour to serve non-market production and contribute to moral economy in this research.

2.3.1 Definition and birth of cultural and creative industries

Before I move to the three theoretical positions of understanding cultural and creative labour, I briefly review the birth of the cultural and creative industries and the definition of labour in these areas. The concept of the cultural industries has been widely used by sociologists and policy makers since the 1960s. The combination of culture and industry represents how culture

– an area that is supposed to be independent of the market – has become part of capitalist production. Mark Banks (2007) defined cultural industries as an area that produces aesthetic and symbolic goods or service, with core functions conveying meanings to others. At the centre of this kind of production is human beings' capacity to create. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) argue that creating has similar connotations with producing, meaning to bring something into being. However, the word 'create' emphasises "newness, invention, innovation, and making something afresh" and becomes more and more closely connected with artistic and knowledge production (ibid.). The authors review how creativity has been brought to the centre of both academia and policy and has become a keyword since the 1980s in the UK. According to Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013), management analysts and economists draw attention to human creativity. The former group aims to boost individual employees' competitiveness while the latter group, aligning with the UK's governmental economic planning (Aghion et al., 1998), views human creativity as a resource for economic growth (Menger 2006: 801). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) contend that creativity has become a doctrine for policy makers. The term 'creative industry' has been used to cover diverse creative activities such as architecture and antiques, designer fashion, film, software, and website, dispensing with cultural industries due to the confusion and vagueness of culture (ibid.). Some debates show both the limitations and applicability of these two terms: "All industries are cultural: a critique of the idea of 'cultural industries' and new possibilities for research" (Mato, 2009) and "From creative to cultural industries: not all industries are cultural, and no industries are creative" (Miller, 2009), but I will not engage in that part of discussion much in my research. I will follow Banks's (2007) and Hesmondhalgh and Baker's definitions about cultural and creative work to continue my review. Scholars contend that the advent of the cultural and creative industries also represents the increasing governmental advocacy of neoliberalism in the 1970s globally (McRobbie, 2002a; Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013), reducing public funds or subsidies, privatizing some public sectors and putting more areas into market competition to stimulate economic growth. Thus, cultural work, which is publicly-funded, becomes privatised and enters into the market while independent cultural work is encouraged by the government.

Since the creative industries are given the role of boosting economic growth and creating more jobs, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) contend that the government describes this kind of work as desirable to encourage more people to engage in these industries. Policy makers emphasise that the desirability of this kind of work lies in both better economic benefits and a stronger sense of fulfilment compared to other work (ibid.). Some academics, not just in management

and economics but also in some media and cultural studies, follow and continue the policy makers' celebratory positions, represented by Florida (2002) and Deuze (2007). Florida (2002) lists a series of desirable characteristics of cultural and creative work, including safety, autonomy, flexibility, connecting with personal interests, skills learning, and social recognition. However, these scholars show little critical distance from cultural and creative work.

I find discussion of cultural and creative industries helps frame and conceptualise my research object, Chinese digital fitness industry. Not only because work in Chinese digital fitness industry shares similar characteristics with cultural work but also because both digital fitness industries derive from similar advocacy of neoliberalism. Regarding the similar features of work, productivity in Chinese digital fitness industry relies mainly on human creativity, just like cultural industries do. That is to say, conscious aspect of labour is key to production rather than the physical aspect (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Berardi, 2009). So, the working conditions are designed to boost maximum human creativity by allocating more autonomy and freedom to workers' physical movements and even blurring play with work (Ross, 2004). Simultaneously, most product in digital fitness industry are aesthetic or symbolic goods or service that try to sell meanings to customers, which is similar with Bank's definition of cultural product. Both the working conditions and product of Chinese digital fitness industry will be displayed in detail in Chapter Four. In addition to similar characteristics of working conditions, Chinese digital fitness industry derives from advocacy of neoliberalism, similarly as cultural industries do. Chinese government once determinately defining meanings of individual body with collective or public discourse in the era of centrally planned economy from 1949 to 1978 (Hua, 2013). After Reforming and Opening up in 1978, the government started to give market some space to impose meanings to individual bodies (ibid). Physical activities were commercialized as a personal consumption choice, known as the fitness industry, which showed that Chinese government delegated some responsibilities of improving physical conditions of population to individual citizens (Ji, 2006; Zheng, 2008; Wang, 2018). Individualised responsibility of physical conditions aligned with and reflected on advocacy of neoliberalism in a wide social context in that era. In a neoliberal economy, many aspects of daily life experience privatization and marketization, with physical activities included. With the booming platform economy, the government has raised some political guidelines with neoliberal features, of "Mass Entrepreneurship, Mass Innovation" (China State Council, 2015a) and "Internet Plus" (China State Council, 2015b). Commercial fitness industry has ushered in new opportunities for development by combining ICTs and become digital fitness industry, the

research object of this thesis. Chinese digital fitness industry derives from advocacy of neoliberalism, which is similar with cultural industries. So, I engage discussion of cultural industries here.

2.3.2 Critiques of cultural and creative industries

The celebratory positions are criticized by scholars in critical social science, represented by Marxist and Foucauldian scholarship. Banks (2007) systematically summarises Marxist critical theorists' and Foucauldian governmentality theorists' discussions of cultural work. Marxist critical theories from the Frankfurt School believe that industrialization and commodification of culture results in the debasement of cultural values (ibid.). And cultural workers are alienated from their own subjectivity in labour and subject to top-down power from capitalism (ibid.). This theory sees capitalism as encroaching on cultural areas and leaves little space for any non-market production. Banks (2007) contends that Foucauldian governmentality theorists view cultural workers as active but governed, internalizing self-enterprising discourse and believing they can obtain self-development by serving corporations and capitalism. In governmentality analysis, cultural workers see themselves as autonomous workers, but they are under soft management and control, with imperatives for self-management and self-discipline (ibid.). Governmentality theories precisely capture a feature of cultural individualization of work, which corresponds with the rise of neoliberalism. Individualization of work means that responsibilities are directly delegated to individual workers and the whole workplace is managed on an individual level. Marxist critical theories do not pay enough attention to this working condition. Aware of limitations of Marxist analysis, some scholars, such as Ursell (2000), introduce Foucauldian theories to remedy those shortcomings. Ursell (2000) acknowledges the existence of exploitation and notes the individualization of work, developing the concept of self-exploitation. Scholars have found that self-exploitation derives from workers' passionate attachment to work, making them so indulged in work that they cannot resist or stop serving capitalist production (Ross, 2004; Neff et al., 2005; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). In addition to self-exploitation, scholars also find that individualization of work may result in self-blaming (Sennett, 1998; McRobbie, 2002b). Following Beck's discussion of individualization, scholars contend that individualized work is an ambivalent experience, which on the one hand frees workers from rules of bureaucratic organization, while on the other it leaves them to fend for themselves (Rose, 1999; McRobbie, 2002b). Consequently, the workers have nobody to blame but themselves. Sennett (1998) finds that employees use a self-

blaming narrative when they are laid off. They may think it is their own fault that they are not equipped with enough skills and they even view the company as the victim of external forces, such as globalization, so the employers have to lay off some employees.

When the responsibilities of cultural and creative work are individualized and privatised, work increasingly becomes a personal business. McRobbie (2002b) contends that work is more than just earning a living; instead, it increasingly incorporates and almost takes over everyday life. Rose (1999) argues that work plays a key role in identity formation and provides the role to realize self-development. Thus, workers are expected by corporations to obtain self-advancement outside working time, and they gradually internalize that requirement (ibid.). As reviewed in section 2.1.2.2, the boundaries between work and non-work have been effaced in the face of flexible working conditions. According to McRobbie and Greggs, work invades private space and time, and employees are expected to handle work out of office time. Simultaneously, leisure activities also enter the workplace. For instance, Ross investigated IT workers' labour in Silicon Village, and he found a workplace there was quite humane, with self-management, autonomy, collegiality and nonconformity. There are also football tables in the office for employees to take a break. But this working condition, argued Ross (2004), aims to improve employees' productivity through leisure activities and enable their freest thoughts and impulses to serve capitalist production. He contends that when work becomes humane, it also means work absorbs an unacceptable portion of lives. All the scholars above share a similar position that suggests capitalism increasingly encroaches on various aspects of life and there is little space for any non-market activities.

2.3.3 Politics of possibility in cultural and creative labour

Apart from celebratory and critical perspectives of cultural and creative work, there are scholars who take a balanced perspective between the celebratory and critical positions (Banks, 2007; Kennedy, 2011; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). On the one hand, they acknowledge that these features of cultural and creative work bring about new forms of control and impose some negative influence on workers, such as self-exploitation. On the other hand, they suggest interpreting creative labour in a more positive way. They believe in terms of cultural and creative work, there is always non-market production outside the dominance of capitalism and that kind of production will bring more ethical considerations to the workplace. Banks (2007) introduces a liberal-democratic interpretation of cultural work, which claims that the same

power of capitalism that makes workers subject to governmentality will also enable them to generate "progressive and socially embedded forms of cultural work". A liberal-democratic perspective views cultural workers as autonomous actors who are capable of pursuing non-economic values proactively (ibid.). Banks (2007) suggests that cultural work has potential to resist capitalism because it combines the logic of both artistic and capitalist production and determines that cultural work has endogenous tensions between art and commerce. Bank (2007) claims that artistic production aims for "aesthetic, authentic values, freedom, pursue a new society" while capitalist production aims for rationality, profit and accumulation. Cultural workers, who desire autonomy and freedom for aesthetics and self-expression, will strive to resist the imperative of capitalist accumulation (ibid.). Banks (2007) predicts that the characteristics of the cultural industries will influence other forms work, with an emphasis on conscious and mental part of work. Banks (2007) claims that cultural workers – like all humans – have psychological needs that lead to ethical and moral practices. That is to say, ethical production derives from the psychological make-up of humans.

Stahl (2006) argues that the separation of market and non-market production is historically constructed. Stahl (2006) reviews how capitalist primitive accumulation forced production out of the family and transformed family production into waged work outside the household. That transformation separates work and life. At the beginning of capitalist society, people needed to exchange autonomy and ownership of labour for payment in the workplace (ibid.). Thus, life became a freer and more desirable sphere than work for humans (ibid.). Stahl (2006) contends that separation of life and work creates a personal form of subjectivity to seek meaning and purpose in life. He claims that this personal subjectivity is incorporated into capitalist production and has become increasingly important or even central in the 20th century (ibid.). Due to separation of work and life since the birth of capitalist society, workers had less autonomy than in life and this phenomenon has gradually been taken for granted. Where informational capitalism prevails in the 20th century, the boundaries between work and life are blurred again. Capitalism thus returns autonomy to workers and enables them to incorporate subjectivity into their work. These kinds of working conditions are viewed as desirable, compared with routine work in industrial capitalism. Stahl (2006) contends that incorporating subjectivity into capitalism also serves to justify neoliberalism, such as promising to end alienation or oppression. However, Stahl (2006) finds that this working condition actually contributes to the alienation and domination of capitalism. In terms of the blurred division between work and life, many scholars criticize that this dissolution enables capitalist

production to encroach on more aspects of life (Sennett, 1998; McRobbie, 2002b; Gregg, 2013). Banks (2007) takes a more positive view, arguing that when work and non-work merges, this also means moral values developed outside workplace could be applied to the workplace and lead to ethical practices at work (ibid.). He claims that moral values, such as integrity, trust, responsibilities and justice, still exist in contemporary capitalism.

Similar to Bank's position, Kennedy (2011) finds that web designers' daily labour reflects ethical considerations, such as building websites for users with disabilities and opposing some speculative competitions that devalue web design work. She finds that web designers' ethical practice originates from a shared ideal of the Web – what Berners-Lee (2003) describes as "a universal, open, interoperable and accessible medium", which should be an essential tool that everyone can access. Even though the Web has become commodified and market-led, the idea that the Web can help to provide opportunities for skills training and job seeking, enhance communication and eliminate social exclusion is hard to shake (Kennedy, 2011). Those ideals simultaneously lead web designers towards ethical practices and attract ethical personnel to engage in this industry (ibid.). Kennedy (2011) argues that it is necessary to reflect on some pessimistic claims that cultural work must be alienated, governed or self-exploitative. Rather, we need to recognize that ethical practice in work. She usefully introduces Gibson-Graham's (2006) concept of "politics of possibility", which means the disempowered find new ways to exercise power, conducting labour with ethical considerations and responding to dominant capitalism.

With a similar balanced position, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) build a framework to assess quality of working life, identifying characteristics of good and bad work. By introducing Marx's theory of alienation and fetishism, they claim that consumption of cultural products draws much attention while human labour's contribution to cultural production is neglected (ibid.). Thus, they highlight the significance of focusing on workers' relationship with their work (ibid.). Considering that Marx is not a sociologist who emphasises political economy, they use Blauner's (1964) conceptualization of alienation with a sociological perspective as a foundation of their own framework to assess good and bad work. Blauner (1964) defines four characteristics of alienated labour – powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement – according to Marx's theory of alienation. The four features refer to lack of self-determination, lack of awareness of the purposes and meaning of work, lack of cooperation,

collegiality and a sense of belonging, and a depersonalized practice that lacks involvement and fails to express unique personalities and abilities (ibid.).

Following Blauner's definition of alienation, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) developed a more detailed framework and identified characteristics of good and bad work. They argue that good work should include "decent pay, working hours and safety; autonomy; interest and involvement; sociality; esteem and self-esteem; self-realisation; work-life balance; security". While bad work is characterized as "poor pay, hours and safety; powerlessness; boredom; isolation; self-doubt and shame; overwork; insecurity and risk" (ibid.). Apart from those elements listed above, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) also closely relates products with the assessment of good or bad work. They think work that generates fake or inferior product or product that will harm consumers cannot be categorized as good work, even if working conditions are good – and vice versa, even if workers can produce qualified products that benefit others, their work cannot be good without a desired working condition. At the centre of labour that generates good product is a pursuit of excellence. This practice means the workers shows strong commitment to quality and strive to achieve high standards. Sayer (2004) claims that this commitment to quality helps enhance humans' ability to obtain a good life. Similarly, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) contend that this commitment to quality can benefit the whole community or society since good products will enrich others. Simultaneously, pursuing good product is also closely related to self-realization, one of the elements that constitutes a good life, according to Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013). Self-realization, as opposed to self-estrangement, means the employees are deeply involved in work, fully understanding the purpose and meaning of labour, and can express personal abilities and characteristics during production. Contributing to both realizing the self and benefiting others, the pursuit of excellence is not just work manner but becomes a lifestyle for workers. This corresponds with Douglas Ezzy's (1997) argument that good work can be part of a life narrative, rather than something opposing life.

2.4 Chinese platform society

The Chinese digital fitness industry is derived from platform-based entrepreneurial labour. The concepts of digital and platform labour were first discussed and developed in the West, e.g in the USA, where ICTs grew into a mature industry. In the past three decades, China has achieved rapid advancement of ICTs and has become a significant part of the global digital economy.

Some Chinese Internet companies have even become the world's most valuable listed digital companies, competing with their counterparts in the USA. The increased influence of the Chinese digital economy has drawn scholarly attention to Chinese platform society and labour to investigate how the specificity of the Chinese context makes a difference to discussions about digital and platform labour (Chen, 2018; De Kloet et al., 2019; Sun, 2019; Qiu, Sun and Chen, 2021; Yu, Xu and Sun, 2022). My research will build on existing studies and explore how the specificity of the Chinese context could enrich understandings of platform society, economy, and labour. My case of labour in the digital fitness companies will be theorized using the following aspects: socialism with Chinese characteristics, reconstruction of Chinese digital economy from manufacturing to ICT-based entrepreneurship, Chinese platform society and labour, and the Chinese digital fitness industry.

2.4.1 Socialism with Chinese characteristics

The advent of the Chinese digital fitness industry based on social media platforms could not have happened without the rise of neoliberalism in China, which first appeared in the 1970s in the name of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" alongside the policy "reforming and opening up" under Deng Xiaoping's leadership. As introduced in Chapter One, China is a single-party state under the charge of the Communist Party of China (CPC). This feature determines that the central government, acting on behalf of the party's interests, plays a dominant role in constructing a neoliberal social relationship, as reviewed below.

The People's Republic of China was established in 1949 by the CPC, which was founded on Marxist philosophy and tried to apply its ontology, epistemology and methodology to managing a country and solving social problems (Communist Party of China, 2017). Based on Marxist philosophy, the CPC announced that China was a socialist country (ibid.). Hui Wang (1997) argues that Chinese Marxism is an ideological tool of the CPC. The CPC uses Marx's historical perspectives to justify: (a) that socialist society is more advanced than capitalist society; and (b) socialist society is a transitional stage to achieve the ultimate goal of China, a communist society, as Marx anticipated. Wang (1997) argues that those justifications shape contemporary Chinese historical perspectives. Chinese people conform to the perspective that there is a goal in the process of social development, and their social practice aims to realise that goal (ibid.). Consequently, there was enthusiasm for communism and a radical dismissal of any capitalist features before 1978 (ibid.). This was reflected in the economy.

It is argued that by identifying the market economy as an exclusive feature of capitalist society, which was not supposed to be present in a socialist country, China officially forbade any individual transactions without the government's approval from 1949 to 1978 (Ji, 2006; Luo, 2012; Zhang, 2014). In a centrally-planned economy, most estates and resources were taken charge of by the state, and living necessities were allocated by the central and local governments (Chen, 2009). A strictly-planned economy resulted in lower social productivity and living standards compared with developed countries (ibid.). This situation could not realise China's aspiration for more international competitiveness, as introduced in Chapter One. In 1978, to boost the people's willingness to create wealth and increase social productivity, the Reforming and Opening Up policy was adopted under the leadership of Xiaoping Deng (Chen, 2009; Luo, 2012; Zhang, 2014). The market economy began to be permitted by the state-party. It allowed free exchange in the market, publicised some public service sectors, and delegated power to state-owned enterprises (Luo, 2012; Zhang, 2014). The related strategies and purposes resonated with how the UK and the US challenged Keynesianism and reduced their governments' intervention in the market.

Although the CPC does not officially claim that a neoliberal principle has been applied to governing the socialist country, using the term 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (Communist Party of China, 2017) instead, some scholars think that Reforming and Opening Up shows that the Chinese economy has obtained some characteristics of neoliberalism (Luo, 2012; Zhang, 2014). Compared with neoliberalism in other parts of the world, the uniqueness of Chinese neoliberalism, they argue, is that it is subject to an authoritarian governance, with the central government playing a dominant role (Harvey, 2005a; Ji, 2006; Yu, 2011; Xia, 2014; Wang, 2018). Those scholars point out the overwhelming authority of the Chinese Communist Party. Everything, including the commitment to disciplines of neoliberalism, must be subject to its leadership. To characterise this phenomenon, Yu (2011) claims that China's neoliberal strategies are "enwrapped in socialist legacies".

Similar to the German government after WWII, the CPC also justifies its governance when applying neoliberal strategies. While Germany used neoliberal principles to limit the state's power to prove the legitimacy of its governance, the legitimacy of the Chinese government derives from the leadership of the CPC. The CPC claims that it "represents the people's interests" and will "guide the people from the socialist society to achieve a communist society,

allowing everyone to be wealthy" (Communist Party of China, 2017). This justifies the CPC's authoritarian governance and leads to state-led neoliberalism, whereby the neoliberal discipline is applied to macro, top-down state regulation and public policy by the government, similarly to Will Davies's argument (2016). Foucault (2008[1979], p. 79) argues that in German neoliberalism top-down planning is vital to reconstructing the economy, suggesting that the strong role of the government may make a neoliberal economy very efficient. The state's role in developing Chinese neoliberalism will be further discussed in the research.

Wang (1997) claims that state-led reform is not only concerned with the economy but also reconstructs the wider social relationship, ultimately letting the market logic rule social life. Under that logic, the Chinese labour market witnessed the rise of individualism and individual workers became self-reliant. Ross (2007) finds that Chinese undergraduates were supposed to be allocated a job by the state upon graduation. This policy was abandoned when marketisation was adopted in the 1970s. Some people were supposed to have lifelong work in the public sectors; however, they were laid off following privatisation (ibid.). New graduates and the unemployed were thrown into the competition of the labour market (ibid.). It is argued that the generation born after the 1980s thus takes self-reliance and competition for granted (Li, 2020).

Although the term 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' was first described in the 1970s to endow the market with more liberty, it is misleading to equate this term with Chinese neoliberalism. The main goal of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' is to consolidate the CPC's leadership and its determining role in overall national development. For instance, how much autonomy the market could have a decision for the CPC. This term implies that all CPC decisions are based on the specificity of the Chinese context and should not be intervened by other ideologies or foreign political powers. There is no doubt that the government's role is important in understanding the Chinese digital economy, especially the platform economy (De Kloet et al., 2019; Chen, 2020; Lin, 2021; Qiu, Sun and Chen, 2021). Chen (2020) notes that the Chinese government has combine the roles of "the law-maker, the designer of the regulatory and development framework, and the promoter of certain social values". And the government will sometimes enhance marketization with some neoliberal principles, depending on its specific governance goals (ibid.). Despite the central government's heavy hand on the market in China, the role of entrepreneurs' bottom-up creativity is also important and cannot be ignored in advancing the digital economy. Both top-down policy guidance and bottom-up

creativity contribute to the reconstruction of the Chinese digital economy, from manufacturing to ICT-based entrepreneurship, which will be reviewed in the next subsection.

2.4.2 Reconstruction of Chinese digital economy: from manufacturing to ICT-based entrepreneurship

Yu (2017) defines the digital economy as a series of economic activities related to information and communication technologies (ICTs), which could be categorised as hardware and software. Hardware provides an essential physical basis, referring to infrastructure and physical devices, such as PC or mobile networked devices, for users to access the Internet. Software refers to Internet applications, underpinned by algorithms and cloud computing. ICTs are the core drivers of the digital economy.

Scholars claim that manufacturing hardware was the starting point of China's participation in the global digital economy (Huws, 2014; Yu, 2017; Pan, 2020). Compared with the USA, the UK and other developed countries, China engaged in the international digital economy late, with its first entry in the 1990s (Liu, 2019). It is argued that the developed countries maintained their dominance of the global market and the most cutting-edge, innovative technologies (Yu, 2017; Pan, 2020). According to some scholars' arguments (Lin, Cai and Li, 1997; Harvey, 2005b), one of China's competitive advantages have been its large amount of cheap labour, thanks to its huge population. China became the hardware manufacturing factory of the world, providing factory workers in assembly lines for transnational companies to produce physical devices (Qiu, 2009; Fuchs, 2014b; Yu, 2017). Though manufacturing labour is not the subject of this research, it provides the foundation of the current Chinese digital economy. At that early stage of the Chinese digital economy, the state stimulated economic growth by introducing foreign capital (Liu, 2019). Tang (2020) contends that this stage belongs to the "bringing-in" process, whereby the state opens its ICT industry to transnational capital. Liu (2019) claims that, during this process, companies and individual entrepreneurs have the opportunity to learn advanced ICTs from their foreign business partners.

However, merely learning from and imitating foreign business is far from the national goal to build an innovation state with stronger international competitiveness. By introducing foreign capital, China aims to develop its domestic capital market and let local capital become globally influential. As Tang (2020) claims, after the 'bringing-in' stage, the central government strived

to make local capital 'go out'. The ultimate goal is to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation (Keane and Yu, 2019). To achieve this national goal, scholars contend that China aims to transform itself from a manufacturing country into an innovation nation so that the national development would not be subject to foreign capital (Yu, 2017; Liu, 2019). Building an innovative country specifically means that the state can develop domestic ICTs technology independently, which is characterised by Hong (2017) as "China's insistence on technological self-reliance". In the 13th Five Year Plan (2016-2020) (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2016), the state required a shift in focus from hardware construction to capacity of developing creative digital economy. Following this requirement, two political agendas were settled in 2015 – 'Internet Plus' (China State Council, 2015b) and 'mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation' (China State Council, 2015a). This series of political guidance is the main context of my research, and the detailed connotation of them will be reviewed a bit in the following paragraphs.

Hong (2017) contends that in the 'Internet Plus' strategy, 'Internet' refers to a variety of Web-based economic activities, including access to diverse services and products. The goals of the 'Internet Plus' strategy are summarised by *China Daily* as follows: "to integrate mobile Internet, cloud computing big data, and the Internet of Things with modern manufacturing…[for] healthy development of e-commerce, industrial networks, and Internet banking, and to get Internet-based companies to increase their presence in the international market" (2015). Scholars claim that the objectives of 'Internet Plus' mean that the state has put ICTs at the centre of economic reconstruction and expected this core element to boost economic growth and gain more international competitiveness (Keane, 2016; Lin, 2021). According to Kean (2016), the state envisages a "digital future" with stronger capabilities to advance ICTs and the digital economy independently while the main drivers to realize this objective are entrepreneurship and innovation among a wide range of citizens. Umarovna (2021) reviews three specific measurements that the Chinese government has conducted to nurture start-up businesses and boost the growth of the Chinese economy. Those measurements include the government's financial support (e.g., tax incentives or financial subsidies), introducing foreign high-tech capital while developing local capital, and reforming educational institutions in relation to science and technology (ibid.). The state aims to encourage the application of ICTs to different industries, which may reconstruct existing industries as well as create new industries.

Through a set of political guidance, the Chinese digital economy has experienced reconstruction, with the core of its economy shifting from manufacturing to ICT-based entrepreneurship. The strong role of the state may result in a misunderstanding that individual entrepreneurs are always passive and subject to top-down political guidance in China. Simultaneously, as Lindtner (2014) points out, the official narratives involved in policies, mainly focusing on improving the capacity of innovation, constructs and consolidates a stereotype that Chinese people lack creativity. However, Chinese grassroots creativity, such as *shanzhai* or maker culture (Lindtner, 2014; Keane and Chen, 2019), proves to be opposite to that official narrative and turns to be quite rich, providing a strong bottom-up power to advance the Chinese digital economy. According to Lindtner (2014), the phenomenon of *shanzhai* (山寨) refers to grassroots makers' imitation of well-known companies' products and creation of counterfeit goods of low quality. *Shanzhai* products could range from retail, such as Gucci bags, to digital devices, such as iPhones (ibid.). Lindtner (2014) argues that in *shanzhai* practice, copying, re-using, and innovation are not mutually exclusive but sometimes entangled. For instance, some *shanzhai* factories not only produce copycat phones but also combine discarded components with new parts to design novel products (ibid.). As Keane and Chen (2019) argue, this highly informal copycat culture is deeply rooted and embedded in the formal production chain. Lindtner (2014) discovers that *shanzhai* makers can even bring about some revolutionary changes to manufacturing production by inventing peer-to-peer databases for sharing hardware design. They create local open resources, lowering production costs and gaining competitiveness in the global market (ibid.). *Shanzhai* practices create a Chinese open resource, creating competitive physical digital devices and providing a material foundation for software development (ibid.). Thus Keane and Chen (2019) claim that this informal copycat practice, representing bottom-up disruptive innovation, contributes to the establishment of many local formal businesses.

However, no matter how much *shanzhai* practice has helped boost China's digital economy, the government will never officially advocate this maker culture. Instead, the government's official attitude towards *shanzhai* is ambiguous. Since *shanzhai* practice violates copyright, this informal copycat culture is seriously criticized and opposed by famous transnational companies. China, with its ambition to engage in the global economy, needs to align with the international market. After joining the WTO, the Chinese government promised to solve the copycat problems. Building an innovation-oriented state with technological self-reliance is

treated as the fundamental solution to copying and imitation (Keane, 2016). However, *shanzhai* has never totally been solved or banned. The government gives tacit approval to informal copycat culture due to its key role in the Chinese digital economy. From how the Chinese government manages its grassroots innovation system, the state must apply some neoliberal principles, remove its heavy hand on the market from time to time, and endow entrepreneurs with more autonomy. These neoliberal principles have given some space for start-ups to grow and maximize their creativity, which has made indispensable contributions to advancing a creative digital economy.

With both the state's top-down support and grassroots bottom-up creativity, some Internet companies have successfully expanded their businesses, grown to become Internet oligarchs, and thus globally influential, such as Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent – collectively known as BAT in China. As Keane (2016) contends, these companies are expected by the state to revitalize the faltering economy and help China gain international competitiveness. Thus, the state applies neoliberal principles to supporting the development of these companies' businesses. For instance, entrepreneurs are allowed to imitate the business models of foreign counterparts in Silicon Valley and celebrate neoliberalism in the enterprises (De Kloet et al., 2019). Simultaneously, the state contributes to making local companies engage deeply in transnational capital, by introducing foreign capital investment in local companies and permitting domestic companies to have overseas listings (Jia and Winseck, 2018; Tang, 2020). Jia (2018) argues that since the reforms in the 1970s, the party-state has gradually realized that its interests converge with transnational capital. When transnational capital started to financialize industries around the world, Winseck (2011) points out that the telecoms, Internet and media sectors have been at the forefront of the process of financialization, experiencing increased numbers of mergers and acquisitions. Tang (2020) finds that the Chinese government, with the purpose of engaging in the global digital economy and gaining more international competitiveness, now plays a more constituting than containing role in transnationalizing and financializing its domestic ICT industry.

Admittedly, the deep entanglement with international capital also brings about challenges to the authority of the Chinese government. For instance, Jia and Winseck (2018) investigate the ownership structure in Chinese Internet oligarchs, BAT, and note how foreign capital investors "parlayed their interests into key positions" so that they have power to allocate resources and develop corporate policies. Jia and Winseck (2018) characterise the investors' ability to

influence resource allocation and policy making with ownership and position as "structural power". Those capital investors' structural power may sometime challenge the party-state's authority. Thus, the government need to regulate some economic activities that may jeopardise the CPC's governance (Dai, 2000; Jiang, 2012; Yang, 2012). Jiang (2012) argues that the Chinese digital economy has experienced liberation, regulation, and has now become state capitalism. Similarly, Yang (2021) claims that the current Chinese digital economy is commercially competitive but also politically regulated. Although neoliberal principles are applied to developing the digital economy, the companies' businesses must be conditioned to the CPC's leadership, and the party-state maintains a dominant position. Wójcik and Camilleri (2015) characterise the development model of the Chinese economy as "capitalist tools in socialist hands" (2015). Thus, a state-led neoliberal economy centred around ICTs has been formed, with diverse forms of entrepreneurship business for online services. The companies that I researched started up their businesses on digital platforms, selling services and products online in the 2010s. In the past decade, digital platforms have become a key mechanism to mediate different aspects of everyday life in China. The phenomenon is characterised as the "platformisation of Chinese society" (De Kloet et al., 2019), which also influences work and employment, bringing about platform labour. Studies about Chinese platform society and labour will be reviewed in the next section.

2.4.3 Chinese platform society and labour

With its state-led neoliberal strategy, the Chinese digital economy has obtained remarkable results, accounting for 38.6% of Chinese GDP (Xinhua News, 2021). As Hong (2017) argues, China is becoming one of the states with the largest digital economy and plays an increasingly significant part in the international economy. The rapid development of the Chinese digital economy is attributed to both manufacturing of physical digital devices as well as the rise of the platform economy. Based on hardware and software advancement, platforms mediate various aspects of everyday life, bringing about new forms of production and employment. It is important to investigate how platforms influence people's working conditions, as many scholars have already done (Drahokoupil and Jepsen, 2017; Chen, 2020; Qiu, Sun and Chen, 2021; Sun and Chen, 2021; Au-Yeung and Qiu, 2022). My case of the digital fitness industry belongs to the platform economy because the birth and development of this industry are based on platforms. I will review current studies of Chinese platform society and labour in this subsection.

As more and more aspects of everyday life become mediated by digital platforms, they can determine how people access private or public services (Plantin et al., 2018). Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018) find that platforms, mastering massive user data and algorithms to process data, have become more capable than nation-states in providing public goods and services for citizens, including transportation, accommodation, retail, education, and medical care. Srnicek (2016) notes that what platforms master is not just information or data, but the infrastructures of society. China has witnessed a similar phenomenon, characterised as the "infrastructuralization of platforms and the platformization of society" by Chen and Qiu (2019). Despite China's late engagement in the global digital economy, the state has experienced rapid platformisation, which has attracted scholarly attention. Researchers have used examples of food delivery and ride hailing service, two of the most influential platform-based services, and categorised them as "digital utilities" (Chen and Qiu, 2019; Qiu, Sun and Chen, 2021). This term refers to public services that are specifically mediated by digital platforms and essential for everyday life, like water, gas and electricity.

When privately-owned platform companies become more capable than the state in providing public services in the process of platformisation, the roles of and the relationship between the state and those corporations move to the centre of discussion. Current discussions of platformisation based on various social contexts show that the specificity of Chinese society results in a different power relationship between the state and platforms compared with that in developed countries, represented by the USA. Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018) claim that in the USA, underpinned by individualism and liberalism, platform society is mainly market-driven with minimum state intervention. Nowadays the most influential giant digital companies' market value has exceeded gross national products, making the companies less concerned about state sovereignty and more capable of competing for global power with the state (ibid.). Moore and Tambini (2018) note that the dominance of platforms is not confined to the market but extends to a wider social and political context, dominating how people understand the world. Content recommendations based on algorithms polarize different opinions and spilt society by damaging the public value (ibid.). There have been appeals to slow down the pace of platformisation and government regulations on platforms have been enacted in developed countries, such as the USA (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018).

In China, the story of platformisation is different: it is promoted, sponsored and choreographed by the state (Yu, Xu and Sun, 2022), which always plays a leading role in developing the digital economy. As reviewed in 2.3.2, China actively pursues economic reconstruction, transforming its role from global manufacturer to an innovation nation with technological self-reliance. Through economic reconstruction, the party-state aims to realize its aspiration to engage in the global digital economy and enhance its international competitiveness and solve problems, such as stagnated economic growth and unemployment (Keane and Chen, 2019; Chen, Sun and Qiu, 2020). Digital platforms now come to the fore of Chinese economic reconstruction and the national macro blueprint. Scholars contend that, instead of slowing down, China is thus keen on speeding up platformisation (De Kloet et al., 2019). Chen (2020) argues that the state's role is composite in the process of platformisation, including law and regulation makers and public value promoters. In the state-led platform economy, the power of regulation and constructing public value is always in the hands of the state while the platform companies' businesses must be conditioned to the party-state's leadership. Although the platform companies master the infrastructure of society, they need to appease the central government and show that they will not threaten the leadership and are in line with a series of national goals, such as stimulating economic growth, solving poverty and unemployment, and obtaining international competitiveness. Hou (2017) contends that Chinese platforms also help the government to monitor users' online activities and opinions. This aligns with Dong's (2012) argument that China conducts a state-centric and interventionist approach of Internet governance, with platform companies providing technical support for censorship and surveillance.

China's fast-paced process of platformisation has thus resulted in the transformation of work and employment. Yu, Xu and Sun (2022) claim that China has created a huge underclass since the government implemented its Reform and Opening up policies in the 1970s, advocating urbanization, marketization and globalization. The underclass includes laid-off factory workers, rural-urban migrant peasants without land, and jobless young graduates (ibid.). They have become informal workers without stable employment and required labour insurance. Chen (2018) claims that nowadays prevailing platform capitalism has turned these informal workers into platform labourers, mainly in platform-based service sectors. Considering that those service sectors are so essential and have become a 'digital utility' in everyday life, scholars find that it is important to investigate such working conditions, which will inspire further understandings of platform labour in a broader social context. They have used the examples of

the two most influential platform-based service sectors – food delivery and ride-hailing – to characterise this form of work (Chen and Qiu, 2019; Qiu, Sun and Chen, 2021).

Chen, Sun and Qiu (2020) contend that it is young, migrant and informal workers who dominate China's platform-based on-demand service industries. Chen (2018) claims that platform-based service work increases the vulnerability of informal workers. Firstly, such platform service workers usually have short or temporary on-demand tenures, which brings more instability in work and undermines workers' potential collective bargaining power through capitalism (Sun and Chen, 2021). Secondly, platforms intentionally complicate the employment relationship through their mechanisms and make it hard to identify the actual employers. This means the workers cannot find out who should take charge of protecting their basic rights in work, such as labour insurance. Thirdly, platform service workers are under intersectional labour control, from both human managers and the 'invisible boss' of platform-designed algorithms (Chen, Sun and Qiu, 2020). Those algorithms set parameters such as temporality and gamification, intensifying the pace of work by pushing workers to complete orders as soon as possible. Taking a perspective of temporality, Chen and Sun (2020) contend that this form of work stratifies the value of people's time, which is created by capitalism but accentuated by platform on-demand service work. Customers' time is viewed as more valuable than the workers' and is saved by disenfranchising workers' time. Thus, workers need to spend time doing work that provides little skills development, making it impossible for workers to gain upward social mobility (Sun and Chen, 2021).

The features of platform-based service work above are formed through a networked power relationship among the state, corporations, and platform labourers. Platformisation of work is promoted by the state, driven by the market and enterprises, and practiced by platform users, who are both producers and consumers. The corporations, which design the algorithm-based labour management mechanisms, directly construct the working conditions of platform on-demand service work. Chen (2018) argues that corporations normalize this kind of work as well as the workers' vulnerability by cultivating customers' daily habits of consuming on-demand service on platforms. The platform companies' profit-driven business strategies have obtained tacit approval and sometimes support from the state due to China's macro national development plans. As reviewed in 2.3.2, the state has long-term aspirations, including revitalizing a faltering economy, seeking economic growth, building an innovation nation with

technological self-reliance, and gaining more international competitiveness. Platformisation now has a key role in these plans, thus the state manages to justify and normalize the development of the platform economy and work. Chen (2020) notes that platform on-demand work is justified for its contribution to economic reconstruction, which helps realize the national development, and solving the problems of unemployment and poverty, which may pose threats to social stability. The state's justification presents the basis of China's political system, a view of social harmony and collectivism, according to Keane and Chen (2019). Chen (2020) claims that the platform companies also actively participate in the national programme of poverty relief and job creation, such as hiring informal workers as platform on-demand service staff. Admittedly, the corporations' engagement does contribute to the public good. However, rather than bringing substantial benefits to workers, the companies' goal is to take advantage of informal labour and seek maximum profits and earn more political support from the government by showing how they help combat unemployment and boost economic growth (ibid.).

On the other hand, scholars claim that platform workers are not passive platform users who are subjugated to the platform companies and the state (Chen, 2018; Qiu, Sun and Chen, 2021). Instead, platform workers will respond to the working conditions in the context of platformisation, despite platform mechanisms to consolidate the workers' disadvantageous position (ibid.). For instance, platform workers will make the most of social media for possible resistance to platform mechanism. Qiu (2016) develops the concept of worker-generated content (WGC) to describe how workers create content in order to "inform, mobilize and counter-attack" in their labour struggles. Some food delivery workers document their lives and struggles through social media, which informs wider society and attracts attention from journalists or policy makers (Qiu, 2022). Chen, Sun and Qiu (2020) contend that platform workers organize some formal or informal organizations through social media to survive in the platform economy. They will establish online support groups to share mundane tactics or organize collective actions like protests and strikes (ibid.). Those protests and strikes are unavoidably subject to crack-down by the single-party state. However, Qiu, Sun and Chen (2021) argue that it is also wrong to assume that the state is always against workers' interests. They claim that the state has realized the significance of platform on-demand work as a digital utility, which is highly dependent on human labour (ibid.). Thus, the state aims to make labour sustainable, create stable jobs and obtain stable fiscal income (ibid.). The state provides policy

intervention, requiring platform corporations to redesign algorithms and ensure workers' safety and welfare (ibid.). This shows that the state is sometimes in line with platform workers in their fight against unfair treatment. A networked power relationship is formed between the state, platform companies and platform workers in the context of platformisation. This relationship will be further explored in my case of the digital fitness industry in this thesis.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) considered both the product and labour process in assessing quality of working life. Their method for making these assessments shows they paid attention to both external and internal rewards, rather than only focusing on the property relationship as crude Marxist scholars do. External rewards refer to reasonable wages, workloads and security, while internal rewards include passion for work, social recognition and self-realization. There is a critical position that sees the market as invading and eroding all non-market production, which leads to pessimistic comments about both external and internal rewards. For instance, cultural workers' pursuit of external rewards is interpreted as self-commodification, viewing culture as being contaminated by capitalism and cultural workers as victims. Simultaneously, because internal rewards provide a significant element of motivation in cultural production, the pursuit of internal rewards is criticized for trapping workers into self-exploitative labour. Banks (2007) provides a more positive response to these pessimistic comments, claiming that it is inaccurate to see the market as necessarily eroding power and contaminating culture. He proposes that cultural companies can act as profit-satisfiers instead of pursuing maximum profits, producing for not just for money but also for love. Banks (2007) claims that emphasis on internal rewards, such as love, may lead to self-exploitation. But the pursuit of internal rewards also helps resist the imperative of the market that sees money overweighing ethics. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) suggest a balanced pursuit of both external and internal rewards, believing that external rewards, such as reasonable wages, workloads and security, can secure people's physical well-being so that they do not need to worry about survival. At the same time, internal rewards serve mental well-being and make employees feel that their work is meaningful, helpful for skills improvement, socially recognized, and of benefit to others. They claim that only when external and internal rewards are both obtained does a job become really desirable (ibid.).

My research is situated among studies of cultural and creative labour, and this strand of scholarship helps me to elucidate the creative aspect of labour in my case. My extensive use of Marxist and Foucauldian theoretical frameworks shows a position that would be criticised as

overly pessimistic by some of the scholars cited above. I fully acknowledge some prominent limitations of Marxist and Foucauldian theorists, including neglecting individual workers' subjectivity and agency and suggesting that all labour is subject to capitalism. However, there is no denying that they remain helpful for criticizing capitalism, especially the fundamental mechanism of labour-income exchange. Criticizing that fundamental mechanism and revealing how that system reinforces inequality is the main aim of my research. My research goal is different from some scholars' research aims, discussing quality of working life within capitalism without questioning the reasonableness of capitalism. Thus, my interpretation of Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks is more pessimistic than others'. However, I fully understand that every study has its priority and focus, and no research can be perfect or include everything. I must acknowledge that studies of cultural and creative labour help me to remedy limitations of my composite framework of Marxist and Foucauldian scholarships. For example, some labour is not subject to the market imperative in my case. As Kennedy (2011) contends, it is empirically inaccurate to claim that all workers' labour serves capitalism. My workers also engage in ethical practices during daily work, which I will further discuss in Chapter Six.

2.4.4 Chinese digital fitness industry

In this section, a description of my research setting, the Chinese digital fitness industry, is provided. I summarise how 'fitness', including the body and physical activities, is constructed in Chinese society and how the concept of fitness is industrialised in a digital context. Research gaps are identified by reviewing current research about the Chinese digital fitness industry.

Smith Maguire (2008) claims that the development of commercial fitness in other parts of the world has much in common with the birthplace of this industry, the USA. Scholars find that the Chinese fitness industry also involves the government's strategies for managing population quality and the rise of consumer culture, resulting in delegated individual responsibility for improving physical conditions and investing in the body. The Chinese government cares about the physical conditions of population. This concern about population is shared among governments in other regions and countries, which is analysed by Foucault (2003[1975]) with the term 'biopower'. He argues that unlike disciplinary power that focuses on an individual body, modern government applies a new technology of power – biopower – to regulate the collective body (ibid). Biopower focuses on the massive body of the whole population and treats man not as an individual but as a race and species, building a database to record data

from birth to death, trying to reduce undesired death and disease and predicting future changes in population (ibid). And China is no exception in applying biopower to regulate its population. The Chinese government cares about the physical conditions of population because population health is an indicator of national strength and competitiveness (Lu and Wu, 2015). Physical activities, viewed as an efficient way of improving collective physical conditions, have been emphasised by the state. This emphasis can be identified from relevant guidelines enacted by the government, for instance, the *Outline of the "Healthy China since 2030" Plan* (China State Council, 2021b) and *National Fitness Plan* (China State Council, 2021a).

With the adoption of the Reforming and Opening up policy in the 1970s and the government's concern about improving population health, commercial fitness training was introduced from the USA to China. Alongside this exotic lifestyle, the consumer culture, as reviewed in 2.2.3, behind the fit lifestyles was also introduced to China. Turner (1982) claims that consumer culture is characterised by the mass production of commodity and the rise of service and leisure industries in the market. With the rise of consumer culture, physical activities have been commercialised as a personal consumption choice in China. Simultaneously, it is argued that the reform in 1987 advocated a neoliberal social relationship in various aspects of daily life, which emphasises individualised responsibility (Ji, 2006; Zheng, 2008; Wang, 2018). Subject to this prevailing neoliberal principle, a fit body is constructed as an indicator of self-control, aspiration and success (Doğan, 2015). A desire is constructed to spend money in shaping a fit body (Li *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the body becomes a site for consumption and self-investment. The commercial fitness industry also obtained the government's approval and support because the industry aligns with the government's goal in two aspects: (a) creating a new consumption choice helps boost domestic economic growth by encouraging domestic consumption. For the Chinese government, seeking economic growth by stimulating consumption has been a significant strategy, recorded in its official 13th Five-Year Plan for Development(Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Some scholars characterise Chinese economic development as a consumption-driven economy (Zhang and Fung, 2014; Lardy, 2016). And (b) the commercial fitness industry could help improve the population's health, which would provide qualified labour and military force.

The phenomenon of Chinese digital fitness emerged due to the development of Internet technologies, as mentioned in the last subsection. Digital fitness business in China can be

divided into two types: physical commercial gyms that digitalise their services via Internet technology; and fitness entrepreneurs who start from scratch and develop their businesses online (Peng, Zhong and Li, 2016; Chen, 2020). My research focuses on the latter. Social media platforms in Web 2.0 allow user-to-user communication, providing a space for entrepreneurial companies to launch their marketing. The advancement of algorithms makes advertisements more exposed and targeted to relevant users compared to those in the mass media age (Fumagalli et al., 2018; Scholz, 2017; Zuboff, 2015; Fuchs, 2014). When people are confronted with targeted fitness content daily, they tend to follow the accounts of those fitness companies and become potential customers.

Digital fitness companies then monetise users' online attention and transform followers into customers by providing paid services and content. There are two methods of monetisation: customers can purchase fitness coaches' immediate guidance face-to-face or through mediated communication; Or the customers can access paid fitness guidance videos in fitness apps. Fitness apps are used to collect users' data, provide personalised services by charging premium fees, and insert commercial advertisements. Most scholars who have researched the Chinese digital fitness industry use fitness apps as an example for analysis (for example, Cai, 2016; Wu, 2018; Xie and Liu, 2018). This is because developing Internet applications has been one of the most popular venture capital investment projects in China since the advent of Web 2.0 in 2004 (Zhai and Liu, 2007). When China entered the Web 2.0 era in 2014, alongside mass production of smart devices and communication technologies, many entrepreneurs, including those in the digital fitness industries, launched their own apps to earn venture capital's investment (Chen, 2020). Fitness apps, as an innovative business model and creative way of doing physical activities, has garnered most attention from scholars who pay attention to this industry. Current studies about Chinese digital fitness industries mainly adopt two perspectives: business and sport. Scholars from management and marketing disciplines (for example, Chen, 2016; Shang, 2017; Zhang and Liu, 2017; Zhao and Yu, 2017; Liu, 2018; Wang and He, 2018; Zhang, 2018b) focus on how to maximise monetisation of online users through fitness apps, such as attracting customers, strengthening the companies' competitive power, and improving service quality. Sports researchers (for example, Liu, 2009; Xing, 2014; Wu and Wang, 2015; Cai, 2016; Miao, Li and Yue, 2017) focus on how to improve public health through these fitness apps. The centralised attention to fitness apps indicates that other business models of this industry and other technological approaches to digital fitness have not received enough attention, which reduces the complexity of this area. At the same time, there are no Chinese scholars

investigating the labour behind this industry, not to mention the broad context of platform society. There are some researchers in the English-speaking world who have discussed the labour of digital fitness, but they focus on the app users' labour (Till, 2014; Gidaris, 2019). Little attention has been paid to the waged employees of this industry and how they conduct their labour on platforms. These two gaps will be addressed in this research.

On the one hand, the Chinese digital fitness industry makes it more convenient for people to train. People do not have to go to physical gyms and hire personal trainers. On the other hand, this industry exposes people to more targeted commercial advertisements. Both disciplinary power and consumer culture reach people with less temporal and geographical limitations. This characteristic not only satisfies the demands of people with busy and fragmented modern lives but also helps the Chinese government develop a neoliberal digital economy, in line with the two policies made by Chinese government, 'Internet Plus' (China State Council, 2015b) and 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation'(China State Council, 2015a).

2.5 Conclusion

The overall research aim of my thesis is to conceptualise the working conditions in two Chinese digital fitness companies with a composite framework of Marxist and Foucauldian scholarship. This thesis will not only enrich understandings of contemporary Chinese society but also advance current Marxist and Foucauldian debates about digital labour by introducing a new case. I will not only test the applicability of the two scholarships in this new context, but also explore whether the two can work well together. In this final part of this chapter, I identify gaps in the existing literature, confirm the rationale of this research and contribute to bringing Marxist and Foucauldian theories together in a new and consistent way.

Both Marxist and Foucauldian scholarships are very influential in debates about digital labour in the platform society. Some scholars apply Marx's theories to elucidate how platforms commodify users' behaviour through datafication and accumulation of wealth (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014; Zuboff, 2015; Srnicek, 2017; Fumagalli *et al.*, 2018; Van Doorn and Badger, 2020). They argue that the relationship between the platform and user results in the relationship between the capitalist and worker in Marx's analysis. The former exploits the latter's labour and alienates the latter from their products – the user-generated content and data. Regarding current debates about alienation of digital labour, there are two gaps. Firstly, existing studies

mainly focus on platform users' labour (Krüger and Johanssen, 2014; Fisher, 2015; Ahmad *et al.*, 2021). However, I contend that compared with users, it is more important to investigate waged workers, who sell their labour power as commodity to employers and are central to Marx's critiques of political economy. Secondly, there is a lack of attention paid to means of production, a key element to describe the specific process of alienation and clarify property relationship in the Platform society. When means of production is absent in discussion of digital labour, scholars fail to recognise the limitations of the Marxist framework to elucidate digital labour. This thesis will address these two gaps in the following empirical chapters by focusing on waged employees in the two companies and discuss the property relationship of means of production.

With digital technologies introduced into workplaces, working conditions have experienced some changes, which cannot be fully explained by a Marxist framework. For instance, means of production based on digital technologies are not monopolised by capitalists but accessible to workers. That change allows the platform users to engage in production in the Web 2.0 era. It is possible for users to carry out entrepreneurship through platforms. Simultaneously, technologies have connected people remotely and constructed a networked workplace. This workplace creates a flexible workstyle that blurs work and nonwork. Scholars (McRobbie, 2002a; Ross, 2007; Gregg, 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013) criticise how, in flexible work, workers are subject to employers' surveillance intensively and are expected to always be available to finish work when required. Foucauldian frameworks, involving neoliberalism, discipline and surveillance, are more applicable to conceptualising those characteristics of labour than Marxist theories.

In recognition of the limitations of Marxist theories in elucidating labour, some scholars have introduced Fouculdian concepts to overcome those limitations. They have combined the two frameworks to explain digital labour, such as governmentality scholars' concept of self-exploitation (McRobbie, 2000; Ursell, 2000) or Marxist theorists' concept of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015; Gidaris, 2019). These scholars primarily rely on Marx's theory of exploitation in their critiques of capitalism, which is not the focus of this study. Because the empirical data I have gathered leads me to another strand of Marxist scholarship, the theory of alienation. Although exploitation is not the main concern of my study, I am inspired by those studies in two ways: (a) they provide a robust framework that integrates Marxist and Foucauldian scholarship and shows how the two can be combined; (b) their studies demonstrate

the complexity of the way capitalist capitalism exploits human labour through information and technology. Inequality between labour and capital becomes subtle or even invisible. So, it is important to expose the masks of inequality.

In order to expose the disguise of inequality, I introduce my empirical materials into current discussions of digital labour. I examine the working conditions in two Chinese digital fitness companies that combine digital labour, platform-based entrepreneurship, fitness expertise, and Chinese state-led neoliberal economy. My motivation to conduct this research is based on two main concerns raised by this case. Firstly, the current debates on Chinese digital fitness focus on consumption and overlook the labour behind this industry. Labor is forgotten in this instance, which is a phenomenon that is widely observed. Likewise, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) observe and criticize this phenomenon when they investigate creative labour in the media industry. According to them, in the capitalist society, we produce and consume products for one another, but care little about the experience of each other in the process of production (ibid.). It is significant to understand labour and production because they are the basis of human beings' survival and are closely related to well-being. In my case, I will discuss the relationship between workers and their labour, both in terms of product and process. This focus leads me to Marx's theory of alienation. The second concern pertains to the means of production in the platform economy. Platforms seem to make means of production accessible to all users rather than monopolized by capitalists. Accessible working tools provides the foundation for a neoliberal economy characterized by entrepreneurship and competition. The question arises as to why workers remain propertyless when they can access production means and become entrepreneurs themselves? My concern leads me to develop a composite framework based on Marxist theory of alienation and Foucauldian theory of neoliberalism.

To construct my composite framework, I identify the most relevant categories, which my empirical data speaks to. Those categories are Marx's theory of alienation (1844), Foucault's theory of disciplinary power (1979) and Foucault's discussion about neoliberalism (2008[1979]). I review Marx's analysis and find that it is both the rule of private property and commodification of labour power that results in and reproduces alienated labour. According to Marx (1884), by purchasing the means of production and paying wages to workers, the employers own working tools and workers' labour power, as well as the products of workers' labour as private property. The workers can neither sell products for income nor use means of

production without constraints. They must sell their labour power to employers for salaries to survive and keep experiencing alienation. That is how alienated labour happens and is reproduced.

Regarding Foucault's theories, I review his theory of disciplinary power. Foucault (2016) contends that power indicates a capacity to influence others' action. He defines power as a process of exercising rather than a property to be possessed (ibid). Foucault (1979) argues that when disciplinary power is exercised, individuals are under constant observation (p.175). Their performance is recorded (p.192) and ranked (p.184) and according to the rankings, rewards and punishment are given. Since the observed individuals do not know whether they are under surveillance or not, they gradually internalise the external requirements and conduct self-disciplinary practices to behave as required.

In addition to Foucault's (1979) analysis of disciplinary power, I review his discussion about neoliberalism. Foucault (2008[1979], p.120) claims that competition is a significant neoliberal governing tool to stimulate economic growth. To form a market for competition, the government must make sure that means of production is not monopolised by the minority but is accessible to as many people as possible (ibid). So, many people could engage in entrepreneurship and join competition in the market. Foucault (2008[1979], p.219) finds that neoliberal principles also expand to non-economic areas and construct a certain way in which people interpret life, seeing life as an enterprise and their life experiences, including education, labour, and marriage, as investment in human capital.

With my empirical case, I identify new connecting points between the two theories. I contend that the discussion of means of production is a vital connecting point. Means of production has been a key element in Marx's discussion about alienation but is absent in Marxist debates about digital labour. At the same time, means of production is vital in Foucauldian discussion about neoliberalism. In digital labour, means of production is not monopolised by capitalists. Instead, some of those working tools become accessible to workers, aligning with neoliberal aims for building a market for entrepreneurship and competition. Discussion about means of production could present limitations of the Marxist framework to elucidate current digital labour and allow Foucauldian theories of neoliberalism to remedy those limitations. How I combine the two theories would be presented in the following chapters.

Lastly, my research will enrich understandings of Chinese digital labour and digital economy by introducing this new case study. I focus on the labour of Chinese digital fitness industry, which related studies have paid little attention to. And despite the fact that the majority of existing labour studies have been based on large corporations, I chose to focus on two small companies. So, I will tell the story of the financialization of the digital economy and the dominance of internet oligarchs from a different perspective, that of small entrepreneurial companies. The two small companies' cases in this study will supplement the understandings of how the dominance of oligarch companies has constrained the living space of entrepreneurial companies and made it difficult for small companies to survive. Thus, understandings of the Chinese digital economy as a whole can be enhanced. My research will contribute to presenting the complexity of the Chinese digital economy and how that economy influences workers' lives. I will use this composite framework, that combines Marxist and Foucauldian scholarships, to guide my process of data collection during the fieldwork and apply this composite mechanism to analyse my empirical data in Chapters Four to Six. Before I present my empirical discussion, I introduce and describe my methodology in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology employed in my research. The overall aim of this research is to investigate the working conditions of two digital fitness companies and their employees' interpretation of their labour. I apply a qualitative methodology to investigate digital labour in two digital fitness companies (called FitGo and StartFit in this thesis). Mason (2018) claims that this kind of methodology emphasises the depth, nuance and complexity of a phenomenon. The characteristics of this methodology are suitable to achieve my research aim to provide a detailed description of workers' daily labour and to understand how they view their labour. My main methods of collecting data involve participant observation and in-depth interviews in both offline and online spaces.

In section 3.1, I introduce the overall research aim, including what sparked my interest initially, my specific research questions, and how I identified two companies suitable for being researched and how I gained access to them. Then I present the methods of data collection, including in-depth interviews and online and offline participant observation, and collecting social media/app data in section 3.2. I also explain the reason that I chose these specific methods and how I applied them to collect data. After introducing the process of data collection, I followed, I describe how I transcribed and translated the scripts and then analysed my empirical data in section 3.3. In section 3.4, I discuss ethical issues of this research. In the last section 3.5, I give a conclusion of this chapter and reflect on my methodology.

3.1 Research aim

As I noted in Chapter One, my previous experiences as a consumer made me aware of a new industry born in the Chinese platform society. People's transformation of identity from consumers to employees fuelled my interest in the working conditions of the Chinese digital fitness industry, which has not been sufficiently investigated in existing studies. To address this gap, I conducted this research to understand the business model, divisions of labour, and workers' interpretations of their daily work and fitness training. To enrich the discussion about the Chinese digital economy and digital labour, I selected two small companies that initially piqued my research interests to answer my research questions. Most current studies about Chinese digital companies focus on giant companies in certain industries (Qiu, 2009; Xia, 2014; Dong, 2016). But the stories of big companies could only depict part of the industry and

inevitably neglect that part of the that industry, which consists of those small-sized companies. My research takes small companies as a research subject to supplement discussion about the ignored part of the Chinese digital economy and labour based in small corporations. This contributes to showing a complete ecosystem of the digital economy in China and presenting workers' labour situation in small businesses, which has previously been neglected by scholars. To achieve these research goals, I created detailed research questions, identified case studies, and gained access to these companies, as introduced below.

3.1.1 Research questions

As noted in Chapter One, the overall research question is: what are the working conditions in the two Chinese digital fitness companies?

The sub-questions are as follows:

(1) Whose and what labour are engaged in the digital fitness companies?

(2) How do workers interpret their labour?

(3) How is the body constructed in both offline and digital fitness contexts and how fitness trainings influence workers' labour?

(4) What specific elements of the Chinese context can enrich current understandings of digital labour?

(5) To what extent are Marxist and Foucauldian analyses helpful for theorising these conditions?

To answer these research questions, I selected two small digital fitness companies as cases for my research and used qualitative methods to collect empirical data. I am particularly interested in how the combination of digital technologies, fitness expertise, and the features of the Chinese context enrich the existing debates about digital labour. In the course of my analysis of these cases, I was able to examine the extent to which Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks can be applied together with this new case. Before I introduce my methods in detail, I will describe how I identified the cases and gained access to the two companies

3.1.2 Identifying cases

One day in 2015, I, a user of Weibo since 2010, noticed that some Weibo users were sharing free fitness knowledge and reposting each other's content. At that time, I was an undergraduate student who was trying to lose weight and searching for relevant knowledge online. I followed several accounts about fitness, two of which belonged to the companies on which this research is based. From their accounts, I learned a lot about fitness as well as the business model of digital fitness. Those online fitness influencers monetised their followers' attention by selling products, including paid fitness services and content (Li *et al.*, 2018). Paid service refers to coaches giving immediate guidance, online and offline. Paid content entails companies charging fees for fitness guidance videos and articles. In 2015 at the beginning of the Chinese Web 2.0 era, developing apps was a very popular entrepreneurial project, making many digital companies choose fitness apps as a product to provide paid content (Chen, 2020).

I have been a consumer of both paid services and content, having joined online training WeChat groups and downloaded fitness apps. It was the experience of StartFit's online fitness service that enabled me to get to know some staff members and drew my attention to the labour behind this industry. After paying membership fees, I was invited to join the online training WeChat group by the service staff and started my 42-day training project. In this group, there was one coach who made training plans for everyone, and two coaching assistants who supervised all the trainees' exercise and diet. I was required to report on my life six times a day to the coaching assistants, sending pictures of my three meals and my exercises, showing the time I spent sleeping and drinking stipulated amount of water.

I can still clearly remember that I felt exhausted and impatient about the training requirements in the first two weeks. But when I began to experience some weight loss, I started to obey the rules proactively. I was surprised how this group made changes to my body without any in-person contact. During the daily communication with the three staff, I was surprised to learn that they had all been customers of the company who had also wished to lose weight and have their exhaustion transformed into a passion for fitness. Due to their diligent performance in training, they had been recruited as waged employees. Their intriguing stories sparked my interest in the labour behind this newly emerging industry.

Reading academic research about this industry, I soon found common limitations among existing studies. Firstly, most research used a business perspective (Shang, 2017; Liu, 2018; Wang and He, 2018) or sports perspective (Liu, 2009; Cai, 2016; Miao, Li and Yue, 2017) and little attention was paid to labour from a sociological perspective. Secondly, the researchers usually based their research on the most influential and giant companies (Zhao and Yu, 2017; Zhang, 2018b, 2018a). The focus of these studies inevitably ignored the rest part of the industry which consisted of small corporations. The story of small companies is an indispensable part of understanding the whole ecosystem of this industry. Lastly, researchers' shared interests in big companies made them focus only on the business models of these giant corporations – developing fitness apps. They did not note other business models in small companies, such as online training projects that I consumed with StartFit. Existing studies use business or public health perspectives to investigate fitness apps developed by the big companies. Thus, I decided to conduct the present research, concentrating on the labour situation and investigating small companies' business models.

I selected the companies for my case study from those digital fitness entrepreneurs whose Weibo accounts I follow. I have followed a group of fitness online influencers on Weibo since 2015 when there was an online fitness boom on this social media platform. Some of those Internet celebrities started up business at the time. To select the researched companies, I identified those online influencers who had established companies, with their corporations still in business. I collected publicly available information about those digital fitness companies. I referred to the criteria of medium- and small-sized companies in the ICTs industry, described by the Chinese government (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology Joint Enterprise, 2011), and identified which companies belonged to the category of small business. It has been stipulated that Internet corporations with fewer than 100 employees and annual income of less than 10 million RMB (around 1.2 milion pounds) can be called small Internet companies. Since most companies did not make their financial situation public, I selected targeted companies mostly depending on number of employees.

I had four companies on my list, including StartFit, whose online fitness service I had previously used. I chose StartFit as one of my cases because workers in this company inspired my research interests and it was the first company that created online fitness training projects through WeChat, an alternative business model to fitness apps. In case of potential problems in gaining access to StartFit, I also needed to identify some back-up companies. I prioritised a

company located in the same city as StartFit – Shanghai – for two main reasons. Firstly, Shanghai is China's financial and commercial centre, with a relatively richer atmosphere of entrepreneurship and competition in the market compared to other cities (Chen and Chen, 2015). Thus, I could experience and explore the macro context of the Chinese neoliberal economy more thoroughly. Secondly, if I could access more than one company I could make comparisons between the two companies. When carrying out the comparison, it is useful for both to be in Shanghai so that the companies and workers face similar working environments. This concern is similar to, as Bryman (2012, p.51) contends, the method of controlling other variables in quantitative studies so that researchers can analyse certain variables. By ensuring the companies were in the same city, I tried to control the external environment and focus on the internal differences of the two companies. Thus, FitGo was left on my list of potential research companies. I kept the other two companies in other cities as a back-up. Compared to StartFit's business model, FitGo's has both similarities and differences. FitGo holds online fitness training projects and has developed its own fitness apps. FitGo was therefore identified as a suitable back-up case if I failed to get access to StartFit and could also allow me to make comparisons with StartFit if I gained access to both companies.

3.1.3 Access

When I prepared my research proposal, I realise that it would not be easy to investigate the situation of labour in companies, especially if I took an overt role in conducting participant observation and informed my participants of my identity as a researcher during fieldwork. My decision about taking an overt role will be discussed in the section on data collection. As I mentioned in the last subsection, I made some back-up plans if my request for access was rejected.

I wrote a formal letter, which included my research aim and a request to join the company as an intern to conduct the research. I applied for an intern position persuaded by the argument that to carry out an institution-based study, the researcher needs a role and should become part of an organisation (Bryman, 2012; Mason, 2018). I ensured the narratives about my concern about situation of labour would not offend the potential participants, leading them to reject my request. For example, I did not directly say that I wished to explore unequal employment relationships and alienation in the company but said that I was going to try to understand employees' daily work and fitness training.

I flew to Shanghai to network with potential participants before I formally started my fieldwork in 2019. During that two-week trip, I contacted the gatekeepers of the two target companies, FitGo and StartFit. They granted me access. I also made acquaintances with some staff working in different digital fitness companies. These networking experiences not only allowed me to make some back-up plans but also enriched my understanding of this industry, including some new business models.

I first networked with former StartFit online staffers Betty and Ruby, who provided my training four years ago. They had left StartFit and found new work, and I recruited them as interviewees personally. Through Betty's introduction, I managed to contact online team manager Autumn through WeChat. Autumn became the gatekeeper of StartFit: she said she was able to make decisions on behalf of the CEO and did not introduce me to the CEO in person. When I sent my request letter, Autumn said she was concerned about the company's business interests, so she would not let me become an intern. Similar with Xia's discussion (2014), the business interest of the company is a common concern among gatekeepers in company-based research. Finally, Autumn said she could designate four to five employees for me to interview. Thus, I secured only limited access to StartFit. I decided to keep this case and make the most of the access that I got.

I then paid a visit to the FitGo company. By coincidence I encountered FitGo CEO Max in the elevator. I knew his face because he is an online fitness influencer whom I follow. I spent five minutes introducing myself as both a PhD student and a long-term follower of his content. He allowed me to join the company as an intern and gave me his personal contact information. Through the CEO's introduction, I got to know social media team leader Claire. We made an appointment that I would start my fieldwork in five months. I thus secured full access to FitGo.

The two gatekeepers gave me different levels of access to their companies. With their formal introduction, the employees in two companies– my participants – were informed of my research. As Bryman (2012, p.151) claims, gatekeepers build a bridge between the research settings and the researcher. However, securing access is not a one-off task. Bryman (2012, p.439) argues that it is an ongoing process. Even though I had obtained physical access to FitGo with the gatekeeper's approval, I still needed to get social access to participants, especially as I took an overt role as a researcher. When I conducted participant observation at FitGo, it was

unavoidable that my participants differentiated me from themselves as an outsider of the company from the beginning. Van Manen (2011) argues that 'being researched' may cause participants to become self-conscious, and they may unwittingly behave unnaturally and establish a front.

To reduce the potential influence of the social front built by the employees in FitGo, I tried to maximise my role as one of them and limit my role as a researcher. I arrived and left the office on time and joined many of their daily activities, including group meetings and weekly meetings, after getting their permission. I noticed that some fit employees usually exercised in the office, so I joined them to work out every day. During and after exercise, I had opportunities to talk with them, and some shared with me their fitness expertise and personal training experiences. At the same time, I also found that the employees had the habit of sharing snacks with colleagues in the afternoon, so I also shared some refreshments with them. These daily activities enabled me to reduce the influence of their social front, and they gradually became used to my existence. After describing how I gained access to the companies, I will introduce my process of data collection in the next section.

3.2 Data collection

My methods for data collection included participant observation, semi-structured interviews and collecting social media/app data. They comprised both face-to-face interaction and mediated communication on social media platforms. I spent four months conducting participant observation on site in the FitGo office and joined the two companies' online training groups. Twenty-three employees were interviewed across the two companies. Since this research is about digital fitness companies, I focused on their products underpinned by digital technologies. Therefore, I collected digital content, the companies' content on two social media platforms, Weibo and WeChat, and data from the FitGo company's app. I say more about each of these methods below.

3.2.1 Participant observation

(a) Taking an overt role

Bryman (2012) discusses the similarities and subtle differences between ethnography and participant observation. He points out that both terms refer to the fact that researchers immerse themselves in a social setting for an extended period, observing researched subjects' behaviour,

listening to or joining their conversation and asking questions (2012, p.432). Bryman thinks ethnography is a more inclusive term and has richer connotations than participant observation. He says ethnography includes other methods of gathering data, such as collecting documents and interviews, and refers to the written outcome of the research (ibid, p.432). To avoid conflating different methods within the term ethnography, I use participant observation and interview separately in this thesis.

Brannan and Oultram (2012, p. 310) argue that the unique advantage of participant observation is that this method allows the researchers to understand certain human experiences, such as cultural and emotional life experiences, which cannot be explored in-depth with other methods. The participant observer's role can be generally categorised as an overt and covert role. Bryman (2012, p.433) claims that the former role means the researcher informs the researched subjects of their identity as a researcher, while the latter role does not disclose the purpose of doing research.

The two roles have their advantages and disadvantages. Bryman points out that taking a covert role could make it easier to gain access than having an overt role (ibid, p.433). Xia (2014) takes a covert role to study labour in Chinese internet companies because she thinks that role can help her observe the participants' more genuine behaviour. But a covert role also means that the researchers must fully become part of the organisation, leaving less time for them to record their observations (ibid, p.436). Walsh (1998, p. 222) argues that a covert role may also result in the risk of 'going native', whereby the researchers may lose their academic position and critical distance from their subjects. More importantly, the covert role is criticised most for its ethical problems since it involves deceiving the subjects. By contrast, taking an overt role does not raise such ethical concerns. However, it is also not that easy for the researchers to gain access, especially to a closed institution (Bryman, 2012, p.433). As I noted in the last section, even after obtaining physical access, the researcher may still be viewed as an invader or outsider, and they must try to break the social front built by participants (Van Maanen, 2011). Atkinson (1981, p. 135) notes that the distinction between the two roles is not always very clear. Even though the researcher obtains access with an overt role, not everyone involved in the study fully knows their identity as a researcher. The researcher may need to change roles when facing different participants. This was necessary in my research, as I explain below.

I took an overt role when I sought access to StartFit and FitGo. I made this choice for several reasons. While researched subjects may behave more naturally and not build a front when facing a covert researcher, a researcher with an overt role can limit and minimise the influence of the front. It is methodologically significant to take some time to gain access and build trust to explore how it is possible to investigate the situation of labour in a company-based study. At the same time, I think it is important to reflect on the notion of participants 'genuine behaviour'. There is no such thing as genuine or unmediated behaviour, no matter whether researchers take an overt or covert role: the presence of a researcher will always influence how participants behave towards them, to a greater or lesser extent (Qaddo, 2019). I preferred to take an overt role since this could generate the participants' reactions to my presence and the fact that they were being investigated. I prioritised ethical concerns over a concern with (so-called) 'genuine behaviour' and wanted to respect my participants' right to be informed that they were the subjects of my research. When my participants and I treated each other in a frank way and built trust, I was able to collect valuable data.

(b) Observing employees' daily work

My overt role in participant observation of the FitGo office brought about disadvantages and advantages. The disadvantage was that the CEO and the employees did not treat me like an intern and part of the company – they did not give me any substantial assignments. It was not easy for me to know their labour thoroughly without engaging deeply in their daily work. I needed to interview the employees and let them describe their labour in detail. But at the same time, this situation brought advantages: I would not 'go native' easily. Going native means observers "lose their sense of being a researcher and become wrapped up in the worldview of the people they are studying" (Bryman, 2012, p.445). I, however, could maintain my identity as an observer and kept a critical distance from the workers I investigated.

Because the participants in FitGo did not treat me as an intern, I had enough time to write my field notes. Bryman says that fieldnotes help solve the frailties of human memory and that ethnographers can both summarise events and record initial thoughts in their fieldnotes (2012, p.447). Emerson et. al. (2011) argue that fieldnotes can reconstitute the observed world in a certain way and allow the researcher to review and repeatedly reflect. When I wrote my fieldnotes, I followed Mason's (2018, p.159) guidance that the researcher must have a self-conscious sense of what I really need to know and kept my research questions in mind. I recorded the employees' working times and breaks, the deployment of space in the office,

divisions of labour, responses to allocated assignments, interactions with colleagues, anything that I found related to my research, and my own initial thoughts about the phenomenon. My field notes became a rich resource of data when I carried out my analysis.

During my participant observation in the FitGo office, the CEO put me in the social media team. The company was located in a two-floor office, with most teams seated on the ground floor. Only the finance staff and the CEO had their independent offices on the first floor, as shown in Figure 3.1 below.
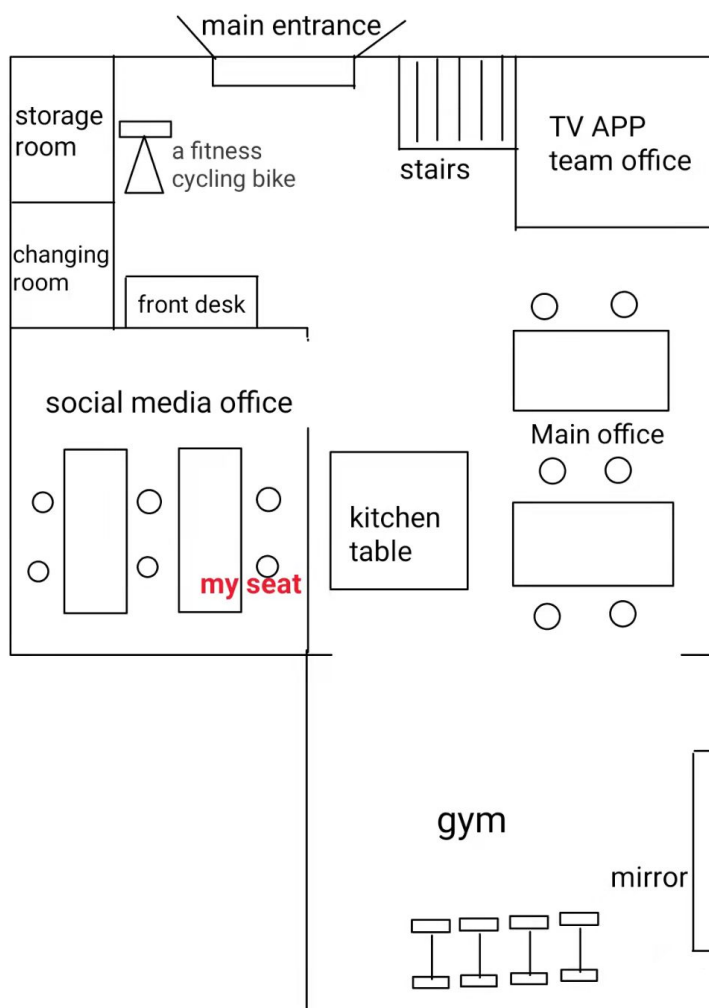
Figure 3.1: The ground floor of FitGo

Source: fieldnote

The social media team leader Claire allocated a desk to me in the social media office. My position allowed me to observe all the team members' activities. Behind my seat was a glass wall. Outside that glass wall was the kitchen and the main office. The main office is shared by the video maker, two coaches, an administrative staff, a customer service staff, and the programming team. I could hear their conversations very clearly from where I was sitting. Thanks to the relatively open space of the office and the small-sized company, I could observe most workers' daily practices from my seat. As I mentioned above, I engaged in their leisure activities, such as sharing snacks at afternoon teatime and joining them for exercise, for icebreaking and making myself seem part of the company. I also sought opportunities to join their daily work.

I observed that workers seldom talked with each other in the office. Instead, the Chinese social media platform WeChat played a dominant role in their daily communication. WeChat enables both one-to-one chat and group chats. With a chat group member's invitation, I could join WeChat groups. I turned to Claire and made a request to join the social media team's working group and the company's big group so that I could continue my research. I promised that I would exit the group when my research was finished. Observing the companies' group enabled me to find out more about their daily work. When I saw notices about meetings, I turned to the meeting holders and asked to join. Those meetings enabled me to get acquainted with workers in other teams. At the same time, I added those colleagues as WeChat friends through the working group, so that I could conduct one-to-one online communication with them. Having the colleagues' personal WeChat contact helped me to recruit interviewees further. I will return to this point in the next section.

Being a WeChat group member helped me in breaking the front. I turned to the CEO and staffer Ann, who was in charge of the online training groups, and requested to join an online training group for further observation. With their permission, I was invited into one group and joined a one-month training project, as discussed below.

(c) Observing in online training groups

With help of Ann, the customer service worker in online fitness training groups, I joined one training group for a one-month observation. Ann took charge of organising these training projects, contacting clients, nutritionists and online coaches, and gathering them into a WeChat group. The group allows the clients to report their exercise, have Q&As with the coaches and

receive notifications from the staff. Additionally, Ann organised small groups for every trainee, involving a nutritionist, coach, and trainee, to protect the customers' privacy. The customers usually share their private information, such as diet, body data and difficulties encountered in shaping their bodies. The staff provide personalised help and support.

After talking with the CEO and Ann, we agreed that I could only be included in the big group to protect the customers' privacy. I had to take a covert role in the big group in case an overt role made the customers want to quit the training group. I needed to prioritise the company's business interests so that I could conduct further research smoothly. The trainees in the big group thus did not know my identity as a researcher.

I also approached Autumn, the gatekeeper of the other company, StartFit, for permission to conduct my participant observation in the online training groups that had raised my research interests initially. The data collected in the online training groups of the two companies could then be analysed in comparative perspective. Since Autumn had rejected my application to be an intern, I did not anticipate she would agree to invite me to a group free of charge. She could have said that this was not allowed due to the company's stipulation. I asked her whether it was possible for me to join a group as a lay customer and pay the membership fees. Autumn thought it was fine if I just purchased their online service to join the group. She also helped inform online coaches and coaching assistants of my research before I join the online training group. With the experience of accessing FitGo's online training groups, I discussed with Autumn whether I needed to take a covert role with the consumers – she agreed that I should, in case I influenced the trainees' experiences.

Thus, I joined the two online training groups with an overt role (to staff) and a covert role (to customers). Considering that this research focuses on employees rather than users, the subjects that I mainly observed were the workers who knew my identity as a researcher. The customers' activities helped enrich my understanding of the workers' labour and products. In these online training group, I observed the staff's working time, labour process and their interaction with users. Whilst I did not inform the customers of my identity as a researcher, I conducted my research ethically when I collected data about users' activity. This will be further discussed in the ethics section below.

3.2.2 In-depth interviews

Considering my research aims to conceptualise the situation of labour in two companies, I must provide detailed descriptions of working conditions there. In FitGo, where I conducted my participant observation, I did not fully engage in the workers' daily work, which prevented me from thoroughly understanding their labour merely through observation. In StartFit, I did not get access to the office and could not observe the employees' work. That situation determined that I must conduct in-depth interviews with participants to obtain an understanding of their work, including divisions of labour and the labour process, from their descriptions. Seale (Seale, 2004, p. 202) argues that qualitative interviews enable researchers to investigate what cannot be observed, including the respondents' feelings and thoughts behind their behaviour. This characteristic of in-depth qualitative interviews allowed me to collect data and to answer questions about how the workers interpret their daily work and fitness training. For further analysis of why the workers construct certain interpretation of their labour, it is also significant to know my participants' background information, and such personal information could only be obtained through interviews. As Kvale (1994) contends, in-depth interviews generate rich information about the respondents – for instance, their previous life experiences.

Fielding (1993) categorises interviews as three types according to the way questions are asked: standardised or structured interviews, semi-standardised interviews, and non-standardised interviews. Bryman (2012, p. 208) claims that the first type is usually applied in quantitative studies, whereby the researchers always ask the same questions to different interviewees to control variables for future analysis. The other two kinds of interviews are commonly used in qualitative studies (ibid, p. 469).

According to Fielding (1993), in unstructured interviews, researchers usually have some relevant topics to talk about with the respondents, known as an interview guide. The researchers can freely adjust how they ask the questions and even discuss them with the interviewees. The semi-structured interview, characterised by Bryman (2012), lies between the structured and unstructured interview. Compared with the former, the questions in a semi-structured interview are outlined in advance but are endowed with more flexibility. The researcher can adjust questions and respond to interviewees according to their answers (2012, p. 716). The interviewers may make questions around certain topics, which are similar to those in an interview guide. But generally, the questions are asked with similar wording (2012, p. 471).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for my research. This method is meaningful for comparing different respondents within the same group by asking similar questions and allows the researcher to stay open-minded according to the special characteristics of each subject (Riessman, 2003). With the clear purpose of understanding workers' labour and body training, I opted to use semi-structured interviews. To workers in the same company who shared similar working environments, I asked questions using similar wording. Considering that workers have different divisions of labour, I also adjusted my questions according to their duties and responsibilities.

To thoroughly understand the business models of the two companies, I needed to talk with the employees in different teams. I conducted purposive sampling to recruit my interviewees. I first interviewed the gatekeepers, who were also my key informants. They generally introduced the business model and divisions of labour in the two companies, which helped familiarise me with the potential interviewees. I had planned to interview five people in each team but found that this was impossible in these small companies, as some teams had fewer than five members. I thus tried to interview as many FitGo employees as possible. I built trust and networked with different colleagues during my participant observation there and sent out invitations for interviews. In the case of StartFit, I connected personally with two previous employees, Betty and Ruby, and interviewed them. With limited access to the StartFit company, I could only interview five employees designated by manager Autumn. I asked Autumn to choose staff with different roles. I ultimately recruited 16 interviewees at FitGo, including 15 workers and the CEO, and five workers at StartFit and two previous StartFit employees. The basic information about my respondents is set out in Table One. The detailed divisions of labour and specific labour content of different teams are presented in Chapter Four alongside the introduction to the companies' products.

Name	Gender	Age	Company	Division of labour	Type of interview
Max	Male	42	FitGo	CEO	Offline
Claire	Female	29	FitGo	Social media worker	Online
Zoe	Female	27	FitGo	Social media worker	Offline
Steve	Male	29	FitGo	Social media worker	Offline
Lan	Female	26	FitGo	Social media worker	Offline

Don	Male	42	FitGo	Programmer	Online
Falling	Male	27	FitGo	Programmer	Offline
John	Male	36	FitGo	Programmer	Online
Ann	Female	34	FitGo	Customer service staff	Offline
Tae	Male	34	FitGo	Online coach	Online
Lee	Male	30	FitGo	Online coach	Online
Hua	Female	31	FitGo	HR manager	Offline
Van	Male	23	FitGo	Video maker	Offline
Yan	Female	20	FitGo	Image designer	Offline
Alan	Male	29	FitGo	TV-end fitness app manager	Offline
Alice	Female	29	FitGo	Finance staff	Offline
Ruby	Female	34	Self-employment	Previous StartFit online coach	Offline
Betty	Female	35	Self-employment	Previous StartFit Online coach	Offline
Autumn	Female	38	StartFit	Online team manager	Offline
Lily	Female	28	StartFit	Coaching assistant	Online
Joyce	Female	31	StartFit	Social media worker	Online
Ben	Male	24	StartFit	Offline coach	Online
Jimmy	Male	25	StartFit	Online coach	Online

Table 3.1: Interviewees' basic information

I conducted both offline and online interviews. For offline interviews, I chose settings following Benney and Hughes's (1956) contention that the more relaxed the interviewees will feel, the more accurate their responses will be. At FitGo, I found a nice setting, the meeting room on the first floor, where a private one-to-one conversation could be conducted. From my observation of their daily schedule, workers spent one to two hours commuting between their workplace and home. They usually rushed home, and it was unrealistic to invite them to do the interviews after finishing their daily work. I thought people would not want to talk with me for another one to two hours after daily work. And it would also bother them sparing half a day during weekends to talk with me. Some of my participants told me they were not always occupied by work and might be free during work hours. I thus sent invitations to interviewees during office hours and informed them in advance of how long an interview might last. All of

the face-to-face interviews with FitGo employees were completed during office hours in the company's meeting room. For offline interviews with StartFit workers, I let my respondents choose the setting and time.

The reason for conducting online interviews was the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown in China at the beginning of 2020. No employee was able to go back to the company; everyone was working from home. I sent out interview invitations through WeChat. My interviewees preferred making audio rather than video calls with WeChat, because that made them feel more comfortable talking with me. Therefore, my online interviews were similar to telephone interviews. Bryman (2012, p.488) notes that the most evident disadvantage of a telephone interview is losing information from facial expression and body language, which may reveal interviewees' true attitudes and feelings. Other than this drawback, Bryman finds that there is no obvious difference between the face-to-face and the telephone interview in terms of generating replies. This was also confirmed in my research. I did not find significant differences between the data collected from audio calls and from in-person interviews. Because I have built trust with those employees in the office before the pandemic. Some very in-depth data, such as the companies' income, was collected from mediated communication, which also manifests a unique advantage of telephone interviews. Bryman (ibid, p.488) claims that telephone interviews may be more effective in explorations of sensitive topics, because the respondents may "feel less distressed about answering when the interviewer is not physically present". At the same time, online interviews are also advantageous in terms of saving time and expenses. When I added WeChat friends with the five StartFit staff designated by the gatekeeper Autumn, I found they all worked remotely in different cities. Due to the pandemic, it has been more difficult to travel in China than before. Online interviews helped me avoid unanticipated problems, reduce costs and finish the research on time.

The questions in interviews generally involved why and how they had chosen their current jobs, their products and labour process, fitness consumption experiences, and motivation and interpretation of their labour and body training. As I am a lone researcher, I used digital recorders to facilitate storage of the interviews. Given the possibility of a technical fault leading to the loss of data, two recorders were used simultaneously. I informed my participants that our conversations would be recorded and obtained their consent to make the recordings. On average, interviews lasted one hour. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese. I will discuss transcription and translation in the data analysis section.

As a method of collecting data from people's narratives, interviews have some limitations. Fielding (1993, p.148) claims that interviewees may "lie or elaborate on the true situation to enhance their esteem, cover up discreditable actions or for any of a whole gamut of motives". I found some interviewees avoided answering certain questions, such as about personal income and expenses. One respondent asked me to turn off the digital recorders to answer some questions about her boss. Additionally, as Hesmondhalgh and Baker note (2010), interviewees may be influenced by the researcher's leading questions and their interpretation of certain matters would change over time. Considering these disadvantages of interviews, I also conducted participant observation and collected data from social media and the fitness app. Therefore, I can supplement data from interviews and reduce the influence of the limitations of interviews.

3.2.3 Digital content on social media and the fitness app

The products of the two digital fitness companies are service and content underpinned by digital technologies, including posts on the companies' social media platforms, service through WeChat groups, and the fitness apps. Digital content, or content posted on platforms, are indispensable sources of empirical data to help fully understand the business model of digital companies and their employees' daily labour. For StartFit, where I only obtained limited access, it was important to collect data from the company's social media to enrich my understandings of this company's working condition. I collected digital content from two social media platforms, Weibo and WeChat, and the FitGo fitness app. I selected Weibo and WeChat because they are the earliest user-generated content (UGC) platforms where the CEOs of StartFit and FitGo became Internet fitness celebrities and started up their businesses. Weibo and WeChat are still the two most influential social media platforms in China, enabling the entrepreneurs to attract and monetise users' attention. I collected data from the app because it is the product of FitGo employees' daily labour and would help me understand the divisions of labour and the workers' labour process. Simultaneously, data from the app also informs me of how a fit body is constructed in a digital context to answer my research questions. Before introducing the data that I collected from digital platforms, I present an overview of the functions of those platforms.

Weibo is a platform with functions similar to those of Twitter. People can post text, images, videos and URLs and follow and unfollow other users' accounts. It is a relatively open space, since people are allowed to make comments, click likes and repost anyone's content, no matter whether they follow that account or not. Using the 'block' function, a user can escape undesired interaction. By using hashtags to highlight key words, people can initiate and join discussions with other people in the user community. An example Weibo post is seen below.

Figure 3.2: A Weibo post
Source: StartFit's Weibo account

Translation of the text in the Figure 3.2: Improve the imperfect self rather than wasting time admiring perfect others. Good morning!

And this post is Reposted 14 times; commented on by four users; liked by 68 users.

Compared with Weibo, WeChat is a relatively private space where only WeChat contacts can interact with each other. Adding a new WeChat contact usually requires the person's permission. WeChat mainly provides an instant messaging service for one-to-one and many-to-many communications through the Chats function. Chats work like WhatsApp and iMessage. Users can send text, images, audio and videos or make video and audio calls in Chats with their WeChat friends. The Chats function allowed me to communicate with the respondents in this research as well as carrying out online participant observation in chat groups, as described above. WeChat also contains a social space similar to Facebook. The Moments function allows users to post text, images and videos. Only WeChat friends can click likes, write comments and see the shared WeChat friends' interaction in Moments.

Besides the communication based on acquaintance networks in Chats and Moments, there is a specific channel for one-to-many non-acquaintance communication called Subscription. Social media workers in two companies create content on WeChat mainly through Subscription.

Individual users and institutions can apply for a Subscription account and post content on this channel. Creators can mass message content to all their followers. Subscription content could be text, images, videos, audio and articles. Articles are the most frequently chosen form by the creators because they can contain all the former elements and there is no limitation on lengths. WeChat Subscription articles are different from Weibo posts. According to Ye (2020), through the one-to-many channel Subscription, the creators can put out in-depth articles and establish a closer and more stable rapport with their Subscription readers than Weibo followers. An account could post a series of articles at once, with the first article in the most obvious position. Below is an example showing the FitGo account's daily publication of articles' topics. On May 15th, 2020, the social media worker posted three articles together.

Figure 3.3: A list of WeChat Subscription articles' topics
Source: FitGo's Subscription account

Translation of the text in the Figure 3.3:

15/05/20 4.31 pm

First article: How many Chinese girls have been harmed by weight-loss pills?

Second article: 90% of people use the wrong method to remove undesired fat under the arms.

Third article: Some small habits for improving your skin.

A WeChat Subscription account can usually post more than one article once every day. The first article has the largest cover image and the most striking topics. The prominent position of the first article determines that it would get the most users' attention. The social media worker usually puts the content that they most want to convey to users in the first post. They usually try to use short but eye-catching topics to attract the readers' attention to the first article quickly, otherwise, followers may not click the topic and read the full article. Considering the most

influential position of the first posts, every day I collected the first article posted by the FitGo and StartFit accounts for further analysis. When readers click the article topic, they can read the full article, including text, images, videos, audio and URLs. The end of the article displays the number of reads, likes and shares related to that article.

The FitGo fitness app has composite functions, including fitness guidance videos, an exercise timer, running recorders, fitness articles (the same as those posted on WeChat Subscription) and a user community for customers to share their exercises and diets. A detailed description of those functions and how they construct a fit body is offered in Chapter Four.

In the face of so much digital content on these three digital platforms – Weibo, WeChat and apps – it was important to identify which items would be essential for my research and needed to be collected as data. With my research questions in mind, I collected data that would help me understand the employees' working time, labour processes and labour outcomes. I decided to focus on the posts on these three digital platforms over three months (November, February and May) to represent the whole year, since methods of marketing fitness products may vary in different seasons. For observations on the fitness app, I tried different functions and analysed how those functions trained customers' bodies. I also collected users' postings on the app user community to see their responses to the digital fitness products.

On the two social media platforms, Weibo and WeChat, I used an API to automatically collect data from around 1,000 Weibo postings and manually collected 181 WeChat articles. I paid attention to their content and to the time and frequency of uploading content, which showed the social media workers' products and work intensity. I also collected and calculated the monthly number of postings, comments, likes and shares of Weibo postings and WeChat Subscription articles and made comparisons between the two companies' accounts. Those numbers generally quantify the users' response, representing how much user attention they obtained and how influential an account was. I collected the users' comments and specifically focused on the users' comments that social media workers replied to, as the interaction between customers and employees helps with understanding workers' daily labour.

3.3 Data analysis

Since my research took place in China and I am a Chinese researcher, I recorded my empirical data in the local language. The digital content from Chinese digital platforms were inevitably written in Chinese. I also wrote my fieldnotes in Chinese because, firstly, Chinese is the language that my participants used to conduct daily communication, and I needed to record their original conversations, and, secondly, using my mother tongue helped me to record things more quickly and precisely. All interviews were also conducted in Chinese before I transcribed my digital recordings. Rather than translate all interviews into English, I chose the relevant parts of data to translate and quote in this thesis.

I chose thematic analysis to inform my empirical chapter, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006), who claim that thematic analysis interprets "experiences, meanings and the reality of participants" from a constructionist perspective. This analytical method acknowledges both how individuals interpret the meaning of their life experiences and how the social context influences their interpretation (ibid). With this method, researchers can reflect on reality and reveal the substance behind the surface of the reality (ibid). Thematic analysis endows me with the flexibility to determine themes, letting themes constantly emerge during the process of analysis.

I first input all my empirical data into the software NVivo, which helped me to store and organise my data. After the process of transcription, I familiarised myself with my data as much as possible. I read my data on three levels: literally, interpretatively and reflexively. I also read the initial reflections that I had written during the process of transcription and then supplemental comments when I found some new points that were intriguing and significant to answer my research questions. Then I created codes from my literature review, research questions and the presumed structure of the thesis. Then I used NVivo to code and organise my empirical data. Coding is an ongoing process, and I continued to make adjustments during the writing up process.

I read the data that was categorised into different groups of codes in NVivo. The advantage of NVivo is that I could always find the origins of the coded data so that I did not need to worry that my interpretation of the data was imprecise due to the lack of initial context. I could read data coded in the same group together, which helped in forming themes. I did not need to worry

that those coded data were divorced from their context, because NVivo enabled me to go back to the original context if required. Reading the coded data helped me find relationships between various codes and create codes on different levels (Braun and Clarke, 2006). By making different levels of codes, I gradually formed themes. After that, I reviewed and refined the themes with the dual criteria coined by Patton (1990): internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. I ensured that there was no overlapping content of different themes. I double-checked whether coded data in one theme belonged to the same category and that no additional data failed to be included. I then settled on my themes.

3.4 Ethical issues

Bryman (2012, p.130) contends that ethical issues are significant because they directly relate to "the integrity of a piece of research and of the disciplines that are involved". He argues that despite various protocols and guidance about how to research ethically, researchers still need to make moral choices by themselves based on the specific research settings (ibid, p.154). Considering ethical issues is not a one-off task but an ongoing process. Bryman (ibid, pp.135-143) lists four main unethical practices for researchers to avoid doing: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception.

To avoid undesired harms to my participants and make sure that my participants had the right to know that their labour was being researched, I took an overt role in requesting access, conducting participant observation at FitGo and interviewing employees in both companies. I generally introduced my research aim and my intention to observe their daily work to all participants in the company's meetings. I told them that if anyone did not want to join my project, they could tell me at any time, and I would not write them in my thesis. I informed my participants of my research aims again before every one-to-one interview. I asked the interviewees' permission about digital recording of our interviews. I emphasised that the digital recordings were only there for me to record information precisely and would not be revealed to third persons. I told them that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions or quit the interviews at any time if they wanted. After fully informing my interviewees, I gave them all a consent form to sign. For online interviews, a digital version of the consent form was sent and signed.

However, I found it difficult to make sure that the participants were always fully informed. Mason (2018, p.97) claims that there are always limits to how adequately a researcher can inform respondents. Sometimes consent cannot be obtained from every participant for practical reasons. As I mentioned above, although I took an overt role to approach my research subjects, the workers in two digital fitness companies, the users in online training groups are not informed. I needed to prioritise the companies' business interests, otherwise I would not have been allowed access to finish this study. With constraints due to pragmatic reasons, I had to take on a covert role to the users or customers in the context of social media.

With the growing influence of social media platforms on social life, they have become an increasingly important setting for social research and require new considerations about ethical principles. Wilkinson and Thelwall (2011) criticise the separation of people from digital data created by them, the view of data as a cultural product or found text, and the use of such data without the creators' permission. Henderson et al. (2012) contend that although people post content online spontaneously, their data should not be used without their consent since their data is not intended for public consumption. These critiques set a rigid criterion for ethical research and moral decisions, which may be too demanding to be practical. For instance, in my research, it was impossible for me to get consent from every user who left comments on the two company's social media postings. I chose to follow the guidance of the ethical rules established by the Association of Internet Researchers (Buchanan, 2012) and struck a balance between pragmatic considerations and protection of participants' rights. I specifically focused on how to make sure that the social media users' personal lives would not be influenced by my research. I removed all the users' information in digital content that makes them traceable and identifiable, such as their ID, images and personal pictures. Their original texts in Chinese would be translated in English and would not be searched and traced.

No matter how informed my participants were, it was important for me, as a researcher, to behave morally. To make moral decisions, I carefully considered what counts as data and how to reduce potential harm. Mason (2018, p.97) claims that sometimes the participants may say something that they do not intend the researcher to use as data. This also took place in my research. Following Mason's suggestions, I decided what counted as data so that I could protect the subjects' privacy to the greatest extent possible alongside guaranteeing the quality of my research. I also kept in mind how to minimise harm to my participants. The most important and necessary step was to anonymise all the companies and participants to protect their identities.

I have identified inequalities in the employment relationship in my thesis and wish to publish my work, but my participants might think this would harm the companies' reputations and recruitment prospects. Thus, I removed all identifiable information about the corporations. I also gave pseudonyms to my participants so that their superiors and colleagues would not be able to identify who said what. It was difficult to totally anonymise the interviewees in the FitGo context, where I interviewed nearly everyone, and interviewees know each other very well. This is a limitation of doing research in a small-sized corporation. All this anonymised data is stored separately from the identifiable information. Physically signed consent forms were locked in a drawer in my temporary accommodation and then in my locker in the department. Identifiable information was only kept in case I needed to have further contact with my participants. All the information will be destroyed when I graduate from my PhD.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced the qualitative methodology that I employed to answer my overall research aim, investigating the working conditions and workers' interpretations of their labour in two Chinese digital fitness companies. My research belongs to the kind of studies that Mason (2018) characterises as emphasising depth, nuance and complexity of everyday life and needs be addressed with qualitative methodology. Therefore, I use qualitative methods, including participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews and recording digital content on social media and fitness apps to collect my empirical data.

I identified my researched companies through purposive sampling. My previous experiences of consuming digital fitness products with StartFit inspired my research interests in labour in the Chinese digital fitness industry. I reviewed current studies about this industry and found that none of them take a sociological perspective to investigate the situation of labour in this industry. Such research usually takes big companies as an example, which inevitably neglect that part of industry consisting of small companies. Stories of small companies could supplement that gap and contribute to presenting a complete picture of an industry. Therefore, I narrowed my purpose of investigating labour in small-sized companies. By referring to official criteria of medium- and small-sized companies in the ICTs industry, set out by the Chinese government (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology Joint Enterprise, 2011), I listed the existing digital fitness companies, which had been established in the Chinese platform society, and identified those with fewer than 100 employees. As the company that

inspired my research interests with a business model based on online fitness service, I made StartFit my first choice for my research. Considering that it is not easy to get access to companies with the purpose of investigating the labour situation, I listed three back-up companies in case my request to join StartFit was rejected. FitGo was identified as my second choice because this company is located in the same city as StartFit and its development process and business models share similarities with those of StartFit.

To behave ethically in research, I decided to take an overt role to approach my participants. Taking an overt role would contribute to understanding to what extent it is possible to investigate the situation of labour in company-based research. I thus contacted the gatekeepers of the two companies, informed them of my identity as a researcher and my research aim, and requested to join the companies as an intern. I got limited access to StartFit and was only allowed to interview five employees designated by the manager. This made me turn to my second choice, FitGo. It was fortunate that the CEO granted me full access to join his company and conduct my research.

My three methods are all indispensable parts of this research and allow me to describe the working conditions of the two companies in detail and answer my research questions. Participant observation allowed me to observe and record what happened in my fieldnotes. This method was conducted both offline and online. I was physically situated in the FitGo office and joined their working WeChat groups to observe the employees' labour processes. I also joined the online fitness training projects of the two companies, which are both based on WeChat groups, observing how the workers served the customers to train fit bodies. Interviews allowed me to supplement the data from participant observation and collect data that could not be observed. I invited the employees to describe their division of labour, their labour process and to interpret their work. I also collected the interviewees' personal information, including their age, education, and previous employment experiences, to help analyse how they formed certain interpretations of their labour. Simultaneously, I collected digital content from social media platforms and the FitGo app, which were the outcomes of the employees' labour and helped understand whose and what labour was involved. These products also show how fitness is constructed as a consumption choice and train fit bodies in a digital context. Data from three methods is compared and analysed together to make sure the reliability of empirical materials.

After data collection I conducted thematic analysis. I transcribed all my interviews and became familiar with them. I read all transcripts and fieldnotes literally, interpretively and reflexively and made some notes. Then I created codes from my research questions, empirical materials and presumed structure of this thesis. I coded my data with NVivo software and let the themes appear alongside the process of analysis. Finally, I identified the names of those themes.

During the research, I always behave morally. I informed my participants, the employees in the two companies of my identity as a researcher and my research aims. I obtained their consent for joining this research, including being observed in the office and being recorded during interviews. However, I had to take a covert role with the customers without telling them I was a researcher when I joined the online fitness training groups – I needed to ensure I would not offend the customers and prioritised the companies' business interests so that I would be allowed to continue my research. To maintain confidentiality and protect the participants' privacy, I anonymised the two companies and participants by giving them pseudonyms. In relation to digital content that may have contained identifiable information of the companies and users, I removed their ID and images. Their original text in Chinese was translated into English and would not be traceable. I ensure that the companies, my participants and the social media users will not be influenced by my research.

Chapter Four: The Chinese digital fitness industry

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I introduced how my personal previous experiences of consuming digital fitness products of digital fitness drew my attention to labour in Chinese digital fitness companies, which has not received much academic attention. As a new phenomenon appearing after China's epochal entry into the Web 2.0 era, the digital fitness industry is based on the Chinese policies of encouraging entrepreneurship, the advancement of ICTs and the popularity of fitness culture (Xing, 2014; Chen, 2016; Wang and He, 2018). The composite basis of this industry indicates that investigating this area would enrich understandings of Chinese digital economy and labour. Therefore, I choose this area as the research subject and investigate the working conditions in two digital fitness companies.

In this chapter, I describe the birth of the Chinese digital fitness industry and the business models of the two companies. In 4.1, I describe the advent of this industry, owing to top-down policy, state-led ICT development, bottom-up creativity in fitness culture and venture capital's financial support. I review the development of the two companies, from their birth to the current struggles. I discuss how difficult it is for small companies to survive in the financialization of Chinese digital economy and a market marked by uncertainty. Thus, on the one hand, Internet companies rely on attracting capital's investment for survival rather than accumulating capital through commodity production. However, giant Chinese Internet companies, referring to BAT (Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent), has won the game of competition and been more competitive to earn capital's investment than small ones. On the other hand, the policy's emphasis on innovation requires businessmen to create new business models to replace the old ones, making it difficult for small companies with tight budget to do so. Thus, the two companies have to struggle with the existing business model and live on commodity production. In sections 4.2 and 4.3, I respectively describe the two companies' free products on social media and their paid products. After a detailed description of these products, I present the divisions of labour in the two companies that contribute to those products in section 4.4. With the requirement to take on multiple roles in daily work, the employees interpret their multi-skilled labour as an opportunity to learn new things. I claim that the employees view their labour as a way of improving themselves to cope with the uncertainty in their working conditions. As a neoliberal modality, uncertainty motivates the employees to seek self-investment.

4.2 Birth of the digital fitness industry

Initially taking on the role of manufacturer of physical devices in the global digital economy, China has had aspirations to change its role, to become an 'innovative country' and strengthen its international competitiveness (Yu, 2017). Since China gained access to the World Wide Web, the state has devoted great efforts to advancing domestic ICTs, making China enter the Web 2.0 era (Yang, 2012; Pan, 2020). The state leads ICTs development and has adopted certain policies that aim to create essential conditions for a market to encourage entrepreneurship with digital technologies and advocating for competition. In this context, citizens' creativity is stimulated from bottom up, motivating some of them to join entrepreneurship and competition. Some fitness experts start up business. They have posted fitness content on two influential Chinese UGC platforms, Weibo and WeChat, and accumulated millions of followers within a few months. Their influence among users has attracted venture capital investment, which has helped to establish digital fitness companies.

4.2.1 Top-down policy and state-led ICTs advancement

The People's Republic of China is a single-party state, with authority centrally controlled by the Communist Party of China (CPC) (Palmer, 2007). This means every aspect of Chinese society, such as politics, the economy and culture, is subject to the CPC's leadership (ibid). To achieve social development and national economic growth, the party-state has made plans every five years since 1953, each known as a Five-year Plan (Hu, 2013). The series of Five-year Plans has directly manifested how the state leads different aspects of social development in certain ways.

With the increasingly significant role of ICTs in the global economy, China has put emphasis on the key role of science and technologies to boost productivity and gain more international competitiveness. Under this general principle, the government has been putting great effort into developing ICTs since the state accessed the Internet in the 1990s. At the early stage, the state required local factories to carry out outsourced work and manufacture physical devices for foreign companies. During this stage, the domestic Internet companies learned about ICTs from foreign counterparts and accumulated capital. In the 12th (2011-2015) and 13th Five-year Plans (2016-2020), the central authority required a shift in focus from hardware manufacturing to building an innovative state, which can advance domestic ICTs independently rather than relying on other countries' support. To achieve this goal, the state created two top-down

policies, 'Internet Plus' (China State Council, 2015b) and 'Mass Entrepreneurship, Mass Innovation' (China State Council, 2015a) in the 2015 government report. The former policy encourages the wide application of ICTs to various industries, the latter policy tries to inspire bottom-up creativity to engage in entrepreneurship. The state leads a neoliberal economy with ICTs. . The details of these two policies have been reviewed in the section 2.3.2. Through these two policies, the state leads a neoliberal economy with ICTs.

The prerequisite of that neoliberal economy, with many citizens becoming small entrepreneurs, is to make ICTs accessible to as many people as possible. Before enacting the policies in 2015, the state had devoted many funds to advancing ICTs development. The State Council Information Office (2010) (2010) claimed that from 1997 to 2009, the state spent RMB 4.3 trillion (around 500 billion pounds) on Internet infrastructure construction nationwide, ensuring that rural areas, including 99.3% of counties and 91.5% of villages, could access the Internet. According to China Internet Network Information Centre, the decade from 2010 to 2020 witnessed an increased rate of Internet users among the total population from 34.3% to 70.40%, as shown in Figure 4.1 below.
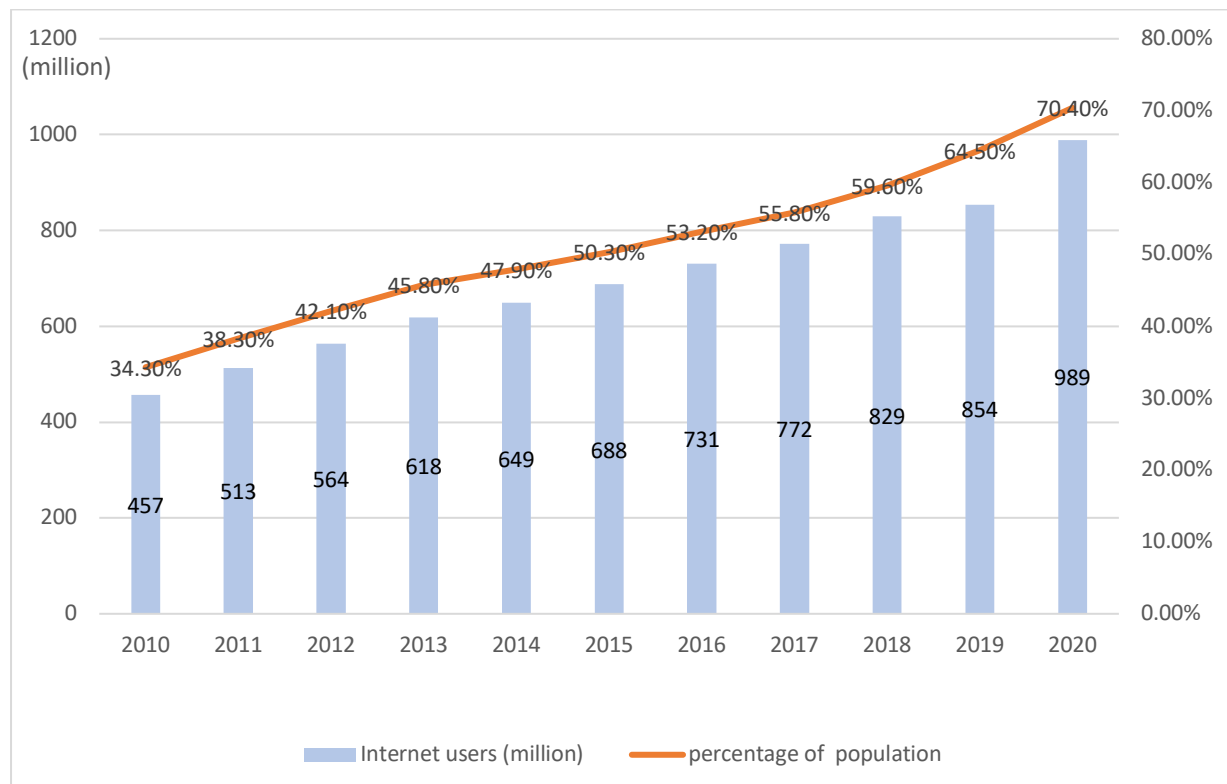
Figure 4.1: Rate of Internet users among Chinese population 2010-2020
Source: China Internet Network Information Centre

When making the Internet accessible nationwide, the government specifically focused on expanding the application of mobile communications, allowing people to get online with mobile devices. The government gave financial support and required communication companies to promote the third generation (3G) of mobile communication in the market in 2009 and made 3G communication cover the whole country in 2010 (State Council Information Office, 2010). In 2013 the state began to promote the fourth generation of mobile communication, known as 4G, to replace 3G due to its faster and more stable connection to the Internet. Around RMB 1.5 trillion (£176 billion) was spent on 4G communication (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Besides building infrastructure, such as base stations for remote communication, the state also supported the local Internet companies to create both hardware and software products suitable for mobile communication, referring to mobile smart devices and Internet applications that suit the devices. In 2011, smartphones formally entered the Chinese market. The iOS and Android systems on smartphones provide a better user interface than the Symbian system in non-smartphones(Zheng, 2018). Users can access the Internet, communicate with each other, and participate in various leisure activities with different Internet applications (ibid). With the state-led development of ICTs, mobile Internet users made up an increasing proportion of all Internet users, as shown in Figure 4.2. The progress of ICTs largely reduced the time and space constraints for getting online, which also contributed to increasing the number of Internet users.
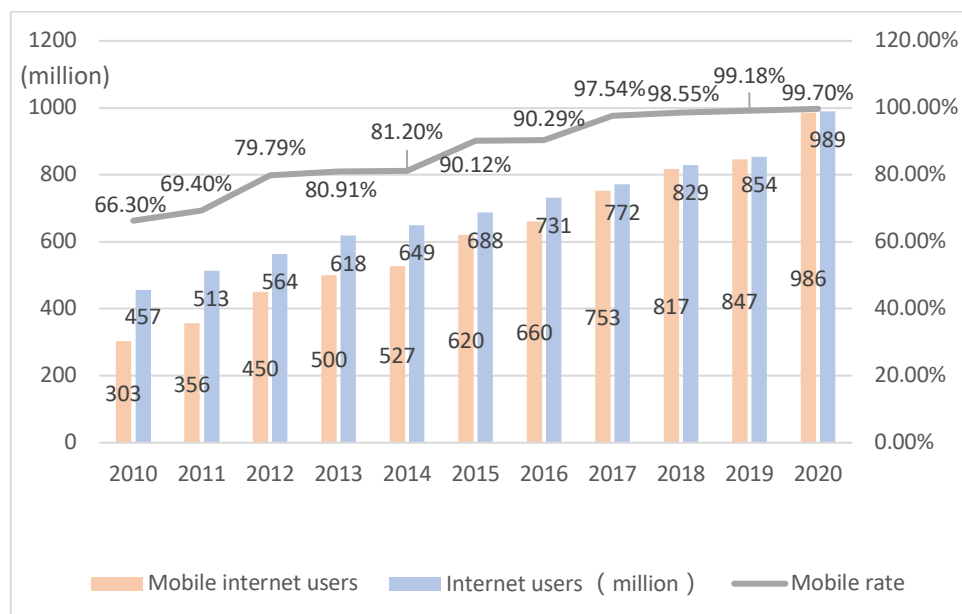
Figure 4.2: Number of mobile Internet users and percentage of

116

4G communication, mobile smart devices and Internet applications provided indispensable conditions for China's entry to the Web 2.0 era in 2014 (Internet Society of China, 2014). As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, compared with the previous Internet environment, the new features of Web 2.0 could be presented in three aspects: (a) users can directly engage in content production on platforms rather than browsing portal websites; (b) users can have immediate many-to-many communication; (c) users can access the Internet with both PCs and mobiles, with their data stored and synchronised between different devices. These new features transformed users into producers, which aligns with the Chinese government's intention to stimulate bottom-up creativity to start up business.

The rise of social media platforms that largely depend on UGC brought about new business models for entrepreneurship. Among all the Chinese digital platforms, Weibo and WeChat are two of the most influential because of their early birth. Sina Weibo, launched in 2009, accumulated 50 million newly registered users within one year, making up 10% of all Chinese Internet users in 2010 (Weibo user development report, 2010). WeChat, launched in 2011, had 100 million users in 2012, accounting for 18% of all Chinese Internet users (WeChat user data report, 2012). Their leading influence thus makes Weibo and WeChat entrepreneurs' preferred choices when starting up their businesses in the early stages of China's platform society. A group of fitness enthusiasts thus carried through their entrepreneurship on the two platforms and created the digital fitness industry.

4.2.2 The boom of fitness culture on Weibo and WeChat

In China, the concept of fitness, translated as *jianshen* (健身) into Mandarin, specifically refers to an exotic lifestyle imported from Western developed countries in Europe and North America (Chen, 2020). This connotation means that fitness is slightly different from other words which describe physical activities, for instance exercise or working out: *duanlian* (锻炼). Exercise or working out has a richer connotation than fitness, since *duanlian* can refer to various physical activities, whether the participants are amateurs or experts, whether they do it for fun or as a specialism (Lu *et al.*, 2008; Chen, 2020). Fitness, however, specifically means a lifestyle

supported by the expertise of anatomy, sports and nutrition (Smith Maguire, 2008; Sassatelli, 2010).

Lu et al. (2008) list some unique features of fitness compared with general physical activities. In terms of training, fitness trainers should have anatomy and sports knowledge and build up different parts of bodies separately by lifting weights with equipment. Thus, they can maximally improve their overall body condition (Carrasco San Martin, 2016). A fitness diet requires trainers to categorise food into three main types: grains supplying carbohydrates, vegetables offering fibre and vitamins, and meat and eggs providing protein (Lu *et al.*, 2008). Usually, a trainer needs to calculate calories and adjust the ratio of different types of food numerically (ibid).

If people want to engage in fitness training, they need to learn something about sports, anatomy and nutrition, follow specialised guidance for working out and use certain equipment. That knowledge sets entry standards for fitness hobbyists, who need to close their knowledge gap to engage in this activity by paying for coaches. Physical activities are commercialised as a business and become a consumption choice.

Fitness was first introduced in the form of commercial gyms from North America to China in the 1980s alongside the Reforming and Opening up Policy (Feng et al., 2017). Given the low living standard and limited disposable income in China at that time, most citizens preferred free exercise over paid fitness training (ibid). At the same time, the imported ideal image of a fit body was a white male with big muscles (Chen, 2020). Thus, without enough fitness expertise, the public formed a stereotype that lifting weights necessarily resulted in big muscles (ibid). Most local people, especially female customers who wanted slim bodies, felt the fit body went against their aesthetics and refused to consume this image (ibid). As a result, fitness became a leisure activity of a minority elite group who could afford and know fitness knowledge (Feng et al., 2017; Li *et al.*, 2018)

The top-down policy for digital entrepreneurship and state-led ICTs development, which is mentioned in the last sub-section, inspired citizen's creativity from bottom up and motivate some people to start up business in the platform society, with the entrepreneurs in the fitness area included. A group of fitness hobbyists, whose training and diet experiences were influenced by the European and American fitness systems, started to create content on Weibo

in 2012 (Chen, 2020). They hashtagged the key word fitness, shared free fitness expertise through text, images, and videos, reposted peer fitness lovers' content and answered their followers' questions (ibid). Some gained millions of followers within three to six months and became Weibo verified opinion leaders, with a V attached to their ID names (ibid). At the same time, WeChat became another space for those influencers to grab users' attention, since its increase in active users was even faster than Weibo, as shown in Figure 4.3.
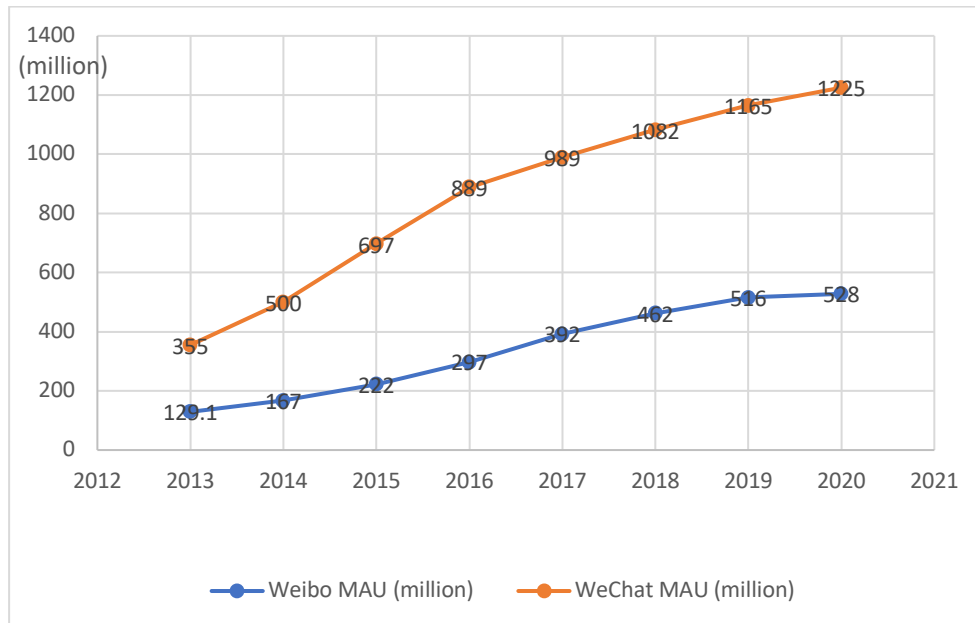
Figure 4.3: Monthly active users of Weibo and WeChat 2013-2020
Source: Weibo user development report & WeChat user data report

These Weibo influencers also guided Weibo users to follow their WeChat Subscription channels and provided in-depth knowledge in WeChat Subscription articles (An, 2015; Ye, 2020). The specific functions of Weibo and WeChat Subscription were described in my introduction in Chapter Three. The products found on those two platforms will be described later in this chapter, in section 4.2.

Those fitness influencers initiated an online fitness boom and vitalised the industry on UGC platforms in the 2010s (Chen, 2020). Their content cultivated more fitness hobbyists and expanded the group of potential customers (ibid). It became easier and cheaper for social media users to obtain fitness expertise than before. People can now enrich their knowledge of anatomy, sports, and nutrition free of charge on social media with their smartphones. To recruit more customers, the fitness influencers introduced another ideal body figure that suited local

aesthetics. Rather than a white male body with big muscles, they shared images of slim white females with clear abdominal lines (Zheng, 2018). A typical example is Victoria's Secrets models. Online influencers claim that they have localised fitness training and diets to suit Chinese people's physiques and would help followers to avoid building up overdeveloped muscles (ibid).

Once the stereotype that fitness necessarily results in big muscles was successfully broken, more users became interested in fitness. I referred to the analysis of keyword from Baidu, China's most influential search engine. Baidu records how many times a keyword is researched by users within a period. I set fitness as the keyword and see how people's interests in fitness changes, which is shown in Figure 4.4 below. I did not use the Weibo and WeChat keyword reports because only data from the past 90 days were available on those two platforms, and I could not obtain data from a decade ago. The focus on fitness is seasonal – usually higher in summer and lower in winter. But it is clear that there was increased interest in fitness from 2011, with a peak around 2015.

Figure 4.4: Number of Baidu users searching for 'fitness', 2011-2021
Resource: Baidu index

After obtaining followers' attention with free content on social media, fitness influencers then attracted users to their paid content and services, which I introduce in sections of 4.3 and 4.4. This is the general business model of digital fitness industries: the more influential they are, the more attention they receive for monetisation, and the more income they generate. Their influence enables them to earn investment from venture capital, helping them to establish companies, as I will explain shortly.

4.2.3 Starting up business with venture capital investment

As discussed above, every aspect of Chinese society is more or less subject to the CPC's leadership, and venture capital's investment is no exception. To discover what is worth their investment, investors also need to refer to the central government's policy besides investigating the market itself. Because in a state-led neoliberal economy, policies usually show what industries would obtain support from the government. According to Zhiyan consulting company (2021), an institution that analyses various industries, venture capital engaged in digital fitness in 2014. Zhiyan publicly provides a report about the amount of venture capital investment from 2015 to 2020, shown in Figure 4.5 below. The digital fitness industry was a popular investment project before 2018, with peaks in 2016. After 2018, the investment boom in this area gradually cooled down.
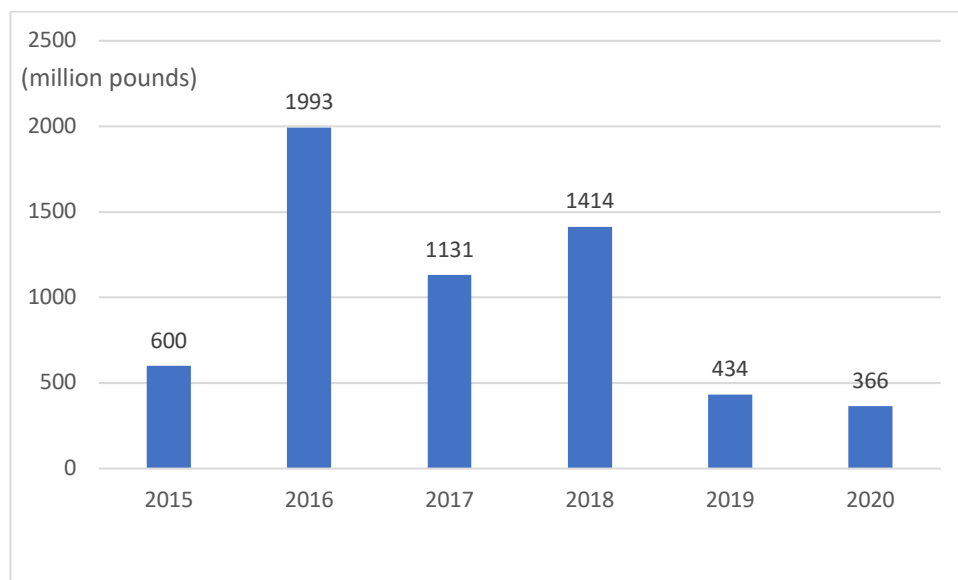
Figure 4.5: Chinese venture capital's investment in the fitness industry, 2015-2020
Resource: ZhiYan Consulting company

The digital fitness industry became a popular investment choice because this area simultaneously aligns with three aspects of the top-down plan and policy. Firstly, digital fitness, as an entrepreneurial project with ICTs, appeals to 'Internet Plus' (China State Council, 2015b) and 'Mass Entrepreneurship, Mass Innovation' (China State Council, 2015a) policies that encourage entrepreneurship with ICTs. Secondly, this industry creates a new consumption choice for citizens. Stimulating domestic demand and consumption is written in the 13th Five-year Plan (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2016) as a key strategy for boosting economic growth. Thirdly, fitness helps improve the population's health,

which benefits national competitiveness. The Chinese government's attention to public health was manifest in related national documents, such as the series of *Guideline of National Health Plan* since 1995 and *National Fitness Plan* after 2008 Beijing Olympics (Liu, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2018).

The digital fitness companies were established on the cooperation between venture capital, which provided funds, and the entrepreneurs, who have influence on social media and provide a business plan for monetising users' attention. There are generally three types of monetisation strategy: (a) the companies provide online paid content or services, giving guidance via fitness apps or remote fitness tutorials via WeChat; (b) the companies provide paid O2O (online to offline) services: the companies will attract the users' attention online and do the marketing on social media platforms. Then they provide paid fitness service in physical gyms; and (c) the companies sell fitness equipment. One company may simultaneously adopt more than one strategy. As Wang and Chen (2016) note, social media platforms became an indispensable marketing channel for online fitness companies. Venture capitalists invested in these entrepreneurs' business models and enabled fitness influencers to start from scratch and become CEOs (ibid). Such cooperation gave birth to the two companies in my research. When I asked FitGo CEO Max how he got enough money to establish the company and whether he put personal assets into the business, he told me:

> "All money came from the venture capital investors. How many funds a company would get depends on its estimated value, which means a company's potential capacity to earn money. That value of my company is estimated by the investors according to my online influence, the number of the followers of my Weibo account. The investors estimated that our company could earn 130 million RMB [around £16.3 million] in the next year. Then they invested 10% of the estimated value as our first funds. I did not put any personal assets into the company. I only needed to provide an idea and the investors provided money. That is how we cooperated." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

Venture capital's investment is categorised into different rounds alongside the development stages of a corporation. The rounds are named A, B, C, D, etc. The final goal of the investors is to achieve an Initial Public Offering (IPO) for the company, which means it starts to sell its

shares to the public and the corporation becomes a listed company (Ye, 2020). When I asked why an IPO is so important for investors and companies, FitGo CEO Max told me:

> "With the IPO, the investors could sell the companies' shares to more citizens, and the investors can earn money from those shareholders. And an IPO proves that the company is a successful investment project and will attract more capital to make investment in the company's business. Now companies need to earn new investment to survive because they could hardly make profits by only selling commodities, including the successful ones, such as Tesla and Uber." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

Confused, I asked Max why some companies still seek investment without making a profit. Max returned to the concept of estimated value:

> "Because the investors do not care about the companies' current capacity to make money or how much the companies have made. They only care about the future ability of earning money, the estimated value. As long as the company is influential in the market, investors are willing to put money in. So, the companies spend most of the investors' funds on advertisements and marketing. They barely having savings in the companies' bank accounts and some of the companies even keep in debt since their birth. Whether a company could earn profits does not influence at all whether investors could earn money. All that the investors want is an IPO because selling shares to citizens enables them to earn profits." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

Max's introduction to estimated value, capital investment and IPOs concurs with Bingqing Xia's (2018) discussion about the status quo of Chinese start-up entrepreneurs. She argues that entrepreneurial companies rely on capital investment rather than commodity production for survival (ibid). Some start-up entrepreneurs become capitalists-in-waiting and pay more attention to IPOs rather than producing good-quality products (ibid). This situation is closely related to the financialization of the Chinese digital economy, discussed later in this section.

To achieve an IPO, a company must obtain at least three rounds of financing. Both companies in this research only had two rounds of funding and found it difficult to earn more investment. Struggles to attract investment can be attributed to the following reasons. Firstly, the digital fitness industry has become a somewhat outdated investment project. As shown in Chart Four

above, overall funds in this area fell rapidly after 2018. When I asked about the financial situation of FitGo, FitGo Chief Technology Officer (CTO) Don, a 42-year-old man, who leads the team of programmers, shared how the company struggled to survive:

> "We did not earn any external funds since 2015. All the money from the venture capital investment have been spent on paying workers' wages and doing marketing. There is little investors' money left in the company's account. We did not have any external investment since 2015. And at the end of 2018, we had to lay off some employees to prioritise the company's survival. Now, we just make both ends meet." (Interview Eight)

Asked why it is difficult to earn investment, Don told me,

> "Digital fitness is no longer popular among venture capital investors. The investment wind has left. There is a joke saying even a pig could fly if it seized the investment wind. But now, the investors have become very cautious and careful to invest in this area. It is not as easy to earn funds as in 2015." (Don, 42, male, FitGo CTO leading the team of programmers, Interview Eight)

There is less space for small companies to survive in the competition game in China's digital economy, which is led by the state, engaged by Internet companies and driven by international financial capital (Jia and Winseck, 2018). Some companies have won the game and grown into transnational corporations, becoming capital themselves and dominating the market. The competition game began with the state's aspiration to gain more international competitiveness and influence (Keane, 2016; Tang, 2020). Tang (2020) claims that the state focuses on transnationalizing domestic Internet capital to realise this aspiration. That effort shows two points: (a) the state realizes that ICTs play a key role in global competition and attach significance to ICTs in national development; and (b) the state knows that global competition is not only about technologies but also about capital. The competition game actually takes place among different capital, which lead to financialization of the digital economy. As Winseck (2011) predicted a decade ago, the telecoms, Internet, and media sectors were at the forefront of financialization. And China's current efforts to engage in the financialization of ICTs corresponds with that prediction. Tang (2020) contends that the process of transnationalizing Chinese Internet capital could be divided into a 'bringing in' and a 'going out stage': opening the local ICT industry to foreign capital investment first, developing the local capital market

and then enabling local capital to venture into the exterritorial market (ibid.). Cultivating local Internet capital turns out to rely on the development of Internet companies, which then become key participants in the global economy and gain international competitiveness for the state.

To cultivate local internet companies, the state introduce foreign capital, enabling domestic corporations to learn from foreign companies' business model (Liu, 2019). Simultaneously, the state constructed a market that advocate competition, encouraging massive bottom-up creativity for entrepreneurship and allowing them to compete with each other. Foucault claims that competition is a significant element for neoliberal governments to stimulate economic growth (2008 [1979], p. 86). Besides bringing economic growth, competition also enlarges the gaps between winners and losers. I compared the most influential Chinese digital fitness company, Keep, with the two small companies in my research. This company had experienced six rounds of financing by 2020. According to all publicly available data provided by Keep, I calculated the percentage of the funds that Keep gets compared to the total investment in the whole digital fitness industry. The percentages were respectively 1.8% in 2015, 6.5% in 2018 and 16% in 2020. I found that limited funds from venture capital investment are mainly given to this winner. When describing the difficult situation for small companies, Don, FitGo CTO said:

> "If you want to get funds from them, you must be the top one in the industry…The best time to start up business in Web 2.0 era has passed. Now the competition in the market is the game between the giant Internet companies. If you find some new digital products in the market, you will find out that the capital that are invested in the new commodities always comes from BAT." (Don, 42, male, FitGo CTO leading the team of programmers, Interview Eight)

BAT, which was mentioned by Don, refers to the three giant Chinese Internet companies: Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent. While the Keep company could be said to win the competition game in the Chinese digital fitness industry, BAT are the winners in the wider Chinese digital economy. As a CEO of a small company, Max expressed discontent with these big companies when sharing the hardship of FitGo' survival with me:

> "I do not like Alibaba. I could still remember there were so many small companies with brilliant entrepreneurial ideas and created great products. But when Alibaba grew to be

one of the giant companies, it did not leave much space for small companies. Alibaba made some of those small corporations die and acquired the rest of them." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

From Don's and Max's descriptions, BAT wins the game of competition and dominates the market. As the winner of the competition game, BAT have been given a key role in gaining international competitiveness for the state, which corresponds to the second 'going out' stage (Tang, 2020). BAT not only attracts foreign investment but also grows into transnational capital itself. As Jia and Winseck (2018) claim, BAT is tightly tied to the circulation of global capital accumulation and thus they characterize BAT as 'capitalist enterprises'. They claim that, through mergers and acquisition, BAT consolidates and diversifies their roles in both local and global markets. These companies are listed in China and abroad, sell shares to investors and try to increase estimated value to attract more investment, and also expand their influence by investing in diverse industries (ibid.). BAT's development and dominant position in the Chinese digital economy and expanded international influence cannot exist without international capital and the state's support. Zhao (2008) and Xia (2018) claim that BAT controls the current Chinese digital economy, and they form an alliance with the government by exchanging benefits. The giant Internet companies help the state engage in the global digital economy by attracting foreign capital investment. They also benefit by improving GDP and enhancing China's international competitiveness. In return, the government gives policy support, reduces intervention, and deregulates the companies' business. Xia (2018) contends that the alliance between giant Internet companies and the government stimulates a process of financialization. BAT's role as capital investor and financialization of digital economy influence entrepreneurial companies, such as my cases. Keep, the winner of the digital fitness industry, was once a small entrepreneurial company. In Keep's financial report, the company obtained four rounds of investment from Tencent within one year from 2020 to 2021. According to Xia (2018), the Chinese digital economy is more concerned with the "appreciation of capital in the realm of finance rather than the accumulation of capital within production" (ibid). That means some start-up entrepreneurs rely on investment rather than commodity production to survive. This concurs with my participants' description of Keep when I invited them to share their perspectives on their competitors. Lee, a 30-year-old coach at FitGo who provides online services for customers in WeChat groups, said:

"Keep is the most successful and biggest company in our industry so it can keep earning so much investment. But when the company is expanded with so many funds, they need to listen to different investors' suggestions of running a company. I mean, they cannot really focus on providing good-quality digital fitness products." (Interview 15)

Financialization makes it hard for small entrepreneur companies to survive by only producing commodities and accumulating capital. If they want to expand and become successful, they need to to keep earning investment from capital or choose to be merged or acquired by BAT. However, in terms of attracting investment from capital, small companies are not as competitive as big companies. The two companies in my case neither manage to earn capital's investment nor choose to be merged by BAT. They must maintain a living through commodity production. As small entrepreneurial companies that are independent from BAT capital, it is hard for them to survive by only selling commodities and competing with Keep, which is supported by BAT capital and strives for an IPO.

This shows how transnational companies, such as BAT, contract living space for small companies, corresponding with Christopherson and Clark's (2007) discussion about power inequality between transnational giant companies and small entrepreneurial companies. They claim that transnational companies can shape policy or governance environments with their regional, national and international influence, while small companies have no voice in terms of policy. Thus transnational companies can become digital ecosystem builders (Chen and Qiu, 2019) and create a market environment that benefits their own development and retains their competitive advantages (Christopherson and Clark, 2007). The dominant position of transnational companies may constrain small companies' growth, harming their potential for innovation (Christopherson and Clark, 2007). For instance, big companies prefer to hire redundant employees to make sure work is done well (ibid.). This corresponds with my participant, CTO Don's response, when he described working conditions: "Big companies prefer to hire more workers as back up so that they can guarantee work can be completed well". Due to big companies' reputation and influence, they are always the main employers in the labour market (ibid.). This will prevent small companies from hiring skilled labour, which is vital to companies' development (ibid.). When small companies struggle to survive, their positive influence on job creation and economic growth will also be limited. Christopherson and Clark (2007) point out that transnational companies have no incentive to help small companies' growth since they do not want to cultivate competitors (ibid.). By controlling key

resources, such as labour or technologies, transnational companies leave limited resources for small companies to develop their capacity for innovation. That will also undermine policy makers' intention to build an innovation society. Christopherson and Clark (2007) argue that "market concentration, failure to cooperate, and knowledge asymmetry" all entail power inequality between transnational and small companies and they call for government to pay more attention to that inequality and give more support for small companies.

Similar power inequality exists in China but also shows some slight difference according to specific context. In China, the party-state plays a determinant role in the digital economy (Chen, Sun and Qiu, 2020; Qiu, Sun and Chen, 2021). Even though some local enterprises have become transnational capital, such as BAT, their business still needs to be conditioned to the party's leadership. They need to show that they align with the state's goal of building an innovation state. Umarovna (2021) claims that big Chinese companies are required by the government to provide support for start-up companies. And the government itself also gives financial support specifically for entrepreneurial companies (ibid.). The Chinese government's intervention in the market tries to remedy the power inequality between transnational and small companies. But it turns out that small companies still cannot survive despite support from the government. The government's financial support for small companies is quite limited compared with the benefits that are given to transnational companies. This is firstly because the state has formed alliances with transnational companies to exchange benefits with each other, as noted in Zhao's (2008) and Xia's (2018) discussion earlier in this section. Transnational companies can sometimes persuade the state to compromise its strong intervention in their business by emphasizing their contribution to economic growth and national competitiveness (Keane and Chen, 2019). Secondly, the way that transnational corporations 'help' small companies is to merge or acquire the most competitive entrepreneurial companies, absorbing the small companies into the bigger ones. Most small entrepreneurial companies who fail to earn transnational capital's investment must struggle to survive or die. Such help ultimately serves the big company's own interests and consolidates their dominance by absorbing skilled labour and capacity for innovation, rather than helping small companies' development. At the same time, by showing that they align with national a development plan and contribute to job creation, innovation and entrepreneurship, transnational companies earn political trophies rather than benefiting the small companies or individual workers. Their bargaining power with the state-party is further enhanced.

At the same time, Chinese government's emphasis on entrepreneurship and innovation motivates creation of new business models, which replaces the old ones. At the beginning of platform society, developing apps was one of the most popular entrepreneurial projects (Wang and Chen, 2016). But few of those entrepreneurial companies survive and apps cannot attract investors' interests (ibid). FitGo, which still works on fitness apps, is struggling to earn funds and survive with this business model. StartFit abandoned developing fitness apps in 2017 and now focuses on providing online tutorials and offline personal trainer services. Serious competition in the market requires CEOs to be concerned with transformation, innovation and upgrading of their business models. However, it is hard for small companies with tight budget to do so. The new business models in the market, as FitGo CTO Don introduced above, are usually supported by capital from BAT. Few opportunities are left for entrepreneurs who are independent from BAT to start up business and compete with those giant companies. Unlike Keep which has built strong bonds with Tencent capital, FitGo and StartFit are independent entrepreneurial companies that struggle to survive. I asked FitGo CEO Max about his experiences and understandings of entrepreneurship; his answer showed that he felt very uncertain about the future:

"Entrepreneurship is like surfing in the sea and trying to predict the next wave. When I run the business, I feel every step is an unknown adventure. It is lucky that FitGo still survives, even in a struggling way. Without external investment, we keep trying to think of new ways of making money. It is really hard to predict the next trends in the market, especially in China. China is so big and has such a huge population with diverse desires. This means the Chinese market is very complicated. Entrepreneurs never know whether and when they could be successful." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

This is similar to what O'Malley (2000) says about uncertainty. O'Malley (2000) claims that uncertainty is a characteristic modality of liberal governance. He differentiates uncertainty from risk, which is central to Beck's (1992) conception of modernity. O'Mally (2000) claims that risk management is based on rational calculation and statistics and aims to predict the future through previous data with the help of quantitative methods. Risk management only works when the future is a repetition of the past (ibid). However, neoliberal governance, which emphasises innovation, makes the future unpredictable and brings about uncertainty (ibid). With innovation being highlighted, both the institution and individuals work towards

reinventing themselves or the environment (ibid), as the Chinese digital companies strive to do. Although the companies hired programmers who can use algorithms to analyse data to understand the past and present, they still cannot predict the next popular investment project that could interest investors. O'Malley (2000) claims that in risk management, people are involved as consumers, who consume the experiences of the past and make prudent decisions for the future. By contrast, the modality of uncertainty involves people as entrepreneurs to maximise creativity and apply entrepreneurial spirit to transform the self. How the workers' labour situation is influenced by uncertainty is discussed in section 4.4. Before discussing their working conditions, I generally introduce the two companies' products in the following two sections.

4.3 Free products on social media accounts

4.3.1 Content on Weibo

FitGo has two Weibo accounts for attracting attention: one is the CEO's personal account, the other the company's official account. When the CEO's personal account accumulated 100,000 followers, its influence attracted venture capital's investment. After establishing the company in 2015, the CEO opened up the company's accounts in order to, as he said, "separate the business from my personal life and behaviour". However, his wish never came true, and the personal account keeps being more influential than FitGo company's account in recruiting new customers. StartFit uses its initial and only account to attract users' attention. The account has been active on behalf of the company, and the CEO never presents his personal life there.

Data from the three accounts are presented and compared in Table 4.1. I list the number of followers and average numbers of daily Weibo posts over a three-month period. When comparing the two companies' official accounts, StartFit's is more active and more influential than FitGo's, but FitGo CEO's personal account makes up the gap. When calculating both FitGo accounts together, the two companies' number of Weibo followers is similar, with FitGo's followers totalling 229,000 and StartFit's followers 239,000. Although FitGo account posts less than StartFit account, FitGo's CEO keeps active and ensures that the total exposure of FitGo's content exceeds StartFit's.

Weibo	Number of followers	Average daily posts

FitGo company's official account	50,000	3.5
FitGo CEO's personal account	179,000	7.2
StartFit's official account	239,000	7

Table 4.1: Number of followers and daily posts on three Weibo accounts

I quantified the frequency of users' interactions by calculating the average number of likes, comments and reposts within three months (in November 2019 and in February and May 2020), which is shown in Figure 4.6 below. Data of three Weibo accounts are marked in three different colours: FitGo company's account (in blue), FitGo CEO, Max's personal account (orange), and the StarFit company's account (grey). From those numbers, I find that Max's personal account has the most active followers, receiving the highest average number of reposts, comments and likes. This means the users have a stronger desire to interact with a specific person rather than an institutional account. Excluding Max's personal account and comparing the numbers of the two institutional accounts shows that StartFit' accounts received more likes and had more frequent interaction with followers in comments than FitGo's. Content on FitGo company's account was more often shared by followers through reposts than StartFit's account.

The more active users are, the stronger their desire to consume products, and the greater the possibility of monetising their attention. Although the followers of the FitGo company's Weibo account were less active than those of StartFit, the FitGo CEO's personal accounts compensate for this deficiency. When introducing the company's business model, FitGo social media worker Claire, a 29-year-old woman, who leads the social media team, told me:

> "The CEO's influence as a key opinion leader on social media platforms is key to our business. Many customers purchase our paid content in the app because they are Max's loyal fans." (Interview Seven)

The data shows that the content on the CEO's personal Weibo account is significant and should not be left out of the discussion.
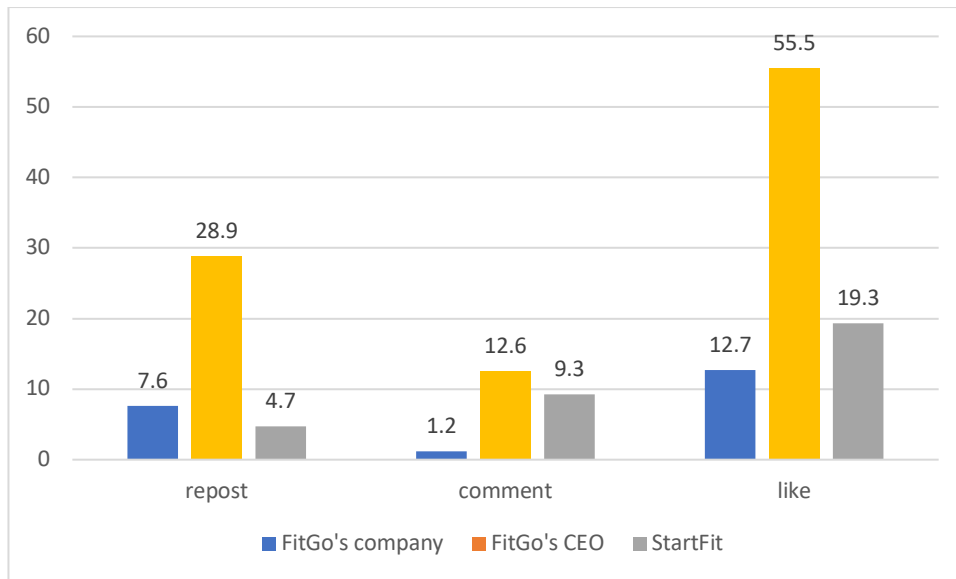
Figure 4.6: Comparison of users' interaction with posts from the three Weibo accounts of the two companies

FitGo CEO's personal Weibo content can be categorised mainly in the following three ways.

(a) Pre-recorded online lectures about health and fitness

I have personally engaged in the recording and editing of those videos. The topics of the lectures come from both the CEO's readings about fitness and the users' questions in the comments. When the CEO finds a topic interesting and deems it worth sharing with users, he will make a video.

Figure 4.7: A screenshot of online lecture of FitGo CEO

Source: FitGo CEO's personal Weibo account

Translation of texts in Figure 4.7:

#Fitness influencers' campaign# The hotpot is a very popular meal among many people. But people worry that eating hotpot may intake extra calories and make them fat. I will give three suggestions so that you can avoid putting on weight and make sure you take enough nutrition. #Fitness Q & A#

The short texts briefly summarise the topic of each video, including the keywords "nutrition, health and avoid putting on weight", to attract readers to these videos. In the lectures, the CEO emphasises that he reads "academic articles" as evidence for his arguments and implies that his knowledge is convincing, robust and scientific. At the end of each video, he advertises FitGo app.

(b) Personal life, including training, eating and reading

When I asked how he motivates himself to keep a fit lifestyle, Max, FitGo CEO said:

"I require myself to do so. I think as a fitness influencer and the CEO of the fitness companies, must keep fit, experience training and diet by myself. Only when I am fit,

my content about fitness is persuasive. A person who is not fit is not qualified to sell anything about fitness." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

His personal life shared on Weibo becomes the brand for his fitness business. When posting pictures of his meals, he also shares detailed nutritional knowledge behind the food.

Figure 4.8: FitGo CEO Weibo posts sharing his diet

Translation of texts in Figure 4.8: I seldom eat white rice because it is overprocessed and loses many fibres and nutrient-rich germs (in order to make white rice more reservable and storable than brown rice). What is left in white rice are starches that increase blood sugar fast. I only eat white rice under two conditions: 1. After training to help my blood sugar go back to a normal level. I will intake proteins with white rice together. But I will avoid eating too much fat after training. 2. Eating white rice with other vegetables and whole grains that is full of fibre to reduce the speed of blood sugar

increase. As a result, I can enjoy white rice without getting fat. I cooked Thailand curry rice, mixing white rice with other beans, asparagus, mushroom, cauliflower, spring onion and coriander. Delicious.

#Vegan #Vegetarian

He records his daily training in short videos and shares his feelings and gives guidance to his followers. In the videos, he is usually topless, presenting his own fit body to the audience. His body is the brand of his fitness content.

Figure 4.9: FitGo CEO's Weibo videos sharing his exercise

Translation of texts in Figure 4.9: Today I will share an exercise that is ten times harder than plank.

The CEO sometimes shares books related to healthy eating, physical exercise, psychology and philosophy. His Weibo posts present a very self-disciplined and knowledgeable man. By living the fit and self-disciplined lifestyle himself, the CEO tries to influence users' understandings of training and diet so that they will follow his guidance and purchase products.

(c) Interacting with users and other fitness opinion leaders in reposts

Weibo allows users to reply to others' comments and repost the original Weibo at the same time. When the CEO interacts with his followers, he usually reposts his own original posts to give the content more exposure.

Figure 4.10: FitGo CEO interact with a follower in Weibo reposts

Translation of texts in Figure 4.10:

The follower: Thank you for sharing such valuable fitness experience and it helps solve my current confusions. Two years ago, I was influenced by you to start to train my bodies. I was a weak fitness novice and now I am growing to be strong gradually. Thank you.

Max: I am very happy that you keep growing strong.

In the picture above, a follower expressed his agreement and gratitude for the CEO's knowledge for "making me love fitness and start to work out and become an experienced trainee" in the comments. The CEO reposted this comment and replied to the user with happiness and encouragement. This behaviour helps retain loyal users by demonstrating care about the followers' feelings. By reposting the users' positive comments, he advertises his product to other followers.

Compared with FitGo CEO's Weibo content with its personal characteristics, the content of the two companies' accounts, run by the social media staff, is relatively fixed. I have categorised the content and the posting time as follows.

(a) During 6 to 8 am, both companies post 'good morning' greetings, with stimulating sentences and pictures of fit bodies

Figure 4.11: A morning Weibo post
Source: FitGo company's Weibo account

Translation of texts in Figure 4.11: #Good morning# You should work hard otherwise you are wasting your life.

Sometimes the staff also post body figures before and after training together. The comparison aims to stimulate followers to start fitness training.
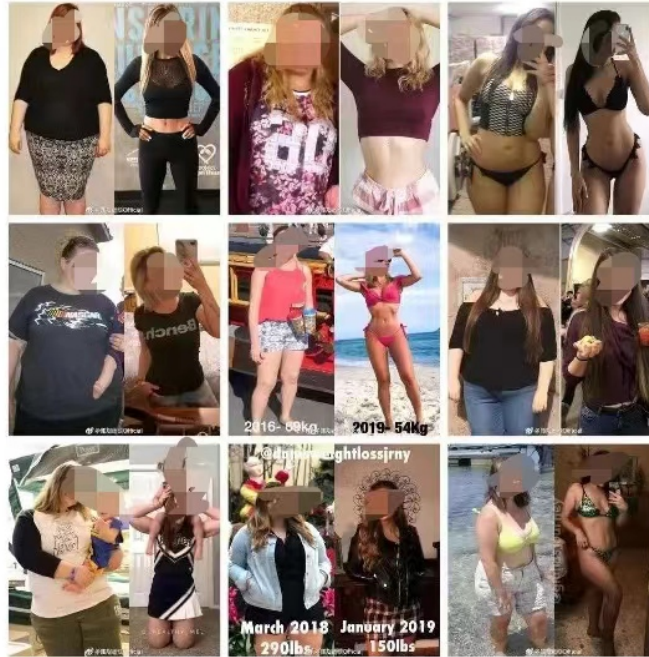
Figure 4.12: A Weibo post that compares body figure before and after fitness trainings

Source: FitGo company's Weibo account

Translation of texts in Figure 4.12: #Good morning# The only Heroism is that you still love life after fully understanding the essence of life.

At this time, most people get up or are on their way to work. The stimulating sentences are suitable for motivating people to start a new day. The staff attach fit body pictures to the sentences, linking a self-disciplined fit lifestyle to heroism, success and perfecting oneself.

(b) At 12 pm, both companies post content about 'healthy eating'

Figure 4.13: A screenshot of a video about

how to eat like an athlete

Figure 4.14: A picture of diet food
Source: StartFit company's Weibo account

Lunchtime suits discussions about food. The food guidance video above in Figure 4.13 is about teaching people how to categorise food according to nutritional knowledge, choosing suitable food and controlling amount of food intake. In Figure 4.14 about food, a standardised fitness diet is presented. One plate for one person entails the control of the intake amount. The food display is organised with different kinds of food separated.

(c) At 3 to 4 pm, during the afternoon break, both companies post content related to training

FitGo posts fitness training guidance videos created by other fitness influencers, mostly from overseas. The overseas background of the content makes it seem more convincing and orthodox, because fitness is an exotic lifestyle imported from the Anglophone world. In those videos, the bodies are trained in different parts with anatomical knowledge. Fit bodies are presented to attract the viewers to join the fitness lifestyle and obtain similar body figures.

Figure 4.15: A screenshot of a fitness video guidance

Source: FitGo company's Weibo account

(d) At 6 pm, most people finish work, so StartFit social meida staff initiate discussion topics to guide user chats in the comments

Those topics may be related to fitness, such as "What are you going to have for dinner today?" or "What is your favourite junk food that prevents you from losing weight?" Sometimes the staff post memes that joke about junk food or overweight bodies. Besides posting the ideal fit bodies to motivate people, fat bodies may also be presented to warn people. In Figure 4.16, a Mr McDonald with a fat body is running on the treadmills. This picture implies that the trainers must keep exercise and go diet at the same time. If they still eat junk food, their exercise is ineffective, and they will not lose weight successfully.

Figure 4.16: A picture of McDonald on treadmills

that warns the users not to eat junk food

Source: StartFit's Weibo account

Translation of the texts in Figure 4.16: Junk food + Exercise = Ineffectiveness

(e) From 9 to 11 pm, social media staff post good night messages

The posting time reminds people to go to bed early and avoid staying up late because insufficient sleeping time will not help build a fit body. FitGo staff post lectures about work on the self, shown in Figure 4.17 below. The videos are related to self-improvement and self-discipline, which aligns with the requirements of fitness. This implies that people should work on themselves by consuming fitness.
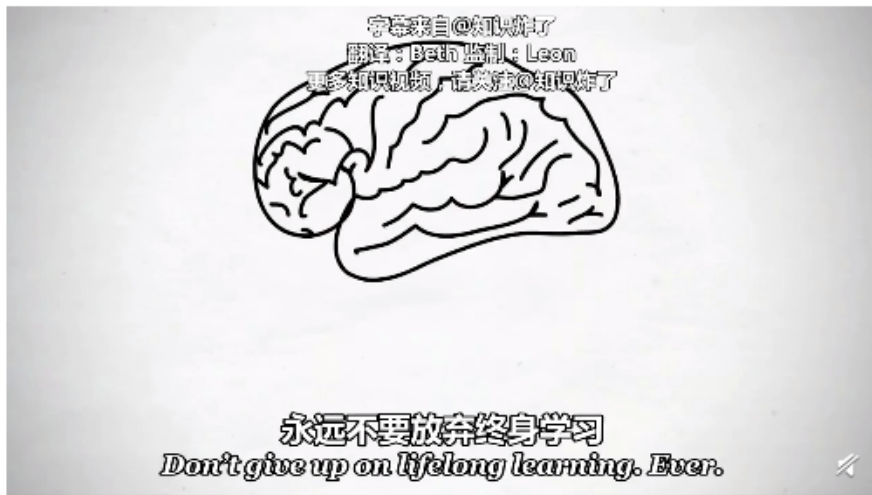
Figure 4.17: A screenshot of a TED talk video

that tells audience never give up lifelong learning

Source: FitGo's Weibo account

StartFit staff will initiate another round of night-time chats, such as "How was your day?" The chat topics make StartFit Weibo receive more comments than FitGo. This is a way of building an emotional bond with users.

By posting images, short texts and videos, the companies' accounts grasp people's attention on Weibo platforms. Weibo followers are guided to follow WeChat Subscription articles for in-depth fitness knowledge.

4.3.2 Content in WeChat Subscription articles

Compared with Weibo, which must seize people's attention rapidly with eye-catching brief content, WeChat Subscription articles allow authors to convey in-depth knowledge in long articles. The articles can be categorised into the following three kinds.

(a) Fitness and health knowledge

These articles convey the nutrition, anatomy and sports knowledge behind diets and physical training. Staff need to make the topics attractive. Otherwise, readers may not open and read the articles. Typical topics in FitGo's account are as follows:

> "Follow the three suggestions, and 80% of you will lose weight successfully in winter"
> "Instant noodles are not necessarily junk food! Here is how to eat them in a healthy way…"
> "This culprit of cancer makes millions of people addicted, but you still drink it daily?"

There are some tricks to attract users' attention. The author may provide an element of suspense and put a riddle in the topic without mentioning the subject of the article. The readers may be curious how to solve the riddle, so they read the article. In the first example above, potential readers may want to know what the specific three suggestions are. For instance, the third topic actually refers to wine, but nobody will know until they have read the articles. The authors usually use a shocked tone with question and exclamation marks to indicate that they are going to expound on some impressive myths. Some data is exaggerated, for instance, the "80%" in the first topic is not statistical data but only means "most people".

Despite the eye-catching topics, FitGo social media workers try to make their content look reliable. Statistical data, pictures of specific food/human bodies and precise academic references are presented in the articles to show that their content is scientific, professional and convincing.

Figure 4.18: The caloric density of different kinds of food
Source: an article from FitGo's WeChat Subscription account

The Figure 4.18 is from a FitGo's WeChat article that introduces the caloric density of food. This term refers to the number of calories a kind of food have with certain weight. This figure lists how many calories that different kinds of food contain per 100 grams. This article suggests that if the users want to lose weight and keep fit, they need to choose food with low caloric density. That kind of food can make sure that trainers feel full without consuming too many calories and putting on weight.
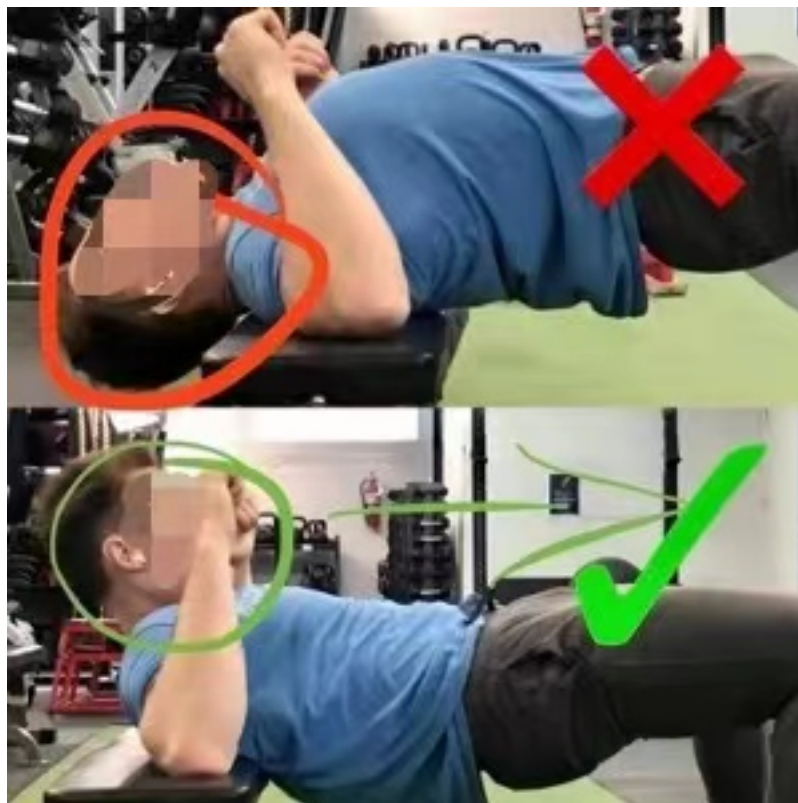
Figure 4.19: The right and wrong physical movements in fitness trainings

Figure 4.19 comes from a FitGo WeChat article that corrects wrong physical movements in trainings and guides readers to exercise using the right muscles and posture. This image corrects specific movements and guides readers to exercise using the right muscles and posture. This image directly shows what movement is wrong and right to the readers. Social media workers say that, when they write articles, they take on the role of a teacher to convey fitness knowledge to their readers. Making eye-catching topics aims to persuade readers to click the topic and read the long article so that they can give in-depth knowledge.

(b) Celebrities' fitness stories

In Weibo posts, social media workers present a few pictures of fit bodies with short stimulating sentences. But in WeChat articles, they can write the long stories behind those fit figures. Some topics include:

"A fat granny started to work out at 60. After 11 years, her body figure is better than her grandson's!"

"This 71-year-old gentleman has been dieting for 20 years and he looks so young!"

"This actress earned five billion, and we discovered her secrets of keeping fit today…"

These topics highlight specific numbers, including age, money and time, to attract readers' attention. The authors describe how some celebrities maintain a fitness lifestyle to obtain both good body figures and a successful life. Fitness is subtly connected with wealth, success, youth and longevity through the celebrities' stories, which try to persuade users to purchase fitness products.

(c) Users' stories

Some customers are selected and invited to write their fitness stories for the companies. The selection and invitation mechanism will be described and analysed in the next chapter. These users' stories are drafted by users and polished by the social media workers. Some topics of users' stories include:

"This 38-year-old mother has lost 10 kg within 1 month! Here is her secret…"

"This 110 kg gentleman lost 14 kg within 72 days. Why does he work so hard?"

In the topics, the ages, weight, and length of time engaging in fitness are highlighted, implying that people can build their bodies successfully with the companies' products regardless of age or weight. The articles include pictures of diets, training and body figures before and after using the companies' products.

Figure 4.20: A User's diet

Source: an article from StartFit's WeChat Subscription account

Figure 4.21: A user is training in the company's offline training room

Source: an article from StartFit's WeChat Subscription account

Figure 4.22: A user's body figure before and after

trainings guided by StartFit coaches

Source: an article from StartFit's WeChat Subscription account

Compared with the celebrities' stories, the users' experiences shorten the distance from readers' everyday lives. As Grinnell (2009) claimed, customers in the Web 2.0 era are more willing to seek information from other users' reviews and comments, which are perceived as more honest than companies' official advertisements.

The ideal body figure used by the digital companies is a female white body with low body fat and clear muscle lines, combined with both slimness and strength. That body figure attracts many Chinese female users who never considered consuming fitness training before the Weibo fitness boom. The ideal body figure is a brand to attract customers. Behind the images of bodies, it is implied: 'Do you want the body? Follow our fitness guidance.' Followers then become interested in fitness and purchase paid products, which are introduced in section 4.3.

4.4 Paid products on apps and WeChat

4.4.1 FitGo fitness app

FitGo's core paid product is its fitness app. To access fitness guidance in the app, membership fees are charged. There are three prices. If the users pay monthly, monthly fees are 98 RMB (around £12 per month). The users can also pay for six-month membership, 248 RMB (around £30 for six months and £5 per month). Additionally, the users can make one-off payment for one-year membership, 388 RMB (around £47 for 12 months and £3.9 per month). The longer-term membership is purchased, the cheaper the price is. The way of charging fees aims to encourage the customers to pay for yearly membership and be long-term users. An app user can record and update their body data (e.g., height, weight and waist, chest and hip measurements) and training goals (e.g., weight loss or muscle building). The app assesses the user's body conditions, gives suggestions and recommends training based on those body data.

The user's homepage contains their total training time, the level and ranking of their training and information about their recent training completed.
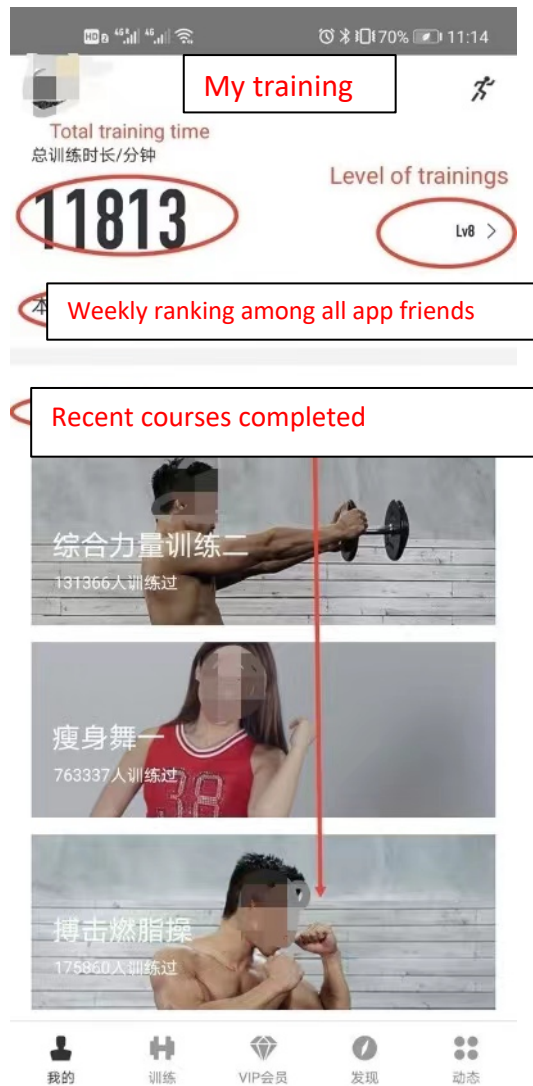
Figure 4.23: A user's homepage
Source: FitGo app

Every time a user finishes training with the app, the training time (in minutes) is recorded automatically by the app. The training time is ranked weekly among all the user's app friends to form peer motivation. The training time is also graded on ten levels; when users reach a new level, the company gives them a reward. The ranking, levels and rewards all aim to motivate the user's further training.

Level	Time	Reward
Level 1	30 min	N/A
Level2	100 min	Ten-yuan voucher for the app online store
Level 3	200 min	Seven-day premium for all paid courses

Level 4	500 min	Twenty-yuan voucher for the app online store
Level 5	1,000 min	Seven-day premium for paid courses
Level 6	2,000 min	50-yuan voucher for the app online store
Level 7	5,000 min	85% discount for one-year premium
Level 8	10,000 min	One-month premium for paid courses
Level 9	20,000 min	One-month premium for paid courses
Level 10	30,000 min	One-month premium for paid courses

Table 4.2: FitGo app awards at different training levels from FitGo app

There are two kinds of training guidance in FitGo app:

(a) Video courses held by coaches

Different kinds of courses are in the app, including yoga, strength training, dancing and aerobics. There are coaches in the pre-recorded videos teaching users and exercising as a virtual companion. A course series is divided into five to six days, training different body parts every day.

全部训练

Day one: chest training

Day two: back training

Day three: shoulder training

Day four: arm training

Day six: leg training

Day six: belly training
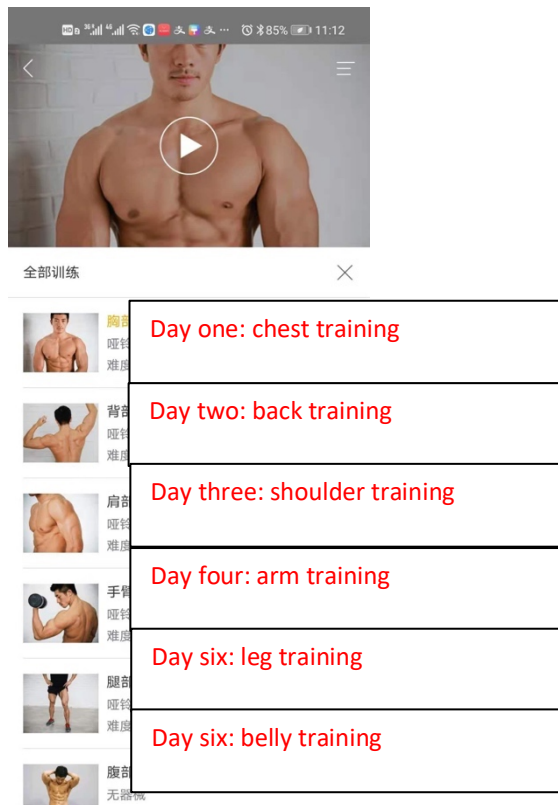
Figure 4.24: A course series in FitGo app

Source: FitGo app

149

(b) Modular movements with commands and timer

The second training function consists of a series of moving pictures. When people exercise with the guidance, they can see a group of modular movements and hear the countdown and commands at the start, break and end of the exercise, as shown in Figure 4.26.
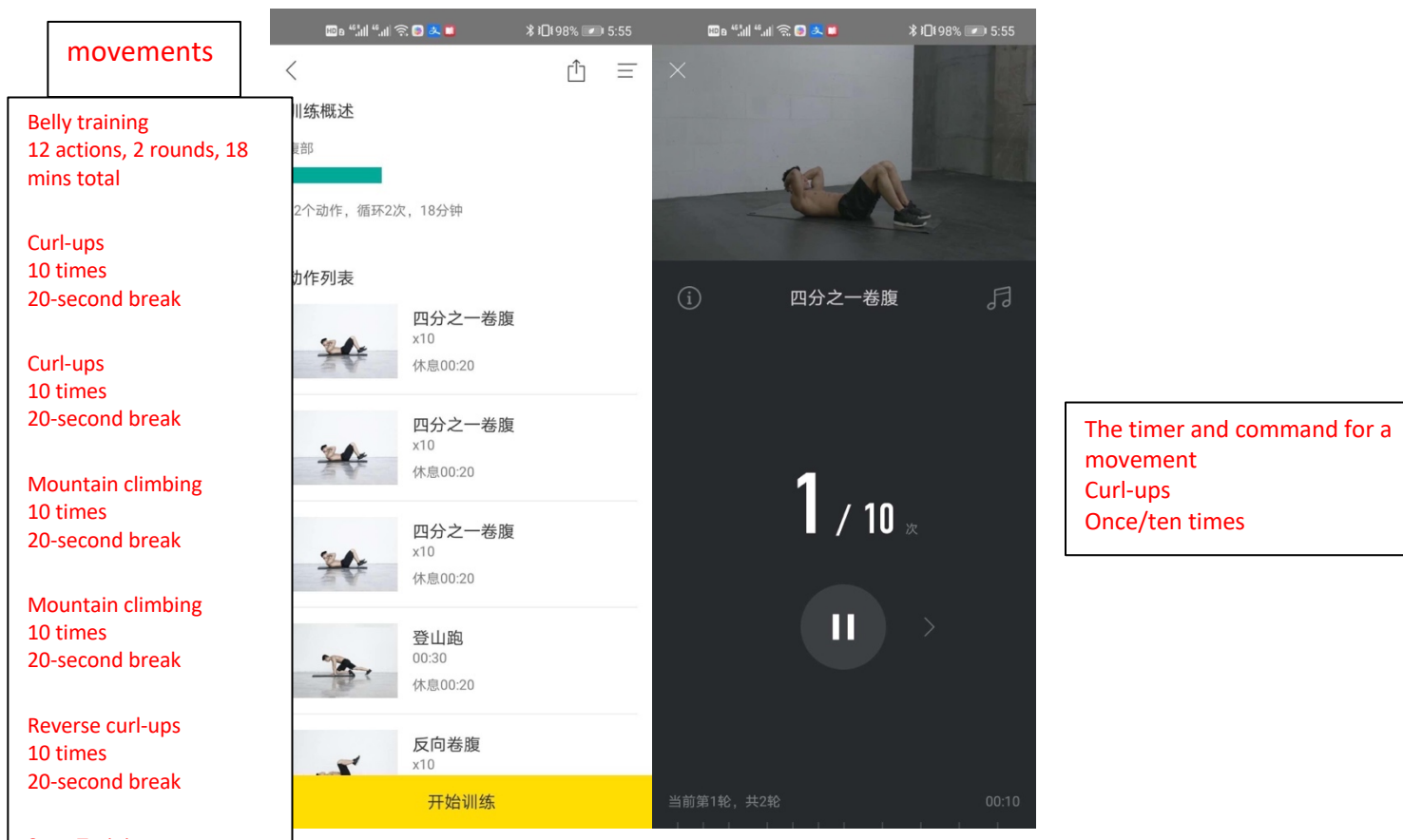
Figure 4.26: A group of modular movements with the timer and command
Source: FitGo app

Both employees and users can select and combine the modular movements and design a training plan, as shown in Figures 4.27 and 4.28 below. There are key suggestions for every modular movement for the users to learn from, ensuring that they train the right muscle. All the moving pictures are stored and categorised via different body parts in the movement archive. The users can decide the duration of a movement and the interval breaks. Once an app user designs and shares his or her training plan on the app, other users can also use that plan.

动作库

胸部	背部	肩部
30个动作	23个动作	26个动作
手臂	腿部	臀部
22个动作	58个动作	31个动作
腹部	全身	拉伸
41个动作	48个动作	58个动作
全部		
303个动作		

标准俯卧撑

动作要领

-腹部，臀部收紧

-臀部与身体保持同一水平面

-肩胛骨后缩

-起来时手臂打直
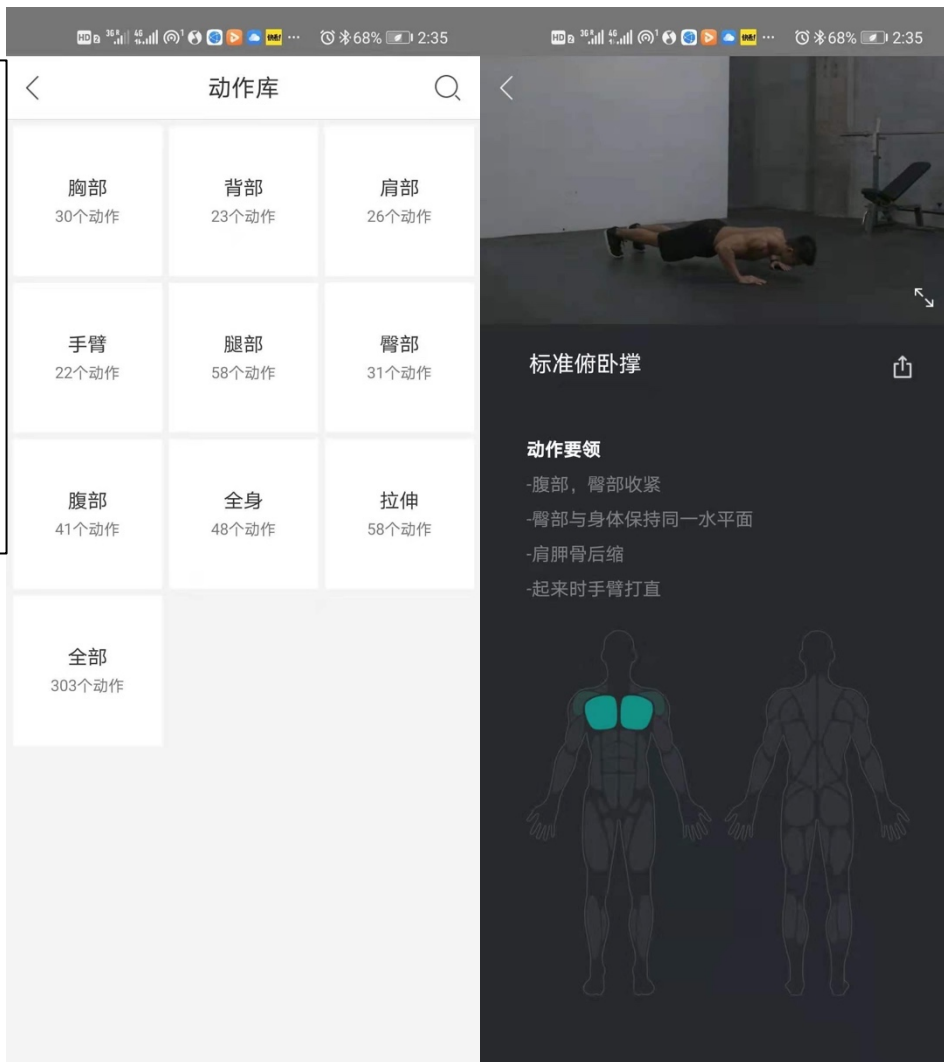
Figure 4.27: Archive of modular movements
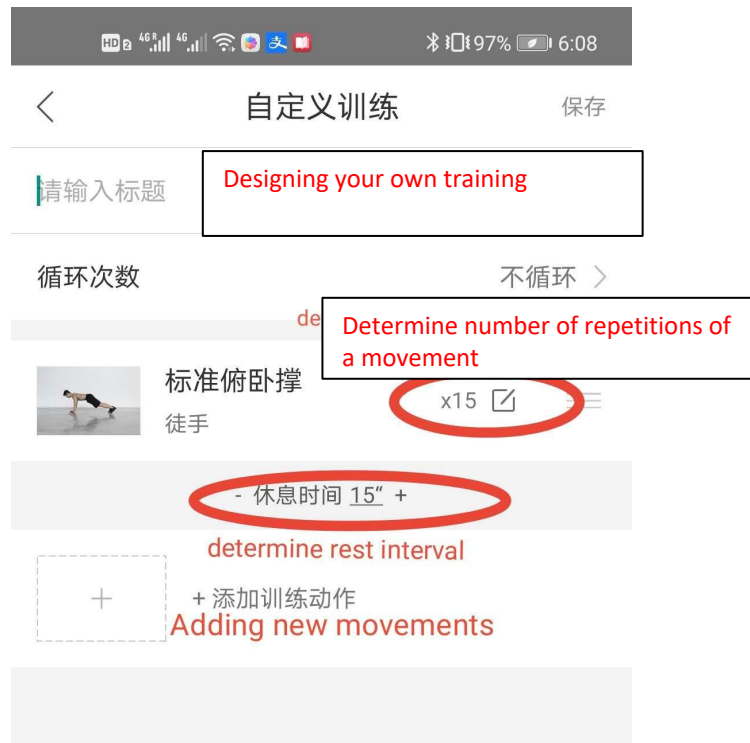
Source: FitGo app

Figure 4.28: How to design a group of modular movements
Source: FitGo app

All the training in the app discourages people from quitting half-way through. If a user does not finish playing a course video or quits before all the movements are done, a notice appears, saying: "quitting half-way will not record time you have spent on this training. Are you sure?"

There is also a user community in the app, shown in Figure 4.29, allowing the app users to post and share their training and diets. FitGo social media worker Lan browses the user community regularly and invites some active users to write their fitness stories for FitGo WeChat Subscription.

Figure 4.29: The user community

Source: FitGo app

4.4.2 WeChat training service

Both StartFit and FitGo provide paid online training tutorials in WeChat groups. StartFit also provides offline fitness services, which will be further discussed in Chapter Six. StartFit online training groups, which recruit much more customers than FitGo, bring about richer data. In this section, I use a StartFit group as a typical example to present how an online fitness tutorial in the WeChat group works.

Every StartFit WeChat training group has one coach, two coaching assistants and 15 to 20 customers. The coaches design the training plans for all the trainees and the coaching assistants help the coach with the training. They are responsible for organising the group, collecting the users' body data and submitting all data to the coach, communicating with the customers and

giving support and encouragement. After joining the group, the trainees will receive a group notice about the basic rules of the training groups, such as:

"Food should be classified into three types, protein, vegetables and grain. Here are some examples… Highly processed food is forbidden, and natural food is encouraged. Here are examples… The amount of food should be calculated according to different people's weight in order to intake minimum essential nutrition. Photos must be taken of all food eaten and reported to the coaching assistants.

The daily schedule for meals and sleep needs to be completed within a given time slot as shown below.

Time slot	Tasks
6 am to 7 am	Get up
6.30 am to 8.30 am	Breakfast
11.30 am to 1 pm	Lunch
5.30 pm to 6.30 pm	Dinner
10.30 pm to 11.30 pm	Go to bed

Table 4.3: Time schedule for trainees in online training groups

Source: Code of practice StartFit online training group in 2019

The trainees should spend one hour working out daily, six days a week, with both aerobic and anaerobic exercise. When doing aerobic exercise, the trainee should control the heartbeat between 120 to 140 times per minute so that the best result of losing weight can be achieved. Anaerobic exercise, also known as strength or resistance training, would be categorised in different body parts, leg, arm, belly, etc. The coach will arrange for the trainee to train one body part every day and get the whole body trained within a week."

All the customers need to obey the rules and report their meals, sleep and exercise to the coaching assistants in the WeChat group on time. The coaching assistants appear at every time slot and remind the trainees to follow the schedule. They give trainees some correctional advice on their diets or confirmation about achieving the required performance. The trainees are required to update their body data weekly to the coaching assistant, and their body data is ranked among all the group members. The list is anonymous, with everyone recorded as a trainee number and posted in the group to motivate everyone. The 'weekly champion' title with the most weight lost is given to the top performer, and a souvenir is sent by the company as a reward. The total amount of weight lost in a group functions as the index for evaluating the coaching assistants' work performance.

4.4.3 Disciplining bodies in the digital context

FitGo's app and the WeChat training groups from both companies both exert control on bodies remotely. The control is meticulous and works at the individual level. The body is understood and trained not as a unit, but as different segments based on anatomical knowledge, seeing the movements archive, the fitness video courses and the coaches' anaerobic training plan. The different body parts are trained separately, while every step during the process is observed and recorded to achieve the best result for effective body building. The individual-level control, the pursuit of overall efficiency and the intensive and constant surveillance of the whole process are three features that Foucault (1979, pp.137-138) characterised as "disciplinary power".

When the body is disciplined, the physical movements of different body parts are reorganised in terms of time and space. All the app training guidance has a timer and a command to start and stop. In online training groups, the timetable of meals and sleep is presented in the group rules. The body needs to behave in a specified way, and gradually a docile body can be achieved. Unlike physical gyms, the digital fitness product cannot arrange space directly, such as setting up a mirror to enable people to see themselves and be seen by others. But the app and the online coaches also influence the users' physical use of space. By providing training guidance that can be done without big fitness equipment or with small equipment, such as dumbbells and yoga mats, the trainees can complete their training at home, as per the slogan of FitGo app: "making your living room into a gym". A new way of seeing and being seen appears in the app and WeChat groups. Constant observation is realised by the users' self-posted photos of food, exercise and diet. To compensate for any manipulation of the photos to weaken the effect of

surveillance, the body figure and training are recorded as data. Such data becomes the most convincing reference point for evaluating the effects of the training.

Through datafication of the body and training, both the app and the WeChat training groups rank the trainees' performance. They turn training into a game. Scholz (2017) observes that gamification not only brings fun but also boosts peer competition to stimulate better performance. In this ranking, rewards for the winner's obedience are used more often than punishment of the loser (Foucault, 1979, p.184). The ranking and gamification work as normalising judgement. The coaches set a norm of training performance in the group rules. During the training projects, the coaches take this norm to judge whether the trainees' performance is standard. Any abnormal behaviour will be pointed out by the coaches. They will display the gaps between the standard performance with the abnormal behaviour to all trainees and motivate them to remedy the gaps. Gradually, trainees internalise the requirements and make themselves achieve a standard performance as much as possible. The trainees conduct self-discipline and train their bodies proactively in the ways that the coaches teach. However, crucially, the disciplinary mechanism not only trains users' bodies but also makes the docile body become useful labour power for the companies. And I will return to this point in Chapter Five.

4.5 Division of labour

Having described the products and business models of the two companies, I introduce whose and what labour contributes to those products and clarify the divisions of labour in the two companies in this section. In start-up companies, employees are usually required to take more than one role in daily work. I have found that employees interpret their multi-skilled labour as a means of self-investment. This interpretation is constructed in the neoliberal social relationship. When the companies are struggling to survive in uncertainty, as discussed in section 4.1, employees also face uncertainty in their career development.

4.5.1 FitGo company

As introduced above, FitGo's business mainly centres around the fitness app that can work on both mobiles and smart TVs. Its business model is to obtain users' online attention on social media platforms, then charge fees for online fitness courses in the app and tutorials in WeChat groups. Figure 4.30 shows the division of labour in FitGo, including programmers, social media

workers, video makers, online coaches, finance staff, designer, and administrative staff. The specific labour content of different participants in my research is presented in Table 4.4. Since workers take more than one role, some of them belong to different teams.
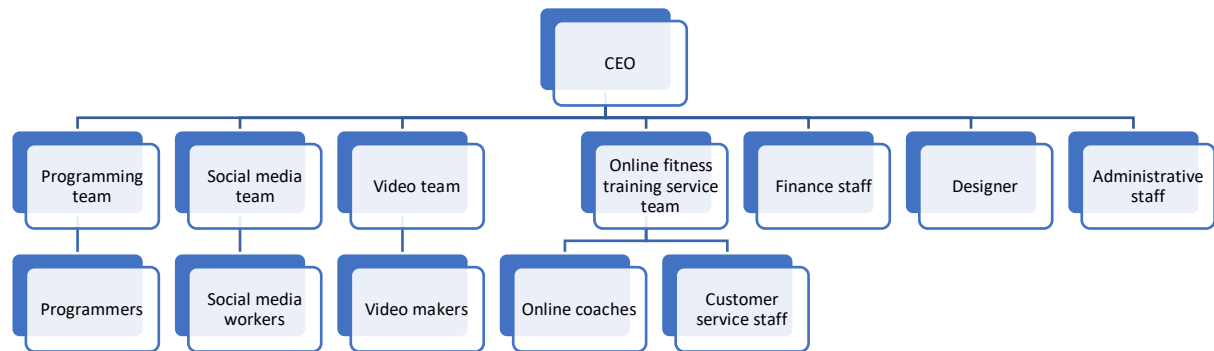
Figure 4.30: Division of labour in FitGo

Team	Work role
CEO (Max)	Makes decisions and leads the company's development.
	He is an Internet celebrity creating fitness content on social media and obtaining users' attention for monetisation.
Programming team (Don*, Falling, John, Tae)	The programmers code algorithms to enable different functions of the app and fix malfunctions. There are two versions of the app, for smartphones and smart TVs.
	After the app has experienced several iterations, the team only needs to solve malfunctions of the app from time to time. There is little work left for them within the company's business. The team now does outsourced projects for other institutions and earns income for FitGo.
	Don is the chief technology officer (CTO) of the company. He leads the programming team, arranges daily work, and negotiates outsourced projects with other institutions.
	Falling designs web pages inside the app.
	John codes for the TV-end apps.

157

	Tae is a data analyst and tests whether the app functions well. He makes daily reports of the company's income and sends the reports to the whole company. He also extracts users' data and draws users' profiles when the company needs to do targeted marketing.
Social media team and the mobile-end app team (Claire*, Zoe, Steve, Lan)	These four people write fitness articles and post content on different social media platforms to attract users' attention online. Claire and Zoe also work with the programming team and video team to upload video courses on the mobile-end app. Lan is a customer service worker handling customers' Q&A about the app. She also observes the app's user community and finds active users. She invites them to write their weight-loss stories to make advertisements for FitGo.
TV app team (Alan, John)	Alan takes charge of the TV app. He needs to make sure the TV-end FitGo app has a good position in the TV app store and appropriate exposure to customers. He negotiates with the TV staff about revenue sharing for advertising FitGo app in the TV app store.
Video team (Lee*, Van)	The video team makes videos, including the courses on the app and the CEO's online lectures. Lee designs fitness video courses on the app and arranges cooperation with outsourced coaches to record guidance videos. Van records and edits all company videos.
Online fitness training service team (Lee, Tae, Ann)	This team provides fitness guidance services in WeChat groups, providing immediate supervision and support for customers' training and diets. Ann provides customer service for the online training guidance service. She bridges communication among trainers, customers and outsourced nutritionists.

	Lee and Tae have professional coaching certificates and work as online fitness coaches, making training plans and giving immediate responses to customers' questions about exercise and diet in chat groups.
Finance staff (Alice)	Alice manages all financial issues, including allocating the staff's income and managing overall revenues and expenses.
Designer (Yan)	Yan designs all the company's images.
Administrative staff (Hua)	Hua is responsible for employees' leave and recruitment, recording attendance and scheduling holidays.

Table 4.4: Work roles at FitGo

(People marked with * are team leaders.)

4.5.2 StartFit company

StartFit's business centres around services, including online fitness tutorials in WeChat groups and offline one-to-one personal trainer courses. Its business model is to obtain online attention via social media platforms and persuade readers to purchase their services. With around 130 offline coaches in 15 physical branches and 150 online part-time staff who work remotely, StartFit team is bigger than FitGo's, and the company structure is more hierarchical than FitGo's, as shown in Figure 4.31.
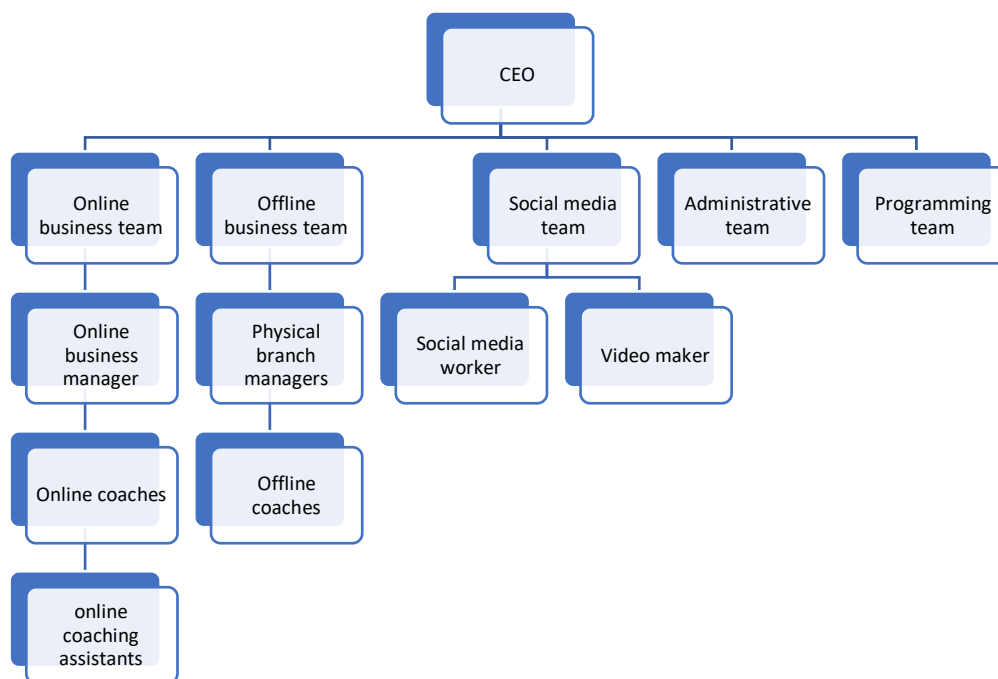
Figure 4.31: Division of labour at StartFit

My key informant in StartFit is Autumn, who works for both the online and the offline business teams. Autumn manages two physical branches and also works as an online business manager. She is responsible for online and online employee recruitment and staff training. On behalf of the CEO, Autumn gave me limited access to the company. I was allowed to interview four more people, including an online coach (Jimmy), an online coaching assistant (Lily), the leader of the social media team (Joyce), and an offline coach (Ben). I also contacted two more interviewees, Ruby and Betty, who were former online coaches of StartFit.

Team	Work roles
CEO	Makes decisions and leads the company's development.
Online business team (Autumn: manager, Lily: coaching assistant, Jimmy: online coach, Betty: former online coach, Ruby: former online coach)	This team provides online fitness tutorials in WeChat groups. Groups consist of one online coach and two online coaching assistants who provide immediate guidance and support for the customers' training and diet. All online coaches and assistants are part-time employees who get paid per project. Coaching assistants organise a group and invite customers to join after they have paid membership fees – around £100 per person for a six-week training. Coaching assistants supervise trainees' daily reports, give emotional support, collect customers' body data and report to online coaches weekly. After a project, the coaching assistants select the most hard-working trainees to join the team of coaching assistants. Every online coaching assistant must be a previous customer of online fitness tutorials. A person who never joins the online training group is not qualified to become a coaching assistant. Online coaches design and adjust training plans for every customer at the beginning of every week. They hold weekly Q&As with customers. They also hold weekly working meetings with coaching assistants, discussing how to improve services and help customers lose weight more efficiently. After a project, the

	online coaches grade and evaluate the coaching assistants' working performance.
Offline business team (Autumn: a branch manager, Ben: offline coach)	The company has offline training rooms, with 15 branches in three cities. In every physical branch, there is one manager who leads ten offline coaches. There are eight to ten cell training rooms with the same deployment of fitness equipment, which will be shown in Chapter Six. Customers make appointments with an offline coach online and have one-to-one training courses in the cell rooms.
Social media team (Joyce: team leader)	The social media team writes articles about fitness and health and posts content on social media platforms in order to obtain users' attention for monetisation. The team members also take charge of recording, editing and posting videos.
Administration team	This team manages administrative work, including financial issues and employee recruitment and leave, attendance and absence.
Programming team	The programming team linking the company's service to WeChat mini programmes. Customers can purchase and make appointments for offline courses via WeChat. Since WeChat is one of the most influential social media platforms in China and covers many aspects of daily life, linking products to WeChat makes it convenient to monetise online attention and improve customers' attachment to the company's service.

Table 4.5: Work roles at StartFit

4.5.3 Multi-skilled labour as self-investment

Most full-time employees in the two companies have more than one role. StartFit social media worker Joyce shared with me her multi-roles in daily work. Joyce, a 31-year-old woman, worked for an advertisement company for five years and then joined StartFit in 2018. Being expert at advertisements, Joyce is good at attracting the followers' attention and then monetise it by writing WeChat Subscription articles. But writing is not everything of her work, sometimes she needed to do different work, such as recording and making videos. Joyce said:

"You know, we are small companies with limited employees. So, it is unavoidable that sometimes I need to assume different kinds of work". (Interview 13)

This is because small entrepreneurial corporations with limited budgets need to prioritise the survival of the company by reducing expenses on human labour. When I started my participant observation at FitGo, the company had experienced a financial crisis and laid off one-third of employees. FitGo CTO Don, who leads the team of programmers, shared the stories of lay-offs with me:

"At the end of 2018, it was really difficult for the company. Max and I considered that we needed to create new ways of making money and reduce current expense. I found an opportunity to do outsourced programming projects for other institutions. So, I led my team of programmers to do it and earn extra income for the company. At the same time, we stopped renting the gyms near the office. That gym was only for internal employees to work out and for coaches to record fitness courses. But the rent was too expensive, around a million RMB (around £125) per year. We also asked some employees to leave. It was a hard decision. But we had to do that to guarantee the survival of the company." (Don, 42, FitGo CTO, Interview Eight)

After the layoffs, some employees need to assume diverse duties. FitGo social media worker, Claire who is the team leader told me:

"Our team only needed to create content on social media platforms. But after lay-offs, now we also assumed the task of uploading and marketing fitness courses in FitGo app." (Claire, 29, female, FitGo social media leader, Interview Seven)

Although employees felt that they had assumed more work tasks after some colleagues had left, they are happy with learning new things when multiple duties are assumed. Some employees even changed jobs from giant to small companies for the purpose of learning more new skills. Alice is FitGo finance staff, a 29-year-old woman. She worked in banks and big companies for three years and joined FitGo one year and a half when I interviewed her. Alice made comparisons between the working conditions in big companies and small ones:

"In giant companies with detailed divisions of labour, you only know a small part of the business. But in small companies, like FitGo, I find I can learn different new things. That is great." (Interview Two)

Being able to learn new things is the main reason employees have stayed in the small company despite work stresses. This feature is interpreted as an advantage over more stable and secure work in giant companies. Steve, a 29-year-old man, is a FitGo social media worker who creates content on the company's Weibo account. He once worked for an airline company and a state-owned bank, but he changed his job and joined FitGo. Steve said:

"I did internship in an entrepreneurial small company after graduating from university. I think that experience really impressed me and enabled me to know what kind of work I really want to do. An ideal work should enable me to learn new things. I felt stuck when working for big companies. Tedious and boring. On the contrary, I find that employees in small companies have a stronger sense of crisis. I love that we all desire to learn new things and become a better self". (Steve, 29, male, FitGo social media worker, Interview 17)

The sense of crisis derives from the uncertain fate of small companies. They may lose jobs, as may their colleagues, at any time, if the company fails to survive. The workers know this is the most significant disadvantage of their work in small companies and they do not expect that they will work there for a very long time. Instead, they treat the companies as a temporary platform for training and learning more skills. Lan is a 26-year-old woman who is a FitGo social media worker and customer service staffer. Lan said:

"I signed a three-year employment contract with the company. I will change my job in the future because I clearly know the disadvantages of this company. It is really difficult for such a small entrepreneurial company like FitGo to achieve breakthrough in its business development or to make a big money. I stay here temporarily and accumulate working experience. If I have three-year working experience, I will get a job with more income in the future. The more skills I learn in this job, the more competitiveness I have in future job-hopping." (Lan, 26, female, FitGo social media worker, Interview 14)

The workers interpret their labour as a means of self-investment. This interpretation concurs with Foucault's (2008[1979], p. 219) discussion about the theory of human capital in American neoliberalism. In this theory, workers' life is viewed as a kind of enterprise (ibid, p. 226) and human capital (ibid, p. 224) that could be invested with purpose of future rewards. All life experiences, including the workers' daily work, is interpreted as self-investment to improve the human capital. Such a neoliberal relationship presumes workers as entrepreneurs and requires them to seek self-investment. And the uncertain future of both small companies motivates the employees to work hard and equip themselves with as many skills as possible to become more competitive in future job-hopping. This manifests how uncertainty works as a significant neoliberal governmental art, as O'Malley (2000) claimed. He argues that unlike risk management based on numerical calculation of data in the past, uncertainty governs people through the future (ibid). People are involved in this modality of uncertainty as entrepreneurs working on themselves and expect a better future (ibid). As Osborne and Gaebler (1993) observe, when facing uncertainty, the transformative power of the entrepreneurial spirit is highlighted. Subject to uncertainty, individual workers are motivated to work hard and seek self-improvement in their daily work. They align the company's production goal with their own purpose of self-improvement (Ursell, 2000). The workers are thus concerned less with inequality in the employment relationship and care more about working on the self. When they interpret their labour power as human capital, it seems that they become capital owners and entrepreneurs. However, this interpretation does not change that they have no substantial property to make a living apart from their own labour power. Because the workers still experience alienated labour and they cannot neither own nor sell the product of their labour in the market for income. Thus, the workers have no choice but to sell their labour power to the employers for wages. The discussion about alienated labour will be unfolded in Chapter Five. When the only thing they are certain about in the future is uncertainty, when they own nothing but their labour power, the employees have no choice but to improve their professional skills to enhance their competitiveness in the labour market.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter first introduced the birth of the digital fitness industry, which was underpinned by top-down policy, state-led ICT advancement, bottom-up creativity and venture capital investment. With the desire to gain economic growth and international competitiveness, the

Chinese government has spared no effort in developing ICTs and encouraging bottom-up creativity to engage entrepreneurship. This state-led neoliberal economy constructs a market characterised by competition and uncertainty. The two companies in my research are situated in that market. As part of the first group of start-up companies in China's platform society, both have experienced their birth, heyday and current struggles. The changes in the two companies' situation are partly because of financialization of Chinese digital economy. Financialization has made the Internet companies increasingly rely on attracting investment from capital rather than accumulating capital through commodity production. Some giant Internet companies, such as BAT, have won the game of competition and played a dominant role in the market. They attract most of capital's investment, leaving few funds for small companies. And BAT even become capital themselves to make investment in some entrepreneurial companies, which are the most influential in various industries. BAT also merge and acquire small businesses. The two companies in my case failed to be influential enough to earn investment and did not build binds with BAT. Consequently, they had to survive on commodity production and struggle to survive. At the same time, their struggles also owe to the market full of uncertainty. The state leads fast ICT development and emphasises creativity, requiring entrepreneurs to work harder and reinvent business models. With many new business models emerging over a short time, it is hard for an entrepreneur to predict the future tendencies and appeal to the venture capital investors' preferences.

After describing the companies' products in detail, I clarified whose and what labour has contributed to those products. The uncertain fate of the companies also influences the workers' working condition and their understanding of daily labour. Employees never assume they can take a job as a life-long career, because uncertainty becomes the only thing that they can be certain about regarding the future. Under these circumstances, the workers in small companies have a sense of crisis. They do not mind taking multiple roles at work. Rather, they interpret their multi-skilled labour as a means of learning new skills. Labour is seen as a form of self-investment, which endows them with more competitiveness in future job-hopping.

Chapter Five: Disciplined Produsers and their Alienated Labour

5.1 Introduction

As I have discussed in Chapter Two, the concept of alienation is vital in the Marxist analysis of capitalist production. In this chapter, I will explore whether the concept of alienation helps elucidate the workers' relationships with their labour in the platform society. The production model of digital platforms, characterised as user-generated content on digital platforms, blurs the division between users and producers. Bruns (2008) speaks of a hybrid identity, the "produser", to describe the blurred division between the two. This hybrid identity highlights the significance of analysing workers' relationship with their labour and reflecting on whether Marxist alienated labour still occurs in platform society. Some scholars, such as Benkler (2006) and Bruns (2008), celebrate or have optimistic views of the produsage phenomenon, which they think has overthrown or will diminish the unequal power relation in production. Some scholars do not agree with this view and hold that alienation still takes place in the digital society (Berardi, 2009; Comor, 2010; Andrejevic, 2011; Fuchs, 2018).

My argument in this chapter is closer to the arguments of the latter group of scholars. In 5.2, I discuss the workers' relationship with their products. I find that digital fitness products endow workers with the hybrid identity of "produsers", which discipline both the produsers' bodies and their working performance. Users with the most disciplined training performance are selected as producers while the waged producers are encouraged to use the products that they create. For waged employees of two companies, they have a user's perspective and know how to improve the quality of the products to please the users. Their experiences of consuming commodities become labour, which on the one hand, generates value for the companies and on the other hand, makes them conduct self-discipline in daily work and become a desired workforce. In 5.3, I analyse the property relationship behind the produsage phenomenon. I find that the reason for the hybrid identity of produsers is that means of production become accessible to individual workers rather than monopolised by the capitalist. This is because the state-led neoliberal economy desires to encourage massive entrepreneurship and construct a market for competition. The workers can engage in entrepreneurship by paying for access to the means of production, which makes them not worker in a strict sense. Their payment for working tools becomes a form of self-investment, making entreprenuers conform to a neoliberal social relationship. Payment is required to access means of production because

working tools are still held as private property by some capitalists. The rule of private property and commodification of labour power determines that in an employment relationship, employees' capacity to labour is the employers' private property. Thus, the employees lose control of their labour and are deprived of the ownership of the products once they sell their labour power to an employer. The workers need to choose either self-investment through self-employment or alienation in an employment relationship. In 5.4, I analyse the workers' labour process, which is less coerced and more autonomous than the labour process in industrial capitalism. But the increased autonomy aims to encourage workers to enter into competition so that they can work harder to serve the companies. I conclude that alienation still occurs, albeit with features that alienation in industrial capitalism did not have. Crucially, these features, which diverge from Marx's concept of alienation, do not challenge but still serve capitalist production.

5.2 Reproducing disciplined produsers as a workforce

In the last chapter, I mentioned how digital fitness products – the remote fitness guidance in the app and online fitness tutorials in WeChat groups – discipline customers' bodies. Building on this, I will now show how the companies' digital fitness products blur the division between producers and users. The hybrid identity of the "produser" enables workers to build a close relationship with their product. The close connection has two strands: their strong attachment to fitness, which will be discussed in the next chapter; and their right to use the product. With the two strong bonds, the produsers' bodies are disciplined along with their working performance. Finally, a mechanism is formed to reproduce a desired workforce for the companies.

5.2.1 Selecting the most disciplined users to become producers

According to my description in Chapter Four, both companies record and rank the users' training performance either with an app or in online training groups. According to the records and rankings, the companies select the most disciplined users to engage in the companies' production. There are two types of participation: one-off temporary cooperation or contracted recruitment. In the former relationship, the users are invited to create content for the companies' WeChat Subscription accounts. Those user authors write their own fitness stories and advertise the companies' products. The latter relationship is more formal, meaning the selected users become waged employees and work for the companies.

To select desired users as producers, some staff assume responsibility for observing and evaluating customers' training performances. Lan is a FitGo social media worker. Her daily work involves writing WeChat Subscription articles, she needs to observe the user's community of FitGo app and finds potential user authors to write their fitness stories for FitGo's WeChat Subscription channel. Lan shared with me how she selects users:

> "I need to browse the user community in the app every day. Users will share their trainings, diet and body figures there. I will follow up the users' posts and see who keep fit well and have obvious changes in their body figures. Then I will invite these diligent trainers to write their fitness stories for our company's WeChat Subscription account." (Lan, 26, female, FitGo social media worker, Interview 14)

The user authors can also be selected in the two companies' online training groups and in StartFit's offline training courses. Autumn, a 38-year-old woman, is a StartFit manager. She told me how the staff in online fitness training groups select user authors:

> "Our coaching assistants rank the customer's reduced weight weekly. The weekly 'weight-loss champion' will be a potential user author. The staff also observe whether a customer reports exercise and diet as required. The trainees who are most diligent and have made the best progress will be invited to write their stories". (Interview Four)

Their standards for selecting a user author can be summarised as 'the most disciplined, the most diligent or the users that loses the most weight'. In this one-off cooperation, the user authors can obtain gifts from the two companies, such as yoga mats or dumbbells. Compared with material gifts, this cooperation also gives the users a sense of satisfaction as spiritual rewards. The opportunity to engage in production becomes a reward for users who perform well. When I asked whether her invitation to the user authors had been declined, Lan from FitGo said no users had ever refused her:

> "All users are very happy with my invitation. I think that is because most ordinary people have a dream of being a celebrity someday. When they train the body well, they have a desire to get attention and confirmation from others." (Lan, 26, female, FitGo social media worker, Interview 14)

The selected users also have opportunities to work for the companies as contracted waged workers. In FitGo, all four full-time social media workers were long-term users of FitGo app. StartFit keeps expanding its online team and recruiting new online customers as part-time coaching assistants. Lily, a 28-year-old woman, is a coaching assistant from StartFit. She said that to apply for working for StartFit as a coaching assistant, the applicant must have a previous experience of consuming StartFit's online service. Otherwise, his or her application would be rejected. Lily said:

> "All of our coaching assistants must be selected among our trainees. A person who has never joined our online fitness training group will not be hired as a coaching assistant. Because he or she does not know the whole process of our training project or how customers feel during the project. A person without a previous experience of consuming digital fitness products cannot bring about good service to the customers and is not qualified to be a coaching assistant." (Interview 16)

StartFit manager Autumn shared the recruitment process:

> "We will send the application form to all online customers and invite them to join us as a coaching assistant if they want. We will review chat records and check whether an applicant is the most disciplined in the training group. Then we will hold online written exams and telephone interviews about fitness knowledge and communication skills. A user then becomes an intern and will be guided by experienced coaching assistants to work in one training group for a trial. After the trial, we will evaluate the intern's qualification and make our decisions." (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)

Being recruited as a formal coaching assistant means the produser is subject to regular assessment and rankings of their working performance. In the many-to-many communication context, workers can see and be seen by colleagues, customers and employers simultaneously. And both their working performance in the WeChat groups and personal life in WeChat Moments are recorded as an index to assess their working capacity. I talked with a previous StartFit employee, Ruby, a 36-year-old woman who had worked as an online coach. She told me how she felt uncomfortable with some of her colleagues' WeChat Moments:

"From Moments, I could see some coaching assistants are very pessimistic in life. I thought they loved neither this job nor fitness and just wanted some money. I did not like working with them". (Interview 23)

StartFit manager Autumn told me that presenting pessimistic attitudes towards life in Moments is seen as a problem that needs to be addressed. Because the managing team think that an unhappy employee may give customers bad impression, which will stop customers from purchasing their service and reduce the company's income. To cope with this problem, Autumn said that StartFit managing team organised an employee training about how to post WeChat Moments:

"Our online coaches and coaching assistants need to use WeChat to contact with customers. That means they need to become WeChat friends with the clients. And the customers can see our staff's personal life in Moments. Only when a staffer has a warm and happy personal life can she or he attract customers to pay for our service. We now train our coaching assistants to post their personal life in Moments in a way that could present an optimistic personality." (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)

Besides the colleagues' and superiors' observations of the employees' daily work, the coaching assistants' work performance is also observed and evaluated by their customers. Autumn said:

"A coaching assistant's performance is graded by customers, online coaches, and peer coaching assistants together. After integrating all the grades, we make rankings...We calculate the rate of how many customers continue to buy our service after a training tutorial. We also review the chat records and see whether a coaching assistant serves the customers patiently and in a timely manner. Those assessments influence the online workers' performance salaries and future opportunities to serve the customers. If a coaching assistant's grade is too low, he or she would not be selected by the coaches to serve a new project next time." (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)

The process of transforming users into producers exemplifies the application of disciplinary authority to conducting workplace surveillance for recruitment and staff training. This system

of surveillance is founded on the app's or WeChat groups' general visibility. Surveillance of prospective employees who are customers is conducted by company personnel. Once a customer begins using the product, the company's personnel observe their training performance. At the same time, the working performance of salaried employees is recorded by social media platforms and is monitored by managers and employers. It is possible to monitor produsers' behaviour in two ways: (a) through their spontaneous sharing on social media platforms, and (b) through the automatic recording of their training and working performance by these platforms. Ruby, the online coach for StartFit, used the first method to observe her subordinates' personal postings in Moments and determine whether their personalities are suited to the job based on the empirical data cited above. According to Ball (2010), this method of conducting surveillance is controversial because it exceeds what is reasonable or necessary for work. When ICTs eradicate work spatial and temporal constraints, employers' surveillance and control expand and penetrate more deeply into employees' daily lives (Levy & Barocas, 2018; Rosenblad, Kneese, & boyd, 2014; Zureik, 2003). Even in their personal time and space, employees must meet their employers' expectations. For example, coaching assistants from StartFit must be trained to exhibit a positive attitude when publishing Moments. According to my observations, some employees have resisted this method of surveillance by modifying their privacy settings on social media platforms, such as by making their personal accounts private and preventing coworkers from viewing their personal posts. Regarding the second method of surveillance, the automatic recording of people's private activities by platforms, Rosenblat, Kneese, and Boyd (2014) express the concern that neither employers nor employees own the content and data generated by individuals. This portion of data and content is controlled and owned by platforms or third parties. And their intent to amass data and content is beyond the control of employers. For instance, platform-based content recommendation algorithms may predict or manipulate platform users' future consumption or reshape platform users' conceptions of themselves and the world. And this may have some unexpected and unanticipated effects on the work and life of employees.

In this surveillance system based on visibility, there are some specialised personnel taking the role of observer. The coaching assistants in training groups conduct surveillance on customers' training performance. They facilitate the exercise of disciplinary power upon individual trainees' bodies (Foucault, 1979, p.174). These personnel were once observed trainees themselves and were then selected as the observers and integrated as part of the disciplinary mechanism. When they become waged coaching assistants, they need to monitor trainees'

physical trainings on the one hand. On the other hand, their working performance is also monitored by online coaches, who are responsible for administering training groups and monitoring the performance of coaching assistants. Thus, a hierarchical power relationship is formed. The observers, who are in a superior position in the mechanism, conduct surveillance of the trainees, who are inferior in the hierarchy (ibid, p.175). The disciplinary power that is exercised through those observers on the users' bodies serves the companies' production (ibid, p. 175) by selecting the most disciplined customers as workers. Those workers are trained to be a workforce that is desired by the employers who are self-disciplined and always strive for a good performance. The observers, who are also labourers under capital's control, now become assistants of capitalist production. And after joining the companies, the produsers need to be disciplined by superiors or employers to become a qualified worker. In this mechanism of discipline, every produser's activities are monitored and recorded, which is similar to Foucault's (1979, p.193) analysis of disciplinary power, which involves "mak[ing] individuals become describable and analysable objects". The recording functions as a "means of control and domination for any possible use" (ibid, p.193). In my case, these recordings serve disciplinary power in three aspects: (a) introducing rankings and boosting competition in order to discipline the trainees' bodies; (b) selecting and recruiting users as waged employees; (c) disciplining waged staff's working performance.

When conducting surveillance on individual produsers, the norm of 'what is a good trainee' and 'what is a qualified coaching assistant' are set to make judgements about their training and work performance. To make the judging process clear, the users' training performance is quantified as training time and weight lost, and the coaching assistants' work performance is graded. These quantitative personal data and grades are ranked, with the top rewarded and the bottom punished (Foucault, 1979, p.178). For the users, the reward is an opportunity to join the companies' production, whilst the punishment is to finish extra training requirements raised by the couches for disobeying rules. For the waged produsers, the rewards include performance salaries and a sense of fulfilment based on praise from colleagues, superiors and customers. Punishment includes the reduction of performance salaries and of future opportunities to serve customers.

The ranking itself also serves as reward and punishment (ibid, p.178), making people feel happy and gratified or humiliated and stressed. Rankings present the gaps between the individual produser and the 'norm' and individualise any 'abnormal' behaviour (ibid, p.193).

The rankings engage the produsers in peer-based competition and the individualised abnormality motivates them to pursue better performance and achieve normality. Observation and normalising judgements form a system of examination, providing surveillance on, and documenting, people's behaviour as individual cases, to guarantee the operation of disciplinary power (ibid, pp.191-193). The examined never know when and whether they are being observed or judged. They need to keep behaving as required and gradually internalise the external rules and the conduct of self-discipline. This disciplinary mechanism not only works on bodies but also on labour. When some users are selected as waged producers, their previous experiences of consuming digital fitness products and the user perspective enable them to fully understand and know how to appeal to customers, making them conduct self-discipline in daily work.

5.2.2 The producers' right to use their product

The current discussion about the hybrid identity of the produser mostly deals with how users engage in production and become producers (Bruns, 2008; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Fuchs, 2014b; Ghazi, 2019). They neglect that the formation of the hybrid identity "produser" is bidirectional. Not only do users become producers, but producers also become users. Less attention is paid to the other side of this hybrid identity. I will discuss it in this section.

In the two digital fitness companies, the waged producers are encouraged to consume their products both during and outside their labour process. This is different from factory workers who cannot consume the products that they produce without the employers' permission. Van, a 23-year-old man, makes videos for FitGo. When describing his labour of making vidoes, Van said:

> "When I shot and edit the videos, I am also a viewer of those videos. I watch them again and again. Although this process is a bit boring, there is also advantages of this job. I learned a lot of fitness and health knowledge by making videos of the CEO's online lectures." (Van, 23, male, FitGo video maker, Interview 19)

Apart from using the product during the labour process, the employees are also encouraged to use the companies' commodities at a discount or free of charge outside the workplace. When I

173

said that I had paid membership fees of FitGo app to get access to paid courses, Yan, a 20-year-old image designer at FitGo, told me that I did not have to pay:

> "All of us have free access to all paid courses in the app. You could directly turn to the programmer Tae and let him grant you free access. This is a kind of internal welfare for all employees." (Interview 20)

In StartFit, the current employees can have a discount on paid service, which is told by both the manager Autumn and the social media worker Joyce.

> "All the coaching assistants can redeem one free online training project for every five groups they serve." (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)
> "I joined the company's offline training courses. I only needed to pay one-fourths of the price to my colleagues." (Joyce, 31, female, StartFit social media team leader, Interview 13)

Giving workers the right to use the product gives a user's perspective to them. This can make the workers self-discipline in their daily work so as to improve the quality of digital fitness products, including fitness content and service. During my participant observation at FitGo, I noticed that after the staff uploaded new video guidance to the app, they always logged in with their personal accounts and took a user's perspective to check whether there were any undesired technical faults. Similarly, StartFit employees try out their products before launching them onto the market. StartFit Manager Autumn told me:

> "When our colleagues create some new types of online fitness tutorials, my colleagues and I will try out the new service. We will organise a new WeChat group. There is an online coach, two online coaching assistants and three to five our StartFit colleagues who play the role of customers. Then my colleagues and I will train our bodies following the coach's and coaching assistants' guidance as lay customers. Based on our training experience, we give suggestions to improve the quality of service in this tutorial. We usually try out a new tutorial several times before selling the service to the users". (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)

In the two companies, some employees have been long-term customers and some not. Having previous experiences of consuming digital fitness products is an advantage in a job application. Lan, a FitGo social media worker, needs to observe the user's community and find potential user authors to write fitness stories. She was once a user author herself. Lan said:

> "I have been a long-term user of the app and was invited to write my fitness story by my team leader. After graduation, he suggested that I could apply for a job in FitGo. The boss hires me because I am a user myself and I can provide a user's perspective. I know how to attract the users' attention, persuade them to pay for our courses and improve the user experience." (Lan, 26, female, FitGo social media worker, Interview 14)

With a user's perspective, the workers can understand users' feelings, reflect on their own labour and adjust the products to appeal to users' preferences. The producers are trained to think like users during the labour process. This user's perspective makes them engage in self-discipline at work, spontaneously carrying out self-checks and corrections and improving the product quality as much as possible.

Allowing the producers to use the product without few constraints also builds the employees' attachment to fitness. After using the product, some employees, who had not been fitness consumers before joining the companies, gradually became interested in this area. At FitGo, finance staffer Alice, administrative staffer Hua, and image designer Yan did not exercise before joining the company; I observed that they gradually started to diet and exercise after they started working for FitGo. Hua shared her fitness stories with me:

> "After giving birth to my daughter, I put on lots of weight and really needed to lose weight. I have joined the company's online fitness training groups three times and successfully lost three kilograms. I am going to join another group this spring. I want to be slimmer before summer." (Hua, 31, female, FitGo administrative staff in charge of employees' recruitment and leave, Interview Ten)

By joining online fitness groups, Hua learned a lot from her colleagues about diet and healthy eating. Although her educational background was not in nutrition, Hua manage to learn nutrition knowledge systematically, take an examination and obtain a nutritionist certificate.

With this kind of knowledge, she once took a role as a nutritionist in the online fitness training tutorials.

"I learned new knowledge and skills in case they might be useful one day. And they turned out to be helpful. In 2017, the online fitness training groups recruited so many customers and my colleagues needed extra help to deliver service. Then I helped give guidance about diet and healthy eating." (Interview Ten)

Hua's identity as a consumer also familiarised her with FitGo's digital fitness products and enabled her to advertise the commodity to people around her. During the pandemic in February 2020, all FitGo employees had to work from home and communicated with each other through the working groups. I observed that Hua shared with her boss and colleagues how she promoted the FitGo app to her friends in a WeChat group. Hua's identity as a customer made her recommendation reliable to those friends who then paid membership fees to use the app.

Joyce is a social media worker at StartFit. When she started to write WeChat Subscription articles for StartFit, she was a fitness novice and knew little about fitness. Joyce appreciated that she could join the company's offline fitness training courses with a low price, which helping her create more reliable fitness knowledge than before. Joyce said:

"I knew little about fitness when I joined the company. Some readers blamed me in the comments because they thought I was not professional in fitness and wrote something wrong. It is great that I can join the offline training courses with a low price only for current employees. Otherwise, it would be too expensive to me. Offline training courses make me gradually love fitness and help me write WeChat articles in a more professional way than before". (Joyce, 31, female, StartFit social media team leader, Interview 13)

For these producers, who know little about fitness, using the product and becoming fit is a kind of employee training. They become familiar with fitness, which helps them create better products or advertise the companies' products with an identity as a customer. For the employees who are fitness lovers, the right to use the product helps them retain their passion in this area, motivating them to pursue even better performance in both training and work. The entanglement between hobbies and work will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

With attachment to fitness and the right to use the products, the producers build a close connection with the product that they create. This kind of relationship between the producer and the product is different from that in Marx's analysis of alienated labour, where the producers are unable to use their product (Marx, 1844, p.3). What is the implication of this close relationship with products to employees? Does this close connection entail that the workers in my research experience less alienated labour than those in industrial capitalism?

To answer the questions above, I need to bring Marx's discussion about the dual character of the commodity to the centre, which I reviewed in Chapter Two. Marx (1990 [1887], p. 131) claimed that the commodity has both a use value and a value. People exchange commodities in the market because they need to use the products, that is to say, consuming the use value of commodities (ibid, p.132). And the value, created by human labour, decides the quantities of exchanged commodities in the market. For a commodity, neither of the features can exist without the other. One the one hand, the use value is a physical barrier to the value. On the other hand, and the value quantifies the use value, which is qualitatively different, and makes commodities exchangeable (ibid, p.132).

In the factory, producers are forbidden to use the product because the consumption of the product reduces the value of the commodity. When the producers use a commodity, what they consume is not only the use value of a product, but also value, which is created by their labour. The decreased value results to reduced income of the employers. However, the situation is different when it comes to digital companies. The producers' consumption of an Internet-based product can increase instead of decreasing the use value, which thus brings about more value. When the employees consume the products that they create, their consumption helps improve the quality of their content and service. The experiences of consuming digital fitness products become labour that generates value for the companies. The more time they spend using their product, the more labour time they devote to the product, and the more value the product is endowed with, the more income an employer can have.

At the same time, by allowing the employees to use the product and making them produsers, the companies train and acquire better workers. Those employees who have a user perspective know how to improve the product and please the customers. A circular system is formed to reproduce a desired workforce by disciplining users, selecting users to become producers,

allowing producers to be users and making employees become better producers. The digital fitness products, produced by the employees, function in the exercise of disciplinary power on their producers, training the employees' bodies and working performance. With a close relationship with the product, including the right to use the product and attachment to fitness, the workers gradually internalise and conform to the external requirements. Disciplinary power, as Sheridan (2003) notes, works on the soul through the body rather than the other way around. Coercion of the body, which occurs in the factory context, disappears when it comes to Internet companies. Instead, similarly to Lazzarato's discussion (1996), power aims to construct a subjectivity that can work on the self spontaneously.

The close relationship with the product serves the commodity production of the companies. But this finding is not enough to answer the question whether alienation takes place in the two companies. In Marx's analysis, the workers' loss of the right to use the product is the expression of estranged labour relations. The fundamental reason for losing the right to use is the loss of ownership. The question above cannot be answered without an understanding of property relationships behind the produsage phenomenon, which I will discuss in section 5.3.

5.3 Accessible means of production

In this section, I discuss the means of production and the property relationship behind the produsage phenomenon. In industrial capitalism, there is a clear boundary between producer and user because, as Marx notes, the means of production is monopolised by the capitalist (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2004). The capitalist has appropriated the means of production as private property. As I noted in Chapter Two, the rule of private property excludes others from using it without the owner's permission. Only when a person sells his or her labour power to an employer and becomes a waged worker, he or she can use the means of production as the employer requires. Otherwise, the workers cannot devote their labour to production. But this situation is changed when the means of production is not monopolised by the capitalist but becomes accessible to workers. This means the workers can engage in production without an employment relationship. Accessible means of production is the prerequisite of the hybrid identity 'produser'. Do accessible means of production mean that alienation is challenged? The answer to this question should focus on the property relationship behind the accessibility of working tools.

Based on my observation, I have summarised different types of means of production in the two digital fitness companies in Table 5.1 below. To clarify the property relationship, I also list who provides access to the means of production, who can get access to the means of production and how.

Means of production	Provider	Owner	Who can access and how
Internet	The employers	Communication companies	All Internet users need to pay for broadband to access the Internet. In digital companies, the employers pay for the companies' broadband and enable the workers to access the Internet for work. Simultaneously, the workers also pay for broadband so that they can access the Internet outside the office. The Internet keeps the workers connected to colleagues and employers outside the workplace and enables them to work remotely if needed.
Physical device, including PC, smart phones, and video cameras	The employers	The employers	All users can own physical devices as private property through one-off purchases. Employers purchase PCs and video cameras, which become the company's private property, and provide those working tools for the workers. The workers also purchase PCs, laptops, tablets and smart phones as their own private property. When the workers need to work remotely, those properties are used to generate commodities and create value for the companies.

Social media platforms	Platform companies	Platform companies	It seems that all the users can get free access to platforms. But the users actually 'pay' the platforms with their data. Some platforms also charge users membership fees for premium services. The employers sometimes pay fees for premium services when they want the companies' content to be exposed to more users.
Software for programming, editing videos and pictures	The employers	Software companies	Some software is proprietary and requires all users to make a regular license payment. The employers regularly pay licenses for the employees in their companies. Some software is open source and free of charge. The workers can directly access the free software.
Informational materials for production, including images, music, fonts, videos, and fitness knowledge	The employers; copyright owners of those materials	Copyright owners of those materials	Similar to software, some informational materials are proprietary and require all users to make regular payment. Employers make the payment and enable the employees to use those materials to create products. Some informational materials belong to open source and are free of charge. The workers can directly download those materials and apply them to creating products. The companies also exclusively own some informational materials, created by previous and current employees. For example, the articles written by authors, or images designed by designers all belong to the company as their internal materials. They are only accessible to current employees.

Table 5.1: Means of production, providers and ways of getting access

Source: Fieldnote

As shown in Table 5.1, the property relationship in relation to the means of production in my research is more complicated than that found in industrial capitalism, where means of production mainly refers to huge and heavy machinery. Some people can make one-off purchases to own those means of production as private property; they become capital owners or what Marx (1990 [1887]) called capitalists. As Wittel (2015) contends, the rule of private property excludes others from using property without the owners' permission. Based on this rule, anyone who needs to use working tools should get the capitalist's permission first. For people who cannot afford to buy those machines by themselves, they cannot use the means of production, which are privately owned by capitalists, until the capitalists allow them to do so. Unable to realise their labour power and create products for survival, these people need to sell their labour power to capitalists for wages and use wages to maintain a living; this group of people are called workers. Marx described this phenomenon as the means of production being monopolised by the capitalists (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2004, p.20). Fine and Saad-Filho (2004) contend that through monopoly of means of production, Marx draws an explicit division between the capitalists and workers. In Marx's critiques of capitalist production, employers are both the owners and providers of means of production in an employment relationship. They provide working tools, which they own as private property, for the workers to conduct their labour.

However, the property relationship in the workplace has changed in my research field, as shown in Table 5.1. Employers are still providers of the means of production in an employment relationship, but they are not necessarily the owners. That is to say, they cannot own some of the working tools as private property. Among all the working tools, only physical devices can be owned privately by the employers through one-off purchases. For some means of production, such as broadband connectivity, software and informational materials that are proprietary, the employers need to make regular payments to the property owners for access. So, the employers can enable the workers to use those tools to create commodities for companies. The employers are renting proprietary working tools from the property owners. Simultaneously, as shown in Table 5.1, not only employers, but the workers themselves can own physical devices through one-off purchases or accessing the Internet, software and informational materials through

regular payments. There is also some means of production belonging to open source, which provide access free of charge.

This property relationship shows two facets. Firstly, the rule of private property, criticised by Marx (1844, p.1), holds true because most proprietary means of production, other than open source, requires the users to make payment to the property owners to get ownership (e.g. physical devices) or the right to use (e.g. broadband connectivity, software, some informational materials). Otherwise, users are unable to access those proprietary working tools. Clearly, both employers and employees cannot get means of production without constraints. That is how the rule of private property works, with the owners claiming private ownership and excluding others from using the property without their permission. In the context of my research, making payment to property owners is the way to get their permission. The second facet is that means of production is not monopolised by the capitalists: some means of production become accessible to workers. For instance, workers can purchase physical devices and own them as private property. By making regular payments to proprietary means of production, workers can rent them and have the right to use them within a certain period. Additionally, workers can also get free access to open resources. The implication of the two facets above are discussed in the section below.

5.3.1 Alienation in the employment relationship

With the rule of private property remaining true, I explore the ownership of the companies' commodities and find that the workers are alienated from the products that they produce in an employment relationship. As seen in Table 5.1, some informational materials are exclusively owned by digital fitness companies and only current employees can access those materials. Those companies' internal materials, including articles, images and videos, are created by previous and current employees. I once observed FitGo social media workers searching the files on the company's PC for images, which were designed by a previous designer, to put those images in their article. The products of the previous designer's labour belonged to the company. Even though the designer had left the company, their products still contribute to the company's commodity production. The worker could not privately own the products, take them away and sell them for income after leaving the company. Alan, a 29-year-old man who

manages the TV-end app for FitGo, told me about the copyright of fitness guidance videos, which confirms the fact that the company holds the products of workers' labour as private property:

> "Part of our company's income comes from selling the copyright of videos. The company holds the copyright of all the videos. If other institutions need to use our fitness videos for commercial interests, that is to say, for making money, they need to request our boss's permission and pay fees for the copyright first." (Interview One)

Alan's description clearly shows that only the employer can sell the commodity for income. The company takes all the income by selling commodities and then gives part of the income to their employees as wages. Although commodities are created by the employees' labour, the workers cannot directly sell the commodities for income and own all the value that they generate. This is because the workers experience alienated labour in an employment relationship, which estranges them from the products they create. To clarify how alienation takes place, I will return to the discussion about the means of production.

The workers could differentiate the company's property and their own property with what means of production they use to create products. They think once they use the means of production that are provided or owned by the employers, the products that they create belong to the companies. Claire, FitGo social media worker, creates content, including pictures and videos about healthy eating on Weibo. She expressed her aspiration to be an influential content creator and build a personal brand in the future. I asked her why not attract some followers for her own brand in the company's social media accounts and apps. Claire said:

> "No, I cannot attract followers for my own brand when I kept the company's account active on digital platforms. The user base and the followers' attention belong to the company and could only be used for the company's commercial interests. I cannot use them for my own business interests. I can only attract followers and interact with them on my own social media account." (Claire, 29, female, FitGo social media team leader, Interview Seven)

Similarly, FitGo video maker Van told me why his videos belonged to the company,

> "Those fitness videos that I made belong to the company. I cannot use them beyond the company's business. Because I use everything provided by the company to produce videos, including the company's cameras, paid access to the software and those outsourced coaches whose salaries are paid by the company. Without these tools and people, I cannot make it."

According to Van's inference, when his labour process involves the tools that are provided by the companies, his products belong to the companies. This reasoning is similar to Elster's (1985) interpretation of Marx's theory of alienation. Elster (1985, pp.102-103) argues that means of production is central to understanding alienated labour because the companies' private ownership of means of production is justification for employers' ownership of products that are created by the workers. Elster's (1985) arguments contribute to highlighting the significance of means of production in analysing alienation. But his interpretation did not pay enough attention to another important prerequisite of alienation – commodification of labour power – which is indispensable for explaining how alienation still takes place in my research despite changes of property relationships, as I explain below.

Compared with the working conditions of industrial capitalism, on which Elster's (1985) and Marx's (1844) analysis of alienation is based, the property relationship in my researched companies is different. The employers cannot own all means of production as private property. Some means of production, such as physical devices (e.g. cameras and PCs), can be owned through one-off purchases and become the companies' private property. And some means of production, such as the digital fitness companies' informational materials, are produced by employees and for which the copyrights are held by the corporations. For these physical devices and companies' internal materials, Elster's analysis of alienation centring around the capitalist's private ownership of means of production holds true. However, some means of production, such as proprietary software and information materials, cannot be owned through one-off purchases and requires the employers to make regular payments. Instead of privately

owning software and informational materials, the employers rent them, which shows a different property relationship from that in Elster's analysis of alienation. However, Elster's (1985) reasoning still holds true that the capitalists alienate the workers from the products by controlling the workers' access to means of production. By renting those proprietary means of production for the workers to create commodities, the employers dominate the workers' access to those working tools and requires the workers to apply tools in certain ways. That is to say, the workers cannot use means of production without constraints. For instance, the employees could not use those means of production beyond the companies' business. The reason that employees must obey the employers' requirements is that the workers sell their capacity for labour to the employers as commodities. The workers' labour power becomes the employers' private property. This is a significant element to understand alienation, which is absent in Elster's (1985) discussion. Consequently, the employers can use the workers' labour power in the ways that the employers want. Commodification of labour power and the rule of private property work together to justify the employers' private ownership of the products of the workers' labour. Thus, the workers are alienated from the products. They can neither exchange the products in the market for an income nor use the companies' products as means of production (e.g. the companies' internal informational materials) to start up a business. The workers need to continue selling labour power to the employers for an income. Or the workers could carry out entrepreneurship by themselves, which will be discussed in section 5.3.2. From my discussion above, Marx's theory of alienation is still helpful to elucidate working conditions in my context.

Admittedly, alienated labour in my research is somewhat different from the factory workers case in Marx's (1844) analysis of the phenomena of estrangement. When Marx (1844) claims that the factory workers are alienated from their product, he means they lose both the use value and value of the commodity. The factory workers can neither immediately use the product nor get income by selling the product. The employees in my research, however, have the right to use the product with few constraints if they still work for the companies. Their loss of ownership of the product is presented in the intellectual property and copyright of their product, which are both in the hands of the companies. The ownership of intellectual property and copyright has been identified as a significant element in critiques of how media workers are alienated from their product, for example by scholars such as Bettig (1996) and Bulut (2014).

Bettig (1996) has criticised how mass media creators must transfer their intellectual property and copyright to capitalist media companies who control the means of communication for content publication. Different from Bettig's (1996) context of mass media, social media platforms nowadays enable more users to access means of communication and publish content more easily. However, the property relationship between the content creators and the owners of means of communication does not have fundamental difference from that in the mass media era. Bulut's (2014) studies about alienation of digital labour proves this fact and is relevant to my research. He investigates the video game developers who working in digital game studios. Bulult (2014) finds that although the game developers can use their products, playing the games they design. But the copyright of games is held by the companies, which prevents the workers from selling the games in the market for income. Similarly, in my research, the owners of FitGo and StartFit do not grant the workers copyright of their product, notwithstanding the workers' right to use their product. The workers' estrangement from their product does not necessarily entail losing the right to use the product, but it does entail losing some value that their labour creates.

5.3.2 Competition as a neoliberal governing tool

Although the rule of private property holds true, the property relationship changes because the means of production is no longer fully monopolised by capitalists. As shown in Table 5.1 above, both the capital owners and individual workers can use the means of production by paying the owners. It is possible for the workers to create products without selling labour power to employers. They can choose self-employment and start their own businesses to avoid alienation. StartFit manager Autumn told me how some customers of online training groups learned from the company's business models and do entrepreneurship by themselves:

> "StartFit is the first company that creates the business model of providing instant online fitness guidance through WeChat groups. It is easy to copy this business model. I once saw some customers of our online fitness tutorials started up their own business by organising WeChat groups and providing paid fitness service online." (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)

Some workers in FitGo also have their own small business to run as a part-time job for extra income. For example, Lan, FitGo social media worker, shares me with her stories of holding an online agent that provide service for students to study abroad.

> "I spent my undergraduate years in Belarus. I am quite familiar with Russian and local life. So, I provide online service through WeChat for Chinese students who plann to study there or have studied there. My service includes giving them language courses to improve Russian, checking their assignments for good scores, sharing them with some experiences of living and studying there."

Choosing self-employment helps the workers escape from alienated labour in the employment relationship. They could realise their labour power with platforms, creating products and selling commodities for income. But self-employment places the workers in a neoliberal social relation. When the workers start up their own businesses, they become self-reliant producers, entrepreneurs and their own main source of earnings. This is what Foucault identifies is at the heart of American neoliberalism and human capital theory (2008 [1979], p.227). To realise their labour power and earn income, the workers must access all the necessary working tools. From my discussion above, the rule of private property still works, with some means of production still privately owned by certain groups of people. Excepting software and informational materials that are open source and free of charge, workers need to pay for access to other working tools. Access to most means of production is obtained via transactions in the market. And it is worth noting that some means of production, such as platform algorithms, are still monopolised by the owners and exclude other people, no matter capitalists or workers, from accessing them, which will be discussed in section 5.3.3. The self-employed workers' payment for means of production becomes a form of self-investment. They take their life experience as human capital and anticipate future rewards from self-investment (ibid). The workers are trapped between alienation – if they work for an employer – and a neoliberal relation – if they choose self-employment.

The reason why some means of production become accessible and are no longer monopolised in the context of the Chinese digital fitness industry is deeply rooted in Chinese state-led neoliberalism, which encourages competition and uses competition as a governing tool. As

reviewed in Chapter Two, China adopted a Reforming and Opening up Policy in 1978, indicating official permission for a market economy. In contradistinction to the centrally planned economy before 1978, the increasingly prevalent market economy meant that means of production were no longer monopolised by the nation but allowed individual entrepreneurs to compete with state-owned corporations (Atherton and Newman, 2017). The emphasis on competition has been enhanced in the Chinese platform society. With the goal of developing the digital economy and generating international competitiveness (Yu, 2017), two policies were set out in the 2015 government report: "Internet Plus" (China State Council, 2015b), encouraging different industries to innovate with digital technologies, and "Mass Entrepreneurship and Mass Innovation" (China State Council, 2015a), encouraging citizens to engage in entrepreneurship and create new business models. Although Chinese government never explicitly advocates neoliberalism, the two policies here do form a social relationship that is consistent with some principles of neoliberalism. In the past three decades, the Chinese government has put great effort into pursuing advancement and widening application of ICT, as I mentioned in Chapter Four, including building communication infrastructure, and mass development and production of Internet-enabled mobile devices. The government's efforts contribute a lot to making some of the means of production accessible to the mass public in order to construct a market for competition.

By encouraging individual entrepreneurs to start from scratch with accessible means of production, the government allowed small enterprises to survive in the market, enabling competition among corporations and preventing any private giant enterprises' monopoly over the means of production and raw materials (Atherton and Newman, 2017). Only state-owned enterprises are exceptions that are allowed to hold monopolies in certain areas (ibid). The Chinese government has taken a leading role in reforming the market since 1978. In contrast to intervening in the market directly with the centrally-planned economy before 1978, the government has created certain social conditions that influence the market indirectly. Those governing strategies, including providing accessible means of production and setting two politcies to encourage competition, are consistent with what Foucault (2008[1979], p. 80) and Davies (2016) analyse as a strong government developing a neoliberal economy through top-down state guidance and regulation. Situated in this context, competition becomes a neoliberal governing tool, as conceptualised by Foucault (2008[1979], p. 120) when he analysed the post-war German economy. Similar to Germany, the Chinese government uses competition to

revitalise the market economy, stimulating the companies' productivity and boosting economic growth.

5.3.3 Limited possibility of surviving the competition game

As discussed in section 5.3.2, some means of production are accessible to workers. Specifically, workers can own physical devices (e.g. PCs, tablets and smart phones) as private property through one-off purchases. For proprietary software and informational materials, workers can rent them by making regular payments to the copyright holders. The workers can access social media platforms by providing their own data. There are also software and informational materials that belong to open source and the workers can use them free of charge. Through these kinds of accessible means of production, workers can start up their own businesses and avoid the alienation of employment relationships. But at the same time, self-employment also involves workers in competition, as discussed above. A vital question emerges about how workers can survive the competition and manage to make a living through entrepreneurship. I suggest that the possibility of surviving in self-employment in the platform society is limited.

According to some of my respondents who have run their own small businesses online, their business models are similar to those of the companies: to attract users' attention by creating content on social media platforms and monetise users' attention by providing paid service and knowledge. To carry out entrepreneurship with this business model, the workers need to have their own physical devices, pay for Internet access, and gain access to social media platforms. As individual entrepreneurs with limited budgets, they prefer to use informational materials and software that are free of charge. Among all those means of production, social media platforms play a key role in determining whether entrepreneurship will be successful or not. Such platforms determine how much audience attention a content creator can obtain, which largely influences the creator's income from monetisation of the viewers' attention. It is not easy for individual entrepreneurs to start from scratch with this business model. Because those platforms, based on datafication mechanisms (reviewed in Chapter Two), do not give equal exposure to every piece of content that is posted. This phenomenon was observed by FitGo social media worker Zoe, who needs to post marketing information of FitGo app on different social media platforms. Zoe said:

"We social media worker needs to attract users' attention on different platforms to our app. It is not easy to guide users' attention because the platforms try to prevent us from doing so. I send advertisements on the platform Headline, and I find that it can detect whether users' posts contain marketing information or links to other platforms. If so, this platform will limit the exposure of the relative content or even remove it. Because Headline does not want its users to be guided to other platforms, which will reduce the platform traffic. So, I must avoid using words that may trigger their alarms and try to maximise the marketing effect. It is like playing a game with the platforms." (Zoe, 27, female, FitGo social media worker, Interview 21)

Zoe's comments suggest that the platforms are concerned about their traffic, referring to the amount of users' attention. This is because platform traffic is closely related to their business interests. The digital platform companies rely on investment from capital for survival, as I discussed in Chapter Four. Investors' concern is for the estimated value of the platform companies, that is to say, the potential capacity to monetise users' attention. The more users and the more traffic a platform has, the more estimated value the platform is endowed with by investors, and the more investment the platform company can earn. Thus, platforms do not want posts with links that guide their own audiences to other platforms, which would reduce their traffic and harm their business interests.

Protecting the platforms' own traffic and business interests is not the only reason for controlling exposure of content – it is also how platform owners claim private ownership of the platform. The owners do not want users to exploit platforms as working tools without their permission to create and sell commodity for income. If anyone wants to start up a business on these platforms, the entrepreneurs must get the owners' permission by paying the platforms. Some platform owners charge entrepreneurs regular service fees for selling commodities on the platforms. Some platforms require the entrepreneurs to share a certain percentage of revenues with them in return for using the platforms for marketing. FitGo TV staffer Alan, who manages the TV-end FitGo app, told me: "We need to share 30% of our revenue from the TV-end app with smart TV companies because we sell our paid content on their platforms." In a FitGo meeting, CEO Max and CTO Don discussed the choice of platforms for marketing. Considering the tight budget of the company, they want to choose a platform that does not share revenue with FitGo.

Don: I think the platform Goose is good because it could directly sell our fitness courses on our behalf. We do not need to allocate extra workloads to our employees for managing content on Goose. But I am concerned about how Goose charges fees. Does it share our revenue?

Max: I have confirmed that Goose does not share revenue. It only charges service fees annually, around 5,000 RMB [around £620], which is not a big deal.

If the entrepreneurs want to get better marketing effect, platforms also provide promotion service. Both the CEOs of the two companies in my case paid promotion fees for some platforms. These platforms then expose the companies' marketing information to more users. Ruby, a former StartFit online coach, joined StartFit at the early stage of the company. She said:

"StartFit has spent a lot of money doing marketing on Weibo since Weibo was the most popular platform in the beginning of the 2010s. The boss paid promotion fees to Weibo and the platform helped make StartFit advertisements appear on many users' homepages." (Ruby, 34, female, former StartFit online coach, Interview 23)

FitGo pays promotion fees for app stores on mobile smart devices. FitGo TV staffer Alan said:

"Our companies make regular payments to the app stores of tablets and smart phones. We want to make sure that when customers search for a fitness app, our app will appear in the first three places." (Alan, 29, male, FitGo staffer managing TV-end fitness app, Interview One)

If workers choose self-employed work with digital platforms as means of production to post marketing information, they need to face the platform' control of content based on algorithm and user data. Individual entrepreneurs who start from scratch with limited budgets will not be as competitive as the companies who have much more money to pay platforms for promotion. Platforms create an illusion of fair competition, where every user can use the platforms to produce and post content. However, as Eva Hartmann (2015) argued, competition is a game of inequalities that obscures an unjust power relationship because it treats subjects as if they were on an equal footing. But subjects do not have the same starting point. Once the producers pay promotion fees, the platform uses algorithms to make these people's content appear on a wider range of users' homepages than before. It is found that the more followers an account has, the

more exposure to users their content will have (Fan, 2020). The platform will prioritise the content of those accounts with more followers than new start-ups with fewer followers because the former has stronger capacity to monetise users' attention and could share more revenue with the platforms (ibid). New content creators with limited budgets and fewer followers cannot compete with their counterparts who pay promotion fees and have more followers.

It is the platform owners with key user data and algorithms that determine who can be the winner in the competition game on digital platforms. In his politico-economic critique of mass media production, Bettig (1996) claims that the capitalist class refers to the group of people who have the machinery and money to control the communication and distribution of information. Wittel (2015, p.93) confirms Bettig's contribution to revealing the property relationship between media workers and capitalists based on the latter's ownership of the means of communication. Compared with mass media, Wittel claims that on user-generated content platforms, the means of communication become distributed among users rather than the media company owners (ibid). I argue that digital platforms now integrate means of communication with means of production and make those working tools accessible to the users, as seen in section 5.3.1. Clearly, not all the means of production are accessible to all users, especially the core parts referring to algorithms and user data, which are in the exclusive charge of the platform owners. The platform owners' exclusive control of that key part of tools gives a justification that they can require the individual entrepreneurs to share some revenue with them. Because without the means of production provided by the platform owners, the content creators cannot start up business. It is said that the platform entrepreneurs usually need to share more than 30% of their income through UGC (Zheng *et al.*, 2020), with the rest part hardly support their living. And the inability to access this part of the means of production determines that the self-employed can barely survive in the game of competition and keep a living through entrepreneurship. At the same time, as Bingqing Xia (2018) argues, big companies, such as BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent), have won the competition game and taken a dominant position in the Chinese digital economy. They have merged with and acquired small start-up companies, leaving little space for independent entrepreneurs to survive. Xia (2018) points out that the Chinese digital economy has experienced financialization, which makes Internet companies rely on attracting investment from capital rather than accumulating capital through commodity production. Giant companies' businesses are more competitive than small ones in attracting investors' funds, because with larger groups of customers and more influence than small companies, giant corporations are endowed with higher estimated value (ibid). It is

difficult for individual entrepreneurs who start from scratch to attract investment from capital or create commodities for survival. The possibility for workers to earn a living through self-employment with the part of the means of production that they can access is limited. That is to say, they cannot survive if they conduct labour only with the means of production that they can use, including physical devices, access to Internet and social media platforms. Self-employment with accessible means of production is an alternative to alienation, but this choice can barely make a living. Even though some of them have their own small businesses as part-time choices, they are cautious about full-time entrepreneurship. Most workers prefer to stay in an employment relationship and endure alienation, especially when BAT controls the digital economy and leaves less space for independent entrepreneurs. As FitGo administrative staffer Hua said, "Working for a company means having a base salary as back-up. It is better than nothing".

5.4 Networked power relations in the labour process

In the previous section, I discussed that how different kinds of means of production are controlled by the employers in an employment relationship through private ownership or rent. I clarified that how the employers' control of means of production and commodification of labour power results to alienated labour. In this section, I discuss the workers' labour process. In Marx's (1844) analysis of alienation, the workers' labour process, including their physical movements and consciousness, are subject to the employers' decisions. But of course, working conditions have changed. On the one hand, the workers in my research are not as passive as factory workers and are endowed with some autonomy in labour processes. On the other hand, the power relation during the labour process is no longer unidirectional, with the employers oppressing the workers. The customers have an increasing influence on, and even engage in, production in the context of the platform society that allows user-generated content and many-to-many communication. A networked power relation is thus formed, involving the employers, the workers and the customers.

5.4.1 Employer's dominance and employers' distributed autonomy in labour processes

In the two fitness companies, the employers have the strongest authority to determine what to produce. The CEOs in two companies have chosen different monetisation strategies. FitGo CEO Max prefer selling content than providing paid service. He told me:

"I have my own principles of running business. I am obliged to tell my customers what I believe is the truth. Alongside my daily learning and exploration, my understandings of fitness are also updated. When content is my core product, I can update my product easily and make sure I always tell my customers what I believe is true. If I sell material products, such as fitness equipment or food supplement, I have to defend my commodities and keep promoting them to customers even though one day I do not believe they are helpful for fitness anymore. This goes against my moral principle. I really enjoy updating and enriching my fitness knowledge and applying my knowledge to influence others to acquire a healthy lifestyle. Even if our companies did not exist, my content could still help others. So, our core product is the content." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

StartFit CEO, on the other hand, does not think content would be a competitive commodity and prefers selling a service. Former StartFit online coach Ruby shared with me their CEO's preference:

"Now if you want some fitness knowledge, you can get it free of charge online. How could the users be willing to pay for it? Our boss thinks that what people need most is service, which gives them companionship and support during the fitness training. StartFit focuses on providing high-quality service. Good service is the source of our company's competitiveness." (Ruby, 34, female, previous StartFit online coach, Interview 23)

The employers' strongest power to make decision derives from their private ownership of workers' labour power and control of means of production. The workers sell their capacity to labour to employers as commodities. After paying wages, the employers take the workers' labour power as private property. According to Wittel (2015, p.97), private property refers to a power to exclude others from using property without the owner's permission. So, the workers cannot determine how to conduct labour by themselves. Rather, they need to obey the employers' requirements. Simultaneously, the working tools are controlled by the employers, either through private ownership or rent. When the workers are using the working tools which are owned or rented by the employers, they need to use those tools according to the CEOs' requirements. It is the employers who set the aims of the workers' labour. When determining the key business strategy, the CEOs are still in the dominant position to exercise power. How

capitalist determines what and how to produce commodities is similar to Marx's analysis of industrial capitalism.

What makes the working conditions in the case of the digital fitness companies different from a Marxist analysis is that the employers delegate some responsibilities to the workers and allow the employees to have some autonomy in their labour process. This shows two different ways of exerting control over labour, direct control and responsibility, which have been developed by Marxist sociologist Andrew Friedman (1977). Friedman (1977) claims that direct control coerces labour power by supervising workers' physical movements closely and minimizing individual workers' responsibilities. Responsible autonomy is a different strategy, which attempts to make labour power adaptable to changing situations for the sake of the companies (ibid.). To achieve that goal, the managing team will give workers status, authority and responsibility (ibid.). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) point out that responsible autonomy increasingly dispenses with direct control since the management system has improved, responding to both workers' resistance and the capitalist production model that relies more on human creativity, which can be maximized through workplace autonomy. Friedman is highly critical of responsible autonomy and describes this form of workplace control as an hypocritic strategy that disguises the inequality between labour and capital. He says responsible autonomy does not remove alienation or exploitation, instead, it simply softens them and distract workers' attention from those inequalities (ibid.). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) claim that Friedman's interpretation is too pessimistic and views workers as pure victims. They introduce Sosteric's (1996) study of a Canadian nightclub. At the beginning of Sosteric's fieldwork, employees had been a given high level of autonomy, so they developed a personalised service style, which appealed to customers and made the club popular. The employees could also handle difficult customers who showed disrespect to staff. This improved the job satisfaction of the workers. However, then the management style was changed by a new manager who replaced responsible autonomy with direct control, which consequently resulted in staff leaving and business collapse. With this case, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) claim that employees were not necessarily victims of capitalism, rather, it is possible to achieve a good balance between companies' business goal and the employees' needs. Similarly, responsible autonomy is applied by the CEOs in my case to managing the teams, giving workplace autonomy to workers. Before I discuss how this form of management respectively influenced the companies and workers, I will first introduce discussion about autonomy and present the employees' autonomy in my case.

To be autonomous, as per Chrisman's (2009) discussion, one acts from thoughts, desires, personalities and conditions that are not externally imposed, but endogenous from one's authentic self. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) defines autonomy as "self-determination". They contend that all autonomy is limited because it is impossible for human beings to act free from external constraints. Thus, the discussion of autonomy concerns a certain degree of self-determination conditioned to a given context (ibid.). Situated in different working conditions with various workloads, the employees' autonomy varies between different divisions of labour in my case, which will be presented below. With their studies of creative labour, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) categorize two kinds of autonomy: workplace autonomy and creative autonomy. Workplace autonomy is a response to the two forms of control reviewed above and could be understood as how much workers can be self-determinant in the way they conduct their labour. Creative autonomy indicates how much self-determination workers have in generating aesthetic, expressive and symbolic cultural products. Creative autonomy is categorised into aesthetic or artistic autonomy and professional autonomy. Aesthetic autonomy means that creative workers always aspire to resist imperatives of capitalism and attempt to generate non-market production. This kind of autonomy shows the tensions between art and commerce, as discussed by Banks (2007), who claims that the power of art that encourages artistic expression will always resist the requirements of accumulation. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) suggest that if we fail to recognise aesthetic autonomy to strive for non-market production, we may fall into a crude reductionism. Another kind of creative autonomy is professional autonomy, which is frequently seen in jobs about constructing, disseminating and interpreting information or knowledge, such as professional book authors, encyclopaedia editors, journalists or documentary producers. With professional autonomy, creative workers set the criteria of qualified work by themselves to judge others' standing or product. This kind of autonomy also helps them resist the eroding influence of commercial goals or intervention from political parties or governments, thus generating content from a relatively authentic self and independent minds. Both workplace autonomy and creative autonomy are exemplified by employees' daily labour in my case. But due to different divisions of labour and the different situations within the two companies, their autonomy varies.

The employers in the two companies generally apply responsible autonomy rather than direct control, which gives relatively high workplace autonomy to employees. Employees have some degree of self-determination in their daily work without close supervision of how they

specifically conduct their labour. In terms of creative autonomy, different workers' labour shows different emphasis on creative or professional autonomy and presents a varied degree of self-determination. Social media workers have relatively high creative autonomy, including creative and professional autonomy, in both companies. They take charge of generating content, attracting and monetising users' attention, with little intervention from the CEO. FitGo social media workers Claire and Steve told me when they choose themes for daily WeChat articles, they select whatever they think is important or they are interested in writing. Since they are fitness hobbyists with much expertise, their capacity for creating content is appreciated and trusted by the FitGo CEO Max. Max told me:

> "It is good to have fitness hobbyists in my social media team. They know much about fitness. I really appreciate that they can create high-quality content every day. So, I do not need to worry about that part of business." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

But fitness experts also have some worries about attracting and monetising users' attention. Claire told me:

> "What we are interested in is not necessarily what the followers want to read. We need to think about attractive topics raising the followers' curiosity and appealing to their tastes." (Claire, 29, female, FitGo social media team leader, Interview Seven)

Joyce, a social media worker at StartFit, has different worries about content creation from FitGo staff:

> "I knew little about fitness when I joined the company. Some readers blamed me in the comments because they thought I was not professional in fitness and wrote something wrong." (Joyce, 31, female, StartFit social media team leader, Interview 13)

However, Joyce is confident in and good at attracting users' attention: "I studied advertising. When I write articles, I always know how to interest my readers." From average readership of per article on WeChat Subscription, the StartFit social media team attracts more followers' attention than that of FitGo. StartFit WeChat articles could have around 18974 number of reads while the FitGo articles only have around 4976 number of reads. But FitGo social media staff

do not want to sacrifice their expression to obtain more attention. They insist on telling customers what they believe is true or valuable at the expense of business interests. Because they really want to help customers to be healthy and fit. All those will be presented in detail in 6.4.2 in Chapter Six.

The social media workers' responses from the two companies suggest that, to be a good social media worker, a person should have two kinds of knowledge: fitness and marketing. Only having one type of knowledge means the workers must learn the other one. During my observation, FitGo social media team learned by themselves from other WeChat Subscription accounts, which they think are high-quality and inspiring, about how to make an attractive topic and article in daily work. From my fieldnote, I also observed FitGo social media team's meeting to discuss how they can improve content quality and attractiveness. Joyce from StartFit trained herself in fitness knowledge and said: "I keep learning new fitness knowledge and try to avoid annoying the readers".

The social media workers' labour shows that both aesthetic or artistic autonomy and professional autonomy are involved in content creation. Staff at FitGo apply artistic autonomy to content creation and the resist imperative of the market economy. As other scholars' envision about cultural and creative workers, they conduct labour with moral values and ethical considerations (Banks, 2007; Kennedy, 2011), such as conveying reliable knowledge and helping with customers' health. Simultaneously, social media workers also apply professional autonomy through journalism and marketing knowledge in content creation. With this kind of autonomy, they set criteria about what a good WeChat Subscription article is and learn from those good examples. They also motivate themselves to polish their own product through self-learning. This helps improve their own professionalism as well as the quality of the product. Although their labour is partly market-led, selling content and monetising readers' attention, there are still some non-market aims of their daily work: helping customers achieve a fit and healthy body. Such non-market production shows the positive influence of professional autonomy.

FitGo video maker Van said he has different degrees of creative autonomy according to different types of video content:

"Now I mainly edit two types of videos, fitness guidance and the CEO's lectures about health and nutrition. For fitness guidance videos, what we record and how we record are usually settled down by my colleague, Lee, and the coaches we are filming. There are given steps to record and edit fitness video guidance and that is less space for me to be creative. If I record the CEO's video lectures about health and nutrition, I can exert my creativity more. I sometimes suggest to the boss how to give a better narrative and also make his speech have more flow by editing the order of his sentences". (Van, 23, male, FitGo video maker, Interview 19)

Van's labour shows relatively high professional autonomy and low aesthetics. Unlike social media users who need to generate content, he takes the role of recording and editing content. What and how to record tends to be fixed elements in his routine guidance videos. He does not need to consider aesthetics and his expression in them, instead he needs to apply his professional skills to combine different sections together. When he makes the CEO's lectures, he exerts a little more aesthetic autonomy to edit lectures logically or to provide a better narrative. His professional autonomy makes his suggestions for the CEO's presentation persuasive.

Image designer Yan told me about her interesting changing attitudes towards aesthetic autonomy.

"When I just graduated from school, I insisted on what I think is beautiful and sometimes argued with the boss or clients. But soon I found it is hard to persuade them. Then I abandoned persuading them and editing my images as they requested. Now, I just want to finish as soon as possible."

Yan became the only designer at FitGo after the other two designers had left the company in 2018. Yan now has higher workplace autonomy than before, but she sometimes feels bewildered rather than happy. She feels that higher autonomy means she needs to be more self-reliant and self-responsible:

"Before 2018, our team had three people. My team leader was very strict with my work, and I needed to revise my images several times. Now I am the only designer. Nobody would be that picky about my work, but I cannot learn more professional skills either.

I just edit when my colleagues think the images are not good. But they do not request much revision, to be honest… Nobody could help me when my inspiration is exhausted. So, I have developed a habit of browsing image websites from time to time and accumulating inspiration for future work." (Yan, 20, female, FitGo image designer, Interview 20)

Yan's creativity autonomy changed along with his working conditions. When she had supervisors in the team, she had relatively lower aesthetic autonomy and needed to adjust to the team leaders' requirements. That experience enabled her to learn skills and improve professionalism as a junior designer. Now, as the only designer, she has more aesthetic and professional autonomy. But she feels lost in this self-reliant situation, which motivates her to conduct self-learning.

The IT staff, who code algorithms, have relatively low creative autonomy in their work. They provide technical support for the digital fitness product, and their work is subject to their boss's and colleagues' requests, including analysing user data or realising certain functions of the apps. I joined a FitGo meeting and recorded the following conversation between the IT team leader Don and the CEO in my fieldnote:

CEO: I need to know how many users clicked the 'share' button yesterday.
Don: Please give me three minutes… there were 675.
CEO: Can you realise a function that our TV users can share their training directly on a mobile after scanning the QR code?
Don: I am not sure now. I have not coded those algorithms before and need to learn from other peers online. I will reply to you tomorrow. (Fieldnote)

However, IT staff still retain some professional autonomy because their professional skills are esoteric. If someone is outside this industry, they cannot really determine what IT staff can or cannot do. Taking the example of the conversation above, Don told the CEO that his requests could not be realized due to technical limitations after he studied certain algorithms, thus the CEO abandoned their request.

Besides those creators mentioned above, there are also service providers in the two companies. How much autonomy service providers have varies between the two companies' business

strategies. In FitGo, where service is not the core product, how to provide the service largely depends on the coaches, and the boss does not give much intervention. FitGo CEO Max, who shows little interest in service in his interviews, said: "I let our coaches manage those training groups and I do not put much energy into online services". In StartFit, where service is the core product, there is formal employee training about how to provide service and certain protocols for the service staff to obey. StartFit manager Autumn said:

"We provide employees with trainings about not only fitness knowledge but also communication skills. We share some typical users' cases and organise seminars for our staff to discuss those cases together. We will sort out the best solution to the some frequent questions raised by customers and summarise experiences in how to comfort the users' emotions and handle their complaints." (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)

Despite the given principles of providing a service, StartFit endows its staff with some autonomy and allows them to provide a personalised service. Jimmy, 25-year-old man, has worked for StartFit for three years. When I asked whether they could give fixed response to different users, he told me:

"It is not good to give fixed and impersonal answers, like a robot, to customers' questions. Some customers may think we do not respect them to do that. I always make them feel that my response is full of humanity by adding some emotions in communication with the users." (Interview 11)

Based on personalised services, the customers are invited by StartFit to grade the service providers' performance, which underpins peer competition. I will discuss competition among service workers in subsection 5.4.2.

Service staff's labour is relevant to discussions about workplace autonomy and professional autonomy and has little to do with aesthetic autonomy. Service staff at FitGo have maximum workplace autonomy due to the CEO's scant attention paid to that part of the business. In terms of service providers at StartFit, their workplace autonomy depends on whether they are senior or junior staff, according to the StartFit manager, Autumn; as noted earlier in this chapter, she showed me the long process of becoming a qualified coaching assistant. A potential service

provider needs to experience internship and trial, where their work should be guided by more experienced colleagues. At that stage, their workplace autonomy is relatively low. When their performance is acknowledged by colleagues and superiors, they can independently serve customers and earn themselves more workplace autonomy.

The service staff also have some professional autonomy in terms of communication with clients. According to Autumn's and Jimmy's descriptions of service work, employees' service can be characterised as "regulated but also personalised". The management team at StartFit gave detailed guidance for service staff's working performance, providing training on communication skills and fitness knowledge. However, the managers did not expect the service providers to give a fixed, patterned and impersonal response. Instead, they still need them to be personal and provide a humane service. Similar to Sosteric's case in the nightclub, this kind of service is welcomed by customers. This determines that managers give more space to the employees so that they have more workplace autonomy and professional autonomy to consider the diversity of customers' cases and provide personalised service to various customers.

After discussing varied autonomy of employees in the two companies, I return to the implications of control and autonomy in the workplace. There is no denying that employers still have the strongest authority, although they apply "responsible autonomy" (Friedman, 1977) rather than "direct control" to manage employees. The level of self-determination that employees can have still depends on the employers' decisions for the purpose of boosting the business's productivity and maximising profits. With control over means of production, the employers can give direct control or autonomy to workers' labour as they please. Taking a Marxist perspective, I agree with Friedman's (1977) assessment that this style of management masks rather than eliminates alienation.

At the same time, giving autonomy to the employees makes the workers become self-responsible and self-reliant in the labour process. This phenomenon can be elucidated by governmentality theories, which is developed by a group of Foucauldian scholars (du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1999; Ursell, 2000; McRobbie, 2002a). They claim that workers are encouraged to, summarised by Banks (2007) "not only conform to corporate values but also view the uptake of such values as crucial to their own personal development and self-interest". Subject to governmentality, workers actively manage themselves, they proactively work on and improve themselves even without the employers' requirements. In my case, nearly all of the workers

feel they are obliged to conduct self-learning when they feel a lack of specific knowledge or skill. Learning as many skills as possible is a way of handling uncertainty, as I discussed in Chapter Four. And working with platforms in the Web 2.0 era make it convenient for workers to complete their self-learning by accessing knowledge and skills online. With responsibilities and autonomy delegated by the employers, the employees are expected to actively and constantly improve their skills by themselves, especially when they are allocated multiple roles in daily work. The workers conform to a neoliberal social relationship. Neoliberal governmentality exercises power differently from that in Marx's alienated labour. Power is not imposed by the capitalist on the workers to keep them shackled. Instead, this power constructs subjects who are willing to work for capitalism by aligning the capitalist production goal with the workers' self-improvement. When the workers internalise the imperative for self-improvement, they engage in work proactively.

Admittedly, capitalism remains dominant and constructs inequality between labour and capital. However, as Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) claim, it risks falling into crude reductionism if we view all production serving as capitalism. Non-market production still exists in my case. When some social media workers insisted on moral principles, conveying reliable fitness knowledge, even at the expense of the business, their aesthetic autonomy resisted the imperative of accumulation. This aligns with scholars' expectations that creative workers' desire for aesthetics, expressive and symbolic production will enable them to resist the market encroachment of non-market production (Banks, 2007; Kennedy, 2011). Consequently, the workers will generate not only good product that contributes to others' well-being, but also to self-realization. These moral stories will be further discussed in Chapter Six.

5.4.2 The customers' influence

The power relationship in the labour process is no longer employer's unidirectional oppression to the employees. Instead, customers are also actively involved. In the workers' description of their daily work quoted in the last section, customers' preferences have a significant influence on the labour process, including selecting topics that may interest them or make the service more personal and humanised. After sales service is an important part of both the companies' business. As I observed, FitGo provides a Q&A section on their app and arranges Lan to handle customers' questions and complaints about the app. At StartFit, manager Autumn told me staff would send questionnaires to collect customers' responses to their service.

The users' comments are collected and considered not only for improving existing products but also for designing new commodities. Claire told me: "If users complain about a malfunction on the app, we contact IT staff immediately and solve the problems as soon as possible". To improve quality of service, StartFit manager Autumn said the service staff would have regular seminars to discuss users' frequent questions and complaints. The companies' staff also get inspiration to create new products from users' comments. In a FitGo social media team meeting, the workers reported to the CEO that some users wanted yoga courses for pregnant women. Thus, a series of yoga courses was recorded and uploaded to the app.

The customers of the companies that I researched can influence the digital fitness companies' products by giving feedback through platforms. Their responses are carefully considered and adopted by the employers and workers to adjust products as per the users' requests. The customers' roles in production are both more active and more influential than that in industrial capitalism. Their active roles owe to the interactive mechanism of platforms that allows user-generated content and many-to-many communication, which makes it easy for customers to give their feedback immediately and directly to producers (van Dijck, 2009).

But the users' voice on the platforms cannot fully explain why the producers attach much more significance to the customers' feedback than they would in factory production. The reason lies in the competition in the market. By making means of production accessible, the state encourages entrepreneurship based on digital technologies among citizens, as mentioned in section 5.3.3. This results in a market fraught with competition. Werron (2015) describes competition as an interaction among competitors vying for the scarce attention of audiences. This description is relevant to my case of digital companies with similar business models that obtain and monetise customers' attention. The volume of users' attention determines how much income a company can make. But in digital platforms, as Grinnell (2009) points out, users are exposed to so much information that they have little patience for every individual piece of content. Users' attention is scarce, and competition is fierce. Considering that there are so many similar alternatives for the customers in the market, competitors need to satisfy customers' needs as much as possible to retain their attention and let them continue consuming products. Grinnell (2009) also claims that the users can make comments on UGC platforms, and those comments are public to all the other customers. Since the users feel the peer customers' reviews are more convincing than the companies' advertisements on UGC platforms, the companies

must please customers and persuade them to give positive comments for a good brand or reputation (ibid).

5.4.3 Managing emotion

The companies' pressure of competition is passed on to and assumed by their employees. They are expected to work in a certain way that will please the customers. In my research, emotion is a key element in service staff's daily work. Employees were required to reply to users with proper emotions that would make the customers feel comfortable, even though they feel bad about the customers' behaviour. Former StartFit online coach Ruby told me how she had been misunderstood by a customer:

> "Misunderstandings are common in online fitness tutorials based on remote communication. I was reported by a customer because she did not think I treated her patiently enough. She felt offended. But I did not mean that." (Ruby, 34, female, previous StartFit online coach, Interview 23)

Customers' discontent causes negative emotions in staff. They all told me that they met difficult customers and that those encounters left them feeling bad. Jimmy, an online coach at StartFit, shared unpleasant memories of interacting with customers. Jimmy said:

> "Sometimes, the customers' requests are ridiculous. For instance, some customers wanted to lose 5-10kg within a week, otherwise they would request refunds. Their goals were impossible and would harm health. Some consumers' cruel complaint made me feel wronged. Because I thought I had tried my best to be patient and kind to help them." (Jimmy, 25, male, StartFit online coach, Interview 11)

As Jimmy introduced, the employees are required to manage their emotions:

> "Based on the company's stipulation that the customers' preference and feelings should be prioritised, we cannot lose our temper with the users. If I feel very angry about a user's behaviour, I will hold back and release my bad mood in another way. Confronted with the customers, I must be polite, kind and patient." (Interview 11)

Following Jimmy's description of daily work, managing emotion does not merely mean holding back a bad mood but also requires staff to express proper emotions to improve the user experience. Jimmy has summarised a series of answers to questions that are most frequently asked by the customers. He worked on the expression of those answers to make sure that those answers could be understood by customers clearly without any misunderstandings. But Jimmy cannot directly copy and paste his fixed answers to different customers. He needed to express some emotions to show his concerns and cares when he responds to customers.

"Giving impersonal answers like a robot with no emotions are unacceptable to the users and this kind of behaivour is not allowed by the company. I always express my concerns and care to different users so that they feel I am a friend." (Interview 11)

By intensifying and supressing emotions according to the companies' requirements and the customers' desires, the workers live up to certain expectations, being kind and patient fitness instructor for customers and desirable employees for the companies. The staff's labour to manage emotions and please the customers, as required by the employers, belong to what Hochschild (1983) coined as "emotional labour" in her studies about flight attendants' work. Hochschild (1983) contends that humans do not just feel emotions passively; instead they can actively produce and create certain emotions (ibid.). She introduces the concept of 'feeling rules', referring to a series of social expectations of the kind of emotions, the strength of emotions and duration of emotions that should be present (ibid.). Hochschild (1983) argues that feeling rules are socially and culturally stipulated and learned. When the social expectations of emotions are applied to labour, it becomes emotional labour, requiring the labourers to "induce or suppress feelings to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (ibid., p.7).

In StartFit, where service is the core product, the company pursues two strategies to ensure that workers conduct emotional labour and please customers. Firstly, StartFit introduced a mechanism of grading and ranking to evaluate the service staff's working performance. The manager, Autumn, reported:

"We invite the customers to grade the staff's working performance after the training project, including whether they gave guidance precisely, and whether they were patient, kind and helpful. Then all the grades are ranked. The grades and ranking will influence

the employees' performance salaries and future opportunities to serve customers." (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)

To avoid being ranked low and losing income and future job opportunities, the workers must devote emotional labour to satisfying customers and striving to win in the competition with colleagues.

Secondly, by making some users become producers, as mentioned in section 5.2, StartFit recruits those employees who have experiences of consuming the company's commodities. A user's perspective makes the workers know how to conduct emotional labour in a desirable way to please the customers. Lily, who is the leader of the coaching assistants' team, was once a difficult customer:

> "I joined one group in 2015 and did not see any changes of my weight in the first two weeks. Then I bothered my coaches and coaching assistants a lot and made many complaints. I felt desperate and even cried when keeping diet. Then in the beginning of the third week, I suddenly found I lost 4 kg and felt very happy. When I looked back that experience, I think I just did not know that weight loss requires persistence and patience. Now I can feel and understand the customers' frustration because I was one of them. So, I will not be mad at any customers' complaint. If they are discontented, it must be because their needs are not satisfied. I will reflect on myself and try to solve their problems." (Lily, 28, female, StartFit leader of coaching assistants, Interview 16)

Lily's colleague Jimmy complains about "ridiculous customers". He needs to hold back anger and presents a good attitude towards customers, as noted above. Compared with Jimmy, Lily does not feel mad at the customers but reflects on herself. Jimmy's and Lily's management of emotion respectively refers to the status of "surface acting" and "deep acting", as defined by Hochschild (1983). Jimmy covers his true feelings and shows the desired emotions to interact with difficult customers. By contrast, Lily not only displays and expresses the desired emotion but conforms to the rule of emotional labour wholeheartedly. She reflects on herself rather than feeling bad about the customers when customers are discontent with her service. According to Hochschild (1983), surface acting, with workers' suppressing negative feelings and performing positive moods, makes their state of mind contradict their behaviour. The workers can feel how they are compelled to instrumentalise emotions to serve the employers' interests (ibid).

Hochschild (1983) claims that long-term surface acting may harm their capacity to feel, resulting in poor mental health. Unlike surface acting, deep acting does not make workers struggle with contradictions between their state of mind and behaviour (ibid). Because the workers have conformed to and internalised the companies' requirements (ibid). Thus, workers who engage in deep acting, such as Lily, conduct self-management proactively and may blame themselves when customers make complaints. No matter whether the workers' emotional labour belongs to surface acting or deep acting, their emotions, as private feelings, are instrumentalised as part of means of production and become commodities. Hochschild (1983) criticises that those human feelings are commercialised. The workers' states of mind, which are supposed to be part of human nature, are alienated from themselves. Humans feelings are supposed to be a spontaneous emotional reaction. But now, the workers are required by the employers to induce or suppress emotions to serve the capitalist production. Simultanesouly, with the private aspect of human beings, emotion is involved in work, and work becomes individuals' private business. Introducing private aspects of life to work requires employees to engage in self-management since those private aspects are supposed to be an individual's responsibility. I will return to these two points, alienation of emotion and privatisation of work, in Chapter Six.

To analyse power relationships in the workplace, Helen Blair (2003) has systematically reviewed both Marxist and Foucauldian concepts of power and pointed out their advantages and limitations respectively. She applies Nobert Elias's theories of power to mediate potential contradictions between Marxist and Foucauldian models of power relationships (ibid.). Her application of Elias' framework is heuristic to my analysis, helping me identify how Marxist and Foucauldian scholarships can be compatible with each other and work well together (ibid.). Blair (2003) claims that there are two kinds of framework to conceptualise power. One camp, represented by Marxist scholars, views power as entailing oppression based on different economic and class positions. For instance, Poulantzas (1978) defines power as "the capacity of one class to realize its interests in opposition to another class". Power is seen as being centrally controlled by certain classes. Blair (2003) notes that another camp, represented by Foucauldian researchers, views power as diffused in every aspect of social life rather than being opposed by particular classes. The Marxist approach does reflect on power inequality, but this approach is criticised for its determinism, conceptualising individuals as nothing but bearers of social relationship and ignoring people's capacity to influence society (ibid.). The Foucauldian approach theorises every individual as power executors and avoids the determinism of the

Marxist approach. However, this approach is criticized for failing to reflect on power inequality among different individuals (ibid.). Blair (2003) introduces Elias's (1970) framework to remedy limitations of both Marxist and Foucauldian approaches. Elias (1970) conceptualises power as interdependencies among individuals. He acknowledges that individuals can influence each other's actions and recognises the power asymmetry in this interdependent relationship. Thus, every individual's capacity for influencing others' actions is different and one side always has a stronger influence than the other in any mutual dependence.

Elias's framework of power, which combines features of both network and inequality, help elucidate the power relationship in my case. The power relationship in this research involves various institutions and individuals. Apart from employers, employees and customers who form a triangular relationship, there are platform companies who control the companies' means of marketing, and software and hardware companies who own means of production and charge every user of these tools, as I analysed in section 5.3. Additionally, the state and transnational capital also play key roles in constructing the infrastructure of ICTs, building a platform society, and giving birth to platform-based entrepreneurship, including the digital fitness industry, as I discussed in Chapter Four. All those institutions and individuals are interdependent with each other to some degree. But it should be noted that the degree or strength of dependency varies among different groups or actors, as does their capacity to influence others' behaviour. Both strength of dependency and capacity for influencing others are determined by control over essential property, such as means of production. For instance, employees are more dependent on their employers than employers are on their workers because they have no substantial property but their ability to labour, thus they must sell their labour power to employers for a living. Once some employees have resigned, employers can find replacements for their former employees without having to worry about survival. Employers who control the means of production and the labour power of their employees therefore have a greater ability to influence workers' labour in the workplace than workers do. When discussing the relationship between digital fitness companies' employers and platform companies, the former then turn out to be the side with stronger dependency on platforms and a weaker ability to influence platforms. Entrepreneurs of digital fitness companies start up and maintain their business on platforms; they are users of platforms. Platforms need the users' content and data for monetization, but there are so many users that platforms can still run their business even after losing one or two content creators. But without platforms, entrepreneurs in digital fitness companies cannot survive. Platforms, who control algorithms and user data, can determine how much exposure

the companies' marketing information could obtain. And companies must pay promotion fees to make sure their advertisements are launched to targeted customers. Thus, platforms have a stronger influence on entrepreneurs' behaviour rather than vice versa. It can be concluded that the more substantial property an institution or individual owns or controls, the weaker dependency they have on others, the stronger their ability to influence others' behaviour. Meanwhile, workers who have no property but their human capital have the strongest dependency on others and the weakest capacity to influence others in this network.

5.5 Conclusion

The two companies merge the identities of producers and users and form a mechanism to discipline and reproduce a desired workforce. With the digital fitness product, the users' training performance is recorded and ranked by the app and by staff to encourage peer competition. Through competition, the companies select the most disciplined users and recruit them as employees. The waged producers are encouraged to use their product because their experiences of consuming digital fitness products can give them a user's perspective. By taking the role of a user, the producers become self-disciplined in daily work. At the same time, the producers' time spent on consumption helps improve the quality of commodities. The workers' experiences of consuming commodities become labour that creates more value, rather than harming the value of the commodity. This is different from factory production. Here, a close relationship is formed between the produsers and their product. This relationship has two components: their attachment to fitness (I will return to this point in Chapter Six) and their right to use the product. The strong bonds discipline individual produsers' bodies and work performance, enable the workers to produce more value of commodity and reproduce a self-disciplined workforce for the companies.

The prerequisite of the "produser" phenomenon is the accessible means of production of the two companies, including access to the Internet, computers, software and digital platforms. However, accessibility does not mean that working tools can be used without any restrictions. Any employers and employees that want to gain access to working tools need to pay the owners of the tools. These payments prove that the rule of private property still holds true, which concurs with Marx's analysis (1844). In the companies, the employers pay salaries to workers and pay for working tools and provide tools for workers to create commodities. The employers take the workers' labour power as private property and control means of production, which

justifies the employers' private ownership of products. I claim that workers are alienated from the products that are created by their labour. Alienation takes place in the employment relationship despite the workers' close relationship with their product. This is because the workers do not own all the value of the commodity and cannot exchange the product that they produce in the market for an income.

The difference between what I have researched and what Marx analysed is that the means of production is no longer monopolised by the capitalists but is accessible to individual workers as well. Outside the companies, it is possible for the workers to choose self-employment and avoid alienated labour. But that possibility makes the workers self-reliant and situates them in the neoliberal social relationship. The workers' payment for means of production becomes an investment in their human capital. According to Foucault's (2008 [1979]) analysis of neoliberalism, making the means of production accessible is a neoliberal governing tool, aiming to avoid a monopoly and encourage entrepreneurship. Thus, various enterprising units would compete and a market for competition is formed (ibid). In this competition game, some Chinese Internet companies, BAT, have won, as I discussed in Chapter Four. The self-employed workers can hardly survive. Selling labour power to employers is a safer choice for the workers. The workers are trapped between two choices, either experiencing alienated labour or subject to a neoliberal social relationship.

The two kinds of social relationship form a networked power relation in the labour process, involving the employers, employees and customers. Taking employees' labour power as private property and controlling means of production, the employers hold the strongest authority to decide what and how to produce commodities. But the employers do not hold absolute dominance. Instead, the employers delegate partial responsibilities and give some autonomy to the workers. This strategy, on the one hand, can maximise the employees' creativity, and creativity is the main resource of the companies' income. On the other hand, giving autonomy is an art of government, a different way of exercising power from that in Marx's analysis. Rather than forcing the workers' physical movements and shackling their consciousness, this governmentality strategy aligns the capitalist production goal with the workers' self-improvement. When the workers internalise the imperative for self-improvement, they conform to the neoliberal relationship and view their labour as means of self-investment. This interpretation of labour motivates them to work for capitalists willingly.

Simultaneously, the customers play an increasingly active and significant role in production. Due to the interactive mechanism of platforms, users can give immediate responses about a product and share their experiences with other users. Situated in a market fraught with competition, the customers have various alternatives if they want to consume a kind of products. To attract and retain customers' attention, companies need to consider users' feedback carefully and satisfy their needs as much as possible. Here a networked power relation resembling that in Foucault's (2016) theory is formed with a multiple and ubiquitous power. Sheridan (2003) claims that for Foucault everyone is a micro-power executor who influences others as well as the whole network. Power is exercised rather than possessed, productive rather than coercive, and it constructs a certain working condition. Subject to the power relationship that combines both alienation and neoliberal disciplines, the workers are not coerced, but motivated by competition to join capitalist production. Competition is both a disciplinary tool and a neoliberal governing tool that makes the waged workers pursue even better performances in their training and daily work. Yet encouraging competition is not the only strategy to make employees work proactively. The employers also entangle work with workers' hobbies and leisure activities, bringing fun to the workplace, to motivate workers' labour. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I also contribute to combining Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks. As I noted in Chapter Two, scholars who have created composite frameworks of Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks do not acknowledge and handle the contradiction between the two scholarships, referring to their different conceptualisations of power relationships. In my research, I address this contradiction through my empirical data, which presents a different working condition from that in industrial capitalism in Marx's analysis. To elucidate the working conditions in my research, it is necessary to adjust Marx's model of power relations between employers and workers according to my data. My data has guided the adjustment of Marx's conceptualisation of power relation to be more consistent and compatible with Foucault's networked power relation, as shown in section 5.4. The relationship between employers and employees is part of a networked power relationship, with both sides influencing each other. I also address the contradiction and make the two theoretical frameworks fit better by choosing new connecting points rather than the concept of exploitation, as most scholars have done. In my research on digital fitness companies, fitness – which refers to both physical training and the workers' labour content – is a connecting point between the two frameworks. I combine Marx's concept of value and Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to enrich the understandings of the

hybrid identity, produser. I suggest that not only are the most disciplined users selected as producers but producers are also encouraged to use products and become users. The producers' experiences of consuming products become labour that generates value for the commodity. And the producers are endowed with a user's perspective for disciplining their labour. I contend that disciplining the workers' bodies cultivates a self-disciplined workforce to serve the commodity production. That aligns with Sheridan's (2003) description whereby disciplinary power works on the mind through the body.

I also discuss the property relationship of means of production and take means of production as a connecting point to combine Marx's theory of alienation with Foucault's discussion about neoliberalism. The phenomenon of produsage cannot be fully elucidated without either theory. Means of production is a vital element to both Marx's analysis of alienation and Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism. However, this key element has not yet been fully discussed in debates of digital labour. By investigating the property relationship around means of production, I find that workers have to choose either alienated labour in an employment relationship or self-investment and competition in entrepreneurship that makes them conform to a neoliberal social relationship. Although means of production is not monopolised and is accessible to both capitalists and workers, they cannot use the working tools without restriction. Anyone who wants to access means of production needs to make payment. This means that some people own the means of production privately and the rule of private property exists. Thus, in an employment relationship whereby labour power is commodified and owned by employers as private property, workers are alienated from the products of their labour and cannot sell the products for income. Or the workers can pay for the means of production by themselves and choose self-employment to avoid alienation. But that involves the workers in a neoliberal social relationship, making them subject to imperatives of self-investment and competition. By making means of production accessible, neoliberal principles make it easy for individual workers to be entrepreneurs and capital owners. Competition, as a neoliberal tool, is applied to create an illusion that every entrepreneur is endowed with the same opportunities. But in a neoliberal social relationship that advocates the rule of private property, some key means of production are still held by the minority. Individual workers cannot access those key means of production, which makes it difficult to survive. The workers still need to sell their labour power to employers for a living. Although the workers' labour power has been interpreted as human capital in neoliberalism, this interpretation never changes how workers remain propertyless and are not real capital owners. Additionally, this interpretation aims to align the goal of

capitalist production with employees' desire for self-investment, making them work proactively. Alienation and neoliberalism work together to consolidate the unequal relationship between capital and labour.

Chapter Six: Working for love and for a better self

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss how employers motivate workers' labour by blurring work with hobbies. Through this combination, the companies align the goal of production with the employees' desire of working for jobs that they like and realise their goal of self-development. In terms of this working condition in the two companies, two changes regarding work could be identified compared to the Marx's analysis of work in industrial capitalism. Firstly, according to Bauman's (2005) categorisation, employment, which was constructed as a moral imperative in the producer society, now becomes an aesthetic choice in the consumer society. Secondly, work, which was clearly differentiated from non-work in industrial capitalism, is now entangled with non-work. Scholars define this kind of work as flexible work and criticises that how employers make employees always ready to work and prolongs their working time subtly through flexible work (Sennett, 1998; McRobbie, 2002a; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Gregg, 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). How the two changes influence workers' labour and their interpretation of daily work will be discussed in this chapter.

In section 6.2, I investigate the first change, whereby workers see employment as a consumption choice based on aesthetic value, emphasising on their interests when choosing jobs. I contend that workers' passion for work may become part of mechanism of control and bind the workers more tightly with the capitalism. In section 6.3, I discuss the second change, as I noted above, referring to the blurred division between work and leisure. I present employers entangle work with non-work and create flexible working conditions, expecting the workers to work remotely outside office while allowing the workers to do leisure activities in workplace. I claim that leisure activities, which bring about fun to relieve hardship in work, are a form of productive labour and generate value for the companies. I use the concept of "playbour", coined by Kücklich (2005), to characterise that kind of labour. When employees' leisure activities become work, their passion for hobbies is instrumentalised to serve capitalist production. What is put to work is not just leisure time or activities, but also more private feelings, such as their passion for hobbies. Playbour has led to alienation of passion. I also find that playbour provides gratification, which enables employees to do moral work and benefit customers. In section 6.4,

I discuss ambivalent experiences from playbour that bringing about both gratification and alienation of passion.

6.2 Aspirational work: an interest-driven job choice

When asked how they made job choices, most interviewees emphasised their interest in their current work. 16 out of 22 employees, who I interviewed, had tried to find a job that they like. For those participants, their exploration started at the education stage when they chose majors and prepared for future employment. Eight out of 16 employees' current work concurs with their educational backgrounds, with both major and job choice inspired by their interests. These employees told me they had chosen specific majors that had appealed to them most at college or university. And they keep interested in their major after graduation and then seek jobs in relative areas. For example, when I asked Alice how she became a finance staff of FitGo, she told me how she had identified her interests in majors and how she got the job here.

> "I found myself interested in accounting, particularly among all the compulsory courses at university. I like this subject because it gives me practical knowledge, enabling me to quantify the companies' business into useful financial data. With my father's support, I got a master's degree in management finance and accounting in the UK. After graduation, I had two internships in banks, but I found that I could not really be an accountant, whom I wanted to be most. So, after talking with the administrative staffer Hua, I worked here." (Alice, 29, female, FitGo finance staffer, Interview Two)

However, the other eight of 16 employees, who chose jobs based on interests, had educational backgrounds that were inconsistent with their current jobs. They found their interests changed when doing their first job, so they quit their previous majors and worked in a new area. In these employees' cases, their likes and interests played a motivating role in their job choices. For those employees who selected jobs driven by interests in digital fitness companies, their likes were based on fitness, digital technologies, or both. Among three FitGo programmers I interviewed, two (Don and Falling) did not major in computer science at university, instead they found interest in this area through working. Don and Falling learned the knowledge and

skills they needed by themselves to perform their current work. Falling, a 27-year-old man, shared with me his experiences of changing jobs:

"I do not think one has to be a computer science student to do programming work. Some members of our IT team chose the job driven by interests. Not everyone has his or her majors at university consistent with current jobs. It is unnecessary to constrain a person's career development by educational background. I studied mechanics at university. And my first job was in a decoration company. But then I found that programming and coding were very interesting. So, I learned it by myself and now work here." (Falling, 27, male, FitGo programmer, Interview Nine)

Some employees who love digital technologies have interests in social media, such as Lan, who originally studied musicals in Belarus. However, she joined FitGo as a social media worker after graduation. Compared with working with music, she preferred working with social media platforms, telling me:

"My mum always asked me to go back to my hometown and be a music teacher at school. But I do not want to be a teacher. I love doing social media work and enjoy creating content, attracting and monetising users' attention. When I studied in Belarus, I organised WeChat groups for Chinese students and sold commodities to them. I thought I was good at selling things online. When I wrote my first WeChat article to advertise FitGo's products, the number of reads was surprisingly great, which kind of proves that this job really suits me." (Lan, 26, female, FitGo social media worker, Interview 14)

Besides a passion for digital technologies, passion for fitness also motivate some employees' change their jobs, regardless of their previous education or work experiences. Tae, a 34-year-old man, is an online coach at FitGo. He shared with me how he had changed his job and compared his previous work and current work.

"I worked in surveying and mapping industry in the past. I felt bad physically, emotionally and mentally when doing that job. At that time, work is just for survival. With desires of losing weight, I studied fitness and nutrition knowledge. When I lost my weight successfully, I felt a sense of achievements and thought maybe I could seek a job in a different area. Then I worked for FitGo and take a job with fitness. This company allows me to strike a balance between work and life. And I can work out regularly to maintain a good physical condition. I feel I am happy with my current life." (Tae, 34, male, FitGo online coach, Interview 18)

Emotional responses to work make employees categorise jobs into two types: what they like and what they dislike. They link the latter type of work to drudgery that brings nothing good except income for survival. The workers expect that work could give more than just wages for survival, so they escape from frustration derived from disliking work and devote themselves to the work that they like. Besides earning salaries for a living, workers expect work to make them happy. In the pursuit of happiness in the workplace, some employees are abandoning their previously more secure and stable employment in favour of more uncertain positions with entrepreneurial companies. Steve, a FitGo social media content creator, told me about his previous employment:

"Before joining FitGo, I worked for two state-owned businesses. My peers and family do not approve of my career choice. I am aware that I have made a decision that seems to contradict the conventional criteria for a successful job. You are aware that working for state-owned businesses results in a more stable income and improved welfare. But I truly feel trapped in this mundane work environment, where the majority of my coworkers never pursue advancement. As a devoted social media follower of my employer, I admire his entrepreneurial spirit and disciplined lifestyle. So, I was employed by FitGo. Here, my coworkers and I relish learning new skills and participating in fitness trainings." (Steve, 29 years old, social media worker at FitGo, Interview 17)

218

Steve's career decision is comparable to Duffy's (2017) concept of aspirational employment. Duffy (2017) investigates women bloggers' entrepreneurial labour, which entails publishing content and monetising audience attention on social media platforms, and she labels this labour "aspirational work". Their occupations as social media content creators become "passion projects" because of their love of self-expression and desire to be entrepreneurs (ibid), despite labour market uncertainty. "Get paid to do what you love" is the driving force behind their job choice and daily labour. However, according to Duffy (2017), the majority of bloggers are unable to receive adequate monetary compensation for their diligent content production, and only a minority of them have achieved significant success. Their passion and desire for success justifies their employment choice and compels them to endure difficult working conditions. Similarly, to the subjects of Duffy's research, Steve chose this position because of his passion for fitness, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit. However, this interest-driven job as a social media worker entails extended working hours, some underpaid labour, and job insecurity for the future. From my observations of company accounts on social media platforms, I have found that it is common for social media creators to be required to maintain the account, publish content, and ensure exposure to followers both during and outside of working hours. And these tasks will not be compensated by the companies. Due to the struggle of entrepreneurial companies to survive in the market competition and the dominance of oligarch internet companies, Steve's career development in these companies is more uncertain than in his previous positions with state-owned companies. The passion he has for his work is a justification for his career choice, which balances out the current difficulty of his work.

Although almost all my participants took it for granted that 'one must do a job that one is interested in', this is not how work has always been understood and interpreted. As Bauman (2005) argues, in industrial capitalism, characterised by big factories and assembly lines, work is constructed as a moral requirement based on the demands of massive labour. The meaning of work is evaluated afterwards through one's contribution to others in a community (ibid). Bauman (2005) coined the term 'producer society' to conceptualise a society where people are initially presumed to be producers. The producer society is characterised by 'work ethic' and 'delayed gratification' following hard work (ibid.). However, that is not the way my participants chose jobs – they instead emphasised their interest in their jobs. Selecting a job

that interests them is like choosing desired commodities. This way of choosing jobs concurs with the features of the 'consumer society', where people are engaged primarily as consumers, as Bauman (2005) argues. He claims that in a consumer society, the meaning of work is not evaluated through contributions to society but through how much pleasurable experience could be provided for the workers (ibid.). Work is like a consumption activity and is "expected to be gratifying by and in itself" (ibid., p.139). Therefore, it could be argued that job choice in a consumer society is based on aesthetic value, which prioritises the workers' own preferences and gratification. The consumer society is characterised by aesthetic choice and instant gratification from consumption, which is relevant to how employees choose jobs in my research. However, the gratification of the employees in my study from their work is not just instant but also delayed, which indicates that their working situation still manifests some characteristics of the producer society. I will return to this discussion of gratification in sections 6.3 and 6.4.

Such interest-driven work introduces affective aspects of human beings into the workplace, which was absent in the work of industrial capitalism. Industrial capitalism, which is characterised as assembly line work in factories, is where Marx's analysis is based. Marx (1844; 1990[1887]) criticises how industrial capitalism coerces workers to sell their labour power to capitalists regardless of whether they love or hate factory work. In industrial capitalism, only the capitalist can afford and own the machines as private property, which are the means of production to create products; Marx contends that capitalists monopolise working tools. The workers cannot realise their labour power without working tools, thus they must sell their labour power to the employers. Once the workers' labour power is sold to capitalists for wages, their capacity for labour becomes the capitalists' private property. That means they are deprived of freedom of physical movement and need to conduct labour in the way the employers require. According to Adorno (2005) and Marx (1884), assembly work means that detailed division of labour and workers need to repeat one given movement. They need to adjust their physical movements to the pace of machine's operation and pay full attention to work without any distraction (ibid). Marx (1844) criticises how a human's spontaneous labour is reduced to a monotonous mechanical treadmill in exchange for wages for survival. Thus, workers are dehumanised and are deprived of the meaningfulness of their labour in mechanical

work. Work in industrial capitalism is seriously criticised for coercion, as being demeaning and dehumanising.

Capitalism, on the other hand, responds to those critiques by incorporating affective dimension of human beings to capitalist production, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) argue, who investigate the spirit and critiques of capitalism in France. This kind of interest-driven work presents opposing features to the coerced, demeaning and dehumanising work of industrial capitalism. The workers find they have self-determination and meaning in their work. For instance, employees in my study, such as Tae and Steve from FitGo, have autonomy to seek a job that they like rather than being coerced to bear a disliked job. According to Tae, he appreciates that his current job is "more than just for survival", implying that he finds more meaningfulness in this job than in previous ones he disliked.

Autonomist Marxist scholars Negri and Hardt (2000) are optimistic about how the affective dimension could influence work. They coined the term 'affective labour' and see this kind of labour as endowing workers with the capacity to struggle against capital (ibid). The connotation of affective labour is challenged by other scholars. Gill and Pratt (2008) contend that autonomist Marxist scholars only see human affects' capacity to fight against capital, with the purpose of political struggle, and they fail to see other roles that human affect may play. Gill and Pratt (2008) argue that affects are not necessarily alternatives to capitalism, as autonomist Marxist scholars expect. Instead, affect could also become part of capitalism and bind the workers more tightly to capitalism (ibid.). When I asked why it was important to have a job they liked, Steve, a FitGo social media worker who write fitness articles, told me:

> "I am interested in fitness. And I want to learn more fitness knowledge. In the future, I will continue working in the fitness industry. Taking the job of writing fitness articles enables me to learn new knowledge, which is what I want. It is natural for me to work willingly. I know writing articles is not easy and takes time to collect and organise materials. But I do not think it is a big deal. Because I enjoy doing it. I think it is important to make my action align with what I really want to do. If the two are

consistent, I will be happy. If they are inconsistent, I will feel the struggle." (Steve, 29, male, FitGo social media worker, Interview 17)

Steve's response emphasises the temporal connection between his current and prospective work. The essential element of Kuehn and Corrigan's (2013)concept of hope labour is its temporal relationship. Although hope labour initially refers to platform users' unpaid and voluntary online social production, this concept is also applicable to explaining the employment situation of waged employees in my case. In anticipation of future employment opportunities, workers voluntarily endure the current hardships of their jobs. Hope labour, supported by neoliberalism, imposed future uncertainty on the individual (ibid). Second, his response emphasises the importance of the affective aspect of labour; he finds that a job he likes means being honest with his own desire. His answer implied that his likes, as part of a human's spontaneous feelings, could represent an authentic expression of self-desire. This is similar to Bauman's (2005) analysis of work in consumer society, which aims to gratify the workers themselves. And choosing a job based on personal likes could satisfy his desire to improve his professional skills. Thus, affective attachment to work makes employees think they not only work for employers but also work for a better self. The goal of capitalist production aligns with the workers' goal of self-development. It is the employees' passion for work that connects the goals of the two sides. This reflects Ursell's (2000) discussion about 'labour of love', based on a Foucauldian framework. Ursell (2000) discusses how media workers' love their jobs because they enjoy self-expression in work and see work as a means of self-actualisation and self-development. She criticises how the capitalists make workers' passion a neoliberal tool, motivating employees to work hard proactively in the name of self-investment, to serve exploitation of labour (ibid.). Her argument is relevant to my research. With the rule of private property and commodification of labour power, alienation takes place in an employment relationship in my study, as I noted in Chapter Five. That means the workers are deprived of the products of their labour by their employers. The workers' labour serves capitalism rather than themselves. When work involves human affects, such as passion, they become part of labour and are instrumentalised to serve capitalism. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) note, workers are allowed and even expected to put more aspects of their private life into work because instrumentalization of human affective dimensions has become how

capitalism takes advantage of labour. In a labour of love, passion not only motivates workers to work hard but also makes them believe their hard work is for a better self. The introduction of some human affects into work forms a mechanism of controlling workers rather than challenging the unequal relationship between capitalism and labour.

Considering the key role of passion in motivating employees' work, the employers in my case need to retain their workers' passion for work. Belonging to the leisure industry, the two digital fitness companies presume some workers to be consumers at first. Experiences of consuming digital fitness products have already cultivated those workers' affective attachment to the products and make them choose to work for the companies. To retain the workers' passion for digital fitness products and make their passion continues to serve commodity production, the employers need to maintain their workers' identity as consumers by enabling them to consume the products. Thus, the employers design flexible working conditions, blurring work and leisure activities, as I will discuss in the next section.

6.3 Flexible working condition

In this section, I first describe how leisure and work are blurred in terms of time and space in the two digital fitness companies. The entanglement of work and leisure is bilateral. Work invades leisure time, and leisure activities are also brought into the workplace. There are two types of leisure activities mainly involved in employees' work: using social media platforms and physical training. I then analyse how the entanglement of work and two kinds of leisure activities lead to flexible work, with characteristics different to work in industrial capitalism, and how flexibility characterises employees' working conditions.

6.3.1 Work in non-office time

It is common for the employees in my research, especially for the social media workers and service staff, to continue working outside the office. I have observed the two companies' social media accounts and found that social media workers usually start work earlier and finish work later than the official working times. The two companies stipulated working times start around 9.30 am and end around 6.30 pm. But social media workers need to post content as early as

223

6.00 am and as late as 11.00 pm. When asking about working overtime, Joyce, StartFit social media team leader, said:

> "After joining StartFit, I never get off work on time because our team needs to post WeChat articles every day and keep the company's social media account active on different platforms. I feel stressful. But as far as I know, it is very common for social media workers to work overtime. This fact will not change if I work for a different company. If I take social media work, I need to work overtime. I have no choice but to accept this fact. After working for several years, I am used to working overtime." (Joyce, 31, female, StartFit social media team leader, Interview 13)

Employees who provide fitness service to customers, such as online and offline coaches and online coaching assistants, are another group of employees who need to work outside office time. Online service providers of both companies need to appear in online training groups and remind their trainees about eating and training at required times every day during the project (see online service staff's working time in Table 4.3 in Chapter Four). During my observation in companies' online training groups, I found the fitness tutorial usually lasted for 30 to 40 days without pauses, which meant staff cannot really have days off within that training period. Besides the required time to communicate with trainees, online service staff are required to respond to customers' questions in WeChat groups as soon as possible. FitGo online coach Tae said:

> "WeChat provides instant communication, so we use it to provide online service. The users can turn to us if they have questions and we can give response immediately, which provides them good user experiences. I frequently check WeChat messages every day in case that some users need help. I will respond to their messages as soon as possible. There is also exception. If some customers have time difference or some raise questions when I am sleep, it is OK for me not to answer their questions soon." (Tae, 34, male, FitGo online coach, Interview 18)

Offline coaches also need to work flexibly. They need to adjust their working time to customers' off-work time. StartFit offline coach Ben told me:

> "Our training room usually opens from 9 am to 9 pm. But some of my customers cannot make it because they work during this period. I sometimes need to work early at 8 am before they go to work. Sometimes I work late because the customers come after work and I cannot go home until 11 pm." (Ben, 24, male, StartFit offline coach, Interview Five)

Social media workers and service staff share a similarity in terms of their work outside the office: they both need to work during their customers' leisure time. To best attract users' attention, social media workers need to make the companies' accounts active when most of their followers have time to browse social media, for instance, when users are commuting, during lunch breaks and before sleep. Similarly, service staff conduct their work mainly in the trainees' leisure time, before customers are at work, during the customers' lunch break, after customers are off work and during weekends or holidays. Working in clients' leisure time is a common characteristic of jobs in the leisure industries. This feature manifests the expectation that work can be finished outside office hours. In the two digital fitness companies, that expectation is not just confined to service work and social media work but extends to other divisions of labour. Van records and makes all the videos for FitGo. He needs to cooperate with others to finish recording videos. So, he needs to consider his collaborators' time. So, he works flexibly:

> "My working time depends on who I am going to record in the videos, for example, the outsourced coaches and my boss. Sometimes they are only available after office time or during weekends – then I need to work overtime." (Van, 23, male, FitGo video maker, Interview 19)

I also observed that when some FitGo employees asked for days off, they continued discussing work with colleagues in the chat groups. FitGo Finance staff Alice said:

"Remote work is common in an Internet company. There is no difference between working at the office or working from home. When we request breaks, we still need to work at home." (Alice, 29, female, FitGo finance staffer, Interview Two)

'Bringing work home' is central to flexible work. Flexible work is different from Fordist work. Fordist work is based on factory and assembly lines in industrial capitalism. Work and non-work time are clearly separated. Flexible work became increasingly popular in the post-Fordist era owing to advancements in ICTs. ICT development connects people with each other remotely, forming what Wittle (2001) called a "networked society", as I mentioned in Chapter Two. A networked workplace, with every worker reachable through digital technology allows flexible work without temporal and special constraints, which is also shown by my data. This working condition is characterised by McRobbie in terms of "time and space dynamics" (2002a) and also described by Gregg as "work's intimacy" (2013). Work is brought out of the office and enters more private time and space. Scholars have criticised how bringing work home subtly makes working time longer and makes workers assume greater workloads in the companies' interests without proportionate remuneration (McRobbie, 2002a; Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013).

Current key critiques of flexible work are based on the exploitation of workers' labour. Admittedly, exploitation is a central concept of Marxist political economy scholarship. But it is not central to my research, and I am not going to challenge those scholars' arguments about exploitation. I am more interested in these scholars' taking for granted that work and leisure are opposed to each other. In flexible work, not only does work enter leisure time but leisure activities also come into the workplace. It is less easy to calculate working time and leisure time precisely. The difficulty of this calculation, in turn, makes criticising prolonged working time less straightforward. It is necessary to look beyond the dichotomy of work-leisure. Are the two always in opposition? I will unfold my discussion in the following section.

6.3.2 Leisure in the workplace

(a) Social media

When work is expected to be finished outside the office in the two companies, two leisure activities are also introduced into the workplace: browsing social media platforms and fitness training. When I observed the FitGo employees' daily work, I noticed that the employees' working time was not always occupied by work. Some of them shopped, played games, watched videos, and browsed social media for fun.

> "The administrative staffer Hua started to watch a film during lunch break. Then she continued watching and finished this film in the following two working hours when other colleagues are working." (Fieldnote, 22nd November 2019)

> "The designer Yan has been busy editing images for the past three days. Today, she finishes all the tasks from colleagues. She is watching a film happily all the afternoon." (Fieldnote, 16th January 2020)

The employees tried to have fun on digital platforms behind their boss's back. For example, the employees would close shopping, video or game webpages when the CEO was nearby. It was not difficult for the employees to prevent the CEO from seeing them having fun online because most of their work required them to stay online through their PCs or mobile phones.

> "The boss's office is upstairs, and the employees can hear the sound of footsteps going down the stairs. The designer Yan is watching videos on phone next to my seat. After hearing the CEO's footsteps, she put down her phone and turned to her laptop, continuing editing images." (Fieldnote, 5th December 2019)

They used the Mandarin word '*Moyu*' (摸鱼) to describe their behaviour. *Moyu* literally means fishing with hands in a river, as a metaphor to describe employees' slacking off during work without letting their superiors find out. From this metaphor, I saw that having fun on digital platforms is not a leisure activity that is formally approved of by the employer. However, as I observed, the CEO did not explicitly forbid the workers from having fun during working time either. He did not closely supervise his employees' work and seldom went downstairs just to check whether employees were focused on their work. He only went to an employee's desk when he needed to discuss work with them. When talking about how to manage his team, FitGo CEO Max told me:

"I do not want to make my employees always fully occupied by work if there is not much work to do. If they finish their work, I am fine that they want to do their own business or leave the office early. But I will not explicitly encourage that. As a leader, I do not want to see the working atmosphere be too sluggish." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

Several employees told me that they thought their CEO is a very nice and kind boss. For instance, FitGo finance staffer Alice said, "Max is a good boss who gives us much freedom in work and life." But the CEO's kindness did not stop the workers from *Moyu*, hiding their personal entertainment activities from the boss. The workers did so because they conform to the rules of private property and commodification of human labour. Once the employer pays wages to the workers, the employer takes the workers' labour power as private property. The workers understand that what they do during office hours is subject to the employer and they should not have fun without the employer's approval, thus they always engage in *Moyu* secretly. The CEO, on the other hand, knows workers would *Moyu* for fun during office time but does not forbid it. The existence of *Moyu* derives from a kind of tacit mutual understanding between the employer and employees.

The employer's tacit sanction of *Moyu* corresponds with Rosenblat, Kneese, and Boyd's (2014) analysis of how the knowledge economy has altered the characteristics of workplace surveillance, as discussed in section 2.2.2. By standardising the physical movements of employees, workplace surveillance is overt and stringent, allowing for maximum efficiency and productivity. According to Rosenblat, Kneese, and Boyd (2014), however, overt surveillance becomes less pertinent or may even reduce productivity in the knowledge economy, which is relevant to my research. In my case, it is not the physical movements of the employees that determine productivity, but rather their creativity. To increase creativity, it is necessary to give employees more freedom at work. Therefore, the CEO of FitGo humanises the work environment by avoiding overt and extensive monitoring. However, I am not denying the existence of workplace surveillance. There is workplace surveillance, but it is administered more subtly and delicately. The CEO's presence in the office signifies surveillance, particularly in a small office where everyone can be seen at a glimpse. As I witnessed, when the CEO did not show up for work, some employees departed the office early or did not show up at all because they were able to complete their daily tasks online. In contrast, when the CEO was

present, those employees left the office on time, regardless of whether they had completed their duties. Since none of the employees knew when the CEO would go downstairs and unexpectedly approach their positions, they attempted to act accordingly. And Moyu was prevented when the CEO was present. Under surveillance, their behaviour demonstrates "anticipatory conformity" by adapting to the CEO's expectations. The employer attempted to require the employees to be self-motivated and self-disciplined by eliminating clock-in and clock-out machines and encouraging them to complete their work proactively. As demonstrated in 6.4.3, some employees internalise his expectations and strive for self-training and self-improvement. Their self-disciplined labour is consistent with scholars' discussions of how surveillance is conducted subtly by requiring workers to internalise work expectations (Gregg, 2011; Rosenbladt, Kneese, and Boyd, 2014).

Only one group of workers, social media staff, can use social media platforms whenever they want and do not need to worry about employers. This is because staying on digital platforms is the main content of their labour. I joined FitGo social media WeChat working groups and observed their daily work. They spent most of their working time browsing different digital platforms to search and collect useful materials for content creation. They also keep talking with colleagues in WeChat about how to make article topics attractive to the audience. Simultaneously, social media workers need to interact with social media followers regularly by replying to the users' comments. FitGo social media worker Claire remarked:

> "Some customers may make complaints about our product on social media. So, we had better keep an eye on the comments from time to time every day, even during holidays, to make response in time." (Claire, 29, female, FitGo social media team leader, Interview Seven)

Unlike *Moyu*, which relates to having fun for oneself, social media workers are required to 'play' for the company. But such 'play', staying on social media platforms, brings less fun than *Moyu* and instead requires the workers to always be 'on the clock' and ready for work.

(b) Fitness training

Besides the leisure activity of staying on digital platforms, fitness training is also brought into the office. StartFit has 15 physical branches, and every branch has an office for employees and eight to ten training rooms for customers. I visited one of the branches. As manager Autumn

made me aware, all the training rooms share the same setup, which is shown in Figure 6.1. She said:

> "Every training room has the same bunch of equipment, similar to the clinic room in the hospital. We provide one-to-one training service here. A customer can train all parts of the body in a room." (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)

StartFit offline coach Ben told me that he also works out in unoccupied training rooms when he does not have courses:

> "On workdays, I have many courses and I need to finish my daily training as soon as possible during the break of two courses. I have fewer courses on weekends than workdays, leaving me more time for myself. I sometimes exercise for two hours in training room." (Ben, 24, male, StartFit offline coach, Interview Five)

Figure 6.1: The StartFit training room

The FitGo office has two floors. The physical space that integrates the office with the gym is shown in Figures 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4. On the ground floor, a small gym shares the space with the main office. There were only two large pieces of fitness equipment for weightlifting due to the limited space. Other fitness tools were small and movable, such as dumbbells, barbells and yoga mats.
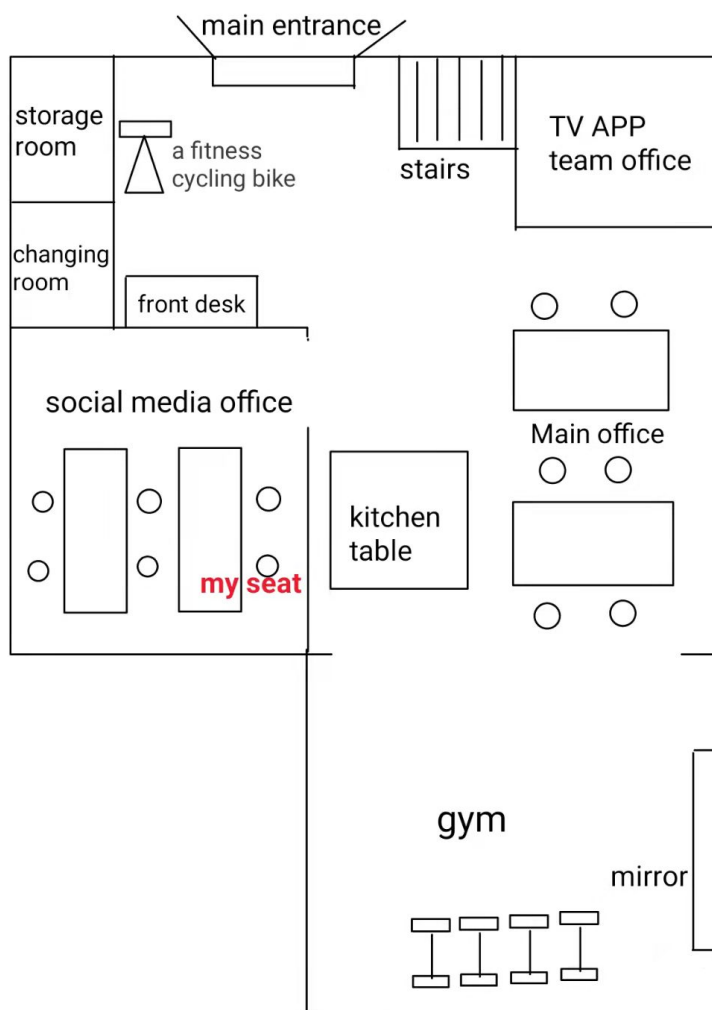
Figure 6.2: the ground floor of the FitGo office

Figure 6.3: The main office and the gym

Besides the small gym, there are other two spaces for workers to exercise: the open spaces by the entrance, as seen in Figure 6.2, and on the first floor, as seen in Figure 6.4. Some employees may ride the bicycle next to the reception desk or take movable fitness equipment, such as yoga mats and dumbbells, there to work out.
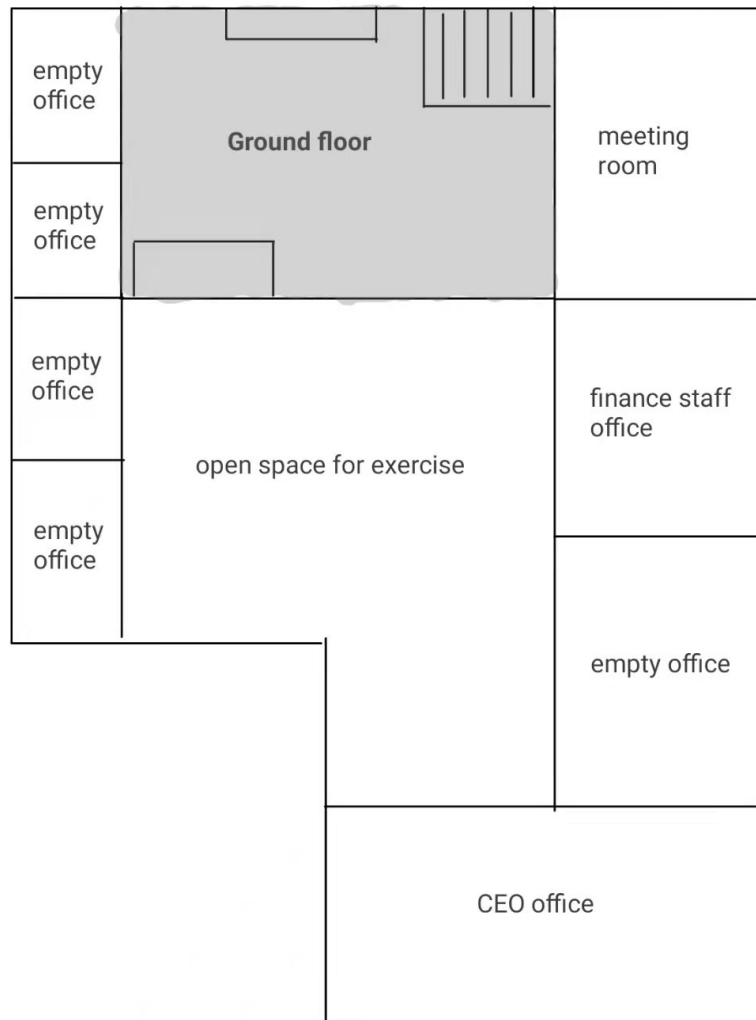
Figure 6.4: Sketch of the first floor of the FitGo office

The official working time of FitGo was from 9.30 am to 6.30 pm, with a lunch break from 12 to 1pm. Fit employees usually exercise in the office before work, during their lunch break and after work. But they do not need to obey the rule of working time very strictly because there is not a rigid clock-in and -out mechanism.

> "Lan used the fitness cycling bike from 12 to 1 pm today. She continued her yoga training upstairs for half an hour. Tae started cycling from 1 pm to 2pm." (Fieldwork, April 15th, 2022)

For employees who are fitness lovers, the office gym is an attractive benefit, and they show attachment to the office gyms. When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in February 2020, all the FitGo staff worked from home. The employees who are fitness hobbyists were unable to continue training there. Social media worker Steve talked with colleagues online: "I really miss the office gym and want to lift weights". FitGo coach Lee told me how he continued his trainings at home:

> "I set some training plans when I work from home. When my daughter takes her nap in the afternoon, I run outside. I continue my weight-lifting trainings. Several days ago, I drove to the company and took some movable dumbbells and barbells home." (Lee, 30, male, FitGo online coach, Interview 15)

FitGo's CTO Don thought the company's working condition, which integrates the gym with office, helps improve the employees' loyalty: "Once an employee loves fitness, he or she will not leave our company easily" (Don, 42, male, FitGo CTO leading the team of programmers, Interview Eight).

Fit employees view body training as a spontaneous lifestyle choice. The FitGo social media worker Steve said: "Fitness is my lifestyle. Even if I did not work in this company, I would still keep fit". However, no matter how these workers interpret their training and how much they love fitness, their hobbies now serve the companies' business and become part of work to some degree. Social media workers, such as Joyce at StartFit and Claire and Steve at FitGo, said that they had learned more fitness knowledge and had got inspiration for content creation from their own exercise experiences. FitGo coach Lee told me how he got inspiration of creating fitness courses for customers through his own training experiences,

> "I often get some new ideas during fitness trainings. I think about what kind of training is the most effective to train a certain part of the body. After trying different kinds of trainings, my thoughts are refreshed and inspired, which help my work of designing fitness courses." (Lee, 30, male, FitGo online coach, Interview 15)

The feelings about fitness of the coaches whose daily work centres around body building are more ambivalent than other fit colleagues who have different duties. FitGo online coach Lee said: "Training is a way of relieving my pressure, but sometimes it is also a source of my stress". It is the workplace requirement of keeping fit that results in the pressure felt. These employees are obliged to update their fitness knowledge and stay in good shape so that the customers will think they are qualified to provide fitness services. Offline coaches feel more stress than their online counterparts because they need to meet trainees in person, so that the customers can see their body directly. Ben, an offline coach at StartFit, told me he is strict with himself about training. He shared with me his worries about reaching the extreme of his body:

> "I must keep fit because my body figure is my brand to attract customers. I was extremely strict with myself about trainings. I required myself to train every single day. One day, I forgot lunch and trained before going home. Then I fainted in the street due to low blood sugar. After that accident, now I allow myself to have a rest every three days. But I still hope I can always make progress in the future. Unfortunately, these years, I can clearly feel that I have been gradually close to the extreme of my body. I know everyone's body has a limit. But I am still very worried that I cannot make any progress anymore. For me, no progress means regression." (Ben, 24, male, StartFit offline coach, Interview Five)

Behind demanding requirements of their own training, Ben also feel lost, empty, or listless. He said:

> "After taking my hobby as my job, I regret doing so. It made me feel very tired. I sometimes cannot tell if it was love of fitness that led to my job choice or whether it was the job that forced me to love fitness." (Interview Five)

6.3.3 Leisure or work?

Besides work in leisure time, leisure activities in the workplace embody another aspect of flexibility in contrast to Fordist work. Fordist work, features of which are summarised by Adorno (2005), requires the avoidance of distraction at work, obedience to stipulated rules on

physical movement and a clear division between work and non-work time. Those requirements express how Fordist work is based on principles of rationalisation, standardisation and uniformity. All non-work behaviour in the workplace breaking those principles should be banned, according to Adorno (2005). It is those principles that can achieve maximum efficiency and productivity in Fordist work.

But the conditions have changed in the post-Fordist era, where employees' creativity becomes the engine of production. Thus, the principle of banning leisure at work is replaced by the introduction of playfulness in the office, as several scholars have found in digital companies. Ross (2004) and Gill and Pratt (2008) claim that fun at work is seen to be helpful for boosting workers' performance. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009), who study the digital game industry, argue that workplaces with a playground atmosphere are an "apparatus of capture" that retain employees' interests in some leisure activities to fuel their productivity and creativity. Passion for leisure activities then becomes employees' motivation to work. At the same time, leisure activities in the workplace, as Butler et al. (2011) argue, also increase workers' job satisfaction, loyalty and attachment and enables them to tolerate hardship in work.

My empirical data demonstrate both similarity with, and nuanced differences from, what these scholars have found. Employees in my research do enjoy a little bit of freedom of *Moyu* on digital platforms during office time. And fit employees do find the gym in the office a good benefit, conceding how fitness inspires their creativity and relieves their pressures. Those facts confirm existing accounts of 'leisure at work'. However, I have found that in studies of digital companies, scholars take it for granted that digital games or media work misleads workers into thinking they are playing rather than working. For instance, Gregg (2013) claims that social media workers may not categorise their use of digital media as work and feel they are playing. She assumes that pleasure experiences from social media attempt workers to keep working without realising they work overtime. But social media workers in my research could differentiate work from playing when they stay online. When I asked Zoe, a social media worker at FitGo, whether she felt her work is similar with an entertaining activity, she told me:

"When I try to write a WeChat article, I need to focus on collecting materials and organising sentences. I know I am working at that moment. That is different from having fun on social media when I am not occupied by work." (Zoe, 27, female, FitGo social media worker, Interview 21)

Zoe's team leader, Claire, a social media worker at FitGo, said she barely have pleasure experiences from social media work. She also feels that when she has no tasks at hand, her mind is occupied by forthcoming work:

"When I need to write a new WeChat article, I will start to worry about what to write. It is hard to choose a topic because sometimes what I want to write is not what the followers are interested in. After I settle down a topic, I need to think about how to write. Even I am not working, these thoughts about writing occupy my minds." (Claire, 29, female, FitGo social media team leader, Interview Seven)

I have also identified fitness as another important leisure activity at work that influences employees' daily lives differently from social media. This highlights the necessity to differentiate between the two types of leisure, as I will do below. I have found that employees have negative feelings about both 'leisure activities at work', such as stress, self-doubt and even frustration. Employees' ambivalent feelings about leisure derive from a deeper entanglement between leisure and work. More than getting mixed up in terms of time and space, leisure has become work itself. Kücklich (2005) coined the term "playbour" to describe the combination of leisure and work. According to my participants' contradictory feelings about their leisure-like work, I claim that playbour provides employees with ambivalent experiences, resulting in the alienation as well as bringing about gratification. In the next section, I further discuss this ambivalence.

6.4 Playbour: alienation alongside gratification

After closely reviewing flexible work in two companies, I have found that work and leisure are not only entangled in terms of time and space, but also merged into the same thing. In this section, I first continue reflecting on the relationship between leisure and work on the basis of

current debates about the concept of playbour and unfold a discussion of how playbour results in the alienation of employees' passion for leisure activities. I also acknowledge that playbour brings about gratification. I discuss two types of playbour based on two leisure activities introduced in section 6.3 and identify how gratification influences employees' daily work.

6.4.1 Alienation of passion in privatised work

As suggested by my analysis in section 6.3, rather than being an alternative to work, leisure activities now become work, turning employees' daily work into playbour. Kücklich (2005), conceptualising playbour, used the example of game players, who modify and create new content for games driven by their passion, become game modders. These modders' leisure activities become labour that serves the commercial interests of the game industry. This phenomenon denotes that play and labour, which are opposite to each other in Fordist work, are combined and constitute a different working condition from that in industrial capitalism. Kücklich (2005), referring to Terranova's (2000) discussion, characterises playbour as "voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited". Game modders, who are users rather than waged workers, engage in production spontaneously out of passion for games, and their labour is usually unpaid or low-paid.

Kücklich's (2005) critique of playbour is valuable for revealing the production model of the 'leisure industries' as it helps reflect on the relationship between leisure activities and work in a flexible working condition. As mentioned with reference to Adorno's (2005) discussion in section 6.3, the clear division of leisure and work is historically constructed in Fordist work, where standardisation, uniformity and rationality lead to maximum efficiency in industrial capitalism. Adorno (2005) thinks the term 'leisure or free time' is specifically constructed in bourgeois society to evoke a situation in which people are not subject to the imperatives of capitalist production. Goggin (2011) noted that it is the intentional separation between leisure and work in industrial capitalism that nurtures today's leisure industries. As Goggin (2011) argues, it is industrial capitalism that created this separation. Yet another form of capitalist production merges the two.

What has changed is the role of leisure in capitalist production. Marx has defined productive labour and unproductive labour (Wittel, 2015). When workers create commodities, that is to say, generate value for capitalist production, their labour is productive labour. In industrial capitalism with a clear division between work and non-work, workers' labour in leisure time is unproductive labour. Although that part of labour is unproductive, Marx (1990[1887]) and Adorno (2005) hold that free time is viewed by the industrial capitalists as a necessary appendage of labour time, dedicated to reproducing human labour power so that workers can continue creating value in the future. But in leisure industries, as in my case, leisure activities become productive labour that generates value for capitalist production directly.

It is the leisure industry that makes leisure activities become productive labour. The leisure industries initially involve people as consumers and cultivate their passion for certain leisure activities. Then, the companies select some consumers to become waged workers and blur the division between consumer and producer (seen in Chapter Five). Some consumers also proactively apply for jobs in the digital fitness industry because they want their work to be fun and interesting. As discussed in section 6.2, taking a job becomes a personal consumption choice based on aesthetic value, embodying characteristics of the 'consumer society' coined by Bauman (2005). These features of work in consumer society are opposite to work in 'producer society', based in industrial capitalism, according to Bauman (2003). Industrial capitalism, based on work in factory assembly lines, requires massive labour that is standardised and unified. Different divisions of labour on assembly lines should contribute to commodity production together. Bulut (2014) finds that industrial work is constructed as a public issue because indstrialisation requires massive worker participation and cooperation. By contrast, work in the leisure industry, with features of consumer society, makes work privatised. With the workers' private feelings, including interests in and passion for leisure activities, emphasised in terms of work, work becomes a personal choice and a private business rather than a public issue (Weeks, 2011; Bulut, 2014).

Privatisation of work leads to two consequences: a self-reliant working condition and alienation of passion. The first consequence means that the workers need to assume responsibility for work mainly by themselves, as I mentioned in Chapter Five that how workers feel obliged to

self-learning if they find they lack specific skills in work. Self-responsibilisation resonates with a neoliberal social relationship whereby people are encouraged to take charge of themselves. In this social relationship, workers need to manage their life as an enterprise and view their labour as investment in human capital (Foucault, 2008[1979]). They feel it is their own responsibility to achieve a better performance. For example, Zoe, a social media worker at FitGo told me:

> "Because I like my job, I want to keep doing it. And due to my passion for this job, I hope I can have a better performance. My passion brings me both motivation and stress." (Zoe, 27, female, FitGo social media worker, Interview 21)

Zoe's answer suggests that the workers' passion for playbour fuels their motivation to work and seek self-improvement. The neoliberal discipline, as some governmentality theorists with a Foucauldian perspective contend, aligns the goal of capitalist production with the workers' goal of self-investment. Thus, workers proactively devote their labour to capitalist production while believing they are working for self-improvement (Rose, 1999; Ursell, 2000; McRobbie, 2002b). When labour is motivated by love, as Ursell (2000) critically remarks, workers are governed by their passion.

The problem is not that workers should not love their work, but that their labour of love serves capitalist production rather than the workers themselves, which moves my discussion to the second consequence: alienation of passion. I mentioned in Chapter Five that due to the rule of private property and commodification of human labour, workers' labour power becomes the employer's private property, making the workers unable to determine how they conduct labour. When leisure activities become productive labour, known as playbour, the workers' passion for playing also becomes part of labour power and is privately owned by the employers. Passion, as a spontaneous and private feeling, should be controlled by the workers themselves, but is beyond the workers' control and taken charged of by their employers. For instance, StartFit manager Autumn told me the company require online staff show their passion for fitness so that they can persuade customers to purchase their service:

"Online coaches provide services remotely. So, the only way that the customers know them is through WeChat. We require online coaches to show their passion for fitness to the customers and present their diligent training as much as possible through chatgroups and their own Moments. So, the customers could be inspired by the staff's passion for fitness and continue purchasing our service." (Autumn, 38, female, StartFit manager, Interview Four)

With this requirement, some workers must continue their playbour even when they feel a lack of enthusiasm and motivation. StartFit online coach Jimmy shared with me his self-doubt and struggles in his work:

"Every time I feel too exhausted to continue trainings, I become plagued with self-doubt and ask myself why I keep fit. I just want to lay down. But I have to cheer myself up, adjust my state of mind, find my love for fitness again and continue training soon. As a coach, I am obliged to stay fit and keep training, setting a good example for my customers." (Jimmy, 25, male, StartFit online coach, Interview 11)

Jimmy's passion becomes a working tool to fulfil his duty of a coach and create value for the company's commodity, fitness service. He needs to manipulate his passion to attract customers to purchase services, as required by the company. Passion is no longer a spontaneous affective reaction but a requirement of working performance to control the employees' labour. Simultaneously, the value of the commodity, which is created by the workers' passion-motivated labour, belongs to the company rather than the workers themselves. The workers can only get a small part of value returned to them as wages. With the workers' passion under employers' control to govern the workers' labour, passion is alienated from the employees. Even when workers feel a lack of motivation and passion, they must continue to engage in playbour. As McKenzie Wark (2009) argues, when the workplace becomes a playground, the workers are required to play with neither freedom to choose when to participate or quit nor power to decide the rules. It is those capital-owners who have power to design the rule of the entire game because they control working tools and take workers' labour power as private property. Workers are alienated from their own labour and products. The workers are unable

to own or sell the products of their labour for income; they have no choice but to sell their labour power, engage in playbour and instrumentalise their passion to serve capitalist production, as required by capitalism.

6.4.2 Gratification from playbour

Current debates about playbour take a Marxist perspective and criticise either exploitation (for example, Bulut, 2014; Cohen, 2012; Kücklich, 2005) or alienation (Phelps and Consalvo, 2020; Törhönen et al., 2018). Scholars mainly criticise how pleasurable experiences of playing blinds workers so that they cannot realise the bitterness of labour and conform to exploitation and alienation. This argument assumes that playing must be pleasant and labour must be painful. However, my research suggests that playing can also be painstaking, and labour also brings about gratification. I find these scholars make this argument because: (a) they do not differentiate and compare different kinds of playbour; and (b) they do not investigate gratification from labour. In this section, I differentiate two kinds of playbour: social media and fitness training. I investigate the workers' gratification from these two kinds of playbour and discuss how gratification influences the employees' interpretation of their work.

Playbour on social media platforms in this study can be categorised as two kinds: (a) employees' *Moyu*, which means having fun on platforms for themselves behind the CEO's back; and (b) social media work. *Moyu* relates to pleasurable experiences that enable the workers to gain instant gratification when they watch videos, play games and go shopping. With the FitGo CEO's tacit approval of *Moyu*, there forms a relaxing atmosphere in the office. Some FitGo workers appreciate *Moyu* help improve working efficiency. The FitGo IT staffer Falling said:

> "When I am not busy, I will *Moyu* for a while. Browsing websites randomly for fun. I can freshen up my mind. So, I will not feel exhausted when the next task is allocated." (Falling, 27, male, FitGo programmer, Interview Nine)

The second kind of playbour on digital platforms refers to social media work. Social media workers gain both instant and delayed gratification from playbour. Instant gratification is

attained in a similar way to *Moyu*, seeing some interesting content on platforms. I quote some chat records in the social media working WeChat group from my field notes.

> "Steve shared an interesting video in the group. Two people made an experiment to see whether they can enter any institution without any restriction by holding a ladder and pretending to be construction workers. Other team members sent emojis of laughing out loud. Claire joked that she hoped it would work at Shanghai Disneyland." (Field note, 25th November 2019)

Social media workers need to collect useful materials about fitness to inspire their content creation. They also have gratification when they find useful materials:

> "Claire shared with the team an author's weight-loss story and this author, Wallan, tells the story in an amusing way.
> Claire: See, Wallan is naughty again. Maybe his ways of telling stories could help our creation.
> Zoe: We can also collect some funny memes he used in this article."
> (Field note, 20th March 2020)

Those jokes gratify the workers by helping them relax or giving them inspiration for their content creation.

Simultaneously, there is another source of gratification from the users' responses. In Chapter Five, I described how readers' negative responses to social media content makes social media workers depressed and stressed. Here, I discuss how readers' positive comments give social media workers gratification. StartFit social media worker Joyce said she felt happy when "some of our customers express gratitude to our companies' service in the comments for helping them shape their body figures". It usually takes a while for social media workers to obtain this kind of gratification. They need to work hard to produce content and then wait for users' later positive responses.

In playbour with fitness, fit employees also have two sources of gratification: users and themselves. As fitness producers, they obtain a sense of fulfilment from customers' positive responses. StartFit online coach Jimmy said: "When my trainees told me they lost weight successfully with the training plans that I designed for them, I felt very happy". Similarly, to social media workers, fitness service providers do not get gratification from users' responses immediately. Rather, they need to work hard for a while and make a difference to the customers' body figures. That is to say, the fitness workers need to earn the customers' gratitude. Simultaneously, the fit employees are also fitness consumers who obtain gratification from their own bodybuilding. Gratification may come later than the moment when training is finished. Jimmy, an online coach at StartFit, told me when he could get gratification from fitness trainings.

> "I feel exhausted when I finish my daily training. But I become happy when I can see the outcome of trainings. I set new goals for training from time to time. I am happy every time I achieve my periodic goal of shaping my body figure." (Jimmy, 25, male, StartFit online coach, Interview 11)

The way that fitness brings about pleasure is different from other consumption activities. FitGo CEO Max, who is an experienced fitness hobbyist, explained the difference as follows:

> "Pleasure from training comes later, after tiredness and sweat. This pleasure is different from eating, which gives you immediate satisfaction. Immediate satisfaction fades away easily. But delayed satisfaction could last longer." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

Bauman's (2000) categorisation of instant and delayed gratification is quite relevant to my discussion here. Bauman (2000) claims that in productive activities, gratification comes later, after hard work. Consumption, on the other hand, gives gratification immediately at the moment the commodity is consumed (ibid). Similarly, in my case, productive playbour with social media and with fitness gives workers delayed gratification when they have users' positive responses. And when employees *Moyu* or social media workers consume content on digital platforms, they experience instant gratification. What is different from Bauman's (2000) classification is that consumption of fitness provides delayed rather than instant gratification. This is because the consumption of fitness is not finished at a certain moment but requires

consumers to devote time and energy to producing fit bodies afterwards. This makes fitness a special consumption choice and a painstaking leisure activity that shares characteristics with productive activities. How fitness provides delayed gratification is similar with the work ethic in Bauman's (2000) "producer society" that workers have gratification delayed until they finish hard work. This similar way of satisfying people inspires some scholars to compared fitness to a kind of work. For instance, Parker (1976) contends that fitness makes work ethics expand to leisure time. Stebbins (1982) argues, fitness is like a career in the trainers' free time. I will discuss how gratification from two kinds of playbour influences the workers' labour and their interpretation of work below.

My findings about instant gratification from playbour on social media, on the one hand, confirm some arguments in the current discussion, and on the other hand, renew understandings about social media workers. Both *Moyu* and some part of social media work enable workers to relax and have fun during work. As I mentioned above, FitGo IT staffer Falling thought having fun through *Moyu* helped freshen his mind in case he felt stuck in work. This confirms some scholars' arguments that introducing playing to the workplace can reduce stress and increase productivity (Ross, 2004; Bulut, 2014). As Ross (2004) argues, when play is introduced to the workplace, the workers' leisure activities and their thoughts in leisure time increases their creativity and productivity, serving capitalist production. In addition to confirming their arguments, I enrich the current understandings of social media work. Scholars who investigate playbour about social media or digital games take it for granted that playing gives pleasurable experiences and blinds the workers to the bitterness of work (Phelps and Consalvo, 2020; Törhönen et al., 2018; Bulut, 2014; Gregg, 2013; Cohen, 2012; Kücklich, 2005). For example, Gregg (2013) contends that fun from social media work induces employees to see work as a form of playing and keep working without realising any bitterness of labour. I do not deny that playing can lead to fun, as noted above, but I deny that fun from playing prevents workers from feeling the bitterness of work. As my study shows, employees are not duped in that way; they do not treat playbour as leisure activities. As quoted earlier in this chapter, Zoe, the FitGo social media worker, told me she did not think social media work was like playing because she had different states of mind. She needed to be more serious to focus on work rather than feel relaxed after finishing work. The social media workers even feel that playbour makes work occupy more free time. As I quoted in Claire's word above, the FitGo social media team leader said she needed to think about what topics to write in the next articles when she just finishes an article. The social media workers do feel the bitterness of work. I also want to problematise

those scholars' assumptions that playbourers can only obtain instant gratification through social media work. I contend that workers can also experience delayed gratification from playbour with social media by helping users, as I have mentioned above and will explain in detail below.

Compared with instant gratification, delayed gratification, which is advocated by a fit lifestyle, is ranked as more advanced by fit employees. Ruby, a previous StartFit online coach, shared with me her understandings of two types of gratification:

> "There are two different levels of happiness. Eating candy is happy. Working hard and obtaining rewards are also happy. The latter is stronger and more impressive." (Ruby, 34, female, previous StartFit online coach, Interview 23)

FitGo CEO Max gives a clearer justification of the priority of delayed gratification:

> "Trying to obtain satisfaction immediately is a human instinct. But delaying happiness means overcoming instincts with our rationality, which is more advanced." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

Priority of delayed gratification sometimes makes fit employees even restrain themselves from getting instant gratification too much. Social media workers consciously resist the temptation of instant gratification because they try to have delayed gratification, which they believe is more advanced. FitGo social media worker Steve, who has a fit lifestyle, said:

> "I believe a saying that self-discipline brings about authentic freedom. That means a self-disciplined person will be free from human instincts. So, I try to be disciplined in work and fitness trainings. I am wary of anything addictive, such as browsing social media platforms, which makes it hard for people to stop it. I will not indulge myself into addictive activities and instant gratification." (Steve, 29, male, FitGo social media worker, Interview 17)

The employees' delayed gratification from playbour has two origins, benefiting the users and training their own bodies. The two origins then influence their daily work in two aspects: (a) they want to do moral work and benefit the customers; (b) they view work as a way of self-

improvement. On the one hand, the workers insist on doing good work and benefiting others. StartFit manager Lily shared with me why she took the job as a coaching assistant:

> "There has been too much misleading fitness information online and I had tried several wrong methods and had failed to lose weight. I was a customer of StartFit and I think the fitness guidance service is very helpful. I wanted to help more people and give reliable suggestions for fitness, so I joined the company as an employee." (Lily, 28, female, StartFit leader of coaching assistants, Interview 16)

The desire to help more customers with fitness training is also expressed by the FitGo CEO. He prioritised to benefit customers at the cost of short-term business interests. He has refused business cooperation with some advertisers who sell weight-loss pills. He told me:

> "I do not think those products are good for my users' health. I only want to tell them what I believe is true. This is my moral principle. I think businessmen who made money from the society are obliged to do good to the society in return." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

His moral principle also influences his employees. Claire, FitGo social media team leader, had been a long-term follower of the CEO's social media account. She said she joined the company not only because she loved fitness but also because she wanted to help customers to be fit and healthy.

> "When I studied in the UK, I put on some weight and then wanted to lose weight. So, I searched fitness guidance online and have followed Max since then. I think the quality of his knowledge and guidance is very high. I joined FitGo since I wanted to help disseminate his high-quality content to help more people. I have kept learning professional fitness knowledge since I started to work for FitGo. Because I want to create reliable content by myself, just like Max does, to help more people get fit and healthy." (Claire, 29, female, FitGo social media team leader, Interview Seven)

In one group meeting of FitGo's social media team, Claire and her team member settled their working principles as conveying reliable fitness knowledge to their followers and building a good brand reputation in the long term.

"Claire: Data shows that our articles with eye-catching topics are shared little by readers. Some readers are attracted only by the topic. They are only interested in guessing the riddles that we leave in the topics. They guess and run, seldom finishing reading the articles. Some readers who care about fitness content may think they are tricked by the eye-catching topics and feel offended. Thus, these readers will have bad impression on our account. That is not what we want. We want to inform the followers of reliable fitness knowledge. So, we should care about not making topics too eye-catching and instead, focusing on improving quality of content.

Zoe: Yes, I agree. We should spend most of our energy and time conveying valuable fitness content to our customers rather than only making eye-catching topics.

Steve: That is what I want to say. We should show our sincerity to customers through content instead of making too many tricks in the topics. It is important to let our followers learn useful fitness knowledge and skills, which helps the company build a good reputation in a long term. Although attention to our articles is not that good, I believe a good reputation will bring us more customers in the future." (Field note, December 6th, 2019)

The pursuit of delayed gratification makes workers engage in moral work that benefits users' health. This working principle contradicts Bauman's (2000) characterisation of work in a consumer society but concurs with the work ethics he associates with the producer society. As I said in section 6.2, employees' job choices are similar to consumption choices, which are based on aesthetic value. Bauman (2000) claims that work based on aesthetic value provides instant gratification in a similar way to consumption activities. In his analysis, workers choose work in this way because they mainly concern about having pleasurable experiences and gratify themselves. He contends that the meaning of work in a consumer society is opposite to that in producer society, with the latter emphasising that work is moral and should contribute to benefiting others (ibid). Here, my participants do concern about their likes and interests when choosing work, as Bauman (2000) characterises, with the purpose of satisfying themselves. However, the employees in my research still consider doing moral work and benefiting the customers. Working conditions of produsage and playbour in my research, entangling consumption with production, thus combine features of work from both producer and consumer societies.

Sometimes doing good and moral work may harm companies' commercial interests. The FitGo CEO acknowledged that:

"My moral principles sometimes prevent me from making good business decisions for my company's survival. For instance, I always encourage customers to eat vegetables rather than any food supplement. But commercial interests come from the latter, not the former." (Max, 42, male, FitGo CEO, Interview Six)

Compared with FitGo, StartFit is more willing to sell food supplements. During the pandemic and city lockdown, StartFit's offline branches shut down and cut off large amounts of the company's income. StartFit even sold snacks, which should not be included in a fitness diet, to survive. Betty, a 35-year-old woman, is a previous coach of StartFit. She told me she left the company because she disagreed with StartFit's business strategies. Now she did entrepreneurship and opened up her online fitness studios.

"I love helping people with fitness trainings. But StartFit company needs to prioritise the survival of the company. So, the CEO required us to cooperate with other industries. I think that part of work contradicts with my initial intention of helping customers get fit and healthy. So, I left." (Betty, 35, female, previous StartFit online coach, Interview 22)

With lower moral self-requirements, StartFit thus has a better financial situation than FitGo. StartFit's business strategy may be despised by the CEO and staff in FitGo. When mentioning other competitors in the market, FitGo CTO Don expressed his concerns and worries about FitGo's business:

"Many other peer companies prioritise money and care less about users' benefits. They know how to attract and monetise users' attention efficiently. It turns out that they earn more money than us, although their products are worse than ours. I do not think this phenomenon shows a healthy market environment because bad money drives out good money. But I think in the long-term, when customers' understandings of fitness become thorough, they could make rational consumption choice and know our products are really good to their health." (Don, 42, male, FitGo CTO leading the team of programmers, Interview Eight)

In capitalist production based on private property, there is limited space for moral work. When moral workers prioritise ethics, they have to sacrifice income and begin to struggle. However, their pursuit of delayed gratification gives a good justification of the current hardship. The FitGo CEO and workers view moral work as a wise long-term choice to build a good brand reputation and gradually expand influence among customers. Thus, they are willing to bear the difficulty, viewing it as a means of investing in the future. They expect a promising future for the companies' business and hope labour in such a situation can cultivate a better self. This moves my discussion into the next point.

Delayed gratification from playbour with fitness also results from the desire for a better self. When consuming fitness, the workers are motivated to pursue self-improvement. Among 23 interviewees across two companies, 14 had been fitness consumers. Their discontent with their figures was widely shared among those fit employees. When I asked why they started training, 12 of 14 fit employees said they "wanted to lose weight" and two of them thought they were "too thin and desired a strong body".

Simmel (1950) claims that the body is the first and most natural possession of human beings. That makes the body an important reference to the self. When fit employees describe their fitness experiences, they equate the body with the self. Previous StartFit online coach Betty said: "Fitness not only changes my body but my personality. I become a more confident and decisive person". Another previous StartFit online coach, Ruby said: "When I was fat, I felt that I lost myself… Body training enables me to know myself more thoroughly". When fit workers shape body figures, they think they also work on a better self. And they think it is up to every individual whether they want to make an improvement. StartFit online manager Lily said: "It is only your decision and action that could make a difference to yourself". The self-responsibility and pursuit of self-improvement thus becomes a new work ethic for employees in the digital fitness companies.

This new work ethic, which has been cultivated in bodywork, motivates employees to maintain self-discipline and pursue even better performances in both training and daily work. As I observed, the FitGo social media workers are the most diligent in diet, training and work. Even without a clock-in and -out mechanism, they always attend and leave work on time. And they proactively assume greater workloads. Some fit employees also conduct self-training to

enhance professional skills. Five fit employees across the two companies have professional ACE (American Council on Exercise Personal Trainer Professional Licence Certification). According to FitGo staffers Lee, Tae and Claire, the qualification for this licence is very special, as it requires ongoing verification instead of one-off obtaining. "A candidate needs to spend around £150 taking the ACE exam. Every two years, a certificate holder needs to spend around £80 earning credits to maintain their qualification. Otherwise, it will expire", Claire told me. Tae described it as "a continual self-education". Lee thought it was "like a constant self-investment."

From a temporal perspective, the self-disciplined performance of these employees demonstrates that they adhere to strict time management and make the most of their time, including leisure time, for self-improvement. So that they can attain maximum productivity and efficiency in their daily work as well as their physical trainings. According to Judy Wajcman's (2019) criticisms of time management, their performance demonstrates that they have internalised the time discipline that people need to maximise productivity and minimise time wastage. By examining an algorithm-based digital calendaring system that determines the daily schedules of individual employees, Wajcman (2019) reflects on the celebratory perception of this automatic tool that it will increase efficiency and productivity (2019). She argues that maximising time and enhancing productivity have been among the most pervasive ideologies (ibid), which stem from Taylorism in capitalist production. This ideology is so pervasive in influencing people's conceptions of time and their daily lives that people take it as a given that they should continue pursuing accomplishments and oppose any idleness (ibid). In the context of my research, the fitness culture corresponds with this ideology and reinforces the notion that one should maximise efficiency and productivity. Therefore, employees internalise this belief and motivation to train and work assiduously. And according to Wajcman (2019), they believe that by working hard for corporations, they can also achieve the aim of becoming a better person.

It can be seen that the workers view their labour as a means of investing in their human capital. The way that employees obtain gratification from fitness makes them believe that they should work hard first. Otherwise, they do not deserve rewards. They justify their current difficulty and think that hardship is means of self-investment in order to have gratification later. The fitness culture that emphasises self-responsibility, self-improvement and delayed gratification resonates with neoliberal principles, which encourages workers to make self-investments and

promises future profits (Foucault, 2008[1979]). Consequently, the fit lifestyle helps enhance the influence of the neoliberal social relationship. Some employees conform to that social relationship by conducting their fitness training every day. Their productivity is not boosted by fun provided by leisure activities, but by their desire for a better self and the expectation of future rewards.

Through a composite Marxist and Foucauldian framework, I have criticized how inequality between labour and capital is consolidated. Nevertheless, I must admit that some empirical materials cannot be fully understood by a framework that views everything as subject to capitalist accumulation. Those materials refer to the ethical considerations and practices of my participants in their daily work, which are not determined by market imperatives. According to some scholars, non-market production can still exist and survive under capitalism's dominance. As Kennedy (2011) argues, it is empirically inaccurate to say all creative workers' labour only serves capitalism. Banks (2007) thinks the motivation of non-market labor relies on the power of art. That specifically means cultural workers' desire to pursue freedom, self-expression, and aesthetics will enable them to resist capitalism. According to Kennedy's (2011) study about web designers, ethical practice can be attributed to the shared belief and ideal that the web is an open and inclusive medium that should be accessible to all. Both Banks (2007) and Kennedy (2011) consider this kind of work to be a model for future forms of work that focus more on mental work in an era of informational capitalism owing to its emphasis on conscious aspects. It has been argued by Banks (2007) that certain characteristics of cultural work will affect all other forms of work, making them moral subjects capable of acting ethically. According to Banks (2007), humans' psychological needs play a key role in the pursuit of non-market production. His argument is that it is a moral practice and considerations are inherent in human nature and make up what we are. In my case, Banks' point also makes sense. In fitness companies, some employees' efforts to do ethical work are motivated by empathy for customers who have similar struggles in bodybuilding. When moral work conflicts with market imperatives, they abandon the latter and choose the former. Despite the fact that competitors on the market make more money by selling weight loss pills or so-called easy ways to lose weight, some employees do not consider taking advantage of these business strategies. Instead, they are concerned that misleading information or fake products may adversely affect the health of their customers and they choose to provide reliable fitness information, even at the expense of their own business interests. In this manner, they demonstrate their integrity and morality. When a content creator refuses to profit from marketing misconceptions about fitness, or when

252

a service provider treats an individual with an eating disorder with patience and empathy, there is a politics of possibility, as described by Gibson-Graham (2006). This term means that formerly disempowered actors, such as workers in my case, find new ways to exercise their power and contribute to the moral economy. The politics of possibility show that individual and disempowerment are not necessarily subject to capitalism and that there is some room for change at the micro level as well. Consequently, there is hope that moral labor can be conducted even under the dominance of capitalism. The topic of moral economy is subject to extensive debate. Considering that my main objective is not to address morality or ethics in this research, I won't elaborate on it further. This area will be explored in my future studies.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the entanglement of leisure and work in two digital fitness companies. The digital fitness industry combines two leisure activities: browsing and producing content on social media platforms and fitness training. The digital fitness industry, which is similar to other leisure industries, involves people as consumers of leisure activities first. This industry cultivates consumers' affective attachment to social media and fitness and then recruits some of them as waged employees. Thus, those workers who have been customers transform their hobby into their work. This transformation means that workers' job choice is similar to a consumption choice, which is based on personal likes and preference. Employees' passion for leisure activities become a resource for the motivation to work, aligning the goal of capitalist production with the workers' goal of having a job that they are interested in.

To retain the employees' passion for social media and fitness, the companies need to make sure the workers continue consuming leisure activities. So, the employers create a flexible workplace, whereby workers are allowed to engage in leisure activities in the office while the workers are also expected to finish work outside office. With the enhanced entanglement of work and non-work, it is more and more difficult to calculate working time and proportionate remuneration to criticise how the employees are occupied by work longer. Despite that difficulty, it is still the case that working time is prolonged because leisure activities become work itself, which is conceptualised by Kücklich as playbour (2005). The phenomenon of playbour manifests that leisure is not necessarily the opposite of work. Today's capitalist production combines the two, which were historically separated in industrial capitalism, and creates leisure industries.

In industrial capitalism, leisure activities belong to what Marx defines as reproductive labour and unproductive labour (Wittel, 2015). This part of labour does not produce value of commodities but aims to reproduce workers' labour power. But leisure industries make leisure activities become productive labour, directly creating value for capitalism. Leisure activities are personal consumption choices for consumers but are work for employees in leisure industries. The role of leisure activities has changed in capitalist production, and this change has made work become a private business rather than a public issue. Privatisation of work, on the one hand, requires workers to be self-reliant in daily labour. On the other hand, privatisation of work results in alienation of workers' passion. The workers' passion for fitness and social media motivates their labour, which means passion becomes part of their labour power. Due to the rule of private property and commodification of human labour, the workers' labour power, with their passion included, is privately owned by their employers. Rather than experiencing passion as a spontaneous feeling, the workers need to use passion as a tool to contribute to commodity production as required by their employers. The employees' passion is instrumentalised to serve capitalism rather than themselves since the products of their passion-driven labour belong to the employers. The workers are alienated from their passion.

Apart from bringing about the alienation of passion, playbour also provides gratification for workers. Current debates about playbour mainly contend that the pleasurable experiences of playing blind the workers to the bitterness of work (for example, Bulut, 2014; Gregg, 2013; Cohen, 2012; Kücklich, 2005). I find that it is not convincing to assume that only play can provide gratification and labour only results in sufferings. I contend that the current discussion of playbour does not appreciate that some leisure activities can also be painstaking, and the discussion does not consider the gratification that can stem from labour. Thus, I differentiate two kinds of playbour – playbour involving social media and playbour involving fitness – and consider how they give workers gratification.

I differentiate two kinds of playbour, playbour with social media and with fitness, and differentiate the ways they give gratification. I find that playbour with social media gives workers both instant and delayed gratification. When employees browse social media platforms as consumers, such as *Moyu* or searching information, they have instant gratification. I confirm the argument that play in the workplace brings fun and improves employees' productivity and creativity (Ross, 2004). I argue that social media could also bring about delayed gratification

when the workers create content and receive users' positive responses. In playbour with fitness, the workers always experience delayed gratification, no matter whether they train their own bodies as a fitness consumer or when they work as a fitness worker. Consumption of fitness provides delayed gratification because trainers need to work out diligently for a while before they see the changes in their own bodies. Fitness is a productive activity to generate a fit body. Working for fitness gives delayed gratification because employees need to work hard to help customers change their bodies. The workers' happiness comes later when they see the desired changes in customers' bodies and receive the customers' gratitude.

Employees' fitness consumption makes them rank delayed gratification as more advanced pleasure than instant gratification. With this ranking, workers prioritise delayed gratification and consciously resist instant gratification from social media work. This contradicts Gregg's (2013) arguments that the social media workers fail to differentiate between playing and work and are tempted by instant pleasure to keep working. In the case of my participants, instant gratification from social media fails to be a sweetener that prevents the workers from realising the bitterness of work. Instead, instant gratification from social media is viewed as a temptation that they need to resist so that they can focus on pursuing delayed gratification, a more advanced and rational pleasure. Delayed gratification has two origins: benefiting others and working on the self. The former motivates the employees to do good and moral work to benefit the users. The latter makes employees conform to a neoliberal social relationship, seeing their labour as a way of self-improvement and self-investment. However, under the rule of private property and situated in the market of competition, doing moral work sometimes harms business interests. But the priority of delayed gratification convinces the workers that the current hardship is an investment in a good future. They bear difficulty willingly and expect to have rewards in the future.

I find that the workers' passion for playbour and gratification from playbour in my case can positively unite the Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks. With the workers' private feeling of passion involved in labour, work becomes a private business rather than a public issue. Work is privatised. On the one hand, the workers are required to be self-responsible, conforming to a neoliberal social relationship. On the other hand, workers' passion are alienated from the workers. Due to the rule of private property and commodification of labour power, workers' capacity to labour are sold to and privately owned by the employers. In passion-driven playbour, workers' passion is also sold and become employers' private property. The employees need to

apply their passion to creating value as employers require while most of value belong to the companies rather than the workers. The two phenomena, self-responsibilisation and alienation, can be respectively elucidated by Foucauldian and Marxist scholarships. With Marxist scholar Bauman's (2000) discussion about work and gratification, I differentiate instant and delayed gratification, which respectively comes from work in a consumer society and in a producer society. Fitness in my case is a special leisure activity requires hard work and gives delayed gratification. Because of the workers' experience of consuming fitness, they rank delayed gratification as more advanced than instant gratification. Their desire for delayed gratification motivates them to bear hardship in work and see labour as a means of self-investment. But their labour ultimately serves capitalism rather than themselves. Due to alienated labour, the workers cannot sell the products of their labour for income and must sell labour power, with their passion included, to employers for wages. Through passion for and gratification from playbour, capitalism aligns its goal of commodity production with the employers' goal of working for a better self. That makes the unequal relationship between capital and labour more subtle but more consolidated.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

I was first intrigued by labour in the digital fitness industry when I consumed some of its products and got to know workers who had been consumers. When they shared how they cultivated love for fitness and how that passion motivated them to work in this industry, I realised that the way that they work and interpret work was so different from what I had observed of my parents' generation since childhood. How could such profound changes in people's working conditions and outlook on work take place within 30 years in China? For an answer, I decided to investigate this industry, which combines digital technologies, fitness expertise and specific characteristics of Chinese society.

The idea that 'the workers sell their capacity for labour to capitalists for income' first appeared in relation to capitalist production. Berardi (2009, p. 214) claims that this exchange mechanism forms one of the most dominant understandings of work today due to the lasting dominance of capitalism. Work entails employees selling labour power to employers, engaging in production and obtaining income in return for survival. 'Earning a living' means 'earning an income' to live. Our working conditions are subject to who purchases our labour power: the capitalist. In the 19th century, in its early stage, capitalism was based on mass industrialisation in assembly lines and factories, whereby rationality, standardisation and uniformity could bring about maximum productivity (Bauman, 2005; Adorno, 2005). Workers were required to be part of a machine, to carry out uniform physical movements as required and to concentrate on work during on-clock time. Such requirements resulted in mechanical work and clear division between work and non-work.

With advancements in ICTs (information and communication technologies) since the late 20th century, capitalism, so it has been argued, has developed new models of production (Tizana Terranova, 2000; Florida, 2002; Bruns, 2008; Berardi, 2009). And thus, the term digital labour come to the centre of critiques of capitalism. Admittedly, scholars have found that factories producing hardware and providing the physical devices of ICT development still have working conditions similar to those of industrial capitalism (Qiu, 2009; Fuchs, 2014). But it is said that ICTs development, which results in the advent of the Web 2.0 era, has made some labour

situations different from factory work. Businessman Tim O'Reilly first coined the term 'Web 2.0' in 2004 and characterised it in terms of the participatory mechanisms of platforms and mobile internet-enabled devices (Scholz, 2008). O'Reilly (2007) said in the Web 2.0 era, users are not constrained to a static PC-end but can access the Internet through mobile devices. At the same time, users are not just passive viewers of portal websites but can participate in content creation on platforms (ibid.). Web 2.0 digital platforms, which function on both PCs and mobiles, connect people remotely with technology and take a key role in people's daily communication. Thus, platforms gradually extend to nearly every aspect of daily life and occupy both work and non-work time. The platform is a place for leisure when people chat with friends, browse or post content on social media platforms. There is a disputable argument that platform users also become unpaid workers, generating commodity for the platforms when their online activities are recorded as data and sold by the platform to third parties for profit. The platform is also a workplace for waged workers when employees connect with colleagues and bosses and when some people's jobs are based on platforms, such as social media workers who need to keep a companies' social media account active (Gregg, 2013), platform companies' waged programmers who code and process data (Fumagalli *et al.*, 2018), and on-demand paid labour enabled or mediated by digital platforms (van Doorn, 2017). The most prominent difference between labour in those situations and labour in factories is the blurred division between work and non-work/leisure. Instead of being opposites, as they were in industrial capitalism, work and leisure are sometimes the same thing. With the boundary between work and leisure breaking down, the divisions between producer and user and between production and consumption, are also being blurred. Hybrid concepts have been coined by scholars to capture this entanglement, such as Bruns's concept of produsage (2008) and Kücklich's concept of playbour (2005), both of which were discussed in previous chapters.

Industrial capitalism has been persistently criticised by Marx and Marxist scholarship for depriving humans of their autonomy, consciousness and freedom. The working conditions with ICTs, however, manifest characteristics opposite to those of industrial work. Thus, some scholars celebrate the changes of the working conditions that are brought about by ICTs and think the changes put an end to the problems of labour caused by industrial capitalism (Florida, 2002; Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008). But it is still not time to celebrate that the unequal

relationship between capital and labour is challenged. The workers still need to sell their labour power to employers in exchange for wages. This is because the workers still cannot directly sell the product of their labour in the market for income. These phenomena show that Marx's critique of capitalism, especially the rule of private property and commodification of human labour, is still relevant.

Simultaneously, it is important to acknowledge the changes in capitalist production and to understand why and how those changes happen. They are closely related to the rise of neoliberalism on a global scale since the 1970s for the purpose of achieving economic growth (Harvey, 2005a; Luo, 2012; Davies, 2016). I follow Foucauldian critiques of neoliberalism and reveal how contemporary capitalist production appropriates labour in a different way from that in Marx's critiques of industrial capitalism and present how the unequal relationship between capital and labour becomes more subtle and consolidated. It has been argued that a neoliberal social relationship involves workers as entrepreneurs and constructs their labour power as human capital (O'Malley, 2000; Foucault, 2008[1979]). The workers in this social relationship view labour as self-investment. And they are encouraged to join entrepreneurship and competition in the market. As scholars claim, neoliberalism is applied to solving the stagnation of economy due to Keynesianism and stimulating economic growth in capitalist society (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Berardi, 2009).

With China's entry into the Web 2.0 era, based on ICTs advancement, and with a policy that encourages entrepreneurship and competition in the market, some new business models based on ICTs and new working conditions of digital labour have appeared, with the digital fitness industry included. In the past decade, alongside the increased influence of the Chinese digital economy, there have been more and more scholars paying attention to China and discussing Chinese digital labour in different industries (Qiu, 2009; Sandoval, 2013; Xia, 2014; Sun, 2019; Zhang and Wu, 2022). Some scholars build their arguments on the two most influential theories, Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks, which have been developed in Western countries, to initiate the discussion of digital labour. In this research, I introduce a new case – the Chinese digital fitness industry, which has previously lacked sufficient academic attention – to current debates of digital labour that are dominated by Marxist and Foucauldian scholarship. I

contribute to enriching the understandings of digital labour in the Chinese platform society and contribute to making the two most influential frameworks work together to elucidate this new case.

7.1 Working conditions characterised by alienation and neoliberalism

In this section, I answer my overall research questions by conceptualising the working conditions of two Chinese digital fitness companies within a Marxist and Foucauldian framework. I claim that the overall working condition in this research is characterised by alienation and a neoliberal social relationship. Situated in the Chinese digital fitness industry, the workers now have two hybrid identities, produser and playbourer. Both identities derive from the mechanism that combines digital technologies with leisure industries. Digital technologes, on the one hand, make some means of production accessible and enable users to engage in production. On the other hand, digital technologies give birth to new, or revitalise existing, leisure industries, which respectively refers to social media platforms and the fitness industry in my research. Leisure industries blur the division between playfulness and work, inducing consumers to choose their hobbies as work and make their passion for leisure serve capitalist production. I present the working conditions in detail in my previous chapters, and I summarise them in the next three subsections.

7.1.1 A top-down neoliberal economy in China

The advancement of information and communication technology (ICT) has played an increasingly significant role in global capitalist production (Fuchs, 2014b). China, as one of the main manufacturers of digital hardware devices and known commonly through the phrase "made in China", has aspired to be more competitive globally (Yu, 2017). In the government's 12th Five Year Plan (2010-2015) and 13th Five Year Plan (2015-2020) for national development, China set goals for transforming its role from hardware manufacturer to a country with the capacity of leading ICTs development independently in the global digital economy.

To pursue the goal of being an innovator and win the game of competition with other countries, China has developed domestic ICT, enhanced the wide application of ICT to various industries and encouraged citizens' bottom-up creativity. Making great efforts to construct

communication infrastructure and advance ICTs, the state has enabled more citizens to access the Internet and web-enabled devices. From 2010 to 2020, the percentage of Internet users among the whole population increased from 34.3% to 70.4% (China Internet Network Information Centre, from 2010 to 2020). At the same time, the ways in which people access the Internet and communicate with each other have also changed with the advent of China's entry into the Web 2.0 era. Platforms allow users to generate content and communicate with other users. Platform users become producers, whose labour contributes to production of content and data, known as produser (Bruns, 2008). And produsers can access the Internet and produce content and data with few time and space constraints with mobile smart devices. Internet users are endowed with some tools to join production and they become labour in the Chinese digital economy. To encourage Internet users' creativity and productivity to contribute to the development of China's digital economy, the government set two policies in the 2015 government reports: "Internet Plus" (China State Council, 2015b) and "Mass Entrepreneurship, Mass Innovation" (China State Council, 2015a). Internet Plus encourages different industries to apply ICT to vitalising production through creating new or upgrading existing business models. The latter policy relates to the state encouraging bottom-up creativity and entrepreneurship. These two policies show how the state plays a leading role in guiding an economy based on ICT, with the guidance consistent with neoliberal principles to some degree.

The Chinese digital economy is characterised by competition and uncertainty. Within this economy, the two companies in this research were born, experienced their heyday and are now struggles in an uncertain condition. To encourage bottom-up creativity and entrepreneurship, some means of production supported by ICT have become accessible to individual Internet users. Internet users, such as the CEOs of the two companies, could transform their role from users to producers and start up their own businesses from scratch. Lots of entrepreneurs in the market bring about competition. Foucault (2008[1979]) contends that competition is constructed as a neoliberal governmental tool with a purpose of effectively revitalising production and stimulating economic growth. In recent decades, three Chinese digital companies, Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent (known as BAT), have won the competition game and become oligarchs. BAT shares dominant roles in the market, controlling key resources and attracting the majority of investors' funds. They have even become capitalists themselves by

making investments in the most influential entrepreneurial companies in different industries, such as Keep, the top Chinese digital fitness company. As Xia (2018) contends, today's Chinese digital economy is experiencing financialization, which means the Internet companies survive based on directly earning funds from capital rather than accumulating capital through commodity production. There is limited space for independent entrepreneurs and their small companies, such as the two in this research, to survive because they struggle to compete with BAT to earn capital investment, and they are not the top entrepreneurial companies to earn BAT's investment. They must struggle to survive through commodity production. At the same time, the policies emphasised on innovation has encouraged the creation of many new business models to replace the old ones. It is hard for the entrepreneurs to predict the next business opportunities and to appeal to the investors' preference. The market is characterised by uncertainty. As O'Malley (2000) conceptualises it, uncertainty means the future is no longer a repetition of the past, making it difficult for entrepreneurs to predict future tendencies with previous data and experience. Situated in uncertainty, where the "transformative power of the entrepreneurial spirits" (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993) is required, both employers and workers need to re-invent themselves and the environment. In a market full of uncertainty, new business models constantly emerge to replace old ones and become new investment hotspots. It is difficult for independent entrepreneurs to appeal to the vagarious demands of the market and investors' preferences in a timely manner to maintain companies' long-term survival.

Working for small entrepreneurial companies in an uncertain situation, employees interpret their labour as a means of self-investment and use it as a main strategy for responding to neoliberal competition and uncertainty. In small entrepreneurial companies, all the workers are required to take more than one role and be multi-skilled. That requirement is criticised by scholars of political economy for making workers assume larger workloads without proportionate economic compensation (McRobbie, 2002a). However, rather than complaining about greater workloads, employees in my research interpreted the requirements of being multi-skilled as an opportunity to equip themselves with more skills. They think that the more skills they have, the less worried they are about losing their job. Because multi-skills would enable them to be recruited by other employers soon. For employees, being multi-skilled also entails having more competitiveness so that they can change to a job with a better income when they

want. Learning new skills becomes a means of self-investment for the future, handling potential problems of job loss or helping future job-hopping. Workers conform to a neoliberal social relationship, viewing themselves as an enterprising unit and viewing their life experiences, including labour, as a form of self-investment. As Foucault (2008 [1979], p.329) argues, the perspectives of market rationality extend to, and even dominate, the non-market aspect, making human life into human capital.

7.1.2 Produsers' alienated labour and competition

Workers in my research were both producers and users of their products, with this hybrid identity conceptualised as 'produsers' (combining producer and user) (Bruns, 2008). This term, coined by Bruns (2008), has been widely applied to show how users are transformed into producers on platforms and how users' online activities become unpaid labour that generates value for platform capitalism (Grinnell, 2009; Comor, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Brown and Quan-Haase, 2012b). However, little attention has been paid to how waged workers are also endowed with the right to use these products, transforming producers to workers. In my research, I suggest that the identity transformation is two-way. The digital fitness companies not only select some users to become waged employees through competition, but also allow producers to use the products. Some users can join the company's commodity production because they can access tools for production. As I mentioned above, some means of production underpinned by digital technologies, including physical devices, access to Internet and digital platforms, are no longer monopolised by capitalists. Instead, this part of the means of production is accessible not only to people who own some capital but also to people who have nothing but their labour power. This is because the state encourages citizens to engage in entrepreneurship and construct a market for competition. Simultaneously, waged producers also become users. The companies encourage their employees to use the commodities because their consumption of digital fitness products becomes the labour for the company. This kind of consumption labour, on the one hand, cultivates a user's perspective, which enables workers to improve the quality of the product and appeal to customers' demands. Consumption becomes labour that generates more value for the company. One the other hand, using the product reproduces a desired workforce that is disciplined in both body training and working performance.

For some means of production that are accessible to both capitalists and workers, people can get the right to use those working tools in three ways: through one-off purchase, regular payment, or free of charge. They can own some means of production, such as PCs and mobile smart devices, through one-off purchases. They can also make regular payments to access the Internet, proprietary software and information materials or to access digital platforms by giving out personal data. There are also software and information materials belonging to open resources and do not charge fees. Most kinds of means of production are proprietary and charge fees, showing that the rule of private property still exists. Once a person needs to use the proprietary means of production, they need to pay the owners to gain access. In the companies, the employers pay for all the necessary working tools and provide these tools for workers. By either owning some tools as private property through one-off purchase or making regular payments for some proprietary tools, the employers control the means of production. At the same time, the employers pay wages to employees, so the former own the latter's labour power as private property. That means the workers must use the working tools and conduct their labour according to the employers' requirements. The employers' control of means of production and private ownership of the workers' labour power justifies the employers taking the final products as private property, selling them as a commodity and owning the income. The workers, who are deprived of the ownership of products, cannot sell the products for income in the market. I contend that workers thus still experience alienated labour in an employment relationship.

When some means of production become accessible, it is also possible for the workers to avoid alienated labour through self-employment. In Marx's analysis of industrial capitalism, workers have nothing, but their labour power and they have no choice but to sell their labour power to the capitalist for income to survive. However, workers in my research can access some means of production by themselves in order to realise their labour power without an employment relationship, but through entrepreneurship. But when workers choose self-employment, they cease to be workers in the strict sense and become individual enterprises that need to enter into competition in the market. And thus, what they pay for their means of production becomes an investment in their human capital, which involves them in a neoliberal social relationship.

However, as described in the last section, the possibility for individual entrepreneurs to survive the game of competition with giant companies who control majority of capital investment is limited. Being hired by an employer is thus a safer choice than self-employment. Workers need to choose between either alienated labour in an employment relationship or self-investment and competition through entrepreneurship.

The property relationship of the means of production helps clarify the networked power relations involved in the workers' labour process. The power relations in my research are different from those in industrial capitalism in Marx's analysis. In industrial capitalism, capitalists totally control workers' labour processes, leaving the workers little freedom of physical movements on the assembly line. Because in factory work, standardisation and uniformity bring about maximum productivity. Based on that working condition, Marx conceptualises power as a unidirectional oppression, with the capitalists coercing the workers to conduct labour in a strictly stipulated way. In my case, power relations exist in a triangular model, involving employers, employees and customers. Thus, Foucault's concept of networked power relation is more relevant to my research. Due to the rule of private property and commodification of labour power, employers, who control means of production and employees' capacity to labour, still have the strongest ability to determine what and how to produce. However, rather than imposing coercion on workers' physical movements, employers now endow workers with some autonomy, which means the employees can make some decisions by themselves in work. Because workers' creativity, rather than standardised and uniform physical movements, is central to productivity in my research. Autonomy can cultivate more creativity and generate maximum value for the companies. At the same time, customers play a significant role in the commodity production of the two companies. Digital platforms enable users to respond to products immediately and exchange their comments with each other. Customers' comments about the products directly influence the companies' reputation and income. Employers must seriously take customers' feedback into consideration in order to earn a good income. The tasks of pleasing the customers are offloaded to individual workers, especially the service providers. Thus, the employees are required to satisfy the customers' requests as much as possible. To make sure that the workers serve the customers as required, the employers also invite the customers to make comments on and grade staff's service.

Through this grading and the corresponding ranking of employees' working performance, competition is introduced to make workers achieve a better working performance. According to Foucault's (1979) discussion about ranking in disciplinary power, ranking itself could be rewards and punishment, with high ranking as praise and low ranking as humiliation. To avoid being ranked low, the workers, who are involved in a game of competition, have to work hard and improve their working performance proactively. Introducing competition is not the only way of making the employees work diligently and actively. Workers' passion for social media and fitness also stimulates their labour, as summarised in 7.1.3.

7.1.3 Passion for and gratification from playbour

The Chinese digital fitness industry is a leisure industry. One of the unique features of leisure industries is the blurred division of work and leisure. For employees in those industries, their daily work centres around leisure activities. In the two digital fitness companies involved in my research, two leisure activities related to the companies' business: social media and fitness trainings. Some workers in this new leisure industry in China's platform society have been consumers, as social media users and as fitness trainees. Then, as mentioned in section 7.1.2, the employers select and recruit some of the customers as waged workers to engage in the companies' commodity production. Since the experiences of consuming digital fitness products cause some customers to build affective attachment to either or both leisure activities, those social media hobbyists and fitness lovers choose to work for their likes and interest in the two companies. Although some workers had not been customers before they joined the companies, they also emphasised that they needed to choose work that they liked or had an interest in. With their emphasis on personal likes, the employees attach significance to whether a job can provide pleasurable experiences for them. This method of choosing a job is similar to choosing a commodity, which concurs with the features of work in a 'consumer society', as coined by Bauman (2005). A consumer society presumes people to be consumers in different aspects of life, including work (ibid.). Bauman argues that job choice in a consumer society is based on aesthetic value, which prioritises the workers' likes, preferences and desires (ibid.). However, the meaning of work is constructed in a totally opposite way in industrial capitalism, conceptualised by Bauman (2005) as 'work ethics' in a 'producer society'. In a producer society, based on industrial capitalist production, massive labour is needed for work in factories

and different divisions of labour on assembly lines should contribute to the commodity production together. To recruit a massive workforce to engage in industrial capitalist production, on the one hand, the means of production is monopolised by capitalists. Thus, the workers have no choice but to sell their labour power to the capitalists for income. On the other hand, work is constructed as a moral imperative and a public issue, requiring people to contribute to factory work. The value of work in a producer society is assessed through one's contribution to the wider community.

According to Marx's (1844) critiques of industrial capitalism, factory workers become mechanical and dehumanized when they need to adjust their physical movements to the operation of machines. However, in my research, a job choice based on personal likes and interest introduces the affective aspects of human beings to the workplace, which is absent in industrial capitalism. Some scholars, such as autonomist Marxist scholars Negri and Hardt (2000), are optimistic about this change. They coined the term 'affective labour' and claim that introducing human affects to work could enable cooperation among different divisions of labour to struggle against capitalism (ibid). As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008) contend, since the goal of autonomist Marxist scholars is not to make sociological critiques but to lead political struggles and intervene social relations, the term 'affective labour' from this scholarship lacks a critical perspective. Some scholars (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008) note that this term only focuses on positive human affects and their positive roles in labour, but neglects unpleasant human affects and their potential negative influence on human labour. Gill and Pratt (2008) criticise when autonomist Marxist scholars only emphasise human affects' capacity to challenge capitalism, they neglect how affects could also play an opposing role. They contend that affects are not necessarily the alternative to capitalism. Instead, affects could also bind workers more tightly to capitalism (ibid.). Ursell's (2000) term 'labour of love' is similar to Gill and Pratt's finding, which is relevant to my research. Ursell (2000) coined this term to elucidate how workers' passion for work could make their labour subject to exploitation. Taking a Foucauldian perspective, she argues that passion motivates employees to work hard and actively in the name of self-investment (ibid). Based on Ursell's argument, I find that employees' likes, interests and passions, as examples of spontaneous human feelings, are viewed as an authentic expression of self-desire. The workers thus believe taking an interest-

driven job enables them to work for both employers and for a better self. When human feelings are introduced to work and become the motivation to work, they are instrumentalised to serve capitalism. Thus, affective attachment to work is a key element to align the goal of capitalism with employees' goal of self-development. In my case, I claim that, instead of challenging the unequal relationship between capitalism and labour, involving some human affects in work becomes a neoliberal tool to govern workers' labour.

When some customers and hobbyists become waged workers, employers maintain their identity as users to retain their workers' passion for leisure activities and to let such passion motivate the employees' work. In my researched companies, the division between work and leisure activities is broken in the workplace, which is characterised by scholars as 'flexibility' (Sennett, 1998; Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). In the flexible working conditions of the two companies, on the one hand, work is expected to be finished remotely and out of office time since digital technology makes employees accessible without space and time limitations, which is described by McRobbie (2002b) as 'time and space dynamics'. Gregg (2013) also coined the term 'work intimacy' to criticise how work invades private aspect of life. My findings confirm scholars' critiques of flexibility in that flexible work only serves the employers' interests rather than the employees'. The employees have to always be ready to work once the employers assign tasks, with their working time prolonged (McRobbie, 2002a; Banks, 2007; Gregg, 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). On the other hand, similar to Ross's (2004) research in Silicon Valley, leisure is also brought into the workplace in the two companies, with the purpose of refreshing workers' minds, boosting their creativity and productivity, and increasing employees' loyalty and job satisfaction. With the entanglement of work and leisure, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between work and leisure time and to calculate time spent on the two parts with precision – but it can be certain that working time has been prolonged because leisure has become work in itself. Leisure time, according to Marx (1990 [1887]) and Adorno (2005), is supposed to be an appendage of work in industrial capitalism, allowing workers to free themselves from work for a while and to reproduce their labour power for future commodity production. In industrial capitalism, labour in leisure time belongs to unproductive labour, which does not create value for capitalism. However, in my case, leisure activities are no longer an alternative to work but becomes work itself. That is to

say, workers' leisure activities also produce value for capitalism, making their working time longer in a strict sense. This working condition can be conceptualised as 'playbour', as coined by Kücklich (2005) to describe how play becomes labour.

I find that existing discussion of playbour mainly concerns how pleasurable experiences from play blind workers from seeing the bitterness of their labour. Scholars take a Marxist perspective and criticise how workers fail to realise that they are subject to the unequal relationship between capitalism and labour in terms of exploitation (Bulut, 2014; Cohen, 2012; Kücklich, 2005) and alienation (Phelps and Consalvo, 2020; Bulut, 2014; Törhönen et al., 2018). I confirm the existing arguments that playbour brings about alienation in my research. I find some existing discussion about alienation of plabyour is vague in failing to clarify how alienation takes place. Simultaneously, they tend to equate the connotation of alienation with that of instrumentalisation instead of analysing alienation as a property relationship. I contend that playbour results in the alienation of passion. When the workers' labour is motivated by their passion for leisure activities, their passion becomes part of labour power. Due to the rule of private property and the commodification of human labour, the playbourers' passion for leisure activities is also sold to employers and owned by them as private property. Thus, employers can control the workers' passion legitimately in an employment relationship. Employees' passion, which is supposed to a spontaneous emotion, are required by the employers to be manipulated and serve commodity production. In interest-driven playbour, passion becomes part of the mechanism to govern workers' labour and thus it is alienated from the workers.

At the same time, I find that the current discussion of playbour – which contends that fun from entertaining activities makes workers unable to realise alienation and exploitation – shares a common assumption that playing is always pleasurable while labour only gives pain. Thus, they believe that when playing becomes playbour, that kind of labour makes workers suffer. I claim this assumption shows a lack of understanding of different kinds of play and a lack of consideration about gratification that can come from labour. To challenge this assumption and enrich understandings of playbour in this research, I differentiate and compare two kinds of leisure activities and suggest that some leisure activity, such as fitness, can be painstaking. I

also investigated how two kinds of playbour also bring about gratification. In terms of gratification, I introduced Bauman's (2000) categorisation of delayed and instant gratification, which respectively resonate with his concepts of 'producer society' and 'consumer society'. Bauman (2000) argues that delayed gratification comes from productive activities while instant gratification derives from consumption activities. According to Bauman's categorisation and other scholars' studies about fitness (Sassatelli, 1999; Smith Maguire, 2008), fitness is a special experience of consumption that requires painstaking work and brings about delayed gratification since fitness is a productive activity that generates a fit body. Thus, scholars think fitness brings work ethics to leisure time (Stebbins, 1982; Parker, 1976). Fit employees have their gratification delayed through their own fitness training. They must insist on a fitness lifestyle for a while and then feel satisfied when seeing changes in their body shape. Delayed gratification also comes from doing good work and helping users. Coaches and social media workers feel satisfied when they receive customers' positive feedback about their service and content. That kind of gratification usually requires the workers to produce commodities with great effort and wait a while for customers' good feedback. They need to wait because the special feature of their digital fitness products which requires consumers to implement a fit lifestyle for a while in pursuit of a desired bodily change. Thus, delayed gratification from playbour has two sources – working on the self and helping others. Besides delayed gratification, playbour on social media platforms provides workers with instant gratification, similar with Gregg's (2013) discussion. When they are not busy with work, all the employees in my research sometimes have fun on social media platforms during work time. When social media workers need to collect materials for their content creation, they also browse the platforms and get instant gratification from some interesting content. But unlike Gregg's (2013) assumption that instant gratification from social media makes workers fail to differentiate play from work and thus tempts them to keep working, I find that the social media workers in my research were not so easily duped. Instead, they are clearly aware of the difference between work and leisure, and they even try to resist the temptation of instant gratification. Their experiences of consuming fitness make them interpret delayed gratification as a more rational and more advanced pleasure than instant ones, with the former overcoming human instinct while the latter is subject to it. This interpretation is also advocated by the fitness companies, which make employees think delayed gratification is worth pursuing. The pursuit of delayed

gratification leads to two results: (a) the workers' desire to do moral work and help users – employees prefer to benefit users in the long-term at the cost of short-term interests; and (b) the workers want to work for a better self. They are willing to bear hardships at work, view labour as self-investment, and will wait for a promising future. Working on the self for self-improvement becomes a new work ethic and moral imperative for workers in a neoliberal social relationship.

7.2 Contributions of this thesis

My thesis depicts workers' alienated labour with their hybrid identity as produsers in the platform society, enriching discussion about both produsage and alienation. Bruns's (2008) celebratory positioning of produsage has been criticised by political economy scholars for neglecting remaining inequality in the platform society (Scholz, 2008; Brake, 2014; Dahlberg, 2015). In turn, critical work on produsage mainly concerns with how users become producers, whereby their labour is unpaid or badly paid (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014; Fisher, 2015). Disproportionately little attention is given to how the employers intentionally make waged producers be users by allowing the employees to use the products. I claim that identity entanglement is mutual and identity transformation from both ends should be analysed together. With Marx's (1990[1887]) labour theory of value, I differentiate products in industrial capitalism from digital fitness products in my research. I claim that the reason that workers are allowed and even encouraged to use their products is that their consumption of products becomes labour that produces rather than reduces the value of the product. By introducing Foucault's (1979) concept of disciplinary power into the discussion on produsage, I have also found that consuming digital fitness products discipline the produsers' bodies and labour, training a self-disciplined workforce for the companies.

I find that Bruns (2008) fails to unveil the unequal power relations behind produsage because he does not analyse the property relationship behind this phenomenon. Using Marx's (1844) theory of alienation, I have enhanced critiques of produsage through an analysis of the property relationship. Elster (1985) claims that means of production has been central to understanding Marx's concept of alienation. He points out that capitalists monopolise and take the means of production as private property (ibid.), which prevents the workers from using working tools

without the capitalists' permission. And the capitalists' private ownership of working tools legitimatises their private ownership of the products that are created by the workers (ibid.). I build my discussion based on Elster's (1985) attention to means of production. Considering the difference between working conditions in my research and in industrial capitalism, I make adjustments to his arguments. Inspired by Elster (1986), I confirm that the means of production is a key element for interpreting workers' relationships with labour, but it has not been sufficiently discussed in the studies of digital labour. From my research, I contend that the means of production is no longer monopolised by capitalists but becomes accessible to not only capital owners but also to propertyless workers, who have nothing but their labour power. That accessibility of working tools leads to produsage. I have presented in detail different kinds of means of production involved in the two companies' businesses and how people can own or use working tools. Apart from some open-source software and informational materials, other working tools are proprietary, requiring all the users to make payments to the owners. All users, including capitalists and workers, can either take tools as private property through one-off purchases or make regular payments, similar to renting, to use tools. The existence of proprietary means of production shows that the rule of private property, criticised by Marx (1844) in *Estranged Labour*, still holds true. But admittedly, property relationships do change compared to those in Marx's (1884) and Elster's (1985) analyses based on industrial capitalism. The employers in my research cannot own all the means of production as private property and they need to rent some working tools, such as proprietary software or information materials. However, in an employment relationship, the employers can still control how the employees use those tools and prevent the workers from using tools without the companies. Because the employers not only control means of production, but also control the workers' labour power.

I enrich Elster's (1985) arguments and contend that besides discussing the property relationship of means of production, it is also important to introduce Marx's (1990[1887]) critiques of commodification of human labour power to understand alienation. When the workers sell their labour power as a commodity to the capitalists for wages, the capitalists take the workers' labour power as private property. That means the employers can require the workers to labour as the employers please. And the rule of private property legitimates the employers' private ownership of the products that are produced by the workers. I argue that in the employment

relationships in my research, the employers still estrange their workers from the products of their labour by controlling the means of production and labour power. Admittedly, when means of production is no longer monopolised by the capitalists but is also accessible to workers, the workers have an alternative to selling labour power to capitalists, which is different from Marx's (1844) analysis of alienation. The workers can access the means of production by themselves through one-off purchases or rent and realise their labour power without an employment relationship. They are not propertyless in a strict sense. It is possible for the workers to escape alienation in an employment relationship through self-employment. Thus, Marx's theory of alienation cannot be applied to elucidate this labour situation. I introduced Foucault's (2008[1979]) discussion about neoliberalism to conceptualise the accessibility of means of production. Replacing monopoly with accessibility of working tools is not generosity of capitalism but a neoliberal strategy to encourage entrepreneurship and form a market for competition. When the self-employers pay for working tools, their payment is a form of self-investment. Taking on the role of entrepreneurs, they need to engage in competition and uncertainty in the market.

Additionally, I advanced the discussion of playbour by differentiating two kinds of playbour and investigating the gratification from playbour. As mentioned in section 7.1.3, current studies of playbour contend that it blinds workers from realising exploitation and alienation of labour through pleasurable experiences as a result of playing (Bulut, 2014; Gregg, 2013; Cohen, 2012; Kücklich, 2005). Behind this argument, the scholars commonly assume that playing always brings about pleasurable experiences while labour only brings suffering. I do not believe that assumption is convincing because it treats playbour as a generalised concept and seldom differentiates various kinds of playbour. Simultaneously, that assumption does not pay enough attention to gratification from labour. I have introduced a new case – digital fitness – and differentiated two kinds of playbour, one linked to social media and the other to fitness training. I introduced Marxist scholar Bauman's (2000) categorisation of instant and delayed gratification. Bauman contends that the former comes from consumption experiences while the latter derives from productive activities. Of the two types of playbour, social media brings about instant and delayed gratification, while fitness training provides delayed gratification. With my findings, I firstly showed that playing is not just about relaxing activities, such as

browsing social media platforms, which brings instant gratification, according to Gregg (2013). Playing can also relate to painstaking productive activities, such as fitness, requiring trainees to work hard and have gratification later, when they see the desired changes in their body. Secondly, by discussing how two kinds of playbour provide gratification for workers, I renewed understandings of playbour linking to social media. Taking Gregg's (2013) argument as an example, social media work is thought to bring instant gratification, making workers think they are playing and tempting them to keep working. However, I have found that social media workers are not ignorant in that way but can be aware of when they are working. They can even feel that working time is prolonged when their mind is still occupied by work in non-work time. In social media work, especially in producing content for customers, employees have their gratification delayed when they finish content production and receive customers' positive feedback. The social media workers feel satisfied with doing good work and helping others, as do coaches, who feel gratified when they successfully help customers achieve their bodybuilding goals and receive customers' positive feedback. Thirdly, I also found that there is an interplay between instant and delayed gratification. In fitness companies, delayed gratification is considered more advanced and rational than instant gratification, making the employees think that the former is more worth pursuing. I introduced Foucault's (2008[1979]) discussion about neoliberalism to Bauman's (2000) discussion about gratification and found that the pursuit of delayed gratification binds workers more tightly to a neoliberal social relationship. They are willing to sacrifice short-term business interests and bear current hardship in work, viewing all difficulty as a means of self-investment, being prepared to wait for delayed rewards in a future full of uncertainty.

I have enriched understandings of Chinese digital economy and labour by introducing a new case in the form of the Chinese digital fitness industry. Current academic attention on this case mainly comes from business (Shang, 2017; Zhang and Liu, 2017; Zhao and Yu, 2017; Liu, 2018) or sports (Xing, 2014; Cai, 2016; Miao, Li and Yue, 2017). Existing studies of Chinese digital fitness lack a critical perspective from sociology and neglect the most sociologically significant theme behind this industry: labour. Simultaneously, most studies select the most influential digital fitness companies for their case studies, which may result in only a partial description of this industry. There are also some small-scale entrepreneurial companies, whose

stories could supplement the gaps caused by the central academic attention to dominant big companies and map out a more complete picture of the Chinese digital economy. Thus, I selected two entrepreneurial digital fitness companies and investigated their working conditions. Eight years have passed since China entered the Web 2.0 era, and in that time the two companies have seen huge changes, from birth, to development to struggling to survive. The Chinese digital economy has changed compared to when the two companies started up. Small digital companies now have limited space to survive due to the financialization of the Chinese digital economy and a market characterised by uncertainty. I confirm Xia's (2018) argument that the Chinese digital economy has been financialized. Rather than producing commodities to accumulate capital, today's Chinese Internet companies survive by directly appropriating capital through attracting investors' funds. The giant Chinese Internet companies Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent (BAT) have won the competition game, sharing a dominant position in the market and attracting the most capital investment. Independent entrepreneurs are not competitive with BAT in their ability to attract capital investment and they struggle to survive through commodity production or choose to be acquired be or merge with BAT. I also introduced Foucauldian scholar O'Malley's (2000) discussion about uncertainty to explain the Chinese digital economy. The state's policy emphasises innovation, which motivates the rapid iteration of business models in the market. It is difficult for small companies with tight budgets to renew their existing business models. They can hardly predict the next trend or appeal to investors' vagarious preferences for investment. The uncertain fate of small entrepreneurial companies also leads to a workers' future marked by uncertainty, influencing how workers interpret their labour and make plans for their future careers. It is impossible for the employees to work in existing companies permanently. Thus, workers see such companies as a temporary training place to learn more skills and view their labour as self-investment. They believe that the more skills they learn, the easier it will be to change to better jobs with more income. The workers have conformed to a neoliberal social relationship.

Lastly, I have contributed to making the two most influential theoretical frameworks of digital labour, Marxist and Foucauldian, work together to elucidate the working conditions in my researched companies. My empirical materials provide three connecting points to bridge the two frameworks: fitness, means of production, and affective aspects of labour. In Chapter Five,

I firstly connected Marx's concept of commodity with Foucault's disciplinary power to enrich understandings of the produser. I showed that not only are the most disciplined users selected as producers but waged producers are also encouraged to use the products as users. The producers' experiences of consuming products become labour that generates value of the commodity for the companies. And the producers are endowed with a user's perspective for disciplining their labour. I then discussed the property relationship of the means of production, which underpins the produsage phenomenon. Means of production is a vital element to both Marx's analysis of alienation and Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism. However, this key element has not yet been fully discussed in existing debates on digital labour. In Chapter Five, by studying the property relationship of accessible means of production, I showed that the workers are trapped between alienation, discussed by Marx (1884), and a neoliberal social relationship, discussed by Foucault (2008 [1979]). the rule of private property exists. Because of the rule of private property and commodification of labour power, the employers control means of production and employees' labour power. Thus, the workers experience alienated labour in an employment relationship. If the workers choose entrepreneurship to avoid an employment relationship, they must pay for access to means of production, which is a form of self-investment. However, due to financialization of digital economy and a market full of uncertainty, independent entrepreneurs can hardly make a living, making selling labour power a safer choice than entrepreneurship. And the workers remain propertyless since they barely have substantial property for income when experiencing alienation in employment relationships. The third connecting point between Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks is affective aspect of work, including workers' passion for and gratification from their labour. When workers' private feelings, in the form of passion, is involved in job choice and daily labour processes, work becomes a private business rather than a public issue. Work is privatised. On the one hand, workers are required to be self-responsible, and they conform to a neoliberal social relationship, discussed by Foucault (2008[1979]). On the other hand, workers' passion becomes part of labour power, which is purchased and privately owned by their employers. The employees have to manipulate their own passion to serve capitalist production according to the employers' requirement. With their labour governed by their own passion, the employees are thus alienated from their passion. Simultaneously, I unite Marxist scholar Bauman's (2000) discussion about work and gratification and Foucault's (2008[1979]) discussion about

neoliberalism. I found that the employees' pursuit of delayed gratification, deriving from experiences of consuming fitness, make them bear their current hardships in work and view labour as a means of self-investment. The employees think they are working for both their employer and for their own better self. The capitalist has aligned its goal of commodity production with the employees' goal of self-improvement. Thus, the workers are bound tightly to the capitalist production and the neoliberal social relationship.

By combining Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks, I demonstrate how the neoliberal concept of human capital veils the unequal labour relationship in capitalist production. Workers still own no substantial property other than their labour power to earn a living. But a certain neoliberal interpretation of labour makes employees believe that the harder they work, the more their human capital will grow, and the more rewards will come in the future. Consequently, the workers spontaneously motivate themselves to work hard and serve capitalist production. By combining Marxist and Foucauldian theories, I characterise alienated labour in current digital work and unveil how neoliberalism consolidates the unequal relationship of digital labour in capitalist production.

7.3 Limitations and future research

The users' voice, their responses to the digital fitness products, are not included in this research because the main subject of this study are employees. Admittedly, the users' responses would add to understanding the outcome of the workers' labour. And users' feedback influences the workers' feelings and interpretation of the meaning of their labour. This absence is compensated slightly thanks to some of my participants' hybrid identity of produser. They have been users themselves, and their consumption experience provides a user's perspective for my research. These produsers, who were selected as waged workers, are the most competent consumers. But users are more diverse, heterogenous and complicated. So, it would be worth talking to different consumers in future studies. In particular, it would be fruitful to compare the users' response with the employees' understanding of the users. The comparison would help understand not only this industry but also the implication of human communication mediated on social media platforms.

In this project, I did not study the most famous giant digital fitness companies, which are successful businesses. This may raise questions about the representativeness of the companies in my study. I have seen most social researchers select the most influential companies to represent an industry, as many current studies about the Chinese digital fitness industry do. They presume that the giants matter more than the small companies because the former's dominant position may have more influence on the market. I believe that investigating the most influential or biggest companies only provides a partial understanding of an industry. There is another part of the industry, consisting of small-scaled entrepreneurial companies. Studying those small entrepreneurial companies could supplement gaps left by existing studies of dominant companies and could help map a more complete picture of the digital fitness industry as well as the Chinese digital economy. During my research, I found that giant companies have influence on small companies. It will be fruitful to study the relationship between the small digital fitness companies and big companies in the future to enrich the description of the ecosystem of this area. As a composite industry with digital technologies, bodywork and creative jobs, the digital fitness industry can be conceptualised in a wider social context and through interdisciplinary perspectives, including sociology, media and culture, and social policy.

I have explored the possibility of studying the property relationship between capital and labour in a company-based research project. According to Xia (2014) who investigates labour in Chinese internet companies, the gatekeepers always prioritise the companies' business interests when deciding whether to grant access to the researchers or not. It is common that companies will reject access if a researcher cannot provide a direct business interest or if the gatekeepers think the research topic may harm their income or reputation (ibid). It is fortunate that I was able to obtain full access to FitGo's office to conduct participant observation and interviews, and I had some access to StartFit, interviewing some designated employees, because the gatekeepers were kind and helpful. However, getting access is an ongoing process rather than a one-off negotiation (Bryman, 2012). I found that I encountered new gates that needed to request access during my research, such as the company's WeChat working group and training groups. I had to build trust and talked to specific employees who managed the groups to gain access. Despite my full access to FitGo's office, not all my requests for access were granted.

For example, I did not access financial reports and specific details about employees' wages from the finance staff. That information was confidential to the company and the employees are required by the CEOs to keep their income confidential from each other. I talked to different gatekeepers and carefully obtained different levels of access to collect data as much as possible with the access that I had. Since I needed to understand property relationship to explore whether alienated labour was taking place – which had the potential to be sensitive for the companies' business interests – I adjusted my research aim slightly when requesting access from gatekeepers. I replaced 'alienated labour' with 'the employees' relationship with their labour' to avoid offending my participants or having them reject my request. This process of studying companies with an overt role, of building trust and encountering obstacles, is meaningful for enriching social science methodology. I suggest that informing my participants of my identity as a researcher – taking an overt role – required me to put in more effort to build trust. Although taking an overt role is ethical, this choice also made the participants treat me as an outsider and exclude me from joining their daily labour. I needed to familiarise myself with their daily labour as quickly as possible and proactively did some work when they needed help. I also built trust by joining their fitness training and afternoon tea and made them feel I was part of them. I also found that taking an overt role in companies requires striking a balance between ethical and pragmatic consideration. It was necessary to make nuanced differences to my description of the research aims or sometimes take an covert role to customers so that I would not offend my participants and could continue my research.

In this research, I have completed basic descriptions and interpretations of non-textual data, such as images, audios and videos, which are collected from the two companies' social media platforms. Scholars have worked diligently on digital methods to analyse on-textual data (Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2008; Quan-Haase and Sloan, 2017; Rasmussen Pennington, 2017). It is demanding to fully understand non-textual data since the researchers need to equip themselves some technological skills to code and do analysis. I am fully aware that it is important to study non-textual data. My thesis does not contribute to this area because in my research the non-textual data have not been that central to the discussion about employees' working conditions. They are more relevant to how the concept of fitness is conveyed to users and influence the customers' understanding of this lifestyle, rather than how fitness influences

waged employees' daily work. Considering the limited space and time for my research, I did not explore innovative digital methods to study non-textual data. Neither do I quote this part of data much when I answer my research questions in Chapter Five and Six. Future research in the area explored here, however, will need to engage with non-textual data to enrich understanding of Chinese digital fitness industry.

In terms of my contribution to combining Marxist and Foucauldian scholarships, I acknowledge that the uniqueness of my case helps address the two scholarships' contradictory ways of conceptualising power relations and makes them fit together well. The working conditions in two digital fitness companies involved private property, commodification of labour power, accessible means of production, disciplined and fit bodies, passion-motivated labour and state-led neoliberalism. This case cannot be fully elucidated without either Marxist or Foucauldian theories. The specificity of my research had a limitation in that how I combined the two scholarships may not work as well in another research context. Despite this limitation, my research still contributes to showing the possibility of making the two frameworks fit better by introducing a special case and finding new connecting points. Those points include fitness, means of production and the affective aspects of labour. I specifically enriched discussion about the property relationship of means of production, which were a key element to understand both alienation and neoliberalism. But this key element has not been discussed in detail in existing debates about digital labour due to its diversity and complication.

Today, the advancement of digital technologies, which is led by some capital owners, enables similar groups of capitalists to determine how digital labour is conducted to benefit their business interests. That is far from the initial expectation that the participatory mechanism of Platforms could challenge the unequal relationship between capitalism and labour. The power that influences our digital labour becomes more centrally controlled by the minority and more pervasive in almost every aspect of individual's life in a subtle way. Consequently, it will be more and more difficult to recognise or resist the power when it is exercised to providing us with an easier, more convenient life. I believe it is of great significance to continue reflecting on combining Marxist and Foucauldian frameworks to understand and criticise such power and stop us being distracted by the sweet conveniences of modern life.

Reference

Adorno, T. (2005) *The culture industry: Selected essays on mass culture*. Routledge.

Ahmad, P.M. *et al.* (2021) 'Digital Labour: Digital Capitalism and the Alienation of YouTube Content Creators', *Journal of Asian Social Science Research*, 3(2), pp. 167–184.

An, J. (2015) *Monetization in Weibo and WeChat*. Democracy and Construction Press.

Andrejevic, M. (2009) 'Exploiting YouTube: Contradictions of user-generated labor', *The youtube reader*, 413(36), pp. 406–423.

Andrejevic, M. *et al.* (2014) 'Participations: Dialogues on the participatory promise of contemporary culture and politics', 8.

Andrejevic, M.B. (2011) 'Surveillance and alienation in the online economy', *Surveillance & Society*, 8(3), pp. 278–287.

Andrew, K. (2007) 'Neoliberalism reified: suzhi discourse and tropes of neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China', 13(2), pp. 383–400.

Antcliff, V., Saundry, R. and Stuart, M. (2007) 'Networks and social capital in the UK television industry: The weakness of weak ties', *Human Relations*, 60(2), pp. 371–393.

Atherton, A. and Newman, A. (2017) *Entrepreneurship in China: The emergence of the private sector*. Routledge.

Atkinson, P. (1981) *The Clinical Experience: the construction and reconstruction of medical reality (Farnborough, Gower)*. Cardiff, articles in Qualitative Research Ashgate.

Au-Yeung, T.C. and Qiu, J. (2022) 'Institutions, Occupations and Connectivity: The Embeddedness of Gig Work and Platform-Mediated Labour Market in Hong Kong', *Critical Sociology*, 48(7–8), pp. 1169–1187.

Ball, K. (2010) 'Workplace surveillance: An overview', *Labor History*, 51(1), pp. 87–106.

Banks, M. (2007) *The politics of cultural work*. Springer.

Banks, M. (2017) *Creative justice: Cultural industries, work and inequality*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Bauman, Z. (2000) 'Work', in *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.

Bauman, Z. (2005) *Work, consumerism and the new poor*. Second. Open University Press.

Beck, U. (1992) *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. Sage.

Benkler, Y. (2006) *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. Yale University Press.

Benney, M. and Hughes, E.C. (1956) 'Of sociology and the interview: Editorial preface', *American journal of sociology*, 62(2), pp. 137–142.

Berardi, F. (2009) *The soul at work: From alienation to autonomy*.

Berners-Lee, T. (2003) *Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) website*.

Bettig, R.V. (1996) *Copyrighting culture: The political economy of intellectual property*. Oxford: Westview.

Blair, H. (2003) 'Winning and losing in flexible labour markets: The formation and operation of networks of interdependence in the UK film industry', *Sociology*, 37(4), pp. 677–694.

Blair, H., Culkin, N. and Randle, K. (2003) 'From London to Los Angeles: a comparison of local labour market processes in the US and UK film industries', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 14(4), pp. 619–633.

Blauner, R. (1964) 'Alienation and freedom: The factory worker and his industry.'

Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. (2007) *The new spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso.

Brake, D.R. (2014) 'Are We All Online Content Creators Now? Web 2.0 and Digital Divides', 19, pp. 591–609.

Brannan, M.J. and Oultram, T. (2012) 'Participant observation', *Qualitative organizational research: Core methods and current challenges* [Preprint].

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Encyclopaedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research.*, 3(2), pp. 77–101.

Brown, B. and Quan-Haase, A. (2012a) '"A workers" inquiry 2.0': An ethnographic method for the study of produsage in social media contexts', *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 10(2), pp. 488–508.

Brown, B. and Quan-Haase, A. (2012b) '"A workers" inquiry 2.0': An ethnographic method for the study of produsage in social media contexts', *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 10(2), pp. 488–508.

Bruns, A. (2008) 'Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: From production to produsage', *Peter Lang* [Preprint].

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research methods*. 4th edn. Oxford University Press.

Buchanan, E. (2012) 'Ethical decision-making and internet research', *Association of Internet Researchers* [Preprint].

Bulut, E. (2014) *Creativity and its discontents: a case study of precarious playbour in the video game industry*. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Butler, N. *et al.* (2011) 'Work, play and boredom', 11(4), pp. 329–335.

Cai, W. (2016) 'Research on the impact of sports APP on national fitness activities', (4).

Carrasco San Martin, D. (2016) *Body Training Practices: A Reading from a Maussian, Foucauldian and Marxist Perspective*. The University of Sheffield.

Castell, M. (1996) 'The information age'.

Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (2016) *National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China Outline of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan*. Beijing: Xinhua News Agency. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/17/content_5054992.htm.

Chen, A. (2009) 'Thirty Years of Chinese Reform --- Transition from Planned Economy to Market Economy', *Asian Social Science*, 5(3), p. p52. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v5n3p52.

Chen, B. (2020) 'What Changes and Does Not Change in Chinese Fitness Industry within Five Years'. Available at: https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/100844919?utm_source=wechat_session&utm_medium=social&utm_oi=836659560608567296&utm_campaign=shareopn.

Chen, J. (2016) 'An Analysis of the Status quo，Problems and Prospects of"Internet plus Fitnes" from the Fitnes Applications', 36(9), pp. 20–27.

Chen, J.Y. (2018) 'Thrown under the bus and outrunning it! The logic of Didi and taxi drivers' labour and activism in the on-demand economy', *New media & society*, 20(8), pp. 2691–2711.

Chen, J.Y. (2020) 'The mirage and politics of participation in China's platform economy', *Javnost-The Public*, 27(2), pp. 154–170.

Chen, J.Y. and Qiu, J.L. (2019) 'Digital utility: Datafication, regulation, labor, and DiDi's platformization of urban transport in China', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(3), pp. 274–289.

Chen, J.Y. and Sun, P. (2020) 'Temporal arbitrage, fragmented rush, and opportunistic behaviors: The labor politics of time in the platform economy', *New Media & Society*, 22(9), pp. 1561–1579.

Chen, J.Y., Sun, S.P. and Qiu, J.L. (2020) *Deliver on the promise of the platform economy*. Canada: IT for Change.

Chen, K. and Chen, G. (2015) 'The rise of international financial centers in mainland China', *Cities*, 47, pp. 10–22.

Chen, Y. (2019) 'The sucessful exploration of Chinese Marxism since Reform and Openning up--Taking Guangdong as an example'.

China Internet Network Information Center (2010) *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*. China Internet Network Information Center.

China State Council (2021a) *National Fitness Plan 【2021-2025】*, *PRC Government*. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-08/03/content_5629234.htm.

China State Council (2021b) *Outline of the 'Healthy China since 2030' Plan*, *PRC Government*. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-10/26/content_5124501.htm.

China State Council (2015a) *Instructions on constructing platforms to promote mass entrepreneurship*. Available at: http:// www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-09/26/content_10183.htm.

China State Council (2015b) *Instructions on promoting "Internet+"*. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-07/04/content _10002.htm.

Christopherson, S. (2002) 'Project work in context: regulatory change and the new geography of media', *Environment and Planning A*, 34(11), pp. 2003–2015.

Christopherson, S. (2008) 'Beyond the self-expressive creative worker: An industry perspective on entertainment media', *Theory, culture & society*, 25(7–8), pp. 73–95.

Christopherson, S. and Clark, J. (2007) 'Power in firm networks: What it means for regional innovation systems', *Regional Studies*, 41(9), pp. 1223–1236.

Cohen, J.E. (2016) 'Between truth and power', in *Information, Freedom and Property*. Routledge, pp. 57–80.

Communist Party of China (2017) *Constitution of the Communist Party of China*. The People's Press.

Comor, E. (2010) 'Digital prosumption and alienation', *ephemera*, 10(3), p. 439.

Dahlberg, L. (2015) 'Expanding Digital Divides Research: A Critical Political Economy of Social Media', 18, pp. 271–293. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2015.1085777.

Dai, X. (2000) 'Chinese politics of the internet: Control and anti-control', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 13(2), pp. 181–194.

Davies, W. (2016) *The limits of neoliberalism: Authority, sovereignty and the logic of competition*. Sage.

De Kloet, J. *et al.* (2019) *The platformization of Chinese society: Infrastructure, governance, and practice*, *Chinese Journal of Communication*. Taylor & Francis, pp. 249–256.

Deal, T.E. and Key, M.K. (1998) *Corporate celebration: Play, purpose, and profit at work*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Deuze, M. (2007) *Media Work*. England: Cambridge.

van Dijck, J., Poell, T. and de Waal, M. (2018) *The Platform Society : Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford University Press.

Doğan, C. (2015) 'Training at the gym, training for life: Creating better versions of the self through exercise', 11(3), p. 442.

Dong, Z. (2016) 'Shameless "996"——taking "overwork culture" as a perspective to analyse the managment dilemma of internet company'.

van Doorn, N. (2017) 'Platform labor: on the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the 'on-demand'economy', *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(6), pp. 898–914.

Dorschel, R. (2022) 'Reconsidering digital labour: Bringing tech workers into the debate', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, p. ntwe.12225. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12225.

Drahokoupil, J. and Jepsen, M. (2017) 'The digital economy and its implications for labour 1. The platform economy', 23(2). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258917701380.

Duffy, B.E. (2017) *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.

Dyer-Witheford, N. and De Peuter, G. (2009) *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. U of Minnesota Press.

Elster, J. (1985) *Making Sense of Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Editions de la Maison des Science de I' Homme.

Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I. and Shaw, L.L. (2011) *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. University of Chicago press.

Fan, B. (2020) 'Study on the relationship between short video traffic and sales conversion - the example of Douyin', *Marketing* [Preprint].

Feng, Y., Sun, C. and Li, F. (2017) 'Historical Development and Developing Trend of Chinese Commercial Health-keping Clubs', 33(1).

Fielding, N. (1993) 'Interviewing', *Researching social life*, pp. 245–265.

Fielding, N., Lee, R.M. and Blank, G. (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods-Online Research Methods and Social Theory*.

Fine, B. and Saad-Filho, A. (2004) *Marx's Capital*. 5th edn. International Higher Education.

Fisher, E. (2015) 'How Less Alienation Creates More Exploitation? Audience Labour on Social Network Sites', in C. Fuchs and V. Mosco (eds) *Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism*. BRILL, pp. 180–203.

Florida, R. (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class*. New York: Basic Books.

Foucault, M. (1979) *Discipline and Punish, trans. Alan Sheridan*. New York: Vintage.

Foucault, M. (1988) *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*. Univ of Massachusetts Press.

Foucault, M. (2003) *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*. Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2008) *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979.* Springer.

Foucault, M. (2016) 'The meshes of power', in G. Moore (tran.) *Space, knowledge and power*. Routledge, pp. 165–174.

Fraser, N. (2022) *Cannibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planetand What We Can Do About It*. Verso Books.

Fuchs, C. (2014a) *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. Routledge.

Fuchs, C. (2014b) 'Theorising and analysing digital labour: From global value chains to modes of production.', 1(2).

Fuchs, C. (2018) 'Universal Alienation, Formal and Real Subsumption of Soci- ety under Capital, Ongoing Primitive Accumulation by Dis- possession: Reflections on the Marx@200-Contributions by David Harvey and Michael Hardt/Toni Negri', p. 14.

Fuchs, C. and Sandoval, M. (2014) 'Digital workers of the world unite! A framework for critically theorising and analysing digital labour', *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 12(2), pp. 486-563-486–563.

Fumagalli, A. *et al.* (2018) 'Digital Labour in the Platform Economy: The Case of Facebook', *sustainabiltiy*, 10(6).

du Gay, P. (1996) 'Organizing identity: Entrepreneurial governance and public management', in *Questions of cultural identity*, pp. 151–169.

Ghazi, D. (2019) 'Emerging Configurations of Time in Facebook Prod-User Culture', *Cairo Studies in English*, 2019(1), pp. 45–64.

Gidaris, C. (2019) 'Surveillance capitalism, datafication, and unwaged labour: the rise of wearable fitness devices and interactive life insurance', *Surveillance & Society*, 17(1/2), pp. 132–138.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford university press.

Gill, R. and Pratt, A. (2008) 'Precarity and Cultural work. In the Social Facotry? Immaterial labour, Precaitousness and Cultural Work', *SAGE*, 25(7–8), pp. 1–30.

Gillespie, T. (2014) 'The relevance of algorithms', *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society*, 167(2014), p. 167.

Goggin, J. (2011) 'Playbour, Farming and Leisure.', 11(4), pp. 357–368.

Grabher, G. (2004) 'Learning in projects, remembering in networks? Communality, sociality, and connectivity in project ecologies', *European urban and regional studies*, 11(2), pp. 103–123.

Grabher, G. and Ibert, O. (2006) 'Bad company? The ambiguity of personal knowledge networks', *Journal of economic geography*, 6(3), pp. 251–271.

Gregg, M. (2013) *Work's intimacy*. John Wiley & Sons.

Gregory, K. and Sadowski, J. (2021) 'Biopolitical platforms: the perverse virtues of digital labour', 14(6), pp. 662–674.

Grinnell, C.K. (2009) 'From Consumer to Prosumer to Produser: Who Keeps Shifting My Paradigm? (We Do!)', *Duke University Press*, 21(3), pp. 577–598.

Guarriello, N.-B. (2019) 'Never give up, never surrender: Game live streaming, neoliberal work, and personalized media economies', 21(8), pp. 1750–1769. Available at: https://doi.org/o0r.g1/107.171/1774/61146414448418919883311653.

Hartmann, E. and Kjaer, P.F. (2015) 'INTRODUCTION', *Routledge*, 16(2), pp. 141–145.

Harvey, D. (2005a) *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Harvey, D. (2005b) 'Neoliberalism "with Chinese characteristics"', in *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.

Harvey, D. (2018) 'Universal alienation', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 22(2), pp. 137–150.

Hearn, A. and Banet-Weiser, S. (2020) 'The Beguiling: Glamour in/as Platformed Cultural Production', *SAGE*, 1(11).

Henderson, C. *et al.* (2012) 'Responses to mental health stigma questions: the importance of social desirability and data collection method', *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 57(3), pp. 152–160.

Hesmondhalgh, D. (2010) 'User-generated content, free labour and the cultural industries', 10(3–4), pp. 267–284.

Hesmondhalgh, D. and Baker, S. (2008) 'Creative Work and Emotional Labour in the Television Industry', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(7–8), pp. 97–118. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408097798.

Hesmondhalgh, D. and Baker, S. (2013) *Creative labour: Media work in three cultural industries*. Routledge.

Hochschild, A.R. (1983) *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.

Hong, Y. (2017) 'Pivot to internet plus: molding China's digital economy for economic restructuring?', *Hong, Yu. Pivot to Internet Plus: Molding China's Digital Economy for Economic Restructuring*, p. 21.

Hu, A. (2013) 'China's unique five-year plan transformation', *The Age of Openness*, 6, pp. 32–37.

Huws, U. (2014) *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*. NYU Press.

Internet Society of China (2014) *A Letter to China's 600 Million Internet Users*, *Internet Society of China*. Available at: https://www.isc.org.cn/article/30365.html.

Jaakkola, M. (2018) 'Vernacular reviews as a form of co-consumption: The user-generated review videos on YouTube', *SMID*, 65, pp. 10–30.

Ji, M. (2006) *Neoliberal developmentalism: State-led economic liberalization in China*. Cornell University.

Jia, L. (2018) 'Going public and going global: Chinese Internet companies and global finance networks', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 13(1).

Jia, L. and Winseck, D. (2018) 'The political economy of Chinese internet companies: Financialization, concentration, and capitalization', *International Communication Gazette*, 80(1), pp. 30–59.

Jiang, M. (2012) 'Internet companies in China: Dancing between the party line and the bottom line', *Jiang, M.(2012). Internet companies in China: Dancing between the Party line and the bottom line. Asie Visions*, 47.

Johnson, M. and Woodcock, J. (2018) 'Conversation, Discourse and Play: Interaction and Moderation in Twitch.tv Live Streaming', *Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA* [Preprint].

Keane, M. (2016) 'Internet+ China: Unleashing the innovative nation strategy', *International journal of cultural and creative industries*, 3(2), pp. 68–74.

Keane, M. and Chen, Y. (2019) 'Entrepreneurial solutionism, characteristic cultural industries and the Chinese dream', *International journal of cultural policy*, 25(6), pp. 743–755.

Keane, M. and Yu, H. (2019) 'A digital empire in the making: China's outbound digital platforms', *International Journal of Communication*, 13, pp. 4624–4641.

Kennedy, H. (2011) *Net work: Ethics and values in web design*. Springer.

Kim, C. and Lee, S. (2020) 'Fragmented industrial structure and fragmented resistance in Korea's digital game industry', *SAGE*, 5(4), pp. 354–371. Available at: https://doi.org/o0r.g1/107.171/2770/52905493463462402099332518.

Krüger, S. and Johanssen, J. (2014) 'Alienation and Digital Labour—A Depth-Hermeneutic Inquiry into Online Commodification and the Unconscious', *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 12(2), pp. 632-647-632–647.

Kücklich, J. (2005) 'Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry', 5(1), pp. 1–5.

Kuehn, K. and Corrigan, T.F. (2013) 'Hope labor: The role of employment prospects in online social production', *The Political Economy of Communication*, 1(1).

Kvale, S. (1994) *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing.* Sage Publications, Inc.

Lardy, N.R. (2016) 'China: Toward a consumption-driven growth path', in *Seeking changes: The economic development in contemporary China*. World Scientific, pp. 85–111.

Lazzarato, M. (1996) 'Immaterial labour', p. 77.

Li, C. (2020) 'Children of the reform and opening-up: China's new generation and new era of development', *The Journal of Chinese Sociology*, 7(1), p. 18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-020-00130-x.

Li, Y. *et al.* (2018) '2018 China Fitness Trends—An Online Survey for Fitness Professionals in China', 42(1).

Lin, J.Y., Cai, F. and Li, Z. (1997) 'The China miracle: Development strategy and economic reform', *Asia Pacific Development Journal*, 4(1), pp. 165–169.

Lin, Z. (2021) 'Commercialization of Creative Videos in China in the Digital Platform Age', 22(8), pp. 878–895. Available at: https://doi.org/o0r.g1/107.171/1775/2175247467462402099553383.

Lindtner, S. (2014) 'Hackerspaces and the Internet of Things in China: How makers are reinventing industrial production, innovation, and the self', *China Information*, 28(2), pp. 145–167.

Liu, F. (2018) 'How to manage the brand of the company in the age of "Internet+" taking LeKe as a case'.

Liu, F. (2019) 'Theoretical origins 情感劳动(Affective labor)的理论来源及国外研究进展', (12). Available at: https://doi.org/10.15897/j.cnki.cn51-1046/g2.20191216.001.

Liu, J. (2019) *The Research of the Innovation Mechanism of Internet Companies in China*. The People's Press.

Liu, Z. (2009) 'The impact of the Beijing Olympics on the national fitness movement', 1, pp. 84–85.

Livingstone, S. (2018) 'Audiences in an age of datafication: critical questions for media research'. Available at: http://eprintss.lse.ac.uk/90467/.

Lou, Y. and Li, S. (2018) 'Research on O2O Smart Body-building Service Model'.

Lu, C. *et al.* (2008) 'East meets west: Chinese-Canadians' perspectives on health and fitness', 99(1), pp. 22–25.

Lu, X. and Wu, J. (2015) *From 'Outline' to 'National Strategy', 'National Execise' has gone through two decades*. News. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. Available at:

http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/xwbfbh/wqfbh/2015/33922/xgbd33929/Document/1459716/1459716.htm.

Luo, Y. (2012) 'A Research on the neoliberalism in contemporary China', (No. 5/ General No. 124).

Mansfield, L. (2005) *Gender, power and identities in the fitness gym: towards a sociology of the `exercise body-beautiful complex'*. Loughborough University.

Markula, P. and Pringle, R. (2006) *Foucault, Sport and Exercise--Power, Knowledge and Transforming The Self*. Routledge.

Marx, K. (1844) 'Estranged labor', in M. Mulligan (tran.) *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Marxists Internet Archive (www.marxists.org).

Marx, K. (1990) *Capital, Volume I: A critique of political economy*. Penguin Classics.

Mason, J. (2018) *Qualitative researching*. Third. Sage.

McRobbie, A. (2000) 'The return to cultural production'.

McRobbie, A. (2002a) 'Clubs to companies: Notes on the decline of political culture in speeded up creative worlds', *Routledge*, 16(4), pp. 516–531.

McRobbie, A. (2002b) 'From Halloway to Hollywood: Happiness at work in the new cultural economy', in P. du Gay and M. Pryke (eds) *Cultural Economy*, pp. 87–114.

Miao, W., Jiang, M. and Pang, Y. (2021) 'Historicizing internet regulation in China: A meta-analysis of Chinese internet policies (1994–2017)', *International Journal of Communication*, 15, p. 24.

Miao, Z., Li, X. and Yue, C. (2017) 'Network Support and Application of National Fitness in China', 36(5).

Ministry of Industry and Information Technology Joint Enterprise (2011) *the Standard Provisions for the Classification of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises*, *The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China*.

Moore, M. and Tambini, D. (2018) *Digital dominance: the power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple*. Oxford University Press.

Negri, A. (1989) *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Negri, A. and Hardt, M. (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nonini, D.M. (2008) 'Is China Becoming Neoliberal?', *Critique of Anthropology*, 28(2), pp. 145–176. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X08091364.

O'Malley, P. (2000) 'Uncertain subjects: risks, liberalism and contract', 29(4), pp. 460–484.

Oprescu, F., Jones, C. and Katsikitis, M. (2014) 'PLAY AT WORK—ten principles for transforming work processes through gamification', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5. Available at: https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00014.

O'Reilly, T. (2007) 'What is Web 2.0: Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software', (1), p. 17.

Osborne, D. and Gaebler, T. (1993) *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*. New York: Plume Books. Available at: https://www.proquest.com/openview/02a084c49657598c3d36bdef1991cfae/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1816610&casa_token=ChWYi9P9SxoAAAAA:x8QYuPE-cFsV0-f2GeDlHZMR1TMw-isMaT_YFKfYbUAgZii0lP2fsMagkB0vA1En7bsAaFCd (Accessed: 1 July 2022).

Palmer, D.A. (2007) *Qigong fever: Body, science, and utopia in China*. Columbia University Press.

Pan, X. (2020) 'A New Competitive Situation in the Digital Economy and China's Actions', *China Int'l Stud.*, 82, p. 123.

Parker, S. (1976) *The sociology of leisure*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Patton, M.Q. (1990) *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. SAGE Publications, inc.

Peng, J. and Tang, S. (2007) 'The first generation of the CPC's leadership on the value of development', (006), pp. 80–82.

Peng, Y., Zhong, L. and Li, X. (2016) 'Thinking about the fitness service industry from an internet perspective', (3).

Poell, T., Nieborg, D. and Van Dijck, J. (2019) 'Platformisation', *Internet Policy Review*, 8(4), pp. 1–13.

Qaddo, M. (2019) 'Participant observation as research methodology: Assessing the validity of qualitative observational data as research tools. project', *Dubai International Academic City, Dubai, United Arab Emirates* [Preprint].

Qiu, J.L. (2009) *Working-class network society: Communication technology and the information have-less in urban China*. MIT Press.

Qiu, J.L. (2022) 'Humanizing the posthuman: Digital labour, food delivery, and openings for the new human during the pandemic', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(3–4), pp. 445–461.

Qiu, J.L., Sun, P. and Chen, J. (2021) 'Labour management and resistance among platform-based food delivery couriers in Beijing', in *A Modern Guide To Labour and the Platform Economy*. Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 290–307.

Quan-Haase, A. and Sloan, L. (2017) 'Introduction to the Handbook of Social Media Research Methods: Goals, Challenges and Innovations', in *The SAGE Handbok of Social Media Research Methods*. SAGE.

Rasmussen Pennington, D. (2017) 'Coding of Non-text Data', in A. Quan-Haase and L. Sloan (eds) *The SAGE Handbok of Social Media Research Methods*. SAGE, pp. 177–195.

Riessman, C.K. (2003) 'Narrative Interviewing', in M. Lewis-Beck, A.E. Bryman, and T.F. Liao (eds) *The Sage encyclopedia of social science research methods*. Sage Publications.

Ritzer, G. and Jurgenson, N. (2010) 'Production, consumption, prosumption: The nature of capitalism in the age of the digital "prosumer"', 10(1), pp. 13–36.

Rose, N. (1999) 'Inventiveness in politics', 28(3), pp. 467–493.

Rosenblat, A., Kneese, T. and Boyd, D. (2014) 'Workplace surveillance', *Open Society Foundations' Future of Work Commissioned Research Papers* [Preprint].

Ross, A. (2004) *No-collar: The humane workplace and its hidden costs*. Temple University Press.

Ross, A. (2007) *Fast boat to China: high-tech outsourcing and the consequences of free trade: lessons from Shanghai*. Vintage.

Sandoval, M. (2013) 'Foxconned Labour as the Dark Side of the Information Age: Working Conditions at Apple's Contract Manufacturers in China', 11(2), pp. 318–347.

Sassatelli, R. (1999) 'Interaction Order and Beyond: A Field Analysis of Body Culture Within Fitness Gyms', *Body & Society*, 5(2–3), pp. 227–248. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X99005002013.

Sassatelli, R. (2010) *Fitness Culture: Gyms and the Commercialisation of Discipline and Fun*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Scholz, T. (2008) 'Market ideology and the myths of Web 2.0', 13(3).

Scholz, T. (2017) *Uberworked and underpaid: How workers are disrupting the digital economy*. John Wiley & Sons.

Schor, J.B. (2017) 'Does the sharing economy increase inequality within the eighty percent?: findings from a qualitative study of platform providers', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 10(2), pp. 263–279.

Scobell, A. *et al.* (2020) *China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition*. Rand Corporation.

Seale, C. (2004) *Researching society and culture*. Sage.

Sennett, R. (1998) *The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*. WW norton & company.

Shang, L. (2017) 'Analysis of the promotion of fitness apps in the context of "Internet + Sports"', (12 (55 in total)).

Sheridan, A. (2003) *Michel Foucault: The will to truth*. Routledge.

Simmel, G. (1950) *The sociology of Georg Simmel*. Translated by K.H. Wolff. London: The Free Press.

Smith Maguire, J. (2008) *Fit for consumption: sociology and the business of fitness*. Routledge.

Sosteric, M. (1996) 'Subjectivity and the labour process: A case study in the restaurant industry', *Work, Employment and Society*, 10(2), pp. 297–318.

Srnicek, P. (2017) *Platform Capitalism*.

Stahl, M.W. (2006) *Reinventing certainties: American popular music and social reproduction*. University of California, San Diego.

Stebbins, R.A. (1982) 'Serious Leisure: A Conceptual Statement', *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 25(2), pp. 251–272. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/1388726.

Sun, P. (2019) 'Your order, their labor: An exploration of algorithms and laboring on food delivery platforms in China', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(3), pp. 308–323.

Sun, P. and Chen, J.Y. (2021) 'Platform labour and contingent agency in China', *China Perspectives*, 2021(2021/1), pp. 19–27.

Tang, M. (2020) 'From "bringing-in" to "going-out": transnationalizing China's Internet capital through state policies', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 13(1), pp. 27–46.

Taylor, Ni. *et al.* (2015) 'Alienated Playbour: Relations of Production in EVE Online', *SAGE*, 10(4), pp. 365–388. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014565507.

Terranova, Tizana (2000) 'Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy', 18(2), pp. 33–58.

Terranova, Tiziana (2000) 'Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy', 18(2), pp. 33–58.

Terranova, T. (2012) 'Attention, economy and the brain', 13.

The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (2021) *China has initially built the world's largest 5G mobile network*, *The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China*.

The State Council Information Office (2010) *China invests heavily in infrastructure to promote widespread internet adoption*. Available at: http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/28/12/Document/661342/661342.htm.

Thorsen, D.E. and Lie, A. (2006) 'What is Neoliberalism?', p. 22.

Till, C. (2014) 'Exercise as Labour: Quantified Self and the Transformation of Exercise into Labour', 4, pp. 446–462. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/soc4030446.

Törhönen, M. *et al.* (2020) 'Fame and fortune, or just fun? A study on why people create content on video platforms', 30(1), pp. 165–190.

Törhönen, M., Sjöblom, M. and Hamari, J. (2018) 'Likes and views: Investigating internet video content creators perceptions of popularity', in. (GamiFIN Conference 2018, Pori, Finland), pp. 108-114.

Tronti, M. (1966) *Operai e capitale (Workers and capital)*. Turin: Einaudi.

Turner, B.S. (1982) 'The discourse of diet', 1(1), pp. 23–32.

Umarovna, T.M. (2021) 'A THREE-STEP STRATEGY TO DEVELOP THE INDUSTRIAL ECONOMY IN CHINA THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION.', *ResearchJet Journal of Analysis and Inventions*, 2(6), pp. 1–5.

Ursell, G. (2000) 'Television production: issues of exploitation, commodification and subjectivity in UK television labour markets', 22(6), pp. 805–825.

Van Doorn, N. and Badger, A. (2020) 'Platform capitalism's hidden abode: producing data assets in the gig economy', *Antipode*, 52(5), pp. 1475–1495.

Van Maanen, J. (2011) 'Ethnography as work: Some rules of engagement', *Journal of management studies*, 48(1), pp. 218–234.

Wajcman, J. (2019) 'The digital architecture of time management', *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 44(2), pp. 315–337.

Walsh, D. (1998) 'Doing ethnography', *Researching society and culture*, pp. 217–232.

Wang, H. (1997) 'The State of Thought in Contemporary China and the Question of Modernity.', 5, pp. 133–150.

Wang, H. (2003) *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press.

Wang, J. (2008) *Brand New China.* London: Harvard University Press.

Wang, X. (2019) 'The Great Firewall of China and Its Implications for Political Information Systems'.

Wang, X. and Chen, J. (2016) *Internet celebrity economy 3.0.* Song Bo Publishing Co.

Wang, X. and He, Z. (2018) 'Research on the mode of integration of "Internet+" fitness industry'.

Wang, Y. (2018) 'A critical research on the Neoliberalism in China', 1, p. Exploration.

Wark, M. (2009) 'Gamer theory', in *Gamer Theory*. Harvard University Press.

Weeks, K. (2011) *The problem with work*. Duke University Press.

Weibo user development report (2010) *Weibo user development report*. Sina.

Werron, T. (2015) 'Why do we believe in competition? A historical-sociological view of competition as an institutionalized modern imaginary', *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 16(2), pp. 186–210.

Wilkinson, D. and Thelwall, M. (2011) 'Researching personal information on the public web: Methods and ethics', *Social science computer review*, 29(4), pp. 387–401.

Wittel, A. (2001) 'Toward a Network Sociality', *SAGE*, 18(6), pp. 51–76.

Wittel, A. (2015) 'Digital Marx: Toward a Political Economy of Distributed Media', in C. Fuchs and V. Mosco (eds) *Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism*. LEIDEN/Bosten: BRILL (Studies in Critical Social Sciences).

Wójcik, D. and Camilleri, J. (2015) '"Capitalist tools in socialist hands"? China Mobile in global financial networks', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 40(4), pp. 464–478.

Wood, A. (2004) *Karl Marx*. Second edition. London: Routledge.

Woodcock, J. and Johnson, M.R. (2019) 'Live streamers on Twitch. tv as social media influencers: Chances and challenges for strategic communication', 13(4), pp. 321-335,.

Wreyford, N. (2015) 'Birds of a feather: Informal recruitment practices and gendered outcomes for screenwriting work in the UK film industry', *The Sociological Review*, 63, pp. 84–96.

Wu, R. and Wang, Q. (2015) 'Research on the development, problems and solution to problems of the fitness APPs', 31(4).

Wu, Z. (2018) 'The implication of fitness apps and analysis of their pros and cons', (196), pp. 137–138. Available at: https://doi.org/doi:10.3969/j.issn.1674-151x.2018.20.068.

Xia, B. (2014) *Labour in the Chinese internet industries*. The University of Leeds.

Xia, B. (2018) 'Capital accumulation and work in China's internet content industry: struggling in the bubble', *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 29(4), pp. 501–520.

Xia, B. (2021) 'Rethinking digital labour: A renewed critique moving beyond the exploitation paradigm', pp. 1–11.

Xie, Y. and Liu, N. (2018) 'Research on Fitness APPs under the Internet Thinking', (Total. 435).

Xing, Y. (2014) *Research on the model of 'Internet + fitness' in China*. Master's thesis. Chengdu Institute of Sports.

Xinhua News (2021) *China Focus: China spurs digital economy as new driver of growth*. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-08/04/c_1310107393.htm.

Yang, G. (2012) 'A Chinese Internet? History, practice, and globalization', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 5(1), pp. 49–54.

Ye, L. (2020) *The opreation of WeChat Subscription account*. Songhua Culture Press.

Yeh, A.G., Yang, F.F. and Wang, J. (2015) 'Economic transition and urban transformation of China: The interplay of the state and the market', 52(15), pp. 2822–2848.

Yu, H. (2011) 'Dwelling narrowness: Chinese media and their disingenuous neoliberal logic', 25(1), pp. 33–46.

Yu, H. (2017) 'Beyond E-Commerce: The Social Case of China's Digital Economy', (4), pp. 3–7.

Yu, H., Xu, J. and Sun, P. (2022) 'Introduction: Platformization of entrepreneurial labor via Chinese digital networks', *Global Media and China*, 7(3), pp. 253–262.

Yuan, L. (2018) *A generation grows up in China without Google, Facebook or Twitter*. News 6.

Zhai, D. and Liu, C. (2007) 'Web 2.0 applications in China', in *Integration and Innovation Orient to E-Society Volume 2*. Springer, pp. 26–33.

Zhang, H. (2018a) 'Functional Design and Promotion Strategy of Fitness APP - Take Keep as an example', 40(1).

Zhang, H. (2018b) 'Marketing strategy about Fitness app--taking KEEP as an example', 40(1).

Zhang, H. and Liu, X. (2017) 'A study of fitness app resources and usage behaviour', 51(10).

Zhang, L. and Fung, A.Y. (2014) 'Working as playing? Consumer labor, guild and the secondary industry of online gaming in China', 16(1), pp. 38–54.

Zhang, N. and Wu, Y. (2022) 'Platformed Playworkers: Game Video Creators' Affective Labour and Emotional Labour on Bilibili', *Global Media and China*, p. 20594364221096496.

Zhang, Y. (2014) *A research on the innovation of the system of Socialism with Chinese characteristics*. SHAANXI NORMAL UNIVERSITY.

Zhao, X. and Yu, F. (2017) 'Fitness APP SWOT Analysis——A Case Study of KEEP', 363(1).

Zheng, S. *et al.* (2020) 'A study on the revenue sharing model of live streaming platforms', *Systems Engineering Theory and Practice*, 40(5), pp. 1221–1228.

Zheng, Y. (2008) 'Transformed Neoliberalism in China and its influence', *Joint Daily Newspaper*.

Zheng, Y. (2018) *Internet+Sport: the future is limitless*. Zhejiang University Press.

Zuboff, S. (2015) 'Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization', 30, pp. 75–89.

Appendices

Appendix One: A list of questions for semi-structed interviews (standardised version for employees)

1. To better understand your work and life, I may need to know some of your background information. Could you please share with me: your age, hometown, previous education, previous employment experiences?

2. Could you please share with me how and why you choose the current jobs in this company?

3. Could you describe your duties in the company?

4. What teams of colleagues do you need to cooperate in daily work?

5. How do you communicate with the CEO and colleagues at and outside office?

6. What kinds of working tools do you need in your daily work?

7. What are the company's restrictions of using working tools?

8. What you could and could not do with your products?

9. In workdays, how is your working time?

10. Do you need to work overtime? If so, how often do you need to work overtime?

11. Do you need to work remotely? If so, how often do you need to work remotely?

12. How much off-work time would you have (including breaks in office time, weekends, holidays and annual leave)?

13. How do you spend your off-work time?

14. What is your working motivation?

15. When will you feel stressed in work?

16. When will you feel happy in work?

17. From your understandings, what is the meaning of your work (to yourself, to customers, to the company)?

18. According to your observations, could you describe the changes of the digital fitness industry?

19. Why it is hard for the small company, like your company, to survive?

20. Are you worried about the company's bankruptcy and job loss?

21. What is your future career plan? For instance, do you think about job-hopping?

22. Do you think about how to cope with job loss?

23. If you do not mind, could you tell me your monthly income and expense?

24. Do you think your income provide a desired living standard for you? Or do you think you need more wages?

25. Have you ever tried to do entrepreneurship?

26. Have you ever been influenced by the company's atmosphere of fitness to be fit?

27. How is your daily meals and physical activities?

28. If you do not keep fit, why not?

29. If you keep fit, how do you start training and become a fitness hobbyist?

30. If you keep fit, what is your motivation to train?

31. If you keep fit, does fitness training influence your work and life?

32. If you keep fit, when will you feel happy from fitness trainings?

Appendix Two: A checklist of what to observe in FitGo office

1. Work and off-work time, including officially stipulated office time, employees' real working time, overtime, break at office, weekends, holidays, annual leave.

2. Divisions of labour and labour processes of different teams

3. How employers and employees communicate with each other in and outside office

4. Means of production in the company

5. Employers' relationship with their products

6. Leisure activities at and outside office

7. Physical space of office

8. How some fit employees work out and keep a fit diet

Appendix Three: A checklist of what to observe in online training groups

1. Online staff's work and off-work time

2. Division of labour in online training groups

3. How employers train customers' bodies in chatgroups, including how to give guidance, how to correct unstandardized diet and training, how to respond to customers' questions, how to give comfort and encourage, and how to handle complaint

Appendix Four: Information sheet of participant observation

Researcher: Yunrui Wu
Email: wyr9423@163.com
Telephone: 00447801131019 (UK)/
008618936229629(China)

Department of Sociological Studies,
University of Sheffield
Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TU

Let me join you and work with digital fitness

I am Yunrui Wu, a Sociology PhD student from The University of Sheffield. I am planning to do my PhD project with your team. I have become interested in fitness and started following your digital fitness company in 2015. As a loyal customer of your fitness App, digital fitness has become part of my life and I have witnessed the development of your company in the past four years. It is your team that raised my academic interest in the operation of digital fitness markets, so it is the optimal option for my research. I really hope that I can participate in your company as an intern and get to know more about digital fitness.

• My PhD project

My research is about how fitness is digitalized and popularized via the development of Web 2.0 in China, and how digital fitness influences people's everyday work and life. I would like to undertake a three- to six-month full-time internship. During this process, I will engage in the daily work with other employees, observe and understand the operation of digital fitness markets from a producer's perception rather than a lay customer's. I will also invite some of you to be my interviewees and talk about more about your work. I will give you more details about my interviews and seek your further consent. I will collect information about the company's history, division of labour and work content. All the materials I collect will be anonymised. Therefore, both the company and individual employees will not be identified or identifiable to anyone else except me. Any identifiable information will be destroyed at the earliest possible opportunity when I finish my project. I will use those anonymised materials **ONLY** for my PhD research.

• What I can do for you

I have working experience in operating new media platforms (Weibo & Wechat) and I am also capable of shooting and editing films (seen in my CV). I can participate in the media team of your company. As a social researcher, I could also help analyse customers' behaviour via their feedback and responses, and thus improve service quality. At the end of my PhD, I will write a report and help your company in the future.

• What to do if you want to take part

If you are happy to help me with my project, I will ask you to sign a form to give me your consent to be researched. This is a form that makes my research practice ethical and helps protect your rights. It is entirely up to you whether you want to participate or withdraw. During the research, you can quit anytime without any reasons. I am always here for any further queries and my contact details are at the beginning of this sheet. If you prefer to contact with someone except me about this research, please contact my supervisor: Professor Helen Kennedy, h.kennedy@sheffield.ac.uk or 0044 114 222 6488

I appreciate your time for reading this information!

Appendix Five: Information sheet of interviews

Researcher: Yunrui Wu
Email: wyr9423@163.com
Telephone: 00447801131019 (UK)/
008618936229629(China)

Department of Sociological Studies,
University of Sheffield
Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TU

May I know more about your work…

I am Yunrui Wu, a Sociology PhD student from The University of Sheffield. I am doing my PhD project on digital fitness companies. I would like to collect people's points of view about their work. Interviews will help me to find out about your work. You are invited to participate in my interview. This will last for 30-40 mins.

- **What will happen during and after interview**

Topics we are going to discuss include your personal fitness experience, your previous career, current working patterns and your perception about your work. Please be aware that you can decline to answer any questions or quit the interviews without giving any reasons at any time if you want. Our conversation will be audio-recorded. This helps me collect for my research. Digital recording frees me from making notes so that I can focus on our conversation. What is recorded will not be disclosed to others or used for other purposes.

I will transcribe the recording. I may contact you to check the accuracy if there is any uncertainty. Then all identifiable information will be removed by assigning you a pseudonym and destroying the recording. You will not be identifiable. I will not pass your words on to other colleagues or the employers.

- **What to do if you want to take part**

If you are willing to participate, I will ask you to sign a form to give me your consent to be interviewed. This is a form that regulate my research practices and helps protect your right so do not feel scared. It is entirely up to you whether you want to participate. I am always here for any further queries and my contact details are at the beginning of this sheet. If you prefer to contact with someone except me about this research, please contact my supervisor: Professor Helen Kennedy, h.kennedy@sheffield.ac.uk or 0044 114 222 6488

I appreciate your time for reading this information!

Appendix Six: consent form for observation

Participant observation in daily work about digital fitness
Consent Form
Researcher: Yunrui Wu
Email: wyr9423@163.com
Telephone: 00447801131019 (UK)/
008618936229629(China)

Department of Sociological Studies,
University of Sheffield
Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TU

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated July 15th, 2019 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in the project by allowing the researcher to participate in the company as a full-time media intern worker, permitting her to observe my company's daily work and make notes.	☐	☐
I understand that I can withdraw my company from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want my company to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in this PhD research. When the research will get published in the future, the researcher will seek my further consent about the specific content. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Name of participant [printed]   Signature   Date

Name of Researcher [printed]   Signature   Date

If you prefer to contact with someone except me about this research, please contact my supervisor: Professor Helen Kennedy, h.kennedy@sheffield.ac.uk or 0044 114 222 6488

Appendix Seven: consent form for interviews

<div align="center">

Interviews about working on digital fitness
Consent Form
Researcher: Yunrui Wu
Email: wyr9423@163.com
Telephone: 00447801131019 (UK)/
008618936229629(China)

Department of Sociological Studies,
University of Sheffield
Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TU

</div>

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated July 15th, 2019 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being interviewed by the researcher and the interview will be audio-recorded	☐	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Name of participant [printed]   Signature   Date

Name of Researcher [printed]   Signature   Date

If you prefer to contact with someone except me about this research, please contact my supervisor: Professor Helen Kennedy, h.kennedy@sheffield.ac.uk or 0044 114 222 6488