









Digital Labor on TikTok and Douyin Platforms: A Scoping Review

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Citation: Kung, Y., Wang, Y., Li, X., Hatrick, J., Liu, W., Wang, Q., . . . Liu, Y. (2025). Digital labor on TikTok and Douyin platforms: A scoping review. *Review of Communication Research*, 13, 229-245. <https://doi.org/10.52152/RCR.V13.15>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 10 Feb 2025

Accepted: 05 Apr 2025

ABSTRACT

The rapid, geographically dispersed uptake of TikTok and Douyin in past years has been coupled with “platformization” where platforms rise with an infrastructural, economic, and cultural model that permeates various economic sectors and living spaces. App users, who not only consume but also produce content, constitute a new form of “digital labor”. This scoping review responds to the rising interest in theorizing short-form video digital labor by consolidating recent research. We constructed an original database of articles published from 2016 to 2022 about TikTok/Douyin across eight databases (SCOPUS, Web of Science, ACM Digital Library, PubMed, Medline, Google Scholar, EBSCO Communication Source, PsycINFO) with two gray literature platforms (ClinicalTrials.gov, WHO’s International Clinical Trials Registry Platform). After identifying “digital labor” related papers in this database, we added publications from 2023 to 2025 on this topic from Google Scholar; 16 papers were analyzed. This scoping review identified six categories of “digital labor” (i.e., creative, visibility, emotional, platform, relational, and promotional) on TikTok/Douyin for elucidation and comparison. Summarizing the papers, we found the goals and situations (precarity/exploitation) of these digital laborers, and their practice performed on TikTok/Douyin to be concurrently discussed. Digital laborers on short-form video apps gravitate to four forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) to achieve personal value. Nevertheless, the platforms’ labor practices employ strategies that subject users to precarity. As these two platforms continue to evolve (and other platforms integrate short-form videos in systems), this review provides a conceptual roadmap for future research about digital labor on networked mobile platforms.

Keywords: Digital Labor, Mobile Platform, TikTok, Douyin, Scoping Review.

INTRODUCTION

Emerging digital technologies have profoundly reshaped the global economic structure and the production mode of contemporary capitalism, giving rise to a new type of labor, “digital labor”. This term can be traced back to 1996 when the Political Economy of Communications school of thought first discussed “immaterial labor” while shedding light on the notion of “audience commodity theory” (Vesnić-Alujević & Murru, 2016, p. 426). Like non-digital labor, the “corporate Internet services’ exploitation of digital labor” involves “processes of coercion, alienation, and appropriation” (Fuchs, 2015, p. 708). Different from traditional labor, current communication research on “digital labor” suggests that the term involves a wide array of digital media technology and content production, where the platform activities of ordinary users are made into labor to participate in capital accumulation (Fuchs, 2015). Specifically, digital labor includes both physical and mental workers who use digital

information technologies as a means of production (Fuchs & Seignani, 2013), spawning new forms of labor such as “prosumer” and “playbor”, who contribute traffic and content commodity to the platform in exchange for technology usage. In terms of capital, Bourdieu’s capital schema (1989) delineates accumulated labor through three foundational forms: economic capital (material/financial resources), cultural capital (institutionalized knowledge/educational credentials), and social capital (relational networks). Symbolic capital, as the legitimizing mechanism, represents the conversion of these base capitals into social prestige and recognition (Bourdieu, 1989). Therefore, positioned within the framework of capital accumulation processes, digital labor operates as a mediating mechanism that facilitates both the aggregation and transfiguration of Bourdieusian capitals (Bourdieu, 1983; Fuchs, 2014a), entailing dynamic accumulation through data production and algorithmic engagement and capital transmutation wherein digital practices convert cultural capital into social capital metrics, while monetized clicks materialize as economic capital.

Networked social platforms have provided digital labor with new spaces. Most recently, short-form video platforms have become popular for allowing the sharing and viewing of user-generated content that is visual and motion-image based, garnering a considerable global user base. TikTok, released in September 2017, is the international equivalent of Douyin, which was released in September 2016 to the Chinese domestic market by Beijing-based parent company ByteDance. In the initial years of these two platforms, users produced and watched 15 to 60-second short videos that incorporated music, filters, and lip-syncing templates (McCashin & Murphy, 2023). The brevity, templatability, and ease of use of TikTok and Douyin enabled them to attract users to continuously produce and consume content, as well as interact with other users in different geographic regions. Notably, core to the user experience of TikTok and Douyin is the social presence (the extent to which the viewers perceive they are socially interacting with video protagonists) enabled by the short-form videos (Wang, 2020). In previous experimental research, such digital social interaction was found to have the potential to sell products (Wang, 2020), which paved the theoretical basis for the commercial nature of the two platforms.

TikTok and Douyin are available in over 150 countries with 39 languages, manifesting in a rapid global uptake (Xinhua Agency, 2018). As an international version, TikTok became the world’s most popular social media platform in 2022, with 672 million downloads (Abidin, 2021). In the Chinese market, Douyin had more than 700 million monthly active users (QuestMobile Research Institute, 2023). Although TikTok is inaccessible in China without a VPN, recently, it surpassed Google as the most visited website and is one of the fastest-growing apps globally (Oladipo, 2024). The global COVID-19 pandemic with its prolonged social isolation and quarantines motivated more users to adopt these platforms for meeting social needs (Abidin, 2021). In light of these numbers, we consider TikTok and Douyin as representative platforms allowing scholars to investigate “digital labor” in the context of emerging short-form video platforms.

In the existing literature on TikTok and Douyin, scholars have explored both “questions related to social media itself” and “questions that inform our understanding of social phenomena” (Kanthawala, Cotter, Foyle, & DeCook, 2022, p. 3106). The literature has not only delineated the production and dissemination of information (C. H. Basch, Meleo-Erwin, Fera, Jaime, & Basch, 2021; Basch, Hillyer, & Jaime, 2022; Q. Chen, Min, Zhang, Ma, & Evans, 2021; Li, Guan, Hammond, & Berrey, 2021; Ren, 2021; van Kampen, Laski, Herman, & Chan, 2022), the reception and processing of information by the audience and its impact on them, such as body satisfaction, purchase intention, and purchase decision (Ardiana & Ananda, 2022; Joiner et al., 2023; Martini, Suardhika, & Dewi, 2022; Mekler, 2021; Meliawati, Gerald, & Aruman, 2023; Zheng, 2023; Y. Zhou, Lee, & Liu, 2021), but also the precarity in the communication process, which broadly includes fake news, brand communication, and public information (Fung, He, & Cao, 2023; Glatt, 2021; Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar, & Asadchy, 2022; McCammon & Lingel, 2022; M. Zhou & Liu, 2021). However, there remains a lack of scholarly investigation into how this growing body of literature about TikTok and Douyin conceptually and methodologically examines “digital labor”.

This review aims to exhaustively identify and consolidate recent studies of digital labor on TikTok and Douyin platforms, synthesizing what aspects of digital labor are studied, how the term is conceptualized and examined, and the academic trends over time. The following passage is comprised of a detailed account of the review method, a summary of the studies reviewed including study characteristics and conceptual explication and comparison, and lastly, discussions on this review’s implications. Specifically, this review discusses the similarities, differences, and relationships among key concepts, and directions for future research. To this end, six research questions were proposed.

RQ1: What categories of “digital labor” are studied in the context of TikTok and Douyin?

RQ2: How are different categories of “digital labor” defined in TikTok/Douyin research?

RQ3: What research questions or study objectives are explored in this body of literature?

RQ4: What research methods are used in this body of literature?

RQ5: What countries or geographic regions are represented in studies about digital labor on TikTok/Douyin?

RQ6: What are the main findings of these studies?

METHODOLOGY

Scoping Review

A scoping review examines the current state of a certain field of study to comprehend and combine research questions, techniques, and strategies (Fiers, 2023). It focuses on determining the scope of a body of literature on a given topic, identifying the volume of studies, and overviewing—broadly or in detail—its focus” (Munn et al., 2018). Our scoping review of recent studies about digital labor on TikTok/ Douyin follows the recommended reporting items guidelines (PRISMA) to ensure a transparent and comprehensive evaluation of relevant research (Page & Moher, 2017; Tricco et al., 2018).

Aimed as a live review, this review uses two searches to ensure studies published after our initial search were considered. Keyword-based searches were conducted. We employed a scoping screening process to eliminate studies irrelevant to the topic, and further filtered records by inclusion and exclusion criteria to form the final list of articles for review. Information in the articles was extracted by one author and validated by another author. This protocol controlled for biases in the review process.

Literature Search

To identify relevant research for screening, two processes were carried out. First, a database of all scholarly articles about TikTok and Douyin published between 2016 and 2022 was constructed. Next, another search in Google Scholar for articles published between 2023 and 2025 was added, using keywords specifically about “digital labor”.

In the first progress, eight electronic databases were searched: SCOPUS, Web of Science, ACM Digital Library, PubMed, Medline, Google Scholar, EBSCO Communication Source, and PsycINFO. The search was conducted in February 2023 to identify all articles published in academic journals and conference proceedings in the language of English (due to resource constraints) between 2016 (the year in which TikTok and Douyin were commercially launched) and 2022. Six Boolean search terms were used: “tiktok”, “tik tok”, “tik-tok”, “douyin”, “dou yin”, “douyin”. A partial collection of 1783 papers was identified after deduplication. Then, additional grey literature was identified by searching registered trials on ClinicalTrials.gov and WHO’s International Clinical Trials Registry Platform (ICTRP), in which three new publications were identified. Next, Google Scholar was searched, with the first 300 papers in each search results sifted through by four researchers; this step resulted in 1200 new papers. In this round, 2986 unique academic papers were found.

In the second progress, six keywords “digital labor”, “digital labour”, “labor”, “labour”, “TikTok”, and “Douyin” were used to search within the database we constructed, and 16 papers containing the keywords were identified. To cover the latest publications that came out after our initial literature search, another Google Scholar search was conducted in April 2025 with the publication year set out to be 2023 to 2025, and 17 articles were collected.

The two progresses generated 33 papers that are potentially pertinent to our investigation for screening.

Literature Filtering and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Following PRISMA (see **Figure 1**), 16 of the 33 papers met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review. The inclusion criteria were:

1. Original research articles (only peer-reviewed empirical studies were included),
2. Published in English (due to resource constraints)
3. Substantially about digital labor on TikTok or Douyin (indicating that these platforms were the primary research subjects rather than being mentioned incidentally).

The exclusion criteria were:

1. Editorial, opinion, commentaries, and discussion papers,
2. In other languages, e.g., Spanish,
3. Not substantially or directly related to TikTok/Douyin and digital labor, e.g., only mentioning the concept in the background, literature review, or discussion sections,
4. Lacking sufficient data or methodological rigor to support claims about digital labor.

See **Figure 1** for the PRISMA flowchart documenting our screening procedure.

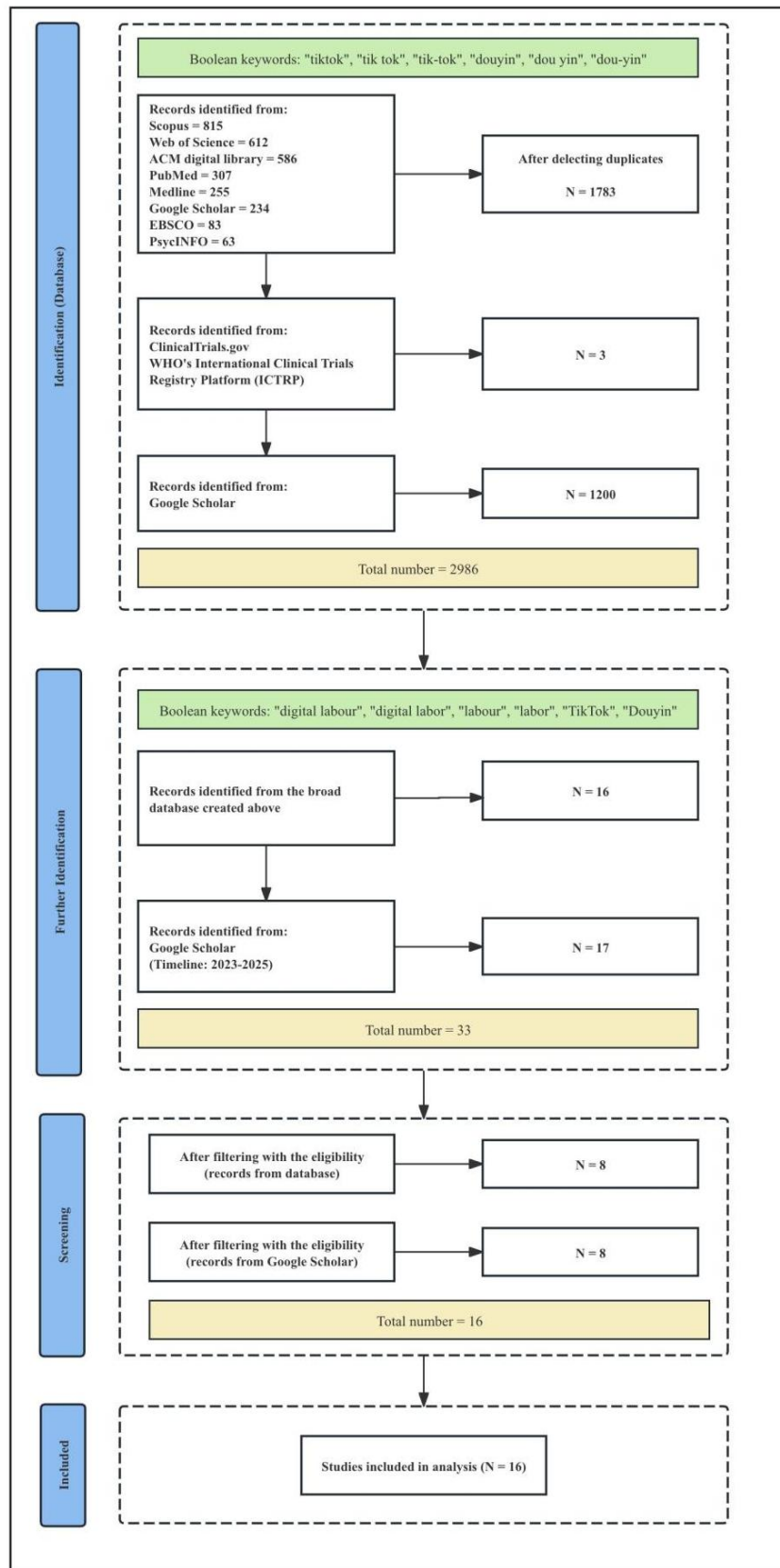


Figure 1. The PRISMA Flow Chart Documenting the Record Screening Procedure

RESULTS

Temporal Publication Trend and Study Characteristics

A total of 16 studies were included for review. **Figure 2** visualizes the counts of the publications about “digital labor” on TikTok and Douyin between 2016 and April 2025, which shows a peak in publications in 2023, followed by a significant drop in 2024 and 2025, and no publications on the topic between 2016 and 2020.

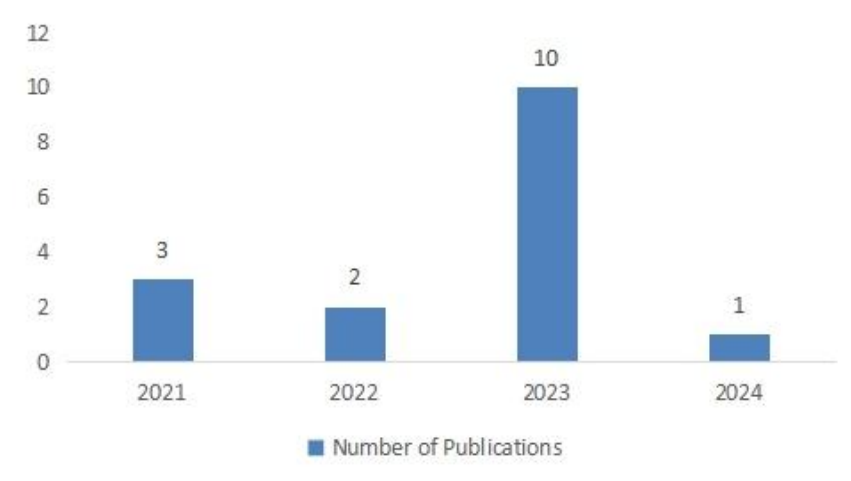


Figure 2. Number of Research Articles on TikTok/Douyin Digital Labor Published since 2016

Table 1 (in Appendix) provides a detailed summary of study characteristics and results, including the country/region where the study was conducted, article type, app platform, study objectives, methods, and main findings. As shown in **Table 1**, the studies were predominantly from mainland China including Hong Kong ($n = 6$), followed by the United States ($n = 4$), Australia ($n = 2$), the Netherlands ($n = 2$), United Arab Emirates ($n = 1$), and Myanmar ($n = 1$). Slightly more studies examined Douyin ($n = 9$) than TikTok ($n = 7$). Since Douyin and TikTok are two platforms that target domestic Chinese and international markets respectively, divided by the study context and the first author’s location of the university, Chinese authors were mainly focused on examining Douyin while others studied TikTok.

In terms of methodology, the papers were grouped into two approaches based on their primary data collection and analysis techniques. Most studies (including mixed-methods ones) used qualitative methods as their primary research method including digital/online ethnography ($n = 3$), observation ($n = 3$), interviews ($n = 10$), document analysis ($n = 2$), case study ($n = 1$), thick description ($n = 1$), netnography ($n = 1$), and field research ($n = 1$), while a small fraction of the studies conducted surveys ($n = 2$).

Digital Labor Categorization and Definitions

The 16 articles investigated digital labor from different perspectives, with six categories of digital labor introduced, defined, and investigated. They are (1) creative labor, (2) visibility labor, (3) emotional labor, (4) platform labor, (5) relational labor, and (6) promotional labor. The definitions for digital labor as an umbrella term and for the six categories of digital labor in the realm of TikTok and Douyin are in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Definitions of “Digital Labor” by Categories

Concepts	Definitions	Author(s) (year)
Digital Labor	Digital labor describes how businesses generate profit by monetizing the typically uncompensated recreational activities of users engaging with online platforms (Gandini, 2021). The commercialization of such user-generated content and the implementation of targeted advertising exemplify an economic model centered on capital accumulation, which sustains the operational framework of prominent social media services (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013).	Fung, Ismangil, He, and Cao (2022) He, Leurs, and Li (2022) Liu and Wang (2022) Losh (2023) Hurley (2023) Jiang (2023)
#1 Creative Labor	The process of professionalizing and monetizing a creative product that is shared on social media—considering how	Duffy, Pinch, Sannon, and Sawey (2021)

Concepts	Definitions	Author(s) (year)
	technological infrastructure affects the regular performance of creative labor (Simpson & Semman, 2023).	Fung et al. (2023) Duffy and Meisner (2023) Simpson and Simaan (2023)
#2 Visibility Labor	Self-posturing and curating self-presentations to be “noticeable and positively prominent” among viewers are two examples of the efforts social media users make to attract the attention of their target audiences (Abidin, 2016).	Abidin (2021) Zhang and Liu (2024)
#3 Emotional Labor	Emotional labor is defined as emotional work that is done for pay and represents the value of emotional exchange (Callahan & McCollum, 2016; Hochschild, 1979, 1990).	Yang (2021)
#4 Platform Labor	Maihuode and Ganhuode are the two categories under which it falls. The former describes the function and labor of live e-commerce vendors in getting ready for live broadcasting. The latter embodies live e-commerce’s claimed quickness, effectiveness, and genuineness (Duan, Lin, & van Dijck, 2023).	Duan et al. (2023)
#5 Relational Labor	It places a strong emphasis on continuous communication throughout time, which strengthens social bonds and provides cultural workers with financial incentives (Baym, 2015). He (p.20) also suggested that this ongoing relationship “may bear a greater resemblance to friends and family than to customers and clients”.	Ye, Dong, and Kavka (2023)
#6 Promotional Labor	In the modern digital landscape, promotional labor is widely observed, often carried out by followers, internet celebrities, and celebrities themselves (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).	Abidin and Lee (2023)

Among the six categories of “digital labor” in these 16 studies, “creative labor” was mentioned most often ($n = 4$) (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Duffy et al., 2021; Fung et al., 2023; Simpson & Semaan, 2023)—as often as the umbrella term “digital labor” ($n = 6$) (Fung et al., 2022; He et al., 2022; Jiang, 2023; Liu & Wang, 2022). The term “creative labor” was used in three United States papers and one Hong Kong paper, while the umbrella term “digital labor” was adopted by two studies from mainland China, one from Hong Kong, and one from the Netherlands. Moreover, the term “visibility labor” was used in two papers (Abidin, 2021; Zhang & Liu, 2024).

Other terms, i.e., “emotional labor” (Yang, 2021), “platform labor” (Duan et al., 2023), “relational labor” (Ye et al., 2023), and “promotional labor” (Abidin & Lee, 2023), were each used once in studies from Australia and Netherlands (see **Table 2** for definitions).

Notably, five studies (Abidin & Lee, 2023; Duan et al., 2023; Fung et al., 2022; Fung et al., 2023; Simpson & Semaan, 2023) featuring Chinese (including Hong Kong) and Australian contexts analyzed digital labor on TikTok and Douyin in relation to the concept of “platformization” (see **Table 1** for study details).

Three Types of Research Objectives in Current Literature

The objectives of the 16 studies about “digital labor” on TikTok and Douyin formed three clusters: (i) the goals of the laborers, (ii) the situation (i.e., precarity/exploitation) of the laborers, and (iii) the labor practices performed on TikTok or Douyin platforms. See **Table 3** for the study objectives of the 16 articles—organized by the purposes of digital laborers, labor situations, and labor practices performed on the platform.

Regarding the goals of using Douyin as opposed to other apps, Fung et al. drew upon Bourdieu’s classical capitals to illustrate how users strive to acquire economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Fung et al., 2022; Fung et al., 2023; Hurley, 2023), and to pursue their self-values through creating TikTok/Douyin content (Fung et al., 2022).

Table 3. Study Objectives of the 16 Articles by the Purpose of Digital Laborers, Labor Situations, and Labor Practices on the Platform

Study Objectives	Categories	Author(s) (year)
Goals of digital laborers	Economic capital	Fung et al. (2022); Fung et al. (2023); Hurley (2023)
	Symbolic, social, cultural capital	Fung et al. (2023)
	Self-value	Fung et al. (2022)
Labor situations (precarity/exploitation)	Market	Duffy et al. (2021); Simpson and Semaan (2023)
	Industry	Duffy et al. (2021); Simpson and Semaan (2023)

Study Objectives	Categories	Author(s) (year)
Labor practices performed on the platform	Platform	Abidin (2021); Duan et al. (2023); Duffy et al. (2021); Duffy and Meisner (2023); Losh (2023); Simpson and Semaan (2023)
	Unstable income	Fung et al.(2023)
	Unstable working time	Fung et al. (2022)
	Resistance	Duffy and Meisner (2023)
	Content production	Abidin (2021); Abidin and Lee (2023); Duan et al. (2023); He et al. (2022); Liu and Wang (2022); Hurley (2023); Losh (2023); Jiang (2023); Simpson and Semaan (2023); Yang (2021); Zhang and Liu (2024)
	Dissemination	Duffy and Meisner (2023); Hurley (2023); Losh (2023); Zhang and Liu (2024)
	Live streaming	Abidin (2021); Duan et al. (2023); He et al. (2022); Liu and Wang (2022); Abidin and Lee (2023); Jiang (2023); Simpson and Semaan (2023); Yang (2021)
	Emotional interaction	Hurley (2023); Jiang (2023); Yang (2021); Ye et al. (2023)

Regarding digital laborers' situation on TikTok and Douyin (i.e., precarity and exploitation), the scholars conceptualized and analyzed five factors: (1) the market (e.g., audience tastes, advertiser demands, and sources of competition) (Duffy et al., 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2023), (2) the industry (e.g., the ecology of platforms on which creators produce and circulate content) (Duffy et al., 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2023), (3) the platform (e.g., its new rules and algorithm) (Abidin, 2021; Duan et al., 2023; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Duffy et al., 2021; Losh (2023); Simpson & Semaan, 2023), (4) unstable income (Fung et al., 2023), and (5) unstable working time (Fung, et al., 2022).

As for the labor practices on TikTok/Douyin, these studies covered five types: (1) resistance (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), (2) content production (Abidin & Lee, 2023; Abidin, 2021; Duan et al., 2023; He et al., 2022; Hurley, 2023; Losh, 2023; Jiang, 2023; Liu & Wang, 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2023; Yang, 2021; Zhang & Liu, 2024), (3) dissemination (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Hurley, 2023; Losh, 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2024), (4) live streaming (Abidin & Lee, 2023; Abidin, 2021; Duan et al., 2023; He et al., 2022; Jiang, 2023; Liu & Wang, 2022; Simpson & Semaan, 2023; Yang, 2021), and (5) emotional interaction (Jiang, 2023; Yang, 2021; Hurley, 2023; Ye et al., 2023).

DISCUSSION

This scoping review of digital labor research shed light on two emerging short-form video platforms, TikTok and Douyin. While an expanding global community of scholars are intrigued by the digital labor phenomenon behind short-form videos, the publication trends suggest a vacancy between 2016 and 2020, and an evident decline of publication interests in 2024 and 2025 following the 2023 peak. Given the growing labor size and more complex labor practices in short-form video production and live-streaming, more research on this topic which centers laborers is needed.

The 16 papers put forth diverse research objectives, methodologies, and conceptual categories to theorize "digital labor" in the context of mobile media and short-form videos. In this section, we discuss the commonalities and differences among the six digital labor types, and delve into the goals, situations, and practices of laborers on TikTok/Douyin. Explicating these aspects of current research helps form a better understanding of "digital labor" in a relatively newer media format experiencing platformization. Insights into the publication trends and future directions will be discussed lastly.

Christian Fuchs argued that despite English translations using work and labor interchangeably, Marx provided different definitions for them (2014a). Per Marx, work is "a process between man and nature" where man "acts upon external nature and changes it" (Marx, 1990, p. 283); and while work is the "general process of production" found within all societies, "labor means types of work that are organized in class relations, where one class produces goods that another one owns" (Fuchs, 2014b, p. 81). Thus, it is the structure of capitalism that differentiates work from labor, assisting in the exploitation and alienation of laborers. Fuchs (2015) further discussed that "digital labor" is the process of creating value in the digital economy, especially the surplus value where Marx regarded it as "all surplus-value, whatever particular form (profit, interest, or rent), it may

subsequently crystallize into, is in substance the materialization of unpaid labor. The secret of the self-expansion of capital resolves itself into having the disposal of a definite quantity of other people's unpaid labor" (1990, p. 374-375). On the digital platform, especially on TikTok and Douyin, capitalists can extract the surplus value via platformization's dual logics. Platformization has been referred to as "the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and its consequences. [It] entails the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data 'platform ready'" (Helmond, 2015, p. 1).

In this review, "digital labor" shared the same digital spaces (TikTok and Douyin) but was separated into six genres with different dimensions mentioned above (see **Table 2**). "Digital labor", as a key term in this review, stands for "companies' deriving economic value from the commonly unpaid leisure-oriented activities of everyday users on digital platforms" (Gandini, 2021, as cited in He et al., 2022, p. 274). Monetizing digital labor and targeted advertising reflect a capital accumulation model underpinning well-known social media platforms such as TikTok and Douyin (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). The overlaps, temporal, and divergences evolution of the six digital labor categories within TikTok and Douyin's socio-technical ecosystem reveal several key points. Firstly, synergies emerge across labor types: creative labor (e.g., monetizing under algorithmic constraints) and promotional labor (e.g., influencer-brand collaborations) both prioritize content production for economic gain but diverge in intent and infrastructure reliance. Similarly, emotional labor (e.g., live streamers performing enthusiasm) intersects with relational labor (e.g., fostering parasocial bonds with audiences), yet the former emphasizes transactional effective performance, while the latter centers on sustained community-building (Baym, 2015; Yang, 2021). Visibility labor (e.g., optimizing content for trends) underpins platform labor (e.g., live commerce preparation), as both are mediated by platform infrastructures but diverge in targeting audience attention versus commercial logic (Abidin, 2016; Duan et al., 2023). Temporally, algorithmic governance has intensified visibility labor through trend-driven adaptability, expanded relational labor via real-time interactions, and reshaped platform labor through monetization innovations (e.g., virtual gifting).

However, despite looking at the same two digital platforms (i.e., TikTok and Douyin), research in this scoping review varied in their focuses, which led to important conceptual differentiation. This is in line with Y. Chen (2014), stressed that various adjectives preceding the term "labor" demonstrate scholarly aspirations and endeavors to comprehend the impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) on not just the workplace and labor structures, but also the essence of work and the dynamics of working within a digital environment. For example, in terms of "creative labor" (e.g., engineer, artist, painter), the objectives of current research emphasized their work involved to "professionalize, monetize, make visible, and relate to one's audience as a cultural producer" (Simpson & Semman, 2023). For other digital labor types, research tended to discuss the level of audience "attention" attracted by visibility labor (Abidin, 2021), the exchange of emotions between the influencers and audiences for emotional labor (Yang, 2021), the long-term interactive relationship-building for relational labor (Ye et al., 2023), the work in promotional activities for selling products or services for promotional labor (Abidin & Lee, 2023), and finally the nature of online and offline work that platform labor blends so that offline labor is converted to online labor, emphasizing the connectivity of the medium (Duan et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it should be noted that within the context of "creative labor", Simpson and Semman (2023, p. 4) also applied "by extension [to] relational labor and visibility labor, creative labor use[s] platforms with already large audiences or those who aspire to have large audiences". Namely, different types of "digital labor" not only occasionally overlap but also reflect a mutual effect on each other.

Digital labor under capitalism demonstrates a kind of capitalist relationship that occurs within specific production-class relations. It incurs exploitation by capital holders (e.g., platform owners) involving alienation and appropriation, in which laborers do not own the means of production, the products they create, or the profits generated from their labor (Fuchs, 2015). In the former, Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) summarized the Hegelian notion that digital labor is alienated from a subject (themselves), an object (means of production), and the subject-object (the products of labor). The latter stands for data commodified and offered for sale by Internet corporations to advertising clients, who can then select specific user groups to target (Fuchs, 2015). Namely, labor power is compelled to work without compensation for capital, which in turn results in the production of surplus value and monetary profit. However, labor in the digital era (especially in the realm of short-form video platforms) differs from that in the industrial age—to a large extent, Fisher (2012) argued because higher levels of exploitation depend on high levels of communication and socialization, which in turn lead to the function of social networks to allow for de-alienation (users gain more self-motivation to produce). Thus, on TikTok and Douyin, digital labor has the autonomy to use and produce even though they still risk being exploited by the platforms. While Liu and Wang (2022) argued that it is fundamentally difficult for organized labor groups to combat platform exploitation, our review sees potential areas for positive social change, such as the "motherhood" showcased by He et al. (2022).

As **Table 3** above shows, these 16 articles examined the purpose, situation (precarity and exploitation), and

practices of “digital labor” on TikTok/Douyin. The three aspects were explored concurrently in the papers that study them. For example, Fung et al.(2022) studied both the purpose and situation of digital laborers, while Duffy et al. (2021) examined the practice and situation. TikTok and Douyin endow users with the autonomy to utilize them for receiving support in content production, dissemination, and live streaming. Laborers may derive benefits from engaging with their audience through various platform affordances such as emotional interactions and parasocial relationships. However, these very affordances that seemingly offer them “advantages” can also present challenges. They can be simultaneously subject to unfair treatment in terms of algorithmic (in)visibility, and market and industry influence, in their pursuit of more followers. As free laborers (i.e., voluntary, unpaid workers) (Terranova, 2012) or the precariat (e.g., the class of chronic uncertain working status) (Standing, 2011, p.52), digital laborers also encounter unstable incomes and working hours, compelled to endure exploitation by capital, thereby fostering a sense of “resistance” to capital within the platforms.

Therefore, in the context of TikTok and Douyin, “digital labor” can be summarized as laborers who utilize these two social media platforms for various aims, employing strategies like enhancing visibility, managing emotional interactions, and fostering relationships with followers to maximize rewards (e.g., monetary compensations), which can, however alienate themselves (e.g., coerced to continue using the platforms), with the means of object (laborers do not own TikTok/Douyin), and with the product they produce (e.g., short-form videos, live streaming). Throughout this process, laborers encounter precarity arising from platform algorithms, markets, and industries, which leads to instability in income and working hours even if these laborers are self-motivated. Through this produce-and-disseminate process, the capitalists (i.e., platform owners) achieve exploitation where not only the content created but the creators are sold as commodities to the advertisers.

Reflecting on the research trends arising from the 16 studies in this review, more scholars are choosing to contextualize TikTok/Douyin digital labor in relation to “platformization”, positioning social media companies in the market and addressing users as both consumers and creators (Gillespie, 2010). During COVID-19, limited access to offline public spheres has led TikTok and Douyin to accelerate their growth by integrating shopping, learning, and entertainment. With the surge of TikTok/Douyin user bases post-COVID-19—the number of monthly active users increased from 600 million in 2020 to more than 700 million in 2023 for Douyin (QuestMobile Research Institute, 2023) and to 1.1 billion in 2023 for TikTok (Iqbal, 2024)—the platforms’ expansion and impact on the everyday life of many may have lent prominence to the term “platformization”. Platformization happens when “platforms permeate different economic sectors and living spaces with infrastructures, economic processes, and management structures” while reconfiguring “cultural practices and imaginaries about platforms” (Poell, Nieborg, & van Dijck, 2019, p. 2). It mediates the relationship between connectors and complementors on the platform (van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018, p. 17). The interactions between users on platforms can lead to shifts in different social domains, e.g., advertisers can be simultaneously consumers; their identities are dynamic and changing. Against this backdrop, by contextualizing TikTok/Douyin digital labor research within “platformization”, recent research may guide future investigations in attending to platform-specific culture (Simpson & Semaan, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This scoping review included 16 paper about digital labor on TikTok and Douyin, two emerging social media platforms where rich image contents are being created and shared by massive users daily. As the first effort to comprehensively synthesize—and critically examine—scholarly works about these two increasingly complex social media platforms with a focus on digital labor, this review contributes to the current understanding of digital labor from three essential perspectives.

Firstly, this review provided a conceptual roadmap of various ways in which digital labor on TikTok and Douyin have been studied, highlighting a growing scholarly interest in this area and categorizing “digital labor” into six categories (i.e., creative, visibility, emotional, platform, relational, and promotional labor). Secondly, we assessed the scope of research objectives explored to date, summarizing the purpose, situation, and practices (i.e., resistance, content production, dissemination, live streaming, and emotional interaction) of digital laborers on TikTok/Douyin. Especially, the 16 studies we reviewed highlighted factors contributing to digital labor precarity and exploitation on TikTok and Douyin, including the market, industry, platform, unstable income, and unstable working time. Lastly, through this review, we discussed current trends in digital labor research in the context of TikTok and Douyin, shedding light on future research directions.

Furthermore, this scoping review synthesized the goals of digital laborers as they utilize TikTok and Douyin to acquire economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital and attain personal value. The 16 studies we reviewed collectively indicated that digital laborers employ various strategies for self-realization through their labor

practices, which often—alongside other disruptive factors—further place them in precarity.

As technology continues to evolve, online platforms have progressively permeated many aspects of daily life, leading to the aforementioned platformization which opens new avenues for research. This scoping review provides a thorough and critical account of recent research about digital labor on TikTok and Douyin. It provides a springboard for future research that seeks to pursue and build upon the rising field of digital labor research in the context of less theorized, less understood emerging media platforms.

LIMITATIONS

Our review is based on secondary data, namely existing academic literature. Whilst we incorporated grey literature and two searches in our review, it is possible that the records are not exhaustive. To be as inclusive as possible, we searched eight prominent databases using various keywords for articles that could help address our research questions.

Meanwhile, the studies in this review are limited to those published in English due to resource constraints. Findings from this review may be compared with future efforts on digital labor research published in other languages.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

YK was responsible for conceptualization, data curation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, visualization, and writing—original draft; YW for data curation, methodology, validation, project administration, and writing—review and editing; XL for data curation, methodology, project administration, supervision, and writing—review and editing; JH for validation, writing—review and editing; WL, QW for data curation; JL and YL for writing—review and editing.

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

FUNDING

The authors received no financial support for producing the research.

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Appendix

Table 1. Study Characteristics (Country, Article Type, App Platform, Study Objectives, Methods, and Main Findings)

Author(s) (Year)	Country/ Region of study context	Country/ Region of the first author	Article Type	Platform	Study Objectives	Methods	Main Findings
Abidin (2021)	NA	Australia	Journal	TikTok	To explore the makings of internet celebrity cultures on TikTok	Digital ethnography, observation, and personal interviews	The mechanisms that create fame, visibility, and audience reach on TikTok are rooted in its design, community practices, and technical elements like soundtracks, video formats, and hashtag trends.
Duffy et al. (2021)	NA	United States	Journal	TikTok	To investigate the effects of creative laborers' endeavors to enhance their visibility	In-depth interviews with 30 creative laborers	The experiences of creative laborers are shaped by not only the promise of visibility, but also its precarity.
Yang (2021)	NA	China	Conference proceeding paper	Douyin	To understand the emotional labor involved in virtual interactions by analyzing mobile game livestreams on Douyin.	Indirect observation	Mobile game livestreaming on Douyin involves emotional labor in the interactions between streamers and their audiences. This emotional labor fosters distinct social dynamics across different networks: (i) a collaborative teammate-like bond between streamers and viewers, and (ii) a hierarchical class-based relationship among audience members within fan communities.
He et al. (2022)	NA	Netherlands	Journal	Douyin	To explore the convergence of motherhood, digital labor, affective work, and platform commercialization through vlogs	Interviews with 12 stay-at-home mother vloggers and thematic analysis	Three coexisting labor modalities characterize digitally mediated motherhood: domestic, affective, and entrepreneurial.
Fung et al. (2022)	NA	Hong Kong	Journal	Douyin	To explore how platforms reorganize our sense of everyday life using TikTok in China	Survey of Douyin wanghong (i.e., influencer) and in-depth interviews	While there is the illusion that audiences are closer than ever to the content creator in terms of engagement, they are also abstracted through platform analytics, where they are reduced to statistics provided to content creators.
Liu and Wang (2022)	China	NA	Journal	Douyin	To examine the organizational practices of Chinese truck drivers on social media	Online ethnography, offline observation, and in-depth interviews with 20 interviewees	It is fundamentally challenging for organized labor groups to combat the exploitation of digital work on capital platforms.

Author(s) (Year)	Country/ Region of study context	Country/ Region of the first author	Article Type	Platform	Study Objectives	Methods	Main Findings
Duan et al. (2023)	China	NA	Journal	Douyin	To explore the ways in which live streaming platforms alter the work process of farmers selling products in rural areas, with an emphasis on the transactional and physical labor involved in platformization	Field research, interviews, official documents, and online materials	Platformization reinforces, rather than disrupts, the subjectivities of e-commerce vendors and the power structures that support them.
Fung et al. (2023)	NA	Hong Kong	Journal	Douyin	To investigate the reasons why, in spite of the unstable situation, producers/consumers, influential people, or wanghong (i.e., wanghong) remain committed to creating and sharing videos on the short video platform Douyin	Survey of Douyin wanghong (i.e., influencer) and in-depth interviews	Douyin gives various wanghong (influencers) the chance to pursue their own intended capitals, which includes social, symbolic, and cultural capital in addition to economic capital.
Losh (2023)	NA	United States	Journal	TikTok	To explore how users manage their visibility in a digital environment and the relationship between this management and algorithms and platform politics.	Case study	TikTok's design encourages rich citation practices, while users must invest significant visibility labor to navigate algorithmic scrutiny and manage their content's visibility, sometimes opting for invisibility to avoid moderation.
Ye et al. (2023)	NA	Netherlands	Journal	Douyin	To examine the power dynamics between genders in the Chinese female streamers' showroom live streaming industry	Semi-structured interview with 24 Chinese informants	The technological and financial affordances of live streaming platforms, the male viewers' craving for close, personal connections, and their own subjectivities all influence the implicitly sexualized and intimate performances presented by female streamers.
Abidin and Lee (2023)	NA	Australia	Journal	TikTok	To examine how TikTok used K-pop as a means of entering the South Korean market, so illustrating the concept of "platformed glocalization"	Document analysis, content analysis, and digital ethnography	Particularly in areas where domestic market cultures and socio-politics are particularly strong, platforms must take into account localizing to adhere to local norms and mores as well as the politics, culture, and market economics of the local market.
Duffy and Meisner	NA	United States	Journal	TikTok	To explore how individuals with historically disadvantaged	In-depth interviews with	Platforms implement governance in an inconsistent manner, and artists'

Author(s) (Year)	Country/ Region of study context	Country/ Region of the first author	Article Type	Platform	Study Objectives	Methods	Main Findings
(2023)					identities and/or stigmatized Content genres perceive and experience algorithmic (in)visibility	30 social media creators	perceptions are linked to experience behaviors that range from self-censorship to deliberate attempts to evade algorithmic intervention.
Hurley (2023)	United Arab Emirates	NA	Journal	TikTok	To find out the everyday digital placemaking of migrant, domestic, and service workers is the focus of this study.	Thick description	In the era of social media, workers' emotive digital-placemaking serves as a type of neoliberal resilience to communicative capitalism and deterritorialization, even as Dubai's social media cultures mirror the hegemonies of the Gulf administration and TikTok's algorithms.
Jiang (2023)	China	NA	Journal	Douyin	To identify how the mechanism of sharenting in the Chinese environment is both facilitated and complicated by mixed-race children in Douyin's racialized discourse	Digital ethnography and qualitative content analysis	These sharenting methods, which are unique to mixed-race children (also known as "hunxue'er"), justify a unique use of children's digital labor in Chinese society through an apparently agentic and unquestionably deliberate play of mixed identities. This study also demonstrates that sharenting children from Chinese-Caucasian families seems to be more prevalent and preferred on Douyin.
Simpson and Semaan (2023)	NA	United States	Journal	TikTok	To reevaluate the notions of creative work and investigate how creative practices and intents contradict the concepts now used	Semi-structured interview with 15 participants	Platforms provide obstacles that interfere with people's creative processes and distance them from their shared creative goals; they also create difficulties that distance people from their audiences and sense of self.
Zhang and Liu (2024)	Myanmar	NA	Journal	Douyin	To explore the tactics three international influencers employ when producing content about Myanmar, controlling their online presence on Douyin, and navigating the cybercriminal connections associated with their Burmese ancestry.	Netnography	Transnational influencers on Douyin strategies successfully manage negative associations associated with Myanmar, where complex interactions between nationalism, gender, sexuality, and entrepreneurship were identified in shaping their identity negotiation and pursuit of digital visibility, even though they might not directly challenge underlying power inequalities.