

## Commodification of Prison Life and #PrisonTikTok: Self-Exposure and Digital Labour on Social Media\*

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This paper investigates the phenomenon of commodifying prison life through video content shared on social media, particularly on TikTok. This platform popularised the cultural trend of sharing prison-inspired video content via the #prisontiktok and #jailtok. Using these hashtags, prisoners and former prisoners expose their personal experiences to vast online audiences to establish social connections with the outside world. Simultaneously, they use social media to commodify their life in prison, as well as their criminal careers, to gain views, monetary gifts and sponsorships, which aids in resocialisation after incarceration. Using digital ethnography and narrative analysis, this study employs long-term online observation to explore how individuals utilise their prison experience to build post-penal identities and careers. The focus of the analysis are the textual, visual, and audio elements of the video content shared on TikTok. The study observes how viral dances and cooking videos, as well as personal confessions all serve commercial purposes of self-advertising on the platform. By emphasizing the economic motivations behind constructing the narratives on prison life, this paper illuminates the precarious aspects of digital labour associated with resocialisation of prisoners. While acknowledging the benefits of transforming prison life into marketable content, this paper also discusses the challenges of online work, particularly with regards to self-exposure and limitations imposed by the algorithmic systems of social media. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the broader conversation about digital labour in the context of resocialisations of former prisoners and representations of prisons on social media that stem from self-commodification strategies.

**KEYWORDS:** commodification / prison life / TikTok / algorithms / social media

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## Introduction

While the stigma of their criminal past and prison sentence is a significant challenge in finding traditional jobs, the sphere of digital work emerges as a new opportunity for former convicts to resocialise. Specifically, many former convicts strive to establish careers by engaging in content production on social media. On TikTok, the proliferation of content related to prison life and storytelling about criminal careers marks a new breakthrough in the popularisation of prison influencers, with the influencer defined as celebrities as “critical form of internet celebrity given their ability to attract and maintain a sizable following on their social media platforms, through highly engaging and personalized content production, which can be used as conduits of information to amplify messages” (Abidin, 2018). However, this new generation of jobs on the digital market is burdened with challenges, making it very difficult for former prisoners to build meaningful careers online.

One of the main problems with interpreting online work through the lens of resocialisation is the under-regulated sphere of social media where algorithmic governance replaces traditional governance. Privately-owned and operated transnational platforms alone establish the methods for filtering, censoring and distributing content while also determining monetisation strategies. Algorithms, which are optimised to maximise engagement and profitability, fail to provide a safe online space, leaving states to find their own ways to manage the consequences of the proliferation of videos generated by users, the disruption this creates in the labour market, and other phenomena associated with social media.

In this poorly regulated online sphere, there are no clear pathways for former convicts to resocialise and establish careers. They are faced with the attention economy (Goldhaber, 2006) built on traditional market economy, where large quantities of content are managed by the algorithms which use undisclosed parameters to assess videos and make decisions on whether and to whom they will be shown. Hashtags #prisontok and #jailtok help make this type of content easily searchable, aiding in the competition for attention in an online space oversaturated with user-generated content. Even though algorithms typically have embedded biases, these biases may not necessarily lead to the same type of discrimination against prisoners such as the official labour market. Nevertheless, the lack of structured pathway to paid jobs in this digital environment forces many former prisoners who strive towards recognition on social media into unpaid aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016). This aspirational labour involves self-exposure and hence self-commodification. Hoping to gain sufficient views and followers that could attract paid sponsorships, many simply post on social media without earning any profits.

This dynamic illustrates an inner paradox of social media which are created for the profit but also aspire to serve as digital commons. While digital platforms like TikTok offer spaces for marginalized groups, including former prisoners, to share their stories and potentially earn recognition and re-integrate into the society, the underlying exploitative nature of digital labour often undermines these possibilities. Social media's focus on engagement-driven content created by the users and sorted by the algorithms coupled with the monetisation policies shifts the responsibility of success entirely onto the creators, exacerbating the precarity of their labour.

This paper emphasises the “exploitative” tendencies of digital labour (Fuchs, 2014) because this aspect of social media is rarely discussed in this context. While these platforms represent *de facto* new working spaces as part of a new digital economy and a modern incarnation of capitalism facilitated by advanced communication technologies, they are still not considered as such. Social media remain critically marginalised by the state and are not fully defined as part of the public sphere. Even though they offer new possibilities to disclose many aspects of prison life to broader audiences, especially through educational content, this potential remains untapped by state officials and is relegated to the margins of an unrecognised public space.

### **Prison Life as a Spectacle**

Identifying how the narratives and images portraying crime and life in prisons have become commodified on social media requires an inquiry into the innerworkings of economic underpinnings of media as a type of a semiosphere. The works of Jean Baudrillard (2005, 2017, 2019), Maurizio Lazzarato (1995) and Guy Debord (2002) are particularly important for understanding the logic of the production processes within media as all three authors build upon the legacy of Karl Marx's theory of commodification and apply it to contemporary society. Lazzarato is the first author to write about “immaterial labour” that produces intangible commodities such as audiovisual content and requires a mix of intellectual and manual skills. This type of labour is central for the entertainment industry of both traditional media and social networks where user-generated content largely replaces the classic formats used for radio and television. Debord's writing on the spectacle as a type of commodity affirms that Marx's concept of commodity fetishism applies to both material and immaterial objects. His argument about the spectacle as a succession of images that replace reality profoundly influenced Baudrillard's concept of “hyperreality” (Baudrillard, 2017).

The concept of hyperreality, rooted in Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, presupposes a critical relation between semiological and economic aspects of production. Baudrillard claimed that the immaterial labour characteristic of both

traditional and social media can only be understood if the association between use and exchange value is reassessed in the context of semiological processes of signification. His main insight was that the emergence of “sign value” makes both use and exchange value obsolete. Similarly, the breakdown of semiology, which is based on the dualism of signifier and signified, further reinforces the transformation of the economy, which increasingly focuses on the production of conceptualisations of objects and intangible goods. The emancipation of the signifier from the signified on the semiological level has led to the proliferation of pure signs as objects of production, operating merely on the level of simulation.

These concepts of immaterial labour and commodification of spectacle within the broader framework of the sign economy, which replaces the traditional economy, are critical for understanding what representations of prison life on social media truly mean. Invisible to ordinary citizens, prison life remains taboo. As a forbidden territory where users are not allowed to have connections to the outside world, it has become a popular topic on social media. TikTok, which offers various methods of monetisation, including user donations during livestreams, has enabled a proliferation of prison content. Genres typically include storytelling about prison life and the criminal offences that led to incarceration. In prison environments where it is allowed to use mobile phones, or where it is possible to smuggle such devices, convicts use live streams to connect to audiences and share filmed content they create in prisons. Prison life content, as a type of commodified spectacle, shows how social media transforms experiences into consumable content that becomes a form of entertainment and caters to voyeuristic tendencies in digital spaces. This content production is part of a digital economy that capitalises on various forms of self-exposure and data collection practices.

Online platforms can be understood as in-between spaces that combine the functionalities of traditional media with innovative communication technologies. They enable ‘sociality’ and interactivity along with a range of shades that span from strictly public to rigorously private. Unlike traditional media, social networks enable users to create and publish content without any restrictions, censorship, or external editing process and mark it as public, private, or something in between. With the addition of the so-called ‘privacy settings,’ these (multimedia) posts are certainly not always public like television, radio, and press were, but they are also not private in the way telephone, telegraph, and letters used to be. This means that the responsibility for the published content is always individual, and each user must decide what is appropriate for sharing with a particular auditorium. On one hand, online platforms facilitate the creation of a more inclusive public sphere by “permitting the emergence of more distant and marginal others” (Gak, 2016, p. 31).

Furthermore, uncensored online spaces that allow anyone’s voice to be heard pose numerous ethical challenges, such as how to regulate antisocial behavior (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 3), determine responsibility for hate speech (Alkiviadou,

2018, p. 19; Guiora & Park, 2017, p. 957), and manage accountability (Helberger et al., 2017, p. 1).

Digital ethnographic research of the hashtags #jailtok and #prisonstiktok shows how strategies of commodifying prison life on social media collectively represent an alternative approach to resocialisation after a prison sentence but simultaneously embody aspirational unpaid labour associated with the exploitative practices of the digital economy. Prison life content on TikTok tends to attract a larger number of views than most genres. The hashtags #jailtok and #prisonstiktok are used to label this type of content and make it easily searchable across the platform. They identify both content created within the prison and videos or livestreams that discuss prison life after completing a prison sentence. The second type of content particularly helps former convicts to resocialise and integrate into society.

Typical videos portraying life in prisons generate large numbers of views and likes. The most prominent genres are workout routines, food videos, and personal confessions about social life in prison. The first two types of videos inform audiences about the most important daily routines of prisoners while showing the environment they live in. The third type of video reveals more nuanced social dynamics between prisoners and staff members. These storytelling videos could potentially represent valuable oral histories, but social media's orientation towards creating profit through user-generated content rather than providing a platform for curated educational content makes it a questionable archive. Since the content is always on a scale between private and public (Borgeson & Miller, 2016), the narrative analyses are challenging.

Additionally, prison-related content on TikTok also includes typical platform-native trends such as viral dances, challenges, and memes. These videos tend to portray prison life in a light-hearted way, featuring content that is often indistinguishable from videos created in ordinary bedrooms. TikTok's design inherently promotes the replication of viral trends, encouraging users to participate in dances, challenges, and memes that gain widespread popularity (Stepanovic, 2024). This culture of imitation fosters a communal approach to content creation, where the emphasis shifts from individual authenticity to the engageability and potential virality of videos. Creators often prioritize trending formats over original content, as engagement metrics and algorithmic favourability are closely tied to participation in these viral phenomena. This dynamic reveals a collective understanding among users that success on the platform is largely determined by one's ability to tap into and replicate existing trends. Such practices highlight the communal nature of content creation on TikTok, where the replication of popular trends often supersedes the pursuit of authenticity in favour of maximizing engagement and virality (Ling, 2022; Smith, 2023).

In Serbia, sharing content from prisons or about prison life is rare because of the strict rules not only on using communication technologies in penal institutions, but also on sharing the information about the penal system. However, content creators follow the trends and themes already established on the platform. Within prisons, it is common to show the prison cell and all the personal belongings in it, as well as nutrition and exercise rituals. Some former convicts also film confessions about their criminal careers and prison life. While some of the content creators focus on educational aspects of their content, others prioritise only sensationalism of storytelling and post content aiming only at entertainment.

The dynamics of paid and aspirational labour can be interpreted through Karl Marx's theory of commodification. For example, Fuchs argues that social media outsource labour to users and consumers in order to cut labour costs and increase profits, a practice that should be recognised as a completely new model of accumulation of capital associated with new communication technologies and, in a way, a 'democratisation' of capitalism (Fuchs, 2014, p. 246). This new system of capital accumulation allows for unprecedented levels of participation in the public sphere with very little curation, control, or censorship. As a result, even marginalised groups, such as inmates, gain access to public discourse. However, their opportunities for paid work remain severely limited.

Social media's exploitative tendencies are explicitly visible in the phenomenon of unpaid "play labour," which capitalises on the self-exposure of users through shared content, but also on the unacknowledged work of viewers or consumers of such content (Fuchs, 2014). While traditional mass media relied on passive audiences, social media platforms have replaced them with highly engaged users who are expected to actively contribute to the production process through activities such as sharing, liking, and commenting. Keeping audiences occupied with reacting to the content forms part of a larger financial strategy for social media platforms, which profit from behavioural data accumulated through these interactions. On TikTok, constant user engagement is embedded in its design: the application encourages users to continuously scroll through content while metrics on their retention are recorded and transformed into behavioural data. Additionally, livestreams enhance engagement by requiring viewers to actively participate, whether by tapping the screen to send likes or providing monetary gifts to streamers through the app.

This analysis highlights how platforms like TikTok not only commodify user-generated content but also exploit the labour of both creators and consumers. By embedding engagement into the platform's design and monetisation strategies, TikTok transforms self-expression into a form of labour that benefits the platform more than its users. For marginalised groups such as former prisoners, these platforms may appear to offer opportunities for visibility and income. However, the unstructured and precarious nature of digital labour, combined with exploitative practices, underscores the limitations of these opportunities. As such,

the promise of digital platforms as tools for empowerment and economic inclusion is tempered by the reality of their algorithmic underpinnings. To address this, future research and policy interventions should critically examine how digital labour is structured and propose solutions that better support creators, especially those from vulnerable groups.

## Conclusion

The commodification of prison life on TikTok exemplifies the exploitative tendencies of immaterial labour in the digital economy. By outsourcing content production to users, platforms like TikTok capitalize on unpaid labour while fostering an illusion of accessibility and opportunity. Former prisoners, drawn into the aspirational labour of self-exposure and self-commodification, often navigate precarious online careers with little structural support.

Globally, prison-related content has carved out niche spaces on social media, marked by trends like viral dances, cooking videos, and storytelling. In Serbia, however, the production and dissemination of such content face stricter limitations due to state-imposed restrictions on communication technologies in prisons and the controlled release of information about penitentiary institutions. As a result, content creators in Serbia often emulate global trends without fully engaging with the genre's potential for narrative diversity or innovation.

The potential of digital media to serve as a tool for education, advocacy, and resocialization remains largely unrealized. Penal systems, characterized by opacity and restrictive policies, fail to recognize the value of leveraging social media as a bridge between prisoners and society. Simultaneously, the lack of regulation and public recognition of social media as a legitimate workspace limits the ability of platforms to provide structured pathways for meaningful careers. Addressing these gaps requires both state intervention and a reconceptualization of social media as an integral part of the public sphere, capable of supporting marginalized voices and fostering genuine efforts to improve resocialization of former prisoners.

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