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An Investigation of Exploitation and Labour Within Memes Production: A Case Study of South African Student Meme Pages

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates labour, and exploitation within the production and consumption of student memes in South Africa. Using two case studies of two prominent South African student meme pages found on Instagram, UCT Just Kidding (@uctjustkidding) and Wits Just Kidding (@witsjustkidding), and critical political economy theory coupled with interviews conducted with administrators and meme creators from both pages, the study interrogated the notion of labour and the forms in which exploitation occurs in the memes production and distribution process. The study found that labour was conceived from the traditional Marx perspective by the administrators of both pages, which doesn't recognise creative, cultural, affective, and free labour. Therefore, paving the way for exploitation of the meme creators' labour which remains unchallenged due to the dynamic power imbalance between the meme creators and administrators. The study calls for a nuanced perspective in labour discourse within the South African student memes context.

KEYWORDS

Labour; Exploitation; Memes; Social media; Student memes; South Africa

Introduction

The South African social media space has witnessed the upsurge of meme pages used to highlight and communicate salient socio-political, economic, and cultural issues while entertaining the public. Lamphere (2018) posits that memes bring great cultural significance to the modern world because they partly play a role in understanding how contemporary society operates. One such meme that has contributed to understanding society and its fabrics is student memes which have become a platform for students to build identity and express themselves (Lamphere 2018). Through their virtual presence, these memes have not only become a dominant narrative within social media platforms but have enabled students to form virtual or online communities (Hardt 1999). To Piñon (2020, n/p), the construction and sharing of student memes have enabled "students to get the creative freedom that can come with being in a closed group, alongside the communal comfort that comes from being in on the joke. Beyond that, there's the wider usefulness of using memes to communicate". Using the freedom and creativity associated

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with memes, students can provide genuine narratives about their experiences as students and construct their realities, challenges and opportunities of being a university or college student (Ask and Abidin 2018).

Singh (2019) and Mgcina (2021) argue that South Africa has seen the proliferation of student meme pages. Mgcina (2021) attributed this to two prominent student meme pages: UCT *Just Kidding* and *Wits Just Kidding*. Both pages have many followers across social media platforms, particularly Instagram. Their influence has resulted in other university meme pages wanting to have a similar social media presence. Singh (2019) argues that the growth of student meme pages appeal to the growing use of Instagram by South African youths between the ages of 18–25 years, with approximately four million active users in August 2019. Regardless of the positionality of both authors, the growth of meme pages such as *UCT Just Kidding* and *Wits Just Kidding* can be attributed to the consistency of meme production, which is laced with daily content that is targeted at their different public but mainly students. Therefore, increasing their visibility and accessibility to both students and advertisers and the resultant profitability of both pages (Mgcina 2021).

Consequently, there is a need to interrogate the echo chamber of these pages, that is, labour within the production and distribution of memes, to ascertain if the success of both pages presents an opportunity for exploitation. Likewise, the need to examine if systems are in place to effectively manage this "labour" within the creative process of memes production and distribution. It is germane to examine and interrogate the labour that goes into the production of internet memes—the software, time spent and mental-worth—associated with the creation of memes because the emergence of new media technologies and social networks has meant that the concept of labour has also evolved to accommodate digital proponents (Lorenz 2018). As Fuchs (2014) argues, the importance of labour within the age of the internet cannot be overemphasised, as new media technologies and platforms are avenues in which human labour can be exploited intensely.

Therefore, using critical political economy theory and drawing from six semi-structured interviews conducted with purposively selected meme creators and administrators of *UCT Just Kidding* and *Wits Just Kidding*, this study examines labour and exploitation within memes production and distribution from both student meme pages to ascertain how both pages conceptualise and manage labour. In addition, the paper seeks to investigate whether there is exploitation of labour, if it does exist, how it is managed by the stakeholders of the meme page. Therefore, this study seeks to address the following research questions, how is labour conceived by the administrators and memes creators of *UCT Just Kidding* and *Wits Just Kidding* within the digital sphere?, In what ways does the management of capital and labour during meme production result in the exploitation of digital labour within *UCT Just Kidding* and *Wits Just Kidding*?

Universities, student life & memes in South Africa

Student voices within institutions of higher learning are considered crucial in understanding student discourses and their overall student experience whether political, economic or social (Ask and Abidin 2018). In the South African context, the impact of student

voices can be linked to various pre and post-Apartheid movements such as—but are not limited to—*The Soweto Uprising of 1976*[1] and the *#FeesMustFall* of 2015.[2]

One of the many avenues that university students utilise to voice their triumphs and concerns is through student memes, which capture random and genuine student narratives during their time at the university. The online presence of such memes has meant that "student stories have culminated in a bona fide genre of memes dedicated to sharable, remixable and relatable narratives about student life world" (Ask and Abidin 2018, 2). Topics such as student debt, mental illnesses, procrastination and general campus news are humorously captured through these memes. Unique to student memes is their ability to combine self-defeating (self-depreciating) humour and university jargon, alongside semiotic resources to allow students to remark on the joys and challenges that come with being a university student (Ask and Abidin 2018). In South Africa, images of well-known politicians, musicians or public figures are used in juxtaposition to fit the context of examinations, missing assignments and tests.

The proliferation of student memes has seen the emergence of student meme virtual groups and pages. According to Piñon (2020), it is through these groups that students share insular in-jokes, which subsequently build an online community that promotes inclusivity and camaraderie. These pages consequently form part of a crucial component of communication amongst university students.

Contextual background to UCT just kidding and Wits just kidding

Singh (2019) argues that there is a proliferation of student meme pages in South Africa. This proliferation is attributed to social media and its affordances in South Africa, which has enabled ordinary people access to the digital sphere. According to Bosch (2020, 1), social media has become an integral part of the everyday life of ordinary South Africa. From democracy, health, dating and communication, people use social media daily, and it has become part of the "production and performance of contemporary sociality." One such production and performance is student memes, in which students communicate their daily realities and challenges within university spaces and contend with socio-economic, political and cultural issues.

Therefore, giving rise to the student meme pages within the South African higher education section with huge followers, that is, youths between the ages of 18–25 years (See Figure 1.) The prominence of student memes in South Africa can be linked to two pages found on Instagram, namely UCT Just Kidding (@uctjustkidding) and Wits Just Kidding (@witsjustkidding). UCT Just Kidding was founded in 2013 by Hilary Chipunza, Manenga Mungandi, Herbert Hill and Vykta Wakandigara. According to Seymour (2017, n/p), the page was initially named "Uni Just Kidding" to accommodate all university students within South Africa. However, the name was later changed to UCT Just Kidding due to a large number of UCT students arguing that this name would preserve the memes for their university. Inspired by UCT Just Kidding, Wits Just Kidding was established in August 2015 by Campion Zharima, who is the administrator, and owner of the page (Mgcina 2021).

[1]Soweto Uprising were a series of demonstrations and protests in South Africa (Tin 2001).
[2]The Fees Must Fall movement was a mobilisation of students with the aim of demanding free higher education (Hodes 2017).

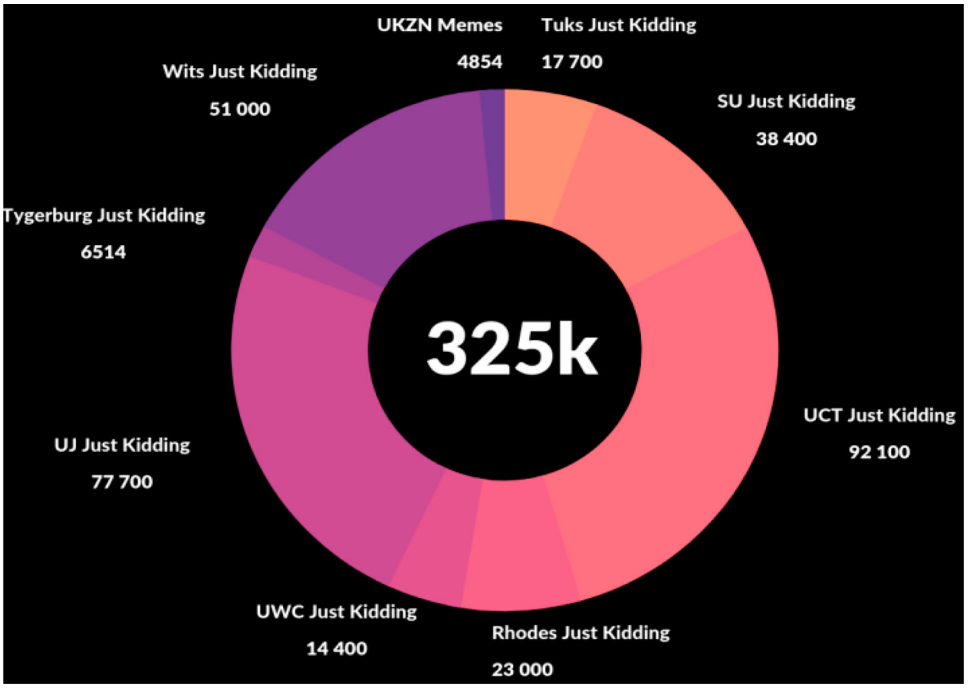


Figure 1. "Just Kidding" South African student meme pages found on Instagram alongside the number of followers each page has as of August 2019. Source: https://www.matiemedia.org/meme-madness-university-meme-pages- making-waves-on-instagram/.

Each page has an administrator who regulates the type of memes and content which appears on the page. Administrators are responsible for recruiting meme creators, also called meme makers, who "create original content, they integrate images or video with text, fonts, colours, and other aesthetic choices to deliver a message or an idea" (Rodríguez 2018, 112; Dewi 2019). Unique to these pages is their ability to consistently post daily content, which transcends memes and reflects the life of a university student in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Becker (2016) noted that using social media platforms such as Instagram has meant that South Africans—in this case, university students—use social media to document life while preserving memories. Because of the popularity and virality of student memes, it has become a promotional and marketing avenue for advertisers and sales merchandise who offer services and products that are aligned with student wants and needs, thus becoming a vital source of revenue for student meme pages. A critical review of the advertising brochure of both pages shows that the lowest advertising rate charged by both pages for advertising is R350 (±24 USD), and the revenue is managed by either the administrators or owners of the page.

Instagram: the commodification of memes & meme pages

Known for its "*like*" and "*follow*" options alongside its visual component, Instagram is a social media platform founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in October 2010 (Instagram, 2019). The app has 4.31 million users in the Global South. Among Instagram's

various profiles, there are infinite meme pages as the platform "has become a space for memes to operate away from the usual right-leaning platforms" (Holowka 2018, 163). In South Africa, pages such as *@black_ cart*, *@nochillmzansi* and *@innluu* are well-known for sharing memes. Internet memes are easily transmittable on social media platforms such as Instagram through the like, follow and share option, where users can send memes to their friends or followers. This contributes to the memes ability to become "spreadable media" and subsequently viral. Juza (2013, 9) substantiates the above, stating that "gathering many 'likes' makes the promotion of a meme and page easier (which is most important in the case of commercial companies)". As a result, memes are created to increase likes, viewership, and the number of followers. This idea links to popular culture, where "contemporary service members need to keep up with popular culture to compete for public attention" (Silvestri 2016, 28). As such, it can be argued that Instagram [meme pages] has become a storage and distribution site for memes, prolonging their digital footprint.

The commodification of media texts, including online texts, has its own implications. As McNair (1998, 109–110) states, the "text has to acquire an exchange-value (price) from which income and profit largely derive". Economically, student meme pages need to produce memes tailored around their audience (students) as they will be able to attract more followers. Through this, the pages are assumed to have a wide reach, thus, attracting advertisers to the page who aim to get customers out of the followers.

Contestation between labour and exploitation

Traditionally, labour has been seen as having a direct link to goods and commodities, such that it adds (surplus) value, highlighting the bargaining power versus worker discipline in creating wealth (Fisher and Bernardo 2014; Hardy 2014). Crucial to this study and to account for the dynamics of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the resultant knowledge base economy, Paakkari, Rautio, and Valasmo (2019) approached labour as culture- specific knowledge produced through affectivity, and is utilised as communication. The notion of work that is associated with labour has resulted in both terms being used interchangeably in some instances. The emergence of ICTs and the internet has challenged how work and labour are understood globally, where there has been an evolution in the labour market due to the gradual progression of digital technologies. The progression has meant that countries such as South Africa, which are regarded as being previously digitally excluded, have also benefitted from it (Mtsweni and Burge 2014).

Egan et al. (2021) noted that three key channels determine the shifts in labour markets: automation, connectivity, and innovation. It can then be argued that it is through the interaction of the aforementioned that the nature of work has advanced incorporating technology as an enabler. The emergence of the internet, alongside social media platforms, has challenged the conceptualisation of work, professions, and industries. Irani (2015, 227) noted that in the digital sphere, "work is turned into a commodity in which workers are transformed into a 'computation service'". This means that work is no longer defined according to geographical location as individuals can work in the comfort of their own spaces. As a result, the gig economy—defined as a labour market based on flexibility, short-term contracts, independent workers and freelance work—

outlines the new approach to work, which is crucial to this study. Exploring the gig economy in relation to meme creators, it can be argued that they should be deemed as "independent contractors" who produce cultural exchange through a range of memes (Wood et al. 2016).

In the South African context, the authors argue that content creation should be considered as work which should be compensated. Factors such as Covid-19, and loadshedding[3] have seen an increase in remote work, not limited to content—meme—creators. Meme creators—coincide with the expansion of workers who are making use of the internet to humorously capture current socio-political issues. Importantly, while there is an increase in the usage of smartphones, internet connectivity requires the purchase and use of [mobile] data, which is relatively expensive in South Africa compared to other emerging countries (Gschwari and Sinclair 2019).

Digital technologies have resulted in the emergence of digital labour, defined as creating and consuming products and information using digital machinery such as computers and mobile phones (Fuchs and Sandoval 2014). Through digital labour, the notion of being a worker is challenged and remains deeply misconstrued. Agger (2011) proposes that content produced through prolonged working time into leisure time should not be regarded as work. This study argues otherwise, maintaining that within new media and the gig economy, the lines of work and leisure have been increasingly blurred; providing normative and widespread exploitation (Ross 2013 cited in and Scholz 2013).

Creativity is a crucial component in meme creation; therefore, it is important also to explore creative labour, which has been used in the digital sphere to account for the prevalence of internauts. Prevailing literature on creative labour refers to creative industries that merge old and new sectors, such as role-playing and new media (Fitzgerald et al. 2012). This is a crucial point, as it includes social media sites such as Instagram, which provide visual and textual tools that assist users in expanding the creative capabilities of meme creators. In addition, creative labour is useful in understanding the combination of culture and semiotic resources within the production process of student memes. Furthermore, the impact of which the combination of symbolic meanings alongside cultural references contributes to the creative counterpart within meme production.

Within content creation, Butosi (2012) proposes that the activities of online users should be classified as productive and profitable digital work. Further, it is justified and reinforced by the lawfully obligatory terms of use alongside the privacy policy provided by social media platforms. As such, the terms of service are equivalent to work contracts in the offline world. This then raises ethical issues of digital work being unwaged as "there is a zero-wage, no set standard of hours that users must work, no benefits paid to workers, no bosses or supervisors that oversee the work day, and there is no explicit job description or workplace objectives" (Butosi 2012, 158).

Not negating the above contestations, we argue that it is through the significant disparities that the characteristics stated above are able to contribute towards the production of online commodities which accumulate and produce profit for its users in the digital economy. Thus, in this sense, work (and labour) in the digital space has been redefined. Therefore, to account for the transformation of labour within the

[3]Loadshedding is a South African colloquial term which refers to power outages which occur to prevent the collapse of the power system country-wide.

digital sphere, we argue that labour forms part of a huge component in producing (student) memes while simultaneously explaining the meme production process as a form of work. This notion of work within the digital space expounds the concept of labour and led to the inception of digital labour, which is the amalgamation of the different types of labour and organisation techniques which allow the creation and consumption of products and information through the use of digital machinery (Reed 2019 cited in Bown et al. 2019). For this study, we approach digital labour from Fuchs' (2015) perspective, that is, the commodification of disposable time which is used in meme production, distribution and consumption. As such, users of social media sites are believed to function as consumers and producers of the content found within the sites, contributing to audience commodity (Smythe 1981).

The above explanation of labour and work within meme production has highlighted how meme creators exert their time, effort and intellect in meme production to grow the meme page, which could present an opportunity for exploitation. Hesmondhalgh (2010) explains that traditionally exploitation is seen from the Marxist perspective of how capitalism is able to produce substantial surplus value. However, within the digital space, Lazzarato (2004, 198) argues that exploitation can be explained as when "knowledge produced collectively or collaboratively becomes private property, which obscures the social dimensions of wealth production". This study approaches exploitation from a Marxist and digital media perspective because the practices of work in a capitalist system as explored by Marx have been categorised by two components: exploitation and power imbalances (Graham, Hjorth, and Lehdonvirta 2017). Innately, digital arbitrations of work and labour amplify both components. In addition, the hierarchal structures found within the ownership of meme pages have an exploitative nature, which can be explained through Marxist conceptualisations. By looking at exploitation, this study does not aim to disparage the time and effort put in by those who create memes and the memes created. Exploring exploitation in the context of meme pages is meant to look at the nuanced acumens of the evolving world of digital work and labour and the various ways it is often dismissed (Briken et al. 2017).

Andrejevic (2013 in Scholz, 2013:154) reiterates that "exploitation … is not simply about the loss of monetary value, but also a loss of control over one's productive and creative activity". Through this, the loss over productive or creative capacity has meant that those who create memes get their ideas—their memes—used without any acknowledgement for their labour and this is more worrisome when the meme page monetises such memes. Lorenz (2018, n/p) notes, "memers represent a burgeoning sector of the labour force that currently has no job security or formal protection". Therefore, contesting this can be challenging as the agreements and rules which are put in place for both the administrator and meme creator are often vague or there are no written documents stating the condition of service. In addition, while producing memes can be perceived as a voluntary activity shared with meme pages, it is, to a certain extent, highly exploitative due to the lack of reward even when such memes are commercialised and profits are derived from them. Hence, ignoring the time, effort, and intellect spent preparing the memes by the meme's creators.

Andrejevic (2013, 152) while buttressing this further held that "productive activities can, in some contexts, be described as both voluntary and subject to exploitation". As much as meme production is pleasurable, the benefits and rewards resulting from the

memes are unequally distributed. Fuchs (2014, 16) argues that "this exploitation does not feel like toil, it is rather more like play and takes place during leisure time outside of wage labour—it is unpaid labour and play labour" This process is a juxtaposition as the work that is done is both oppressive and liberating (Boehnert 2019). The power dimensions are, thus, questioned from three perspectives: from the person who creates the meme; the owner or administrator of the meme page; and the social media platform from which the page operates. It can then be seen that exploitation in meme production remains an area which has not been explored, and it is through the understanding (digital) labour and ownership within social media that exploitation can be seen and further understood.

Theoretical underpin: critical political economy (CPE) theory

CPE theory explores the unequal power distributions and arrangements within media (Hardy 2014). The theory puts emphasis on capitalist societies, where the media's function should be viewed through lenses of historical, organisational, political and cultural components (Iosifidis 2016). This means that media products are deemed as economic and cultural goods in the sense that they represent economic aspects that contribute to the production of meaning within a society. Therefore, this theory allows us to examine the complexities of power and ownership in attempts to understand labour and exploitation in meme pages. As such, the theory will shed light on the professional practices of meme creators and administrators of the meme pages and how these intersect with the commercially induced digital sphere.

Political, economic and cultural factors determine what is produced and distributed within meme production. According to McChesney (2004), media owners determine the type of content that appears and does not. For meme pages, they form part of an industry which is owned and controlled by administrators (private individuals) who then regulate and determine what can or cannot be seen on the page, thus making them gatekeepers of the page. Consequently, this mounts pressure on meme creators to produce memes that will attract the most metrics (likes, comments and shares). Kellner (2011, 4) comments that "the system of production often determines what sort of artefacts will be produced, what structural limits will be there as to what can and cannot be said and shown, and what sort of audience effects a text may generate".

The idea of effect relates to the economic value which memes can generate for the page. According to Bhayroo (2008), Naisbitt and Bisesi (1983), new media technologies have equated information technology with economic production, where information and technological transformation can operate in juxtaposition with economic growth and new information economies. Hence, student memes can be seen as products of the liberal market, which garners funding mostly from sourced advertisers and endorsers. Therefore, we argue that meme pages have a dual function for administrators and their audience—a communication hub and a business platform that sells a specific socio-cultural context (tertiary education student life) and context-specific advertising space. Funding and distribution of resources within media institutions are central to the theory. As noted above, meme pages are financially dependent on advertisers. Meme pages on Instagram have a range of followers and are, thus, able to attract a hand full

of advertisers who offer financial gain or other benefits for the meme page. As Latiff and Safiee (2015, 18) noted, "advertising on Instagram is a huge advantage for these sellers as there's no third party involved, no fancy media or agency budget needed, so it's just between them and the owner of the account".

The economic and political facets form part of CPE in its entirety, as noted it is "defined by the claim that culture is linked to economic structures and that any attempt to understand the products of media need to include the understanding of how they are produced and how that relates to broader structures of society" (Hardy 2014, 24). In the context of this study, investigating culture through the lenses of the CPE approach has meant exploring the political and economic structures of the meme pages which influence their construction and sustenance. Memes are cultural products used by students in the construction of collective student identity, representation and culture, thus fostering virtual communities. Within the South African context, student memes reflect university student identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa through semiotic resources which reflect the broader neoliberal economy of the country.

Methods

This study adopts qualitative research methods. According to Dominick and Wimmer (1994), qualitative approach enables researchers to construct meanings and their embodiment within social actions from the world. Therefore, within this study's context, using a qualitative approach will enable the researchers to interrogate and examine labour and exploitation within student meme pages and have a comprehensive view of the social problem. Therefore, using a case-study approach of two South African student meme pages found on Instagram—*UCT Just Kidding* (@uctjustkidding) and *Wits Just Kidding* (@witsjustkidding), data was garnered through semi-structured interviews with six individuals (three from both pages). Two administrators and one content creator from both *UCT Just Kidding* and *Wits Just Kidding* were purposively sampled and interviewed between November 2019 and January 2020. Robinson (2014) argues that purposive sampling enables researchers to intentionally select research participants with a wealth of experience and knowledge that will help explain the social problem of the study. Therefore, by interviewing these memes creators and administrators, a critical understanding of labour and exploitation within memes production was ascertained. The collected data was analysed through a thematic analysis, where themes and patterns arising from the data were identified (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Carrying out a thematic analysis meant that the researcher had flexibility in understanding labour and exploitation in meme pages. Consequently, using thematic analysis allowed the researcher to conduct a rich and in-depth analysis of the collected interview data.

Findings and discussion

Two themes of understanding labour and exploitation of labour will inform the discussion within this section, as these are the dominant themes that emerged from the collected interview data.

Understanding labour from a meme creator and administrator's perspective

Most study participants understood work and labour based on their own practices as meme creators or an administrator for *UCT Just Kidding* or *Wits Just Kidding*. In addition, their perception of labour was centered around the its traditional conception, which is centered around goods, commodities and generating wealth (Fisher and Bernardo 2014; Hardy 2014) which negates digital labour. According to Rogan Hodgson, an administrator and memelord[4] for *UCT Just Kidding, "when you think about labour you think about laws of labour … which is wages, that's not the point. You're doing it [producing memes] as a hobby so it's not labour*" (R. Hodgson, interview, November 15, 2019). Traditionally, labour laws are understood as rules which are aimed at regulating the contractual agreement between an employer, employee and trade unions, thus "balancing the rights, duties and obligations of employers and employees as equal legal actors in the processes of work and production" (McCallum 2005, 1). It is through the guidance of labour laws that the stakeholders involved can warrant good working relations and rectify some of the differences which can possibly emerge between employer and employee. Based on this understanding, Rogan considers the meme production activity as devoid of labour because it does not adhere to South African labour laws.

Furthermore, his assertion reveals that labour, or rather, work in the digital sphere, is still conceptualised and understood through the former perspective, negating the virtual proponents which make labour and work inimitable. Therefore, Lorenz (2018, n/p) calls for the unionisation of meme creators as, according to him, meme creators "represent a burgeoning sector of the labour force that currently has no job security or formal protection". Such a conception calls for a holistic discussion of what constitutes work or labour within the digital sphere because cultural products like memes produced through hobbies rely heavily on labour despite showing traces of being a hobby which should be recognised. Consequently, Ahlquist (2019 cited in Lorenz (2019, n/p), posits that although meme creators "are not direct employees of these tech platforms, nor are they independent contractors for them. But they produce, directly or indirectly, the bulk of these platforms' income, and current labour protections do not cover this type of "mediated work"".

In a meme page, Rogan of *UCT Just Kidding* argued that labour is mostly tied to the duties of an administrator. He notes that:

> *I feel like it's more labour when I am doing the admin side. I mean things like reading hundreds of DMs every day and communicating with businesses … and they all wanna know the insights and interpret them.. Uhm … I think there is a lot more pressure as the admin because like it's directly related to you. Like you have to focus on a lot more than just to make [memes] … it feels like you're running a business as well as trying to create* (R. Hodgson, interview, November 15, 2019).

A similar position was shared by Herbert Hill, who is the founder and a memelord of *UCT Just Kidding*. He stated that "*you've got people in the DMs asking about different stuff, you've got people asking for advice. Some people are trying to raise awareness, some companies are reaching out. So that's basically where the majority of the work is"* (H. Hill, interview, November 19, 2019). Such an approach to labour from both—the administrator and founder of

[4]A memelord is a term used by Cohen and Kenny (2020) to describe an individual that consistently posts or create their own memes while they concurrently keep track of their specific community of followers.

UCT Just Kidding—of classifying labour based on the kind of activities is questionable as it tends to see labour based on intensive duties. Thus, the production of memes is considered less labour intensive, unlike posting memes, maintaining the page, and engaging with their specific community of followers (Cohen and Kenny 2020).

To Campion Zharima, the founder and memelord of *Wits Just Kidding*, the meme production process by meme creators cannot be classified as labour as it is unpaid, and draws heavily on creativity (C. Zharima, interview, November 20, 2019). Evidently, meme production for Campion has meant that it demonstrates itself as a form of unpaid endeavour, thus drawing on the idea of free labour (Wittel 2012), as noted in the literature section. While Campion's assertion buttresses the idea of meme creation as a form of unpaid labour, it highlights a form of exploitation[5] within meme production. It can be argued that, although there is no promise for recompense, the free labour of the meme creators is a form of investment with, to a certain extent, the anticipation of commercial and reputational return (Gandini 2016; Gandini, Bandinelli, and Cossu 2017).

For many meme creators, having no promise of rewards for creating memes is their reality. Likes, shares and comments are seen as a measure of success and an adequate recompense for their labour. Rogan Hodgson of *UCT Just Kidding,* while buttressing the point, held that, "*you do not know what it's like to get 7000 likes, it feels really good*" (R. Hodgson, interview, November 15, 2019). As such, it can be deduced that for Rogan, there is an ontological association between likes and affect, such that obtaining likes results in positive dispositions and sentiments. Terranova (2000) maintains that affective activities such as producing content for likes and comments should be considered labour, mainly because content (meme) creators willingly engage in production in exchange for communicative fulfilment beyond the surface level.

To Peace Ndlovu, a memelord of *Wits Just Kidding*, his role and activities within the page constitute work and labour. He recalled how:

> *Since I joined the page, it became more of a job [chuckles] … because I'm expected to post at certain time, because I can't just say, 'I'll just post in two months' time when I finally get the idea'. I must make sure that I get ideas within days … for the growth of the page. I must post about, maybe two to three memes [a day]* (Ndlovu, interview, November 22, 2019).

From the above discussion, both the meme creators and administrators perceive labour differently, their conceptualisation is largely shaped by the perception of some activities within meme production being leisure, which is fun and is derived mainly from creative processes as such, it does not constitute work or labour that should be rewarded. Takudzwa Murwira from *UCT Just Kidding* summed this up by stating, "*I would not consider producing memes as labour because, like I said, I just do this for fun. I don't really think of it as being a full-time job … I don't feel like I am obliged to produce a meme every week or whatever*" (T. Murwira, interview, November 14, 2019). Paasonen (2016) explained that "the users of social media may obviously not identify their activities as work—immaterial, affective or other—given the degree to which these engagements facilitate diversions from work obligations". It is then evident that there is a distinct combination of amusement and labour within the production of student memes. Thus, understanding labour from a perspective of entertainment and leisure has meant that labour practices within

[5]This will be discussed in detail in the subsequent sections of the analysis.

the digital world should be viewed from human communicative practices that contribute towards maintaining and producing economic value for the meme pages.

Exploitation of labour

From the above, it was established that conceptualising labour in relation to a meme page has revealed that the meme production process is susceptible to exploitation of labour, which is to the detriment of the meme creators and, to a certain extent, the memelord. There were interesting insights with regard to the way the *Wits Just Kidding* team viewed exploitation of labour in contrast to those of the *UCT Just Kidding* team. For Rogan Hodgson of *UCT Just Kidding*, having exploitation of labour within meme production was tough to conceptualise. He stated, "it's a difficult question, which is subjective" (R. Hodgson, interview, November 15, 2019). The implication is that the discourse of exploitation in meme production is subject to the positionality of the meme creator or administrator. Thus, juxtaposing the complex temperament of exploitation within the digital sphere. To Herbert Hill of *UCT Just Kidding*, exploitation within the meme production process is largely evident, and this manifests in two ways, when credit due is not given to the meme creator and used by others, and material reward for the memes is commercialised by the page (H. Hill, interview November 19, 2019). Hill's assertion is salient, as it also points to the aspect of immaterial labour, where capitalist development aims to render production an increasingly social and technological process. Fuchs (2014) notes that the creation of value through immaterial labour is generated by forms of activity that remain unremunerated because they fall outside of the domains of activities which the wage form "applies".

For the *Wits Just Kidding* team, exploitation of labour within their meme production process was refuted initially. Thamsanqa Mahlangu, an administrator and memelord stated that "*uhm, I will speak for our side … there is no exploitation … There isn't it at all because if there's anyone that has been exploited, it will be ourselves by ourselves"* (T. Mahlangu, interview, November 22, 2019). For him, the production of student memes is linked with self-exploitation, which can be traced back to Marxist ideas, where "most of the time there is no distinction between self-exploitation (where the ancient direct producer pushes herself to perform surplus labour in order to pay landlords, lenders or the tax man) and capitalist exploitation" (Brennan, et al., 2017: 270). Likewise, Campion Zharima shared a similar view and stated that there is no exploitation of labour which occurs within their team, and his reason was based on the account that those who are part of *Wits Just Kidding* have always wanted to join the page. He stated that "*you need to understand that most of the people, all of the people that [I/we] have recruited have always wanted to be part of the page"* (C. Zharima, interview, November 20, 2019).

Both assertions show that exploitation of labour is concealed within the framework of meme creators wanting to share their ideas and memes using the meme pages to gain popularity with the public. Peace Ndlovu substantiated the above, stating, "*I enjoy doing this. That is the reason that I'm still here, doing it. I haven't left the page, because I can just leave anytime. I really enjoy doing it … I don't feel like I'm losing anything or doing anything"*(Ndlovu, interview, November 22, 2019). Peace's discernment of exploitation of labour is similar to the argument brought forward by Fuchs (2014), who proposed that the challenge with exploitation is that it is often concealed as a form of

entertainment and play which befalls during one' free time as such, it becomes indissoluble from labour. This shadows the line between what is considered labour and leisure time. However, one should note that "labour time is extended to leisure time and leisure time becomes labour time" (Fuchs 2014, 16). It is then evident that there is a distinct combination of amusement and labour within the production of student memes, which to a certain extent, masquerades the process of exploitation. It can be argued that the production of student memes assimilates and integrates the aspect of leisure, which, in retrospect, contributes towards the production of economic value for the meme pages.

The interview data revealed that both *UCT Just Kidding* and *Wits Just Kidding* have a business constituent ascribed to them. Having an active audience and stable engagement on both pages has meant that they are able to make money through advertising student-related products and services. Rogan Hodgson stated "*UCT Just Kidding is so large that the platform can be considered an advertising platform which one can make money out of*" (R. Hodgson, interview, November 15, 2019). Thus, the commercial element of both pages can be associated with the business practices of any media house, where they are capitalist and commercially driven (Fuchs 2014; Hardy 2014). Herbert Hill explained the business component of UCT Just Kidding, stating that:

> *We get companies that approach us and they want to introduce products specifically for students. So, we charge them for posts on our page, we charge them for stories on our page, basically for any exposure we're gonna give them. But obviously we also have people we don't promote, it's not just 'bring your money' … it's like 'what are you posting?' 'What will the impact be?' You can't just come with your rubbish post because you're giving us money* (H. Hill, interview, November 19, 2019).

Dahlberg (2015, 285) argues that there has been an increment in social media advertising and this is "becoming ever more subtly integrated into the stream of everyday digital interaction". Both pages have advertised products and services that align and cater to students' wants and needs to increase revenue for their growth, thereby establishing the CPE theory argument that the media is propelled by the necessity to seek and obtain advertising (Govender 2015). The advertising rates vary, with *UCT Just Kidding* charging from R500 (±33.49 USD) for a single Instagram story and R750 (±50.23 USD) per post on their Instagram feed.[6] While at *Wits Just Kidding,* a minimum amount of R350 (± 23.44 USD) is charged for an advert.

Exploitation of labour becomes dominant in the management of the funds for the operations of the pages. According to Rogan Hodgson, the funds generated from *UCT Just Kidding* are used to compensate the administrators and memelords which ensure the visibility of the page across all social media platforms on a monthly basis (R. Hodgson, interview, November 15, 2019). Nevertheless, findings from the study show that not all involved with the page as meme creators or administrators are compensated. Takudzwa Murwira, a meme creator stated that he has never been compensated for the memes which he created and were posted by the page. According to him, "*I think the least that I get is maybe a mention when they post the meme … and then from there, I get maybe a bit of recognition, either from people I haven't met or some of the people that actually*

[6]The rates are only applicable to students and small businesses. They are subject to change depending on the individual or corporation which approaches the page.

follow me, my friends and maybe some family members" (T. Murwira, interview, November 14, 2019). This reiterates Murphy's (2018: 57) view that "although there are internet users that receive compensation for their productivity online, such as paid bloggers etc., the majority of people who create content do so for the emotional compensation". In this case, emotional compensation can be linked to affective labour, where mentioning the creator on the meme is seen as "renumerating" them. However, Herbert Hill stated that not everyone gets compensated as only individuals who constantly produce memes relatable to the public are compensated (H. Hill, interview, November 19, 2019).

For *Wits Just Kidding*, most participants suggest a lack of transparency with the accrued funds and its management. For instance, Peace Ndlovu states that he is unaware of the cost of advertisements and revenue derived from the page. This position was shared by Campion Zharima, who stated, "*[Peace] doesn't know, if you ask him. He might tell you numbers, but I don't even think … he's sure"* (C. Zharima, interview, November 20, 2019). This highlights the ambiguity attached to the management of funds, and agreements between Campion, the founder of the page, and Peace. Russ (2014, 171) argues that "transparency of decision-making would reveal inner workings". This lack of transparency reflects the power dynamics and structural inequalities within the page (Wasko 2005). This is supported by Soha and McDowell (2014: 2), who note that "memes are an immense collection of heavily monetised creative work, often with no financial compensation for the individual producers as well as an unclear, tentative and shifting set of rights and control mechanisms over content". Evidently, meme creators are not paid or rewarded from the revenue from the page.

According to Campion Zharima, while explaining the non-payment stated:

> *The people that I have recruited have always wanted to be part of the page … And part of them wanting to be part of the page was never about money. They wanted to do it because they felt it was cool to be part of the page. And to get the perks of getting into parties for free, getting freebies because we get freebies a lot. If one of them was working on the project, we share it. There's nothing hidden, they know …* (C. Zharima, interview, November 20, 2019).

The above reveals how exploitation of labour for *Wits Just Kidding* is concealed through the desire of being part of the page and obtaining perks. This echoes Nixon's (2015:10) argument that "exploitation is achieved by controlling the conditions", and in this instance, Campion has control over the allocation of the perks while also dictating the reasons which motivated others to join the page (which exclude monetary benefits). The rationale for the non-payment centres around the idea that the meme page is not a formal business structure with a mechanism to determine payment rate. According to Campion Zharima:

> *The whole point of this page is not business because once you bring a business mind, you gotta pay them and pay them fairly too. So how much do you pay someone who makes 10 memes a day? How much do you pay someone who doesn't make 10 memes a day? This is why it's hard to come up with the payment structure because this is not business, when you make it business it becomes less fun you know?* (C. Zharima, interview, November 20, 2019).

While the above assertion suggests that *Wits JustKidding* is not a business, the transactions of taking and placing advertisements show traces of the page being a virtual business. The case of *Wits Just Kidding* not having a definitive payment structure for the page allows for many loopholes that result in labour exploitation. Although *Wits*

Just Kidding is not a registered business, it is able to obtain income like a business through the commercialisation of the meme page to produce transactions and advertising deals, as a result, the page is comparable to other e-commerce businesses (Latiff and Safiee 2015). From the above, it was evident that labour exploitation occurs in two ways: first, through labour-power, ownership of the page. Second, it can also be seen in a monetary and economic sense, where meme creators are not remunerated for the memes which they produce.

Conclusion: rethinking exploitation in meme pages

The findings from the study suggest that the administrators and meme creators from *UCT Just Kidding* and *Wits Just Kidding*'s understanding of labour in relation to meme production and distribution is largely shaped by how they conceive exploitation. Exploitation was mostly ascribed to traditional forms of labour, as most participants refuted its multifaceted nature. In both pages, exploitation (in a monetary and non-monetary sense) was evident, and this maintains Wittel's (2012) argument that exploitation sometimes surpasses money and can be in the form of an idea or influence. This exploitation was facilitated by the narrow conceptualisation of labour by both meme creators and administrators, who exclude creative labour or activities of meme production engaged in as a hobby. This resulted in some components of meme production being classified as not being work or labour that should be rewarded. As Wong (2017), cited in Gandini and Graham (2017: 199) highlights, "creative industries make jobs desirable and at the very same time create the conditions for self- exploitation and exploitation by employers. We may love the work, but we have the stress and lack of financial security".

This juxtaposes Terranova's (2013) cited in and Scholz (2013, 53) assertion that "a new kind of exploitation which concerns the immaterial commons of cultural and technical production" is arising and calls for the need to rethink what constitutes labour and exploitation within the digital sphere. Such rethinking should reflect the realities of the ever-dynamic digital environment, enabling the robust relationship between digital labour and exploitation (Fuchs 2014). Such conceptualisation of labour must go beyond the labour laws but reflect the everyday actions and activities that enable and facilitate memes production and distribution that are not encapsulated in the labour laws. For instance, after his interview, Tshepo[7] had a change of perspective, commenting that he felt exploited. He noted that:

> *You know, the interview we had got me thinking, why am I really doing this? The page is growing and promoting stuff every day, but I don't get a cent from all that". When I am at home, [I] have to go all out to get data and to get content and post, maybe I am just being greedy 'idk' [I don't know], but I really enjoy what I am doing* (T. Smith, interview, November 26, 2019).

Tshepo's assertion calls for a nuanced understanding of labour within the digital sphere as material and immaterial labour, pleasurable, creative acts, and time are invaluable digital assets that should be rewarded. This nuanced understanding of exploitation under the conditions of digital labour and exploitation will challenge the ways in which exploitation is understood by those who create and post content on social media platforms, thereby

[7]A pseudo-name used to protect the identity of the participant in this instance as the participant was not comfortable revealing his name post-interview.

maintaining their enclave (Marx 1976). Also, while the findings of this study align with that of the global north, the rethinking of labour and exploitation within the South African context is salient due to the historical antecedence of exploitation and the gross inequalities that exist. A comprehensive legislative framework that recognises labour in the ever-growing digital economy and sphere will ensure that such exploitation is addressed.

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