

Sewing Machine, Smartphone, and the “I”: A Study of Media Use Among Garment Workers in the Context of Alienation

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Abstract: Based on fieldwork in Guangzhou’s “Zhongda Textile Circle”, this study explores how garment workers navigate alienation through mediatized practices. Employing participant observation and in-depth interviews, it identifies a triple-alienation dilemma—survival, social, and ideological—driven by the dual control of assembly-line logic and digital platforms. The findings demonstrate that workers are not passive victims of structural oppression; instead, they exert agency through digital media to reclaim private time, reconstruct social networks (both kinship and weak ties), and foster reflexive self-development. While these micro-resistance practices are fragmented and localized, they serve as vital tools for reclaiming subjectivity and emotional energy. Ultimately, the research highlights the pivotal role of digital media in the interplay between alienation and resistance, confirming that marginalized laborers remain active, independent subjects despite the pervasive constraints of modern industry.

Keywords: Alienated labor; Resistance; Mediatized practice; Subjectivity

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1. Introduction

Drawing upon Marx’s theory of alienated labor and Foucault’s perspective on bodily discipline, contemporary manufacturing has achieved profound control over workers’ physical bodies, social interactions, and attention through the upgrading of mechanical equipment and the implementation of workshop surveillance networks. Taking garment workers in Guangzhou’s “Zhongda Textile Hub”—a region undergoing urban spatial restructuring—as a case study, this group endures ten to twelve hours of high-intensity mechanized labor daily within the context of an “accelerated society” driven by capital’s pursuit of maximal profit. The existential time and space of these workers are strictly confined to the circuit between the workshop and the dormitory, resulting in chronic physical pain and severe psychological strain ^[1].

Existing literature has established that portable media, such as smartphones, serve a fundamental connective

function for marginalized labor groups in maintaining social networks, accessing pragmatic information, and facilitating emotional venting [2-5]; furthermore, scholars have noted that the physical suffering of laborers constitutes an objective form of everyday resistance [6]. However, current scholarship lacks a systematic empirical investigation into the dynamic micro-processes by which assembly-line workers—subjected to extreme time-space compression and rigorous disciplinary constraints—actively mobilize media resources to ameliorate their living conditions.

Synthesizing the aforementioned theoretical strands and practical dilemmas, this study selects the Zhongda Textile Hub as a fieldwork site to explore the specific action logic of garment workers under conditions of extreme alienation. Specifically, it examines how they utilize everyday mediatized practices to alleviate physical and mental exhaustion, reconstruct social ties, and establish subjective identity. Ultimately, this research aims to systematically address the core academic question of how digital media intervention provides a space for micro-resistance and a pathway for self-reconstruction for grassroots laborers.

2. Method

This study was primarily conducted using participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews as part of a fieldwork methodology. Between December 2023 and May 2025, the researcher undertook multiple field visits to the Zhongda Textile Hub in Guangzhou, totaling three months of immersive investigation. During this period, in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 garment workers, centered around three core thematic axes: “media usage profiles”, “social interaction patterns”, and “everyday life experiences” (Table 1).

Table 1. Profile of interviewees

ID	Gender	Age	Work Tenure	Hometown	Marital Status
S1	male	30	3	Henan	Married
S2	male	50	16	Hunan	Married
S3	male	37	23	Hubei	Married
S4	male	37	11	Hubei	Married
S5	female	30	15	Hubei	Married
S6	male	37	24	Hubei	Single
S7	male	26	1	Guangdong	Single
S8	female	38	24	Hubei	Married
C1	male	45	21	Hubei	Single
C2	female	31	16	Hubei	Single
O1	male	51	30	Hubei	Married

3. Findings

3.1. Extended media: Attentional adjustment within time-space compression

At 9:00 AM, S3 sits at her workstation, flips the switch of the serging machine, and as the roar begins, she puts on her headphones, entering the world of audiobooks. This “listen-while-working” mediatized scenario is not a

random individual choice, but a response to the pervasive characteristics of assembly-line labor: monotony and repetition. When performing single, simplified tasks for prolonged periods, the human brain is prone to boredom; compounded by the ambient factory noise, the most common emotions experienced by garment workers are dullness and fatigue ^[7]. As interviewee S3 noted: “You get sleepy so easily after working for a while, especially around two or three in the afternoon—it’s exhausting.”

Labor, for these workers, has become a form of attrition. Compared to the past, sewing machines have evolved from manual thread-trimming to fully automated systems. However, this technological progress has not lightened the workers’ burden. Instead, it has directly contributed to the temporal alienation of labor. Driven by capital’s relentless pursuit of profit, the simplified procedures on the sewing machine are converted into surplus attention and extended working hours extracted from the workers.

During fieldwork, the researcher observed that workers are not entirely passive subjects in the face of alienated assembly-line labor. Rather, they employ “tactical maneuvers” to carve out pockets of time and spaces for respite. These tactics generally fall into two categories: first, glancing at their smartphones during brief lulls in work; and second, wearing headphones to immerse themselves in the virtual time of audiobooks or short dramas, thereby accelerating their perception of the arduous working day.

3.2. “Being seen” in digital space: Network reconstruction amidst the dilemma of atomization

High-intensity assembly-line labor severely depletes the physiological energy of garment workers, forcing them to adopt extreme physical recovery strategies and proactively sever offline social interactions. As interviewee S1 remarked: “When I have time off, I’d rather just lie in bed and rest than go out; I still have to work the next day.” This predicament of atomized existence prompts workers to turn toward digital spaces in search of emotional compensation and social connection.

Confronted with prolonged spatial separation from family members, workers employ visual communication technologies to engage in remote family practices, thereby maintaining the core function of familial emotional support. High-frequency video interactions establish a stable sense of family identity and provide ontological security for these precarious workers against the pressures of alienated labor ^[8]. Respondent S1 noted that “hearing the child’s voice feels very warm”, highlighting how the remote “presence” afforded by digital media effectively dispels feelings of physical loneliness.

Beyond kinship-based strong ties, social media platforms like short-form video apps provide workers with a “virtual third space” to reconstruct weak-tie networks. By posting snippets of their labor on these platforms to garner likes and interactions, workers establish social visibility and subjective value through the perceived gaze of others ^[9]. During existential crises, such as the industry’s off-season, workers utilize comment sections for collective expressions of negative emotions. This interaction ritual, centered on shared life situations, transforms individual anxiety into communal emotional energy, helping them find the spiritual sustenance needed to confront the pressures of reality within a virtual community.

3.3. The “one-dimensional man”: Desensitized labor and the agentic subject

Capitalist production logic dismantles complex labor into standardized, repetitive motions to maximize managerial efficiency, leading to severe intellectual deprivation and cognitive depletion for the workers. Within the highly subdivided garment assembly line, workers are isolated within singular operational segments—such as cutting or

sewing—where their labor process is entirely subordinated to the mechanical rhythm of the machinery, and they are called “feeder” by Marx ^[10]. This results in the total compression of the subject’s reflexive space. Such long-term, localized standardization fixates the worker’s attention on a narrow production zone and severs their access to macro-social information, thereby triggering deep spiritual emptiness and one-dimensional thought patterns. This is exemplified by respondent S5, who, feeling “too bored in the dormitory” on rest days, proactively returned to the workshop to maintain a state of labor.

Within this context of extreme alienation, however, certain agentic workers leverage smart media to acquire systemic knowledge, thereby initiating a reflective construction of the subject. Digital media serves as a cognitive tool that breaks through resource constraints, providing robust external informational support during the interludes of mechanized labor. For instance, respondent C2 actively accumulated professional skills necessary for a career transition by consistently watching and practicing video editing tutorials on social media platforms. Such resource acquisition through mediatized practices effectively assists workers in establishing self-development goals within a closed production system, providing a substantive cognitive foundation for transcending class rigidity and exploring future career trajectories.

4. Conclusion

Based on fieldwork conducted in Guangzhou’s Zhongda Textile Hub, this study reveals a triple-alienation dilemma—encompassing conditions of existence, social interaction, and ideological consciousness—faced by garment workers under the dual control of assembly lines and digital platforms. Concurrently, it documents the micro-resistance practices enacted by these workers through the affordances of smart media. Although such resistance is characterized by fragmentation and localization and remains insufficient to fully dismantle the structural hegemony of capital, these behaviors provide compelling evidence of marginalized laborers’ existence as independent agentic subjects. By illustrating the authentic landscape of individuals utilizing mediatized functions to navigate existential crises, this research offers robust empirical support for understanding the reconstruction of subjectivity among laborers in the digital age.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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