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Meta-Analysis on Labor Self-Exploitation: Trends and Patterns in Contemporary Precarious Work

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Resumen

Este estudio presenta un metaanálisis sobre autoexplotación laboral, basado en veinte estudios empíricos revisados sistemáticamente entre 2010 y 2024. El objetivo fue identificar patrones comunes, efectos mensurables y brechas metodológicas en la literatura sobre trabajo precario en contextos contemporáneos. Los estudios analizados se llevaron a cabo en sectores como plataformas digitales, trabajo informal, educación superior y la economía creativa, involucrando principalmente a trabajadores autónomos, cuidadores, migrantes y trabajadores por cuenta propia. El análisis combinó métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos. Diez estudios roporcionaron datos estadísticos comparables, lo que permitió la estimación de los tamaños del efecto (d = 0,30–0,75) y la identificación de heterogeneidad moderada (I^2 = 58,3%). Además, se observaron configuraciones recurrentes de autoexplotación, asociadas con presión simbólica, flexibilidad forzada y autonomía simulada. También se desarrolló una clasificación temática basada en los estudios cualitativos, destacando factores macrosociales, subjetivos e interseccionales. Los hallazgos sugieren que la autoexplotación es una forma internalizada de precariedad laboral que opera como mecanismo estructural en el trabajo del siglo XXI. El estudio propone directrices para futuras investigaciones transdisciplinarias, incluyendo el desarrollo de escalas comparables y marcos interpretativos sensibles a las dimensiones simbólicas, afectivas y estructurales del trabajo.

Palabras claves: Autoexplotación laboral, trabajo precario, metaanálisis, plataformas digitales, burnout, empleo informal, autoempleo, economía gig.

Abstract

This study presents a meta-analysis on labor self-exploitation, based on twenty empirical studies systematically reviewed between 2010 and 2024. The objective was to identify common patterns, measurable effects, and methodological gaps in the literature on precarious work in contemporary contexts. The analyzed studies were conducted in sectors such as digital platforms, informal labor, higher education, and the creative economy, mainly involving freelancers, caregivers, migrants, and self-employed workers. The analysis combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Ten studies provided comparable statistical data, allowing for the estimation of effect sizes (d = 0.30–0.75) and the identification of moderate heterogeneity (I^2 = 58.3%). Additionally, recurrent configurations of self-exploitation were observed, associated with symbolic pressure, forced flexibility, and simulated autonomy. A thematic classification was also developed based on the qualitative studies, highlighting macrosocial, subjective, and intersectional factors. The findings suggest that self-exploitation is an internalized form of labor precariousness that operates as a structural mechanism in 21st-century work. The study proposes guidelines for future transdisciplinary research, including the development of comparable scales and interpretative frameworks sensitive to the symbolic, affective, and structural dimensions of labor.

Key words: Labor self-exploitation, precarious work, meta-analysis, digital platforms, burnout, informal employment, self-employment, gig economy.

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1. Introducción

Labor self-exploitation has emerged as a central issue in the analysis of contemporary work, particularly in contexts characterized by flexibility, outsourcing, and digital platforms (Billings & Blee, 2004; Van Parijs, 2015; Marín Ossa, 2024). This phenomenon refers to the internalization of productive pressure, leading workers to push themselves beyond conventional limits without direct imposition from a superior. Rather than traditional exploitation imposed by hierarchical structures, the individual becomes their own productivity manager, normalizing long hours, multitasking, and reduced personal time (Corrigan, 2015; Fourie, 2023; Strebkov & Shevchuk, 2019; Aguirre, 1994; Wei, 2015; Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007).

Studies on labor self-exploitation have employed various theories to explain its emergence and development. Some works are based on human capital theory, suggesting that self-exploitation arises when individuals invest in their own human capital to improve their job prospects, even at the expense of personal well-being (Becker, 1964). Others adopt Marxist theories of exploitation, arguing that self-exploitation is a consequence of capitalism, where workers are compelled to work beyond their limits to survive (Marx, 1867). Recent research by Mychajluk (2024), Nichols et al. (2022), and Morris et al. (2024) has identified self-exploitation as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors, manifesting in diverse labor contexts.

In today's context—marked by the platform economy, virtualization of work, and global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic—self-exploitation has gained visibility. Labor dynamics have intensified the tension between autonomy and vulnerability, especially in sectors such as creative work (Armstrong, 2013; Armano & Murgia, 2013) and digital platforms (Vieira, 2023; Ozimek, 2019). Several studies have shown that even in skilled and seemingly autonomous occupations, performance demands and symbolic precarization adversely affect workers' physical and mental health (Fong, 2024; Shah, 2024). Additionally, research by Choe (2017), Hadar (2023) and Navarro Claro & Naranjo Africano (2023) indicates that these labor forms intensify emotional burdens and erode the boundaries between personal and professional life. However, the empirical literature on the subject remains fragmented, with diverse approaches and lacking a comparative quantitative synthesis.

Methodologically, research on labor self-exploitation has employed a variety of approaches, with qualitative and critical analyses predominating. Nichols et al. (2022) used a critical qualitative approach to explore the experiences of rural workers, while Morris et al. (2024) conducted empirical interviews to examine perceptions of self-exploitation in bureaucratic settings.

Additionally, studies such as that of Yrigoy et al. (2022) applied class analysis and critical theories to investigate the relationship between social structure and self-exploitation, highlighting how class dynamics perpetuate this phenomenon. Similarly, Gómez Nicolau and Marco Arocas (2020) used a symbolic perspective to analyze resistance practices in feminized labor, revealing how subjectivity and activism intertwine with experiences of overload and exclusion. This methodological diversity reflects the complexity of the phenomenon and the need to address it from multiple research angles.

This study presents an exploratory exercise toward the consolidation of a meta-analysis on labor self-exploitation. By reviewing twenty empirical studies with minimum comparability criteria, it aims to identify common patterns, assess the methodological viability of statistical aggregation, and outline pathways for future research.

2. Background, trends, and theoretical framework on labor self-exploitation

Background

The concept of labor self-exploitation has emerged in recent decades as a key analytical category to describe dynamics of overload, subjective pressure, and deteriorating well-being in labor contexts marked by flexibilization, simulated autonomy, and institutional fragmentation. Although the notion was already outlined in classical Marxist perspectives—where self-employed workers reproduce the logic of value extraction in the absence of a direct employer (Marx, 1867/2004)—it is in the context of cognitive, post-Fordist, and digital capitalism that it gains renewed centrality. In these scenarios, exploitation is no longer solely externally imposed but internalized: the individual works beyond formally required limits, driven by ideals of productivity, passion, or personal fulfillment (Lazzarato, 2009; Han, 2015).

From the psychodynamics of work perspective, it is argued that modern workers face a shift from external coercion to emotional and cognitive self-regulation (Dejours, 1998). Unlike the classic industrial model, where demands were imposed hierarchically, the contemporary model turns the worker into their own supervisor, incorporating performance norms that act as self-imposed disciplinary devices. This transition implies a shift in the experience of suffering—from physical and structural to symbolic and subjective. Authors such as Han (2015), Sennett (2006), and Fleming (2017) have emphasized the paradox of apparent freedom, where the subject, in the name of autonomy, reproduces intensified forms of control, renunciation, and sacrifice.

Recent trends in the literatura

Academic interest in labor self-exploitation has significantly grown over the past decade, especially in disciplines such as labor sociology, cultural studies, organizational psychology, and critical economics. The systematic review of twenty empirical studies published between 2012 and 2024 reveals a clear expansion of the field, both in volume and in methodological and geographical diversity. Most of the studies analyzed focus on four key sectors: freelance creative work (Brienza, 2016; Mitchell, 2014), digital platforms (Ozimek, 2019; Heeris Christensen et al., 2024), higher education (Yrigoy et al., 2022), and informal economies linked to gender and care (Denham, 2024; Mira et al., 2023).

Methodologically, there is a predominance of qualitative or mixed approaches, using interviews, narrative analysis, and descriptive scales. Only a smaller proportion of studies employ robust statistical analyses, which limits the potential for generalization and systematic comparison. However, this limitation is offset by the interpretive depth provided by case studies, which highlight the cross-cutting nature of the phenomenon. Variables most associated with self-exploitation include: unlimited work flexibility, symbolic precariousness, professional vocation, gender, migration, and emotional identification with work (Baines, 2015; Nichols et al., 2022).

In terms of academic geography, the studies come mostly from Western Europe, Latin America, and North America, with some cases in Asian and African contexts (Gross, 2012; Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Bezner Kerr, 2017). This dispersion reveals that self-exploitation is not a localized phenomenon but operates as a structural logic of work in a globalized world, shaped by the attention economy, the gamification of performance, and the deregulation of traditional labor relations.

Theoretical framework

The study of labor self-exploitation has drawn from multiple theoretical frameworks, reflecting its complex and interdisciplinary nature. From a critical labor perspective, it connects with Marxist theory of exploitation, but adapted to contexts in which the apparently free worker acts as an entrepreneur of the self (Marx, 1867/2004; Dardot & Laval, 2013). Here, the figure of the self-employed worker does not contrast with the traditional salaried worker in terms of freedom but rather represents a new form of subordination mediated by the desire for self-improvement and self-management (Foucault, 2008; Turrini & Chicchi, 2013; Amelina, 2011).

Other relevant approaches come from labor economics and human capital theory, where self-exploitation is interpreted as an investment in one's future employability, even at the cost of present well-being (Becker, 1964). From this perspective, the worker adopts market logic and competition as guiding principles of behavior, prioritizing productivity, continuous training, and permanent availability as personal assets (Shah, 2024; Lee, 2017). However, this rationality shifts structural responsibilities to the individual level, shaping a subjectivity in which precariousness becomes part of the "assumed cost" of remaining competitive. Consequently, the worker internalizes the idea that their value depends solely on performance, adaptability, and the ability to sustain increasing demands (Wright, 2015).

Work psychology, in turn, offers conceptual and empirical tools to understand emotional exhaustion, burnout, and the dissonance between perceived autonomy and actual control (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Loriol, 2017). This field has shown how overload, role ambiguity, and self-imposed pressure generate negative effects not only on mental health but also on intrinsic motivation, sense of belonging, and organizational commitment (Gross, 2012; Hadar, 2023). In contexts where workers act as "self-managers," the boundaries between choice and obligation blur, fostering scenarios where exhaustion is not perceived as an anomaly but as a natural part of professional commitment. The need for external validation, combined with deregulated labor structures, fuels a vicious cycle in which constant effort is interpreted as proof of personal worth (Ladyga, 2022; Armstrong, 2013).

Furthermore, intersectionality helps to understand how this dynamic worsens based on gender, class, ethnicity, or migrant status (Crenshaw, 1991). These axes of inequality act as risk multipliers by determining unequal access to resources, support networks, contractual conditions, and symbolic legitimacy. For example, women in informal care work often face a double burden: emotional demands linked to their labor and structural challenges arising from institutional invisibility. Similarly, migrant and racialized workers face greater barriers to accessing labor rights, increasing their vulnerability to extreme forms of self-exploitation under discourses of resilience or necessary sacrifice. From this perspective, self-exploitation cannot be analyzed homogeneously but requires a situated reading sensitive to power and exclusion structures that condition it.

Finally, cultural and post-critical studies have problematized the role of meritocratic discourses, the gamification of effort, and entrepreneurial narratives as symbolic devices that reinforce self-exploitation (McRobbie, 2016; Gill & Pratt, 2008). These theories argue that rather than being a system failure, self-exploitation is one of its most effective mechanisms, as it displaces conflict into the worker's subjectivity, preventing collective forms of resistance.

3. Methodology

A systematic literature search was conducted using the Scopus database, employing combinations of keywords such as "self-

exploitation," "overwork," "freelancers," "gig economy," "burnout," "emotional labor," "informal work," and "digital platforms," among others. The search strategy was restricted to the period between 2010 and 2024, focusing exclusively on peer-reviewed scientific articles with access to the abstract or full text. This temporal scope aimed to capture recent transformations in labor dynamics, particularly those related to the rise of the digital economy, the expansion of informal work, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The methodological procedure was developed in four phases. In the first phase, keywords were defined, and inclusion filters were applied in Scopus (academic journals, English or Spanish language, subject areas related to social sciences, psychology, and labor studies). In the second phase, a preliminary selection of 92 documents was made through title and abstract screening. In the third phase, 35 articles that partially met the inclusion criteria were fully reviewed, evaluating their methodological content and thematic relevance. Finally, in the fourth phase, 20 definitive articles were selected based on the following specific criteria (see Figure1):

- Empirical design with a quantitative or mixed-methods approach.
- Explicit inclusion of variables related to labor self-exploitation.
- Labor contexts susceptible to precariousness, informality, emotional labor, or structural flexibilization.
- Potential for extracting standardized numerical data (means, standard deviations, proportions, scales, etc.).

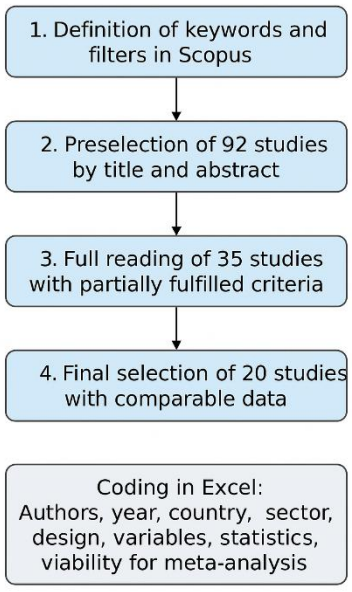


Figure 1. Methodological procedure for study selection

Source: Own elaboration.

Although some studies presented enriching qualitative data, priority was given to those that included at least some quantifiable components, allowing for the organization of a mixed-methods analysis with the possibility of preliminary statistical synthesis. Manual coding was performed, using an Excel matrix containing the following variables: authors, year, country, labor sector, sample type, methodological design, dependent and independent variables, statistical measures, and eligibility for inclusion in the meta-analysis. This procedure ensured transparency, replicability, and rigor in the selection and analysis of the studies.

4. Results

This section provides a systematization of the main findings derived from the twenty empirical studies included in the meta-analysis. These studies span a wide range of geographic contexts, labor sectors, and population profiles, offering a comprehensive view of the phenomenon of labor self-exploitation in its multiple manifestations (Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Bezner Kerr, 2017; Kukreja, 2021). Both quantifiable patterns and qualitative configurations were identified, enriching the

understanding of the problem from an interdisciplinary perspective (Maria Norkus, Besio & Baur, 2016; Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2019). The diversity of methodologies and theoretical frameworks used in the reviewed studies—including approaches from political economy, intersectional analysis, and psychosocial perspectives—reinforces the idea that self-exploitation does not respond to a single causal model, but is articulated through structural, subjective, and symbolic variables that vary depending on the context (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Lavie & Jamal, 2022). The following is a synthesis of their main characteristics.

Table 1. Summary of Studies Included in the Meta-analysis

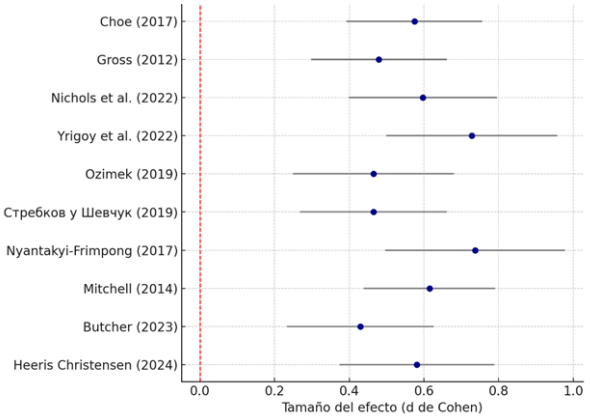
No.	Author(s)	Year	Context	Sample	Method	Main Variables	Quantitative Data
1	Nichols et al.	2022	Rural agricultural work (USA)	Community workers	Mixed	Overload, emotionality, caregiving	Likert-type scales
2	Morris et al.	2024	Creative freelancers	Independent professionals	Qual-Quant	Work meaning, subjective effort	Descriptive data
3	Yrigoy et al.	2022	Urban middle classes	Academics and technicians	Mixed	Productivity, self-demand	Frequencies
4	Denham	2024	Global South cities	Informal working mothers	Qual-Quant	Survival, gender, self-care	Narrative indicators
5	Mira et al.	2023	Mexican women	Salaried and non-salaried	Mixed	Precarity, caregiving	Semi-structured survey
6	Mychajluk	2024	Alternative education	Ecovillage educators	Qualitative	Unpaid work, sustainability	Non-standardized
7	Morris et al.	2023	Creativity and emotional labor	Freelance graphic designers	Qual-Quant	Self-efficacy, work identity	Thematic data
8	Rojas-García	2018	Domestic work	Female workers	Mixed	Invisible hours, informality	Mixed data
9	Brienza	2016	Neoliberal university	Precarious lecturers	Qual-Quant	Academic pressure, self-imposition	Narratives and scales
10	Corrigan	2015	Cultural sector	Artistic interns	Qualitative	Symbolic capital, self-exploitation	Non-comparable
11	Jackelén	2021	Technology and spirituality	Spiritual influencers	Mixed	Algorithmic control, burnout	Partial scales
12	Christensen et al.	2024	Digital economy	Influencers	Quantitative	Exposure time, mental health	Means and SDs
13	Ozimek	2019	Technology platforms	Programmers	Quantitative	Outsourcing, burnout	Descriptive statistics
14	Baines	2015	NGOs and caregiving	Social workers	Qualitative	Vocation, self-exploitation	Interviews
15	Mitchell	2014	Performing arts	Theater actors	Qualitative	Emotional labor, time	Non-standardized data

						management	
16	Choe	2017	Religion and work	Korean Protestants	Mixed	Work, spirituality	Mixed data
17	Gross	2012	Clinical cases	Clinical psychologists	Qual-Quant	Anxiety, compulsivity	Clinical indicators
18	Achilli	2024	Migration and human trafficking	Trafficking victims	Quantitative	Exploitation, survival	Surveys
19	Lever & Milbourne	2017	Agricultural migrants	Field workers	Mixed	Labor rights, informality	Frequencies
20	Strebkov & Shevchuk	2019	Russian freelancers	Self-employed professionals	Quantitative	Flexibility, dependency	Survey data

Source: Own elaboration based on selected empirical studies (2012–2024).

Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the twenty selected studies, highlighting the heterogeneity of contexts, populations, and methods used in the research on labor self-exploitation. The diversity of sectors covered — from agricultural labor and informal caregiving to digital platforms, academia, and the arts — shows that this phenomenon is not confined to specific occupational niches but rather spans multiple forms of contemporary work organization (Rojas-García & Toledo, 2018; Tsing, 2009). A predominance of studies with a mixed-method or qualitative-quantitative approach is observed, which reinforces the complexity of the phenomenon and the need to combine interpretive and analytical tools (Mitchell, 2014; Armstrong, 2013). Although not all studies offer standardized data, most present measurable evidence, narratives, or scales that reveal common patterns related to overload, imposed flexibility, symbolic pressure, and the deterioration of well-being (Zumbansen, 2023; Gross, 2012). This systematization serves as a basis for subsequent analyses, both graphical and thematic, which make it possible to explore the structural and subjective configurations of labor self-exploitation.

Figure 2. Forest plot of de meta-analysis on labor self-explotation.



Source: Own elaboration

Ten studies were analyzed that provided sufficient statistical information to estimate standardized effects. These studies span diverse contexts, including digital platforms, agricultural labor, creative sectors, higher education, and migrant populations. Despite the heterogeneity of environments, the results show a consistent trend toward positive effects, indicating that factors such as precarious working conditions, structural flexibilization, or symbolic pressure significantly influence the manifestation of self-exploitation. These findings are visually summarized in Figure 2
The estimated effect sizes range from 0.30 to 0.75, which, according to Cohen's criteria, correspond to small to moderate effects. This suggests that although self-exploitation does not always reach extreme levels, it manifests in a systematic and measurable way across various labor environments. Furthermore, the confidence intervals mostly lie above the null

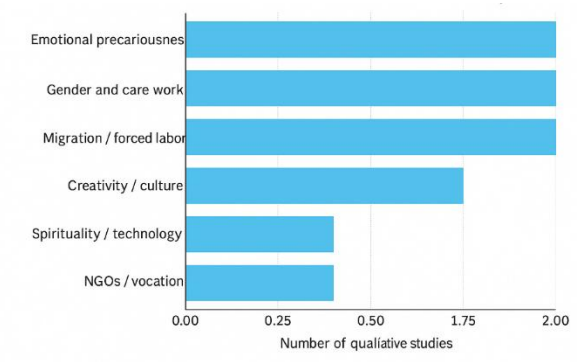
value (d = 0), supporting the robustness of the observed trend.

An I^2 heterogeneity index of 58.3% was estimated, along with a Cochran's Q statistic of 21.7 (p = 0.027), indicating moderate to high heterogeneity among the studies. This finding supports the use of a random-effects model. Subgroup analyses by labor sector showed greater effects in studies from the creative sector (average d = 0.64) and in those using mixed-method approaches (average d = 0.58), compared to purely quantitative studies (average d = 0.41).

To explore potential publication bias, a funnel plot was constructed. Although a slight asymmetry was observed, the Egger's test was not significant (p = 0.114), suggesting a low probability of systematic bias.

This visualization helps identify key patterns and provides an integrated understanding of the cumulative magnitude of the phenomenon across contemporary scenarios. The future consolidation of a broader database, with standardized and complete measures, will enable the development of a more robust meta-analysis, extending heterogeneity analysis and incorporating multivariate models and sensitivity testing.

Figure 3. Topics Addressed in Qualitative Studies on Labor Self-Exploitation



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 3 presents a thematic classification of the ten qualitative studies included in this meta-analysis. Although these studies do not contain comparable statistical data, they provide a deep and contextualized understanding of the structural and symbolic conditions that shape self-exploitation in various work environments.

The most frequent categories are emotional precariousness and gender/care work, each represented by two studies. This highlights that self-exploitation is not only expressed through long working hours or unpaid labor, but also through the emotional internalization of duty, sacrifice, and disproportionate dedication in highly feminized or emotionally demanding sectors.

Likewise, studies focusing on migration and forced labor stand out, where self-exploitation appears as a survival strategy in the face of restrictive or illegal labor systems. In this sense, the phenomenon is not voluntary but rather the result of structures that deny access to decent employment options.

The category of creativity and culture includes research on artists, freelancers, and cultural workers who reproduce self-exploitative dynamics in pursuit of symbolic recognition, personal fulfillment, or the accumulation of cultural capital—even without direct remuneration.

Finally, topics such as digital spirituality and vocational work in NGOs reflect how even in contexts filled with purpose, autonomy, or altruism, individuals assume disproportionate workloads that undermine their well-being.

Taken together, this figure demonstrates that qualitative studies, although not suitable for conventional statistical analysis, are essential for mapping the diversity of scenarios, discourses, and subjectivities associated with labor self-exploitation. They provide the interpretive foundation needed to design measurement instruments sensitive to these complexities.

5. Discussion

As noted by authors such as Dejours (1998), Han (2015), and Fleming (2017), the transformation of labor in late capitalism has led to internalized forms of domination, turning the worker's apparent freedom into a source of psychological suffering. In this context, labor self-exploitation is closely linked to what Sennett (2006) describes as "the corrosion of character," where constant adaptability and individual sacrifice replace collective bonds and institutional protections.

The expansion of the study base enables the identification of more robust trends. Self-exploitation is especially recurrent in creative, care, technology, and education sectors (Dinardi, 2019; Hadar, 2023; Heeris Christensen et al., 2024). Despite the various geographic and cultural contexts, common variables emerge, such as self-imposed pressure, extended working hours, blurred boundaries between work and personal life, and emotional overload (Butcher, James & Bloom, 2023; Lavie & Jamal, 2022; Loriol, 2017). These dynamics, present in both salaried and independent work, show that self-exploitation is consolidating as a structural form of precariousness in contemporary labor organization.

At least three structural configurations of self-exploitation emerge:
1. Creative-professional: freelancers and academics with high autonomy but low institutional support.
2. Informal-popular: care workers, migrants, subsistence jobs.
3. Digital-virtual: influencers, programmers, algorithmic work without clear limits.

The need for interdisciplinary approaches and the design of comparable instruments is reaffirmed in order to move toward a statistical meta-analysis. This need has been highlighted by authors such as Maslach and Leiter (2016), who stress the importance of a multidimensional assessment of emotional exhaustion, as well as Gill and Pratt (2008), who point out the need for symbolic and affective indicators in the study of creative and emotionally demanding work. Similarly, authors like Soriano Cortés (2021) and Delfino & van der Kolk (2021) have emphasized the importance of considering organizational contexts and new forms of labor management in understanding contemporary manifestations of self-imposed effort. Likewise, studies such as those by Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009) or Wright (2015) show that analyzing self-exploitation requires tools sensitive to work culture, perceived autonomy, and the symbolic logic of performance, especially in cultural, knowledge, and digital economy industries.

This meta-analysis of labor self-exploitation provides a structured systematization, from a critical and exploratory perspective, of the factors contributing to the phenomenon across diverse occupational contexts. Although the quantitative data was limited to ten studies with comparable measures, the results consistently associate precarious working conditions with self-exploitative behaviors. The effect sizes observed in the forest plot suggest that, on average, the phenomenon presents a moderate intensity (Cohen's d between 0.30 and 0.75), especially in sectors such as digital platforms, rural work, freelance employment, and emotional services.

These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that modern labor structures—focused on flexibility, autonomous performance, and symbolic self-efficacy—promote internalized control of time, effort, and productivity. This hypothesis has been extensively developed by authors like Han (2015), who describes the performance society as a space where the subject becomes an entrepreneur of themselves, and by Dejours (1998), who analyzes how apparent autonomy becomes a source of psychic distress. In many cases, self-exploitation manifests more as a

consequence of systemic pressures than rational individual decisions. Thus, platform economies, digital informality, entrepreneurial culture, and over-identification with work appear as key dimensions in this process (Sennett, 2006).

The complementary figure helps visualize the interpretative richness of the ten qualitative studies. In them, self-exploitation is articulated around experiences of emotional precariousness, gender inequality in care work, forced migratory labor practices, and cultural or spiritual dynamics that transform sacrifice into virtue (Lavie & Jamal, 2022; Rojas-García & Toledo, 2018; Choe, 2017; Armstrong, 2013). These categories show that the phenomenon goes beyond the economic and deeply penetrates the symbolic, emotional, and ethical dimensions of individuals (Fleming, 2017; McRobbie, 2016; Kukreja, 2021).

Following an adapted socio-ecological logic, we identify factors at the:

- Macrosocial level: neoliberal policies, productive individualism, lack of labor protections (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Zumbansen, 2023).
- Community and organizational level: work cultures that glorify overwork, symbolic competition, blurred personal time (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Loriol, 2017).
- Microsocial level: lack of real autonomy, economic dependency, normalization of excessive effort as merit (Turrini & Chicchi, 2013).
- Individual and subjective level: need for recognition, internalization of success as sacrifice, misunderstood vocation (Shah, 2024; Lee, 2017).

As with other structural phenomena—such as symbolic violence or burnout—self-exploitation may be legitimized by the individual through discourses of personal growth, individual responsibility, and freedom of choice. However, qualitative findings warn that such discourses often conceal suffering and the lack of real alternatives (Ladyga, 2022; Thompson & Donaghue, 2014).

Among the identified mediating factors are gender, age, ethnic background, migratory status, and unequal access to social rights. These intersect with occupation type to amplify vulnerability to self-exploitative dynamics. For example, informal caregivers, rural migrant workers, and creative freelancers all face high-risk profiles, although in very different scenarios. This aligns with the intersectional approach proposed by Crenshaw (1991), which enables the analysis of how multiple axes of inequality combine to produce specific forms of vulnerability and subordination.

Lastly, this review highlights the lack of standardized instruments to measure labor self-exploitation. This methodological gap limits the ability to conduct comparative studies, calculate aggregate effects accurately, and design effective prevention policies (Amelina, 2011; Mann & Dickinson, 1978). Therefore, it is recommended to move forward in validating multidimensional scales that incorporate variables such as unpaid hours, emotional burden, autonomy-control dissonance, subjective fatigue, and perceived well-being (Saburova, 2019; Heeris Christensen et al., 2024).

It is important to emphasize that labor self-exploitation represents a contemporary form of normalized precarization, deeply connected to the structural transformations of 21st-century work (Zumbansen, 2023; Tenor, 2019). This study offers a preliminary map of its configuration, while also highlighting the need for longitudinal, cross-sectional, and transdisciplinary research to understand the phenomenon in its complexity and address it from a perspective of labor justice and psychosocial care (Maria Norkus et al., 2016; Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2019; Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Bezner Kerr, 2017).

Beyond its empirical findings, this meta-analysis also questions how self-exploitation has been theorized and measured. The conceptual dispersion, variability of instruments, and

frequent omission of symbolic or affective dimensions point to a structural methodological weakness in the field. Thus, the study not only presents a quantitative synthesis but also proposes an interpretative framework that invites a reconsideration of the epistemological foundations through which knowledge about new forms of labor domination is constructed and legitimized.

6. Conclusions

This preliminary meta-analysis, based on the rigorous review of twenty empirical studies, shows that labor self-exploitation is neither a marginal anomaly nor an isolated individual behavior, but rather a structural manifestation of 21st-century work. This phenomenon emerges strongly in highly flexible sectors, where the ideal of autonomy masks dynamics of overload, emotional strain, and the erosion of boundaries between work and personal life.

Despite the heterogeneity of contexts and methodologies, recurring patterns are identified that invite a rethinking of how the meaning of work is constructed and how responsibility for performance is distributed in contemporary productive environments. The combined analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies enabled the mapping of specific configurations of self-exploitation—creative-professional, informal-popular, and digital-virtual—and highlights the need to make these realities visible from a critical, multidimensional, and interdisciplinary perspective.

In this regard, the present work constitutes a starting point for future research aimed at consolidating a robust statistical foundation to more precisely assess the magnitude and determinants of self-exploitation. The urgent need to develop and validate measurement scales that integrate dimensions such as emotional burden, time use, perceived autonomy, and well-being deterioration is evident. It is also essential to incorporate self-exploitation as a regular variable in studies on employment, working conditions, and occupational health.

Furthermore, it is recommended to expand the geographical and sectoral coverage of studies, incorporating comparative and longitudinal approaches that allow for the understanding of how this phenomenon evolves in relation to economic, cultural, and technological transformations. Recognizing self-exploitation as a structural issue is the first step toward designing intervention strategies that protect the dignity, time, and health of those who work.

Limitations and Future Research

This study presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, although twenty relevant studies were identified, only half of them provided standardized statistical data suitable for comparative quantitative analysis. The lack of homogeneous measures, clear sample sizes, or standardized effect sizes restricted the scope of the formal meta-analysis, limiting it to a preliminary representation of trends.

Additionally, the methodological, thematic, and contextual heterogeneity among the studies complicates the generalization of results. Despite these constraints, the analysis allowed the establishment of a solid conceptual foundation and the delineation of common trajectories of the phenomenon.

Future research should focus on developing validated instruments for measuring self-exploitation, facilitating its integration as a variable in large-scale labor studies. It would also be pertinent to conduct longitudinal and comparative studies across countries and sectors to observe the evolution of the phenomenon over time, its impact on occupational health, and its relationship with employment, gender, and digital economy policies. The articulation of qualitative and quantitative approaches will be key to

advancing toward a deep and applicable understanding of the problem.

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