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Abstract

This paper examines the moral economy of 'Make Money Online' (MMO) practices in Vietnam and introduces the concept of the earning web to describe the distributed infrastructures through which informal platform earning is organised. MMO refers to a heterogeneous field of online income-generating practices that operate across advertising networks, e-commerce platforms, social media systems, payment channels and automation tools. Drawing on discourse analysis of MMO4ME, Vietnam's largest MMO forum and ethnographic fieldwork with phone farmers, the paper analyses three practices: content arbitrage, dropshipping and phone farming. It shows how participants monetise attention, time, connectivity, discarded devices and platform loopholes by navigating unstable rules, automated thresholds, volatile payout systems and uncertain boundaries of legitimacy. Rather than treating these practices as scams, marginal gig work or technical workarounds, the paper argues that they constitute a form of informal automation assembled from below. MMO practices are sustained not only by scripts, devices, accounts and monetisation flows but also by shared moral evaluations of effort, risk, reward and acceptable conduct. The paper contributes to debates on platform economies, digital labour and ICT infrastructures by showing how informal actors govern value within systems that offer monetisation without stability, participation without protection and automation without accountability.

Keywords

Platform economy, informal automation, digital labour, moral economy, ICT infrastructures, Vietnam

Introduction

This paper examines the moral economy of 'Make Money Online' (MMO) practices in Vietnam and introduces the concept of the earning web to describe the distributed infrastructures through which these practices are organised. MMO is a vernacular term for a heterogeneous and unstable field of online income generation operating across platforms and monetisation systems. This paper focuses on three practices: content arbitrage, which extracts value from differentials in the cost and monetisation of online attention; dropshipping, which coordinates sales across marketplaces, suppliers and logistics systems without holding inventory; and phone farming, which uses repurposed devices and automation tools to generate or monetise platform engagement. Often dismissed as scams, marginal gig work or technical workarounds, these practices provide a window into how economic life is organised under conditions of informality, infrastructural reuse and platform-based monetisation.

The central claim is that MMO practices are shaped not only by technical affordances and platform incentives but by shared moral expectations about effort, risk, reward and legitimacy. These expectations inform judgements about what kinds of earning are acceptable, what counts as opportunistic or exploitative and when technical ingenuity crosses into deception. I describe the wider formation through which these practices are connected as the earning web: a decentralised and improvised infrastructure through which participants monetise time, attention, connectivity, devices, accounts and platform loopholes across multiple systems. The earning web is sustained not only by tactical manoeuvres and automation workflows but also by community advice, cautionary tales, reputational hierarchies and informal rules of conduct. It therefore constitutes a form

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of informal automation assembled from below, within environments where platform rules are unstable, incomes are volatile, and institutional protections are largely absent.

The analysis draws on discourse analysis of MMO4ME, Vietnam's largest MMO forum and ethnographic fieldwork with phone farmers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Examined together, content arbitrage, dropshipping and phone farming reveal different configurations of the earning web. Participants exploit gaps, delays and contradictions in infrastructures not designed with them in mind; move among platforms, accounts, devices and payment systems; and continually assess the legitimacy of their own and others' tactics. Studying these practices together also makes visible forms of earning that would remain fragmented if approached through any single platform or conventional category of digital labour.

Rather than treating informality as a residual condition or automation as a force imposed exclusively from above, the paper shows how informal actors assemble automation, govern participation and negotiate value within platform systems. It contributes to debates on digital labour, platform economies and the grey zones of legitimacy that increasingly organise online economic life. MMO is not an anomaly to be explained away, but a sociotechnical and moral formation in its own right.

What's in a moral economy? Contours of a historical concept

The moral economy framework adopted in this paper builds on historical and anthropological scholarship concerned with how economic practices are shaped by moral reasoning: collective obligations, social expectations and culturally situated ideas of legitimacy, value and entitlement (Fouksman, 2020; Frevert, 2019; Raval and Lalvani, 2022; Rogan, 2017). Rather than treating the economy as a neutral or technical domain, this work examines how exchange, subsistence, distribution and resistance are organised through social norms and moral evaluations, particularly under conditions of precarity and market disruption. Moral economy is therefore not a nostalgic remnant of pre-capitalist life but an analytic for grounding abstract political-economic processes in lived experience and historicising everyday practice within specific classed and cultural contexts (Booth, 1994; Palomera and Vetta, 2016; Sayer, 2005).

The concept is most closely associated with E.P. Thompson's 'history from below', which traced the moral claims, customary rights and collective struggles that shaped working-class economic life (Thompson, 1971, 1980). In his account of 18th-century English food riots, Thompson rejects 'spasmodic' explanations that reduce collective action to hunger or instinct. The riot instead expressed deeply held expectations about subsistence, entitlement, price, access and justice. The transformation of grain into bread was not merely technical but moral, situated within a wider shift from paternalistic provision to a political economy increasingly organised around free-market principles.

James C. Scott (1976) extended this framework through his study of Southeast Asian peasant rebellion and the 'subsistence ethic'. For Scott, peasants navigated chronic uncertainty through norms of solidarity, reciprocity and risk avoidance. Rebellion emerged not simply from surplus extraction, but from breaches in a social framework of moral expectations that had once regulated unequal but tolerated relations between peasants, village elites, patrons and colonial authorities. His interest was therefore less in revolt as an event than in the accumulated grievances and tensions that made revolt possible.

Together, Thompson and Scott bridge historical materialism and cultural analysis, offering tools for understanding not only how people make a living but also how they make sense of what they are owed. Their work also resonates with Karl Polanyi's substantivist critique of formalist economics: economic life is never autonomous from society but embedded in cultural norms, political institutions and historically contingent systems of obligation (Polanyi, 1944). Markets are socially constructed arrangements, often sustained through intervention and tension with older forms of reciprocity and redistribution.

Two dimensions of moral economy are especially relevant to MMO. First, it offers a normative critique of neoclassical economic rationality, foregrounding values such as solidarity, mutual obligation and subsistence. Second, it provides a descriptive framework for tracing the affective, moral and cultural dynamics that anchor economic practice in specific contexts. These orientations are not mutually exclusive. Following Fassin (2009), moral economy can be understood through a 'double topography' that captures both the structural conditions shaping economic life and the lived moral evaluations through which that life is navigated. This dual reading helps frame MMO as both a response to and a product of platformisation. MMO practices do not sit easily within existing classifications of labour, entrepreneurship or deviance. They occupy a grey zone in which legitimacy, risk and value are constantly negotiated through sociotechnical infrastructures, automated monetisation systems, informal networks and collective moral reasoning.

The earning web: Platform informality and MMO practices

The earning web is best understood as a topology, a moral infrastructure and a mode of navigation. As a topology, it names a distributed and improvised system of devices, platforms, scripts, accounts and monetisation flows, held together not by coherence but by fragile dependencies and tactical interlinkages. This topology is shaped by shifting architectures of online monetisation: from ad-supported

content and platformised engagement to speculative, tokenised or pay-to-access infrastructures. These overlapping regimes configure where value can be extracted and what kinds of earning tactics become possible or desirable.

Platforms are never only sites of intermediation but arrangements of programmability, data extraction, governance and dependency that increasingly organise the conditions under which economic and social activity can take place. Work on platformisation has traced how platforms expand through APIs, decentralised data flows and the reorganisation of cultural and economic practice (Mukherjee, 2025; Nguyen, 2023; von Blomberg and Liu, 2026). This expansion also unsettles any clean separation between platforms and infrastructures. Platform power and infrastructural power must be analysed together, since control over technical systems, data flows and access points shapes the conditions of participation itself (Goggin and Athique, 2026; Wu, 2026). Yet infrastructural capacity does not automatically become platform power. It depends on fragile alignments among technical systems, user practices, incentives, trust and viable forms of participation. This matters for informal platform economies because earning does not occur through stable institutional arrangements, but through contingent access to shifting monetisation architectures, opaque thresholds and volatile systems of visibility.

The platform, however, is not a universal form with a single genealogy or political logic. Its meanings and operations must be traced through the vocabularies, institutional histories and situated practices through which it becomes actionable in context (Soriano and Mamac, 2026; Steinberg et al., 2025). This is crucial for analysing MMO. 'Make Money Online' is not simply a loose label for scams, gig work or digital entrepreneurship; it is an emic category through which participants name a heterogeneous field of online earning, classify risk, distinguish legitimate tactics from exploitative ones and orient themselves within unstable platform systems. Reading MMO in this way shifts attention from platforms as corporate infrastructures to the vernacular infrastructures users assemble around them: forums, scripts, accounts, devices, payment channels, reputational hierarchies and shared moral codes. The earning web names this informal formation, where platformisation is encountered not as a coherent system of control, but as a field of gaps, thresholds and tactical possibilities.

Platform informality refers here to conditions in which earning depends on formal platform infrastructures but takes place without stable occupational categories, contractual protections, predictable rules or settled boundaries of legitimacy. Informal automation, by contrast, refers to the technical and organisational arrangements users assemble within those conditions: combinations of scripts, devices, accounts, modular tools and continuing human calibration that automate selected parts of earning. The earning web names the wider formation through which these arrangements are connected, navigated and morally evaluated across platforms.

As a moral infrastructure, the earning web is shaped by shared evaluations of what counts as legitimate, fair game or exploitative. These collective judgments govern the boundaries of acceptable conduct in the absence of stable regulation or institutional protection. As a mode of navigation, the earning web describes how participants manoeuvre through automated systems by adjusting to changing rules, detection thresholds, payout structures and the risk of sudden deplatforming. These dimensions are tightly interwoven: the earning web is not simply a structure or a set of practices but a lived formation in which technical improvisation and moral reasoning converge to sustain informal earning.

Taking its name from the logic of interconnection, the earning web foregrounds the relational dynamics of informal platform economies. It emerges not through centralised coordination but through layered attachments and peer-driven tactics: referrals, reposts, linked accounts, shared scripts, repurposed devices and redirected data flows. Monetisation is unstable and contingent, surfacing through platform loopholes, market inefficiencies or fleeting algorithmic quirks. For example, YouTube's requirement of 1000 subscribers and 4000 public watch hours for monetisation has pushed users toward engagement-boosting tactics such as mass commenting, sub-loops or shorts automation (Google, n.d.), while the volatility of TikTok's creator fund has generated short-lived optimisation races followed by abrupt shifts in earning viability (Sternlicht, 2023). Success depends on timing, access to capital and tools and the ability to reverse-engineer earning strategies through collective experimentation.

Infrastructure studies have long treated the movement from situated practices to large technical systems as a methodological problem, particularly where online and offline activity intersect (Star, 1999). The earning web addresses this problem by connecting the everyday routine of an individual cycling through apps, monetising screen time and automating engagement to a broader infrastructural condition shaped by platform dependency, volatile payouts and deplatforming risk. It therefore moves between the micro and macro, the technical and the moral, the everyday and the systemic, showing how value is extracted and generated not despite instability, but through it.

Understanding MMO through the earning web foregrounds the infrastructural conditions, moral calculations and affective sensibilities that shape how people hustle for money through platforms. These practices are not marginal or exceptional; they are integral to how platforms generate value. The next section outlines the methodological grounding of this analysis, positioning Vietnam not merely as a field site but as an infrastructural node within the earning web's global circuitry.

Methods

This paper draws on two primary sources: discourse analysis of the MMO4ME forum and ethnographic fieldwork

with phone farmers in Vietnam. Combining online discourse analysis with on-site observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews, the study examines how MMO participants evaluate risk, legitimacy and reward while sustaining access to income under shifting platform conditions.

MMO4ME, established in 2011, is Vietnam's largest online community focused on earning through automation, speculation and platform workarounds. It is a key site for understanding how MMO participants classify opportunities, assess credibility and debate moral boundaries around acceptable earning. The forum rewards users based on the frequency and quality of their contributions, fostering reciprocal engagement and reputational labour. It also organises MMO activities into a tiered structure based on risk and investment. Using a custom Python script, I collected publicly accessible forum materials posted between 2011 and 31 March 2025, including post content, timestamps, usernames, engagement metrics, user hierarchies and thread structures. These materials were analysed to trace how users construct and contest distinctions between fair game, strategic copying and unacceptable exploitation.

Ethnographic fieldwork grounds the analysis in the material infrastructures of MMO, with a focus on phone farming. Phone farming combines hardware repurposing with platformised activity. Operators coordinate multiple surplus or modified smartphones with automation tools – including click simulators, task schedulers and app-environment spoofers – to generate income through app engagement, advertising incentives, account management and the production of social signals. Phone farming involves the coordinated use of multiple smartphones and automation tools, including click simulators, task schedulers and app-environment spoofers, to generate income from app engagement and advertising incentives. Fieldwork was conducted between January and March 2024 across five phone farms: three in Hanoi and two in Ho Chi Minh City. During these visits, I observed how operators assembled hardware, managed devices and accounts, fielded client enquiries, discussed monetisation strategies and adapted to platform changes. I also conducted informal conversations and follow-up interviews to understand participants' practices, adaptations and decision-making processes. This research received ethics approval from RMIT University (approval no. 29198).

Together, these materials make visible how MMO practices are built, justified and contested across online communities and material work sites. The forum data captures the circulation of advice, warnings, hierarchies and moral judgements, while the fieldwork shows how these logics are translated into everyday infrastructural labour. The unit of analysis is therefore not any single platform, but the earning practice as it is assembled across forums, social media systems, advertising networks, marketplaces, payment channels, devices and automation tools. This cross-platform orientation makes visible connections that would be fragmented by a platform-specific research design, while attending to the relationship between shared moral reasoning, platform dependency and practical improvisation.

Interview and fieldwork participants are anonymised, and identifying details have been removed where appropriate. Forum materials were collected from publicly accessible threads; usernames are anonymised unless the account operates as a public-facing commercial identity. All Vietnamese-language materials and interview excerpts were translated by the author.

Tiers, thresholds and the moral pedagogy of MMO

More than a discussion board, MMO4ME functions as an infrastructural map of Vietnam's informal digital economies. Read through the earning web, its tiers do not represent fixed occupational categories or a linear progression from one kind of work to another. They provide coordinates through which users navigate practices differentiated by skill, capital, risk and expected return. The forum's front page is divided into zones for 'easy', 'medium', 'hard' and 'extremely hard' modes of earning, alongside market exchanges, payment mechanisms, automation toolkits, technical advice, scam warnings, currency exchange and requests for mentorship. Users move among these zones as their resources, technical capacities and assessments of opportunity change. The forum's architecture therefore does not merely organise information; it maps possible routes through MMO, ranks methods of earning, distributes technical knowledge and assigns moral legitimacy through the structure of the site itself (Figure 1).

This moral ordering is made explicit in one pinned onboarding thread, 'Making Money Online – Basic Knowledge'. Authored in 2020 by a long-time administrator, the thread serves not simply as a how-to guide but as a manifesto: a pedagogical frame for what MMO is, who should do it and how one should conduct oneself within its informal economy. It defines MMO broadly as any form of online income generation, whether through tasks, trading, referrals or platform-based engagement. Yet its language quickly shifts from neutral explanation to normative persuasion. MMO is framed as viable, necessary and potentially transformative: a path toward autonomy and scalable income, but also a field marked by burnout, scams and disappointment for those who lack persistence, discipline or guidance.

MMO is imagined here as an explicitly tiered economy, with each level requiring different forms of labour, risk tolerance and infrastructural capacity. The thread outlines five levels of activity, from 'easy' practices such as paid-to-click (PTC), where users earn small sums by clicking ads or viewing websites and Airdrops, which offer free cryptocurrency for basic engagement, to 'extremely hard' practices such as high-yield investment programmes (HYIP) and

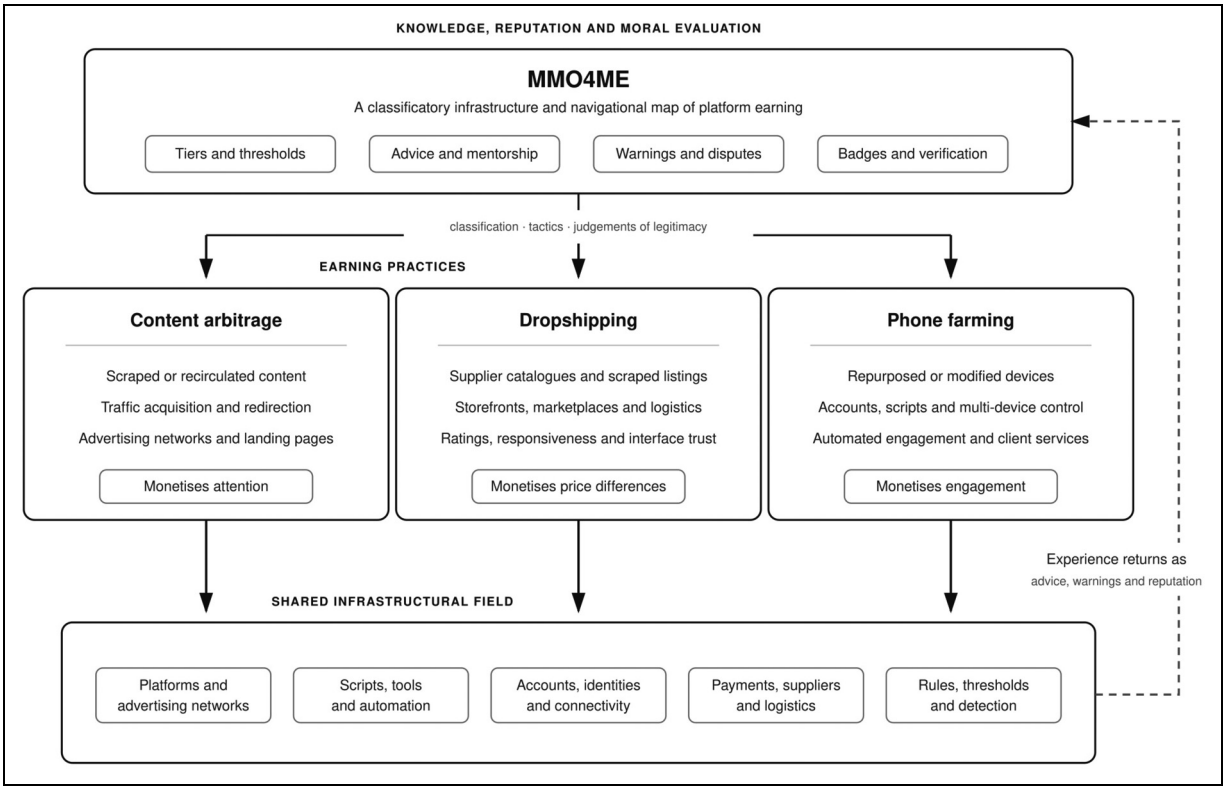


Figure 1. The earning web as a navigational and infrastructural topology. MMO4ME classifies earning practices and circulates advice, warnings and reputational judgements. Participants navigate among content arbitrage, dropshipping and phone farming, which draw on a shared field of platforms, tools, accounts, devices, payment systems, logistics and platform governance. Source: Author.

gambling, which promise high returns but demand significant capital and carry a high probability of loss. Between these extremes sit practices such as dropshipping, affiliate marketing and YouTube monetisation, which require marketing knowledge, platform navigation skills and minor to moderate capital investment.

This hierarchy is not only technical or financial but also moral. Low-level tasks are associated with drudgery, low payout and exposure to scams, but they are also framed as training grounds where newcomers learn discipline, resilience and basic platform literacy. The emphasis is not simply on what one earns, but how one earns it. As the manifesto puts it, 'MMO is not easy, but it's not hard either. It's hard only for those who refuse to learn, to explore, and to work'. Success is cast less as access or luck than as persistence. Adaptability, discipline and moral stamina take precedence over shortcuts or insider advantage. Movement through the tiers is therefore not merely a technical upgrade; it is a narrative of personal transformation. 'If you want a lot, you have to try a lot', the manifesto continues. 'No one will ever prepare a lavish banquet and wait for you to show up'.

If tiers name the categorical structure of MMO, thresholds mark the crossings between them. These thresholds are not just technical milestones or earnings brackets. They are moral, affective and infrastructural transitions through which legitimacy is acquired and recognised. The beginner becomes a practitioner not through formal certification but through persistent contribution and reputational labour. The line between participation and exploitation turns on whether one invests time to build systems or falls prey to schemes that monetise naivety. Visibility also has thresholds: one moves from anonymity to recognition through posts, reactions, verification status and accumulated presence. Higher-stakes practices require new levels of capital, judgement and self-discipline. These are not simply gateways; they are moral tests embedded in the design of MMO's informal economy.

Such tests are made legible through MMO4ME's infrastructure of reputation. User profiles prominently display join dates, post counts, reaction scores, badges and verification status. In the absence of formal contracts or guarantees, these signals become proxies for credibility. The forum's badges, titles and thread hierarchies act as a distributed system of vetting and ranking. Holding 'hero' or 'legendary' status signals a form of peer recognition that carries symbolic and economic weight. When one experienced user responds to a request for mentorship by stating that 'few MMO masters would take on disciples in this game', the point is not merely that expertise is scarce. It is that one must be willing to do the grunt work, endure uncertainty

and prove one's worth before being admitted into higher-functioning networks. Status, here, reflects accumulated moral and technical capital.

Knowledge circulates on MMO4ME through public tutorials and discussion threads, but it is also exchanged commercially through referral posts, paid mentorship, scripts, toolkits, account services and access to specialised workflows. Sellers establish credibility through join dates, contribution histories, reaction scores, badges and verification status, while prospective buyers use these signals to assess whether an offer represents transferable expertise or another scheme targeting newcomers. Forum warnings draw a moral distinction between selling expertise and monetising ignorance. By the latter, I mean charging newcomers for generic, recycled or freely available information presented as privileged access to a viable earning opportunity. The objection is not to investment itself: many MMO practices require expenditure on advertising, hardware, tools or specialised knowledge. What matters is whether payment develops practical capacity and greater autonomy or merely preserves informational dependency while transferring risk to the newcomer.

Crucially, this moral sorting applies not only to what one does, but how one does it. In the same thread, one experienced user reflects on five years in MMO and offers advice that is less about tools than orientation: choose a niche large enough to scale, give value until people depend on you and build a system that can run without constant input. Legitimate earning is imagined as recursive, generative and self-sustaining. Income is not the endpoint but the side-effect of having built something useful, trustworthy and calibrated to others' needs.

What emerges is a moral pedagogy of informal platform earning. Learning happens through watching, mimicking, testing and adjusting, not through formal instruction but through recursive feedback loops with platforms and peers. Knowledge is not only tacit and experimental but also publicly circulated: veteran users post tutorials, flag scams, narrate failure and reflect on their own learning trajectories. This circulation of experiential and tactical knowledge resembles the work of 'skill-makers' in platform economies, for whom the capacities required to perform digital labour are collectively produced and transacted rather than simply acquired in advance (Soriano and Panaligan, 2019). Even when users reject the role of mentor or teacher, they participate in a shared pedagogical order that values transparency, calibration and contribution.

MMO, then, is not a free-for-all. It is structured, hierarchical and moralised, but its hierarchy functions less as a fixed occupational ladder than as a provisional map of routes through informal earning. MMO4ME gives the earning web a navigable form: users locate themselves through tiers, reactions, badges, thread formats and reputational signals and then reposition themselves as their technical capacities, available capital, tolerance for risk and earning opportunities change. This navigational order is not designed by platforms alone. Users create informal rules, develop onboarding scripts, build reputational infrastructures and establish moral distinctions in the absence of formal governance. These mechanisms do not simply describe participation; they sort, legitimise and sustain it. In the MMO world, earning is therefore not only a technical act or financial outcome but also an ongoing negotiation of value, visibility and virtue.

Automating the click: content arbitrage and tactics of recursivity

One of the most accessible and widely circulated practices on MMO4ME is content arbitrage: generating ad revenue by redirecting attention to low-cost or automated content. The practice involves repackaging and redistributing digital material – scraped, translated, re-captioned or re-sequenced – to monetise traffic through advertising networks such as Google AdSense or Facebook Audience Network. At its core, content arbitrage exploits the differential between what a click is worth and what it costs to produce, acquire or redirect the content that attracts it. Success hinges less on originality than on timing, targeting and traffic flow management.

A typical arbitrage workflow involves purchasing low-cost traffic, funnelling it through landing pages filled with recycled or sensational content and monetising the resulting impressions or ad clicks. Traffic is often acquired from sources where clicks are cheap, usually in regions where advertising rates are lower because users are presumed to have less purchasing power. Arbitrageurs then redirect this traffic to monetised pages, extracting small margins at scale. The model works, at least temporarily, when the revenue from each monetised click exceeds the cost of acquiring it. Profitability depends on volume: if each visitor generates only a fraction of a cent, earning requires thousands, or millions, of them. It also depends on timing, since detection thresholds, declining traffic quality and platform rule changes can quickly erode returns.

Automation plays a central role in this process, not as labour replacement but as labour intensification. MMO4ME users trade scripts, plugins, scraping tools and browser extensions that accelerate the production, formatting and distribution of arbitraged content. Text-spinners generate SEO-optimised headlines; scraping bots harvest posts from Vietnamese and international sources; batch-upload tools push content across networks with minimal oversight. Automation routinises rather than removes labour, turning content production into a recursive process of calibration around traffic flows, payout stability and detection risk.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the model, content arbitrage is rarely framed on MMO4ME as exciting or aspirational. The tone is often weary, procedural and ambivalent. Threads rarely celebrate big wins or boast about traffic spikes;

more often, they circle around endurance, burnout and diminishing returns. The aesthetic of the workflow is stripped down and terminally provisional: browser tabs full of half-rendered landing pages, translation plugins, duplicate posts, crashed scripts and dashboards that must be checked repeatedly. Automation, here, is less about liberation than tedium management. It outsources parts of the workflow so users can keep going, not necessarily get ahead.

And yet, this churn is not only exhausting but also exhilarating. Amid complaints and warnings, users share screenshots of traffic spikes, post analytics charts and narrate their tweaks in real time. They track platform shifts like weather systems, knowing that opportunity is fleeting and saturation inevitable. As one participant put it, 'People think we're wasting time. But when you hit a flow, even for a day, it's like printing money'. The temporariness is the point. Content arbitrage becomes less a matter of gaming a stable system than moving with its volatility: surfing the breaks in algorithmic time, always one detection cycle away from disappearing, but always ready to return.

What content arbitrage demands is not creativity in the conventional sense but interpretive agility. MMO4ME users describe this as a kind of 'flow': a working rhythm of watching what sticks, pivoting formats and rebalancing volume and frequency to avoid triggering detection. Unlike the fantasy of passive income that often surrounds automation, content arbitrage depends on recursive, embodied knowledge: how many articles to post before raising flags, how often to vary headlines, when to rotate IPs or accounts and how to maintain continuity without becoming too visible. Templates and batch-upload routines enable scale, but only when paired with fine-tuned calibration. Arbitrage becomes a form of epistemic labour, less about what is posted than about when, where and in what configuration. It functions as an informal analytics method, reverse-engineering platform thresholds not through documentation but through repetition, suspension and ban evasion.

Aesthetic choices are part of this calibration. Forum posts debate whether clickbait thumbnails with red arrows still attract attention or whether more understated visuals now perform better in particular niches. The goal is not to build a coherent brand, but to simulate legitimacy just enough to pass platform scrutiny. Reposting viral videos with slight caption edits, reordering paragraphs from scraped news, adding filler introductions or inserting more 'humanised' titles are all ways of keeping content circulating without attracting penalties. Informal actors become skilled in visual mimicry, borrowing the interface conventions of mainstream media and repackaging low-effort material into monetisable formats. These tactics produce an aesthetic of plausibility: content does not have to be good, only good enough to blend in, be clicked, loaded and monetised before its shelf-life expires. Within MMO4ME, technical calibration is also morally evaluated: experimentation and system-building are treated as legitimate forms of learning, whereas selling recycled tools or promises of guaranteed traffic is condemned for transferring risk without developing practical capacity.

Scrape, simulate, sell: Dropshipping and the interface of legitimacy

Dropshipping is a form of retail mediation in which sellers do not hold physical inventory but pass customer orders to third-party suppliers, who handle storage, packaging and shipping. It is often advertised as a low-capital entry point to e-commerce entrepreneurship across platforms such as AliExpress, Shopee, Shopify, Amazon and Walmart (AliDrop, n.d.; Sheehan, 2024; Ferreira, 2025; Quaker, 2024). In practice, however, dropshipping demands constant calibration: sourcing strategies, pricing finesse, customer engagement and infrastructural literacy across supply chains, payment systems, logistics networks and algorithmic visibility.

Among MMO4ME users, dropshipping is not treated as a monolithic business model but as a volatile tactical field. It appears most prominently in Level 3 ('hard') of the forum's earning tiers, where users move beyond low-barrier digital labour and into entrepreneurial forms of risk-bearing. Here, dropshipping is portrayed as neither scam nor stable profession but as a speculative craft requiring adaptability, grit and timing. It attracts users through its promise of scale and low formal entry barriers, but discourages many through saturation, operational fragility and unpredictable platform dynamics.

This tactical complexity is not only practised; it is also commodified. Level 3 users often sell accumulated expertise, toolkits and platform workflows to Level 1 newcomers through the forum's 'referral' category. These transactions, framed as mentorships, start-up kits, shortcut templates or system guides, recast dropshipping as a marketable object in its own right. What is sold is not only access to suppliers or products but the promise of preparedness: the knowledge of how to appear capable within unstable infrastructures. Dropshipping therefore involves selling twice: products to customers and plausibility to those trying to enter the field.

A long-running thread initiated by user yam2408 offers a detailed schema of what it means to do dropshipping within the Vietnamese MMO ecosystem. First posted in 2018, the thread functions as an evolving field guide, introducing supplier leads, automation tools, platform tactics and sourcing workflows. These range from classic international aggregators such as AliExpress, DOBA and Banggood to more idiosyncratic routes, including dropshipping entirely within Shopee. What distinguishes the thread is its tone: neither evangelical nor cynical. Dropshipping is presented as laborious, fragile and often disheartening, but still worth pursuing if one is prepared to learn the 'flow': the iterative logistics of sourcing, listing, negotiation, fulfilment and post-sale care. As yam2408 puts it, 'Any of these approaches can generate good returns if you are willing to learn and experiment'.

Shopee holds particular significance in this landscape because of its mobile-first design, low seller onboarding requirements and platform-integrated logistics. Unlike marketplaces organised around warehouse fulfilment or branded storefronts, Shopee thrives on high-volume, low-margin trade shaped by dynamic algorithmic visibility. Sellers operate in a system where social signals – likes, comments, follows, ratings and responsiveness – can influence ranking and trust. Yet these signals are volatile. Listings can be demoted or removed without explanation, and account suspensions are common. Visibility is therefore not simply a reward for good performance but a conditional resource that must be managed, staged and occasionally gamed. For MMO practitioners, Shopee offers opportunity not because it is stable, but because it is unstable in knowable ways.

The Shopee case illustrates the improvisational ethos of MMO4ME dropshipping. In yam2408's account, users might create twenty or more dummy storefronts, scrape trending products from Shopee itself, inflate listings through social signals and negotiate fulfilment directly with sellers through the platform's logistics system. Trust is simulated through repetition and interface familiarity. As yam2408 put it, 'You do not always have to undercut everyone else. Sometimes a small price adjustment, a cleaner-looking shop, quicker replies, or a better-presented listing is enough to make buyers trust your version'. This is a form of affective labour routed through interface design; it complicates easy distinctions between arbitrage and manipulation, since legitimacy is not simply claimed but performed through the platform's own signals. This account is treated here not as a representative model of Shopee dropshipping but as one concrete workflow circulated within MMO4ME.

Automation is central to this performance, though rarely in a fully integrated or high-capital form. Dropshippers stitch together modular routines: scraping product listings, harvesting metadata, generating storefronts, syncing supplier catalogues, tracking conversions and optimising visibility. Services such as DSers or Yakkyofy can automate supplier integration and product listing; Shopify templates shape checkout flows; ad-targeting tools test audiences across ephemeral storefronts. These tools reduce friction, but they do not stabilise the business. Automation here does not replace labour. It distributes and transforms it, rerouting human attentiveness into scriptable, programmable and endlessly tweakable tasks.

Over time, MMO4ME dropshipping has grown more intricate, but its underlying moral economy remains consistent. Rather than a frictionless route to passive income, it is framed as infrastructural problem-solving. The illusion of zero-capital entry, often perpetuated by external content platforms such as YouTube, is sharply contradicted by forum discourse, which foregrounds the sunk costs embedded in even basic operations. These costs are not only financial but also epistemic and temporal: advertising spend, supplier negotiation, paid tools, platform literacy, logistical fluency and the time required to learn what cannot be formalised in advance.

For newcomers without capital, training or direct mentorship, the field appears open but unforgiving. Entry is low-barrier only at the surface. Progress depends on tacit knowledge, iterative failure and the ability to read infrastructural cues in real time. The forum's pinned 2020 onboarding manifesto combines encouragement with a pragmatic account of risk:

> Invest according to the capital you have. If capital is limited, put in the labour and take that as your return. Small winds gather into a storm: accumulating steadily is more reliable than staking everything on one big gamble at the outset.

The line between amateur and professional is not drawn by income alone but by orientation: whether one learns to attune to volatility rather than be undone by it.

If the forum treats 'hard' earning as a test of infrastructural literacy, dropshipping is one of its most complex trials. One must build visibility without being flagged, scale without collapsing and earn without undermining trust. The field is not unregulated; it is governed by soft metrics: ratings, refunds, disputes, response times, platform visibility and customer affect. Those who thrive do so not because they find a stable formula but because they learn to read and reroute instability. In this sense, dropshipping is less about selling products than orchestrating credibility across broken or makeshift infrastructures.

Beneath the storefronts and supply chains lies a quieter form of infrastructural hustle: the production of engagement, clicks, conversions and trust signals that make platform commerce appear viable in the first place. The next section turns to phone farming, where devices, automation scripts and bodily labour converge to sustain the metrics on which platform earning depends.

Feeding the system: Phone farming and the automation of hustle

If dropshipping is a test of how to orchestrate credibility under volatile conditions, phone farming is an exercise in automating hustle itself. Originating from 'beer money' forums on platforms such as Reddit in the early 2010s, where users shared small-scale tactics for generating passive income with spare devices, phone farming has matured into a technical subculture defined by repurposed hardware, bespoke software and a finely tuned understanding of platform infrastructures. Classic phone farms involve dozens, sometimes hundreds, of discarded smartphones wired into grids, running apps that simulate user behaviour for ad revenue, view inflation or data brokerage. Contemporary box



Figure 2. Box phone racks as nodes in automated infrastructure. Source: Author's fieldwork.

farms intensify this logic by stripping phones of their screens, batteries and back covers to reduce thermal and spatial inefficiencies, treating devices less as phones than as nodes in a decentralised automation rig (see Figure 2).

By producing high volumes of automated engagement, phone farms sustain the visibility and circulation that platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook and Instagram monetise. They maintain the appearance of constant user activity, enabling monetisation for other actors while propping up the metrics on which platforms themselves depend. The infrastructural role of phone farming reveals a deeper paradox: these practices are often framed as exploitative or fraudulent, yet they help generate the very signals that platform economies require. Engagement, whether organic or manufactured, feeds the algorithmic loops through which platforms scale attention. In this system, the line between value extraction and value creation blurs. Phone farmers are not external to the platform economy but embedded within it as unofficial contributors whose legitimacy is unstable but whose impact is structural. In this sense, phone farms operate as para-platform infrastructures: systems adjacent to formal platforms that automate the production of the engagements on which platform visibility and monetisation depend (Weltevrede and Lindquist, 2024).

What phone farming stages is a partial redistribution of automation's affordances. Once the guarded privilege of corporate actors with access to high-end infrastructure, automation is here recast as a tactical capacity available to informal actors through repair, reuse and repurposing. With discarded smartphones and lightweight automation

tools, phone farmers enter a space usually reserved for well-resourced entities. They do not mimic corporate scale so much as reroute automation toward different ends. This is not democratisation in any idealistic sense. It is a workaround: a mode of infrastructural improvisation born of constraint, ingenuity and uneven access.

Phone farming therefore operates as a form of guerrilla infrastructure: improvised, tactical and designed to exploit platforms from within. While platforms project an image of centralised control and algorithmic coherence, they are in practice riddled with gaps, inconsistencies and dependencies on informal user activity. Phone farmers step into these gaps not as anomalies but as infrastructural agents who assemble discarded devices and fragmented software into systems that quietly uphold the platform economy. What makes this guerrilla is not only its informality, but its refusal of legibility. It is neither fully visible nor easily governable, yet it shadows and sustains the infrastructures it exploits. Detection was therefore understood as an ordinary condition of operation rather than an exceptional breakdown. As one operator explained,

> If a device hits a checkpoint, we leave it and run another one. We keep rotating between them. You have to watch and adjust as conditions change; you do not succeed straight away. Sometimes the whole setup stops working, so you move on and build another one. You have to stay ahead of the situation to make it work.

His account frames technical adaptation as a matter of timing and restraint: viable automation depends not only on what can be made to work but also on knowing when to recalibrate, reduce activity or withdraw.

Unlike jugaad, commonly used to describe frugal and flexible problem-solving under resource constraints (Prabhu and Jain, 2015), guerrilla infrastructure is defined here by its adversarial dependence on a host infrastructure. Phone farms rely on platform systems while remaining strategically illegible to the rules and detection mechanisms they circumvent. The distinction therefore lies not in improvisation alone but in concealment, tactical timing and operation from within an infrastructure that may disable the arrangement once detected.

The material condition that makes these guerrilla systems possible is excess: the churn of devices, the logic of discard and the availability of infrastructure after its official life has ended. Phone farming does not exist outside platform capitalism. It is one of its inevitable expressions, an artefact of discard capitalism, where rapid device turnover and data extraction converge. It emerges from the constant upgrading of new devices and the fallout of the old, from the drive to discard, replace, reconnect and monetise. The phone farm turns obsolescence into capacity. What appears as electronic waste becomes an earning machine. Scholarship on electronic waste shows that obsolete devices do not simply reach an endpoint but enter uneven circuits of storage, repair, reuse and redistribution (Gabrys, 2011; Lepawsky, 2018). Phone farming extends this material afterlife, but it should not therefore be treated as inherently circular or sustainable: prolonging device use does not resolve the extraction, energy consumption, toxicity or eventual disposal through which electronic surplus is produced.

These infrastructures are held together not only by hardware and scripts but also by a shared way of knowing: a guerrilla epistemology rooted in visibility, timing and tactical disclosure. On MMO forums, phone farmers publish guides, post code, document setbacks and share detection workarounds. Yet this openness is strategic rather than purely generous. Sharing a tactic signals that a niche is active, that a method works and that the window of profitability has not yet closed. As one farmer put it,

> Don't kid yourself, nothing in life is free. We share because the terrain is vast – no one can master everything. But once you've hit a sweet spot, you don't just give it away. You keep talking to see if the space is still worth it – but not for long.

Operators also drew a line between providing technical capacity and guaranteeing what that capacity would earn. As another farmer put it,

> We only supply phone boxes to our customers. If they need help, we provide technical support around the clock through Zalo. But whether they succeed is up to them; we do not guarantee their earnings. Our responsibility is technical support.

Legitimate expertise, in this account, consists in providing tools, configuration or technical support while leaving platform risk visible. Exploitation begins when that uncertainty is concealed, and technical assistance is sold as a guaranteed return.

Visibility, then, becomes both lure and warning. It not only proves that a tactic is viable but also hastens its saturation. Opportunity is fleeting, legitimacy unstable and every technique engineered to expire. Success depends not only on what works but also on when to enter, how long to hold and when to disappear. MMO forums operate less as stable communities than as volatile risk ecologies: barometers of viability, repositories of expired scripts and soft archives of infrastructural decay.

The earning web and the moral economy of informal automation

What holds content arbitrage, dropshipping and phone farming together is not a shared method or platform but a shared sensibility: the ability to turn volatility into value. Each practice extracts income from infrastructural gaps through scripts, surplus devices, reputational labour and

calibrated moral distinctions. Together, they form what I call the earning web: a distributed and improvised infrastructure built not for stability but for manoeuvrability. These connections resemble the patchworked infrastructures through which informal digital workers stitch together access to labour across fragmented sociotechnical systems (Chen, 2026). In the earning web, however, such patchworking extends beyond labour supply to connect monetisation practices, devices, accounts, payment systems and reputational knowledge.

The earning web is born from volatility, not despite it. It evolves with the monetisation architectures it shadows. Under Web 1.0, MMO actors gamed traffic flows and stacked ads to mirror the logic of impression-based advertising. In Web 2.0, value shifted toward platformised engagement, and the tactics followed: phone farming scaled visibility; forum users built tiered systems of trust; automation routines mimicked social signals. In the current speculative phase, shaped by tokenisation, micropayments and gamified contribution, MMO communities test each mechanism for viability, cycling through new schemes with clinical speed. They do not buy into the future. They test it, extract from it and move on.

This infrastructure also rests on material excess. If billions of phones were not rendered obsolete each year, there would be no phone farms. These rigs are built from surplus: discarded hardware, available time and the pressure to earn in an environment where wages stagnate and platforms monetise every click. What appears as a workaround is embedded within the system itself: an informal infrastructure that feeds the metrics platforms demand while subsisting on the waste they disavow. Phone farming transforms e-waste into economic possibility not through efficiency or design, but through leakage: through the cracks, excesses and breakdowns of discard capitalism.

By discard capitalism, I mean the structural production of technological surplus as a condition of economic growth. Consumer electronics are designed and circulated through cycles of novelty, replacement, extraction and obsolescence. Discard is not failure but function. If discard capitalism is defined by churn and waste, phone farms show what happens when that waste congeals into structure. They are not merely makeshift hacks, but infrastructures assembled from the leftovers of a system that builds obsolescence into its design.

In this light, Latour's provocation that 'technology is society made durable' reads not as abstraction, but as material diagnosis (Latour, 1990). Phone farms make durable the conditions of economic precarity, platform opacity and hustle-as-default. In one fieldwork encounter, I watched a phone farmer in Vietnam record a demo of his custom-built TikTok automation software while fielding live client questions in the corner of the screen. The software could swipe videos, solve CAPTCHAs, log into accounts, change usernames, update profile photos and configure app settings: tasks once performed manually, now delegated to fleets of stripped phones running in silent coordination. What began as casual reuse has thickened into method. Discarded phones become core components; detection workarounds become protocols; forum lore hardens into operational logic. This is not infrastructure as stability but infrastructure as accumulation under constraint.

Yet the earning web is not sustained by technical ingenuity alone. Its continuity relies on moral legibility. Each tactic is evaluated not only for whether it works but also for whether it counts: whether it reflects effort, justifies risk or crosses a line. Moral judgment is therefore infrastructural. It shapes who receives help, who is flagged as a scammer and whose tactics are worth replicating. On MMO4ME, legitimacy circulates through contribution scores, script-sharing, reputational tiers and warnings. These are not merely symbolic distinctions; they are mechanisms through which economic life is sorted.

Moral economy here is not a nostalgic claim to fairness. It is a practical system for navigating instability. Where platforms change rules without notice, payout systems fail without explanation and institutional protections are absent, moral judgment steps in where governance falls away. It does not eliminate exploitation; it classifies it. It instructs participants on what kind of loss is worth taking, what kind of gain can be kept without shame and what kind of conduct turns hustle into scam. This is not a rejection of the market. It is the condition of working inside it without guarantees.

The convergence of automation and informality in MMO practice challenges how platform participation is typically understood. Informal automation, as I use the term, is not simply automation occurring within an informal sector. It describes systems assembled from below through the selective coordination of scripts, devices, accounts, modular tools and continuing human oversight. Rather than eliminating labour, these systems redistribute it across manual calibration and machine-executed routines. They emerge in response to automation as rule-setting: the top-down enforcement of thresholds, limits, triggers and detection systems that make participation calculable. MMO actors reroute these rules not simply to break the system but to make its constraints productive. Informal automation is therefore not scaled from above but assembled from below.

The earning web, then, is not simply a workaround. It is the sedimentation of practice into infrastructure. It is where values about legitimacy, effort, risk and entitlement become embedded in scripts, workflows, referral chains, user tiers and automation tools. It is where social distinctions – between hustler and scammer, trial-and-error and exploitation, ingenuity and deception – are made durable through everyday technical practice. What is being built here is not only a set of tactics for surviving platforms but also a vernacular infrastructure for governing value when platforms refuse to.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the earning web as a sociotechnical and moral formation that sustains MMO practices in Vietnam. Through analysis of content arbitrage, dropshipping and phone farming, it has shown how platform earning is organised not simply through technical affordances or monetisation schemes but through a moral economy of risk, legitimacy and effort. These practices are neither disorganised nor marginal. They are infrastructural: held together by shared tactics, reputational labour, informal rules of conduct and collective judgments about what kinds of earning count.

MMO, in this light, is not an anomaly. It is a distributed response to the failures of formal governance and the asymmetries built into platform automation. Where platforms impose thresholds, users recalibrate around them. Where infrastructures fragment, new systems are patched together through discarded devices, recycled tactics, scripts, referrals and shared evaluations. The earning web is what coheres when formal systems fracture and users intervene, rewiring value through attention, timing, repetition and tactical adjustment.

Rather than treating informal automation as a symptom of disorder, this paper reframes it as a constitutive logic of contemporary platform economies. It is not automation scaled from above, but automation assembled from below: provisional, tactical and morally coded. This perspective shifts attention from platforms as coherent systems of control to the informal practices that make platform economies workable, exploitable and durable. It also shows how legitimacy is not simply granted by platforms or states but continuously constructed in grey zones of infrastructural contingency.

The earning web is therefore not a detour from the system. It is the system made legible by those who stretch its limits, inhabit its gaps and survive its churn. To understand MMO is to understand how people govern value where formal governance fails; how they build infrastructure from leftovers; and how, under conditions of volatility, earning becomes not only a technical practice but a moral one.

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