

Prosuming Academia: The Circuit of Unpaid Work in the Academic Environment

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Abstract

This essay explores the dynamics of prosuming academia as a continuous and often invisible circuit of unpaid and voluntary work in the academic environment. Grounded in the theoretical framework of presumption and unpaid work, it critically analyses how academic environments perpetuate asymmetries and exploitation through the expectation of voluntary contributions that sustain institutional functions. The essay highlights that prosuming encompasses both paid and unpaid forms of labor, underscoring the blurred boundaries that enable systemic inequities. By framing academia as an ongoing, incomplete circuit of prosumerism, the paper reveals how unpaid and voluntary intellectual work becomes a site of contested value, reinforcing hierarchies and unequal distributions of recognition and reward.

Keywords

prosuming, academic environment, unpaid work

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Defining Relevance Through a Critical View on the Prosuming Academia

Prosuming embraces the blurred boundaries between production and consumption. Although the concept has only recently spread, it is not new. It started with Toffler (1980), a well-known American guru (or futurist) who, in the 1980s, wrote ‘The Third Wave.’ In his seminal work, Toffler argued that people would produce goods and services for their own consumption. Prosumption can be defined as “value creation activities undertaken by the consumer that result in the production of products they eventually consume and that become their consumption experiences” (Xie et al., 2008, p. 110). This definition helps us comprehend prosumers as a segment of consumers who become producers of their consumption benefits (Alhashem, 2016). However, this is not a decisive definition but a starting point for our discussion.

Since then, prosumerism has been debated by many authors in different knowledge fields worldwide and is still a hot topic (Espelt, 2020; Pieńkowski, 2021; Rayna, & Striukova, 2021; Veen, Dagevos, & Jansma, 2021). One of the authors responsible for spreading the concept was Ritzer (2010, 2014, 2015a, 2015b), bringing the discussion to the sociological arena. In business and management, the concept of prosumption usually appears related to managerial aspects. It has emerged with great relevance in the work of Prahalad, & Ramaswamy (2004a, 2004b) ‘The Future of Competition.’ It is possible to find studies addressing prosumption, especially since the late 2000s, in many areas such as marketing (Alhashem, Moraes, & Szmigin, 2021; Nagel, Cronin Jr, & Utecht, 2018; Wolf, Ritz, & McQuitty, 2020), human resources management (Reis, & Braga, 2016), innovation (Shokouhi et al., 2019), and organizational studies (Fontenelle, 2015; Córdova, 2018).

One of the many possibilities of discussion is to bring prosumerism to academia. Two articles pointed out the close relationship between prosumption and the academic field, which helps us understand the phenomenon. Chen (2015) discusses the transformational, disruptive, and exploitative power of the consumer figure. Chen’s work (although it is not the focus of analysis of her study) points to the situation in which readers/researchers of academic journals generally write, review, and edit content as part of their professional responsibility. However, they do so in exchange for no or limited compensation – especially from publishers who, in turn, sell or reprint the articles with royalties. The second study, from Dusi and Huisman (2020), is about the students’ role and position

within higher education (HE) systems and institutions.

They argue that there is a lack of studies focused on prosumption and HE students. They propose discussing the complex and heterogeneous role of HE students using Ritzer's (2014, 2015a, 2015b) idea of the prosumption continuum. In this paper, we expand on the discussion started by Chen (2015) and Dusi and Huisman (2020). We aim to present and discuss the notion of "prosuming academia" and the circuit of unpaid work in the academic environment. Prosumers have been defined as individuals who consume and produce value, either for self-consumption or consumption by others. They can receive implicit or explicit incentives from organizations involved in the exchange. Beyond the transformational and disruptive power of prosumption, several authors point out a face of exploitation that can be perceived. We use this critical perspective to address prosumption in the academic sphere. We argue that academia can be seen as an endless and incomplete circuit of prosumerism, mainly linked to free (although intellectualized) academic work.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section presents some basic concepts of prosumption, connecting the idea to the higher education context. Then, we discuss free labor in academia, followed by the paper's main idea: the circuit of prosumption in academia. Finally, concluding this essay, we offer some final thoughts and outline future research directions.

Prosuming Academia: Translating the Concrete Concerns

A starting point for prosumption is understanding the entanglement between production and consumption in contemporary society. The attitude of reviewing hotels and restaurants (Tripadvisor, Booking, etc.) and the idea of consumer participation in online communities (Beer, & Burrows, 2010; Ritzer, & Jurgenson, 2010) are examples of how the prosumption process manifests in society. In the literature, it is common to find two "main divisions": one focused on discussing consumer empowerment (Pralhad, & Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b; Tapscott, & Williams, 2006), and another that discusses consumer exclusion (Comor, 2010a; Cova, Dalli, & Zwick, 2011; Ritzer, & Jurgenson, 2010; Scholz, 2012; Terranova, 2000; Zwick et al., 2008). In this paper, we develop our essay through the second perspective.

Comor (2010a, 2010b) gives us an important hint when critically analyzing the prosumer. He argues that people are compelled to become mere tools of a production

process since the prosumer depends on companies that command the essential infrastructures in which people produce and consume. The companies leave little room for genuine autonomy – even when it seems that the prosumer participates in a free and autonomous way and is aware of being under the control of its activities related to production and consumption. With the idea from Ritzer (2004) of the “McDonaldization” logic of customer work, Zwick et al. (2008, p. 166) point out that the co-creation economy enabled “the liberation and capture of large repositories of technical, social, and cultural competence in places previously considered outside the production of monetary value.” Companies realized that providing technological resources to customers could potentially “unblock” the creative, innovative, and profitable forms of customer participation. Arvidsson (2006) called it a platform of action, where customers become active participants in creating economic value. For instance, managers’ role would be to identify different modes of social cooperation with customers. To some extent, this logic can be amplified in Higher Education (HE) systems.

Regarding Higher Education (HE), Dusi and Huisman (2020) say there is a lack of prosumption literature because the original conceptualization of prosumption did not consider HE as a field of application. They argue that although Toffler (1980) did not specifically study HE in his studies, he foresaw some student engagement as future workers who would develop a certain mindset within a regulated workspace (Dusi, & Huisman, 2020). Also, much literature on HE spaces discusses how this connects with free labor or unpaid work.

Unpaid Work in the Academic Environment: What Are We Fighting Against?

Unpaid and voluntary work, what we call free labor, is a common feature in many education spaces (Guillem, & Briziarelli, 2020; Lopes, & Camargo Santos, 2025; McKenzie, 2021; Terranova, 2013). Guillem and Briziarelli (2020) pointed out that the notion of educational work is commonly related to an honorable vocation that involves an abstract sense of engagement, justice, and the willingness to make the academic environment a better place. “The role of love in academic labor” and the idea of doing something for love were investigated by Coin (2018, p. 302), relating to the academic labor processes. Especially in young academic positions, this devotion reveals itself as a

trap that is nebulously related to a vague promise of future opportunities and personal fulfilment (Coin, 2018).

Gill (2009, p. 40) emphasizes the importance of focusing on the academic “labor processes, organizational governance, and conditions of production.” In fact, as occurs in other areas, the work in academia is involved in an arena with its own peculiar “rules of the game.” People involved in academia know there is a price to pay to navigate in that space “by working hard both within and outside the classroom spaces, especially for the newcomers and the beginners” (Friedman, 2021, p. 61). As a result, there are positions of greater vulnerability in the group of people involved in academic activities, such as graduate and undergraduate students, faculty members on a non-tenure line, and pre-tenure faculty members (Almjeld, & Zimmerman, 2021). We can also cite the newly deinstitutionalized PhDs who look forward to postdoctoral fellowships to remain in the academic arena. Not infrequently, they work voluntarily, without any payment, to remain active in the academic field.

These situations differ from the common practice of keeping up to date or undergoing continuous training in other work areas, which is aimed at securing better jobs and higher salaries. There is a common and shared understanding in the academic field that it will be necessary to carry out several unpaid activities. It can be noticed right at the beginning of the academic trajectory, during graduation, to PhD or postdoctoral levels, and finally, taking up the position of professor in a higher education institution. In many cases, these activities take the form of reviewing papers for congresses and journals, assisting professors in planning classes, correcting assignments and tests, organizing meetings, promoting lectures and debates, organizing books, or being part of or leading research groups. Although these activities are inherent to the craft of a scholarship in master and doctoral students’ positions, in practice, we are aware that it is unpaid work (Dujarier, 2014; Arvidsson, 2006, 2008, 2013; Zwick et al., 2008). Who in the academic field is not invited, almost daily, to work for no fee at all?

The relationship with free labor in academia extends beyond early-career and precariously employed academics, affecting all career levels and academic staff (Heffernan, & Smithers, 2025). Some examples, but not limited to, are the free labor involved in hosting, coordinating, and executing conferences, symposiums, and colloquiums. The importance of academic conferences for the growth of the scientific field is undeniable, and researchers have already observed it from many perspectives (Eden, 2016; Graham, & Kormanik, 2004; Henderson, & Burford, 2020; Jackson, 2019;

Jacobs, & McFarlane, 2005; Rittichainuwat, Beck, & Lalopa, 2001; Tomaszewski, & MacDonald, 2009).

Almjeld and Zimmerman (2021, p. 32) shed light on the significant amount of invisible and unpaid work required and involved in conference organizing, including the operational and logistical work. They reinforce that it is also “intellectually challenging” work, frequently passion-motivated. However, despite its importance, being involved in time-consuming conference activities is not valued and weighted in the same way as, for example, publications are (Almjeld, & Zimmerman, 2021). Suppose conferences are already recognized for their critical contribution to the academic community. In that case, the organizing activities surrounding them should also be acknowledged, as these events depend fundamentally on human, although invisible, academic labor.

There is also a considerable amount of free academic work which usually seems to be framed as a kind of “opportunity” for senior academics to engage in (Heffernan, & Smithers, 2025), for example: reviewing for publishers being part of editorial boards in competitive or, supposed to be, top journals; evaluating grant proposals for research councils; and serving as “external assessors” on appointment and promotion panels in institutions other than one’s own employing institution (Arboledas-Lérida, 2024; Ivancheva, & Garvey, 2022).

It is also worth mentioning the free academic work delivered by staff development sessions for early career academics in institutions other than one’s own employing institution, writing reference letters in support of grant applications, job applications, promotions, as well as examining doctoral theses for free or with a very low fee as compensation (Altan-Olcay, & Bergeron, 2024). It is also crucial to recognize that unpaid academic labor is not confined to academics at any career stage. Such work is likewise undertaken by professional services staff and by individuals in other operational roles within universities, ranging from catering staff to porters (Heffernan, & Smithers, 2025; Ivancheva, & Garvey, 2022). The list of examples illustrating this phenomenon is extensive and far from exhaustive.

Taken together, these examples underscore the alarming extent to which academia relies on unpaid labor (Mirza, & Gunaratnam, 2019). This systemic mode of operation fosters a labor structure grounded in favors, voluntarism, and informality, ultimately undermining the sustainability of academic institutions themselves. The absence of formal recognition for unpaid work stands in stark contradiction to the very principles of merit and acknowledgment that academia professes to uphold (Ivancheva, & Garvey,

2022; Heffernan, & Smithers, 2025). Moreover, the lack of recognition intersects with entrenched gender and racial inequalities, which emerge as central challenges in this debate (Bam, Waters, & Janse, 2024; Collins, 2000; Docka-Filipek, & Stone, 2021; Lopes, & Camargo Santos, 2025; McKenzie, 2021).

It is important to note that the expectation to engage in unpaid academic work is unevenly distributed. Women and members of racialized or otherwise minoritized groups are disproportionately invited to undertake such “pro bono” tasks, particularly those associated with values of care, social justice, and community engagement (Docka-Filipek, & Stone, 2021; Bam, Walters, & Jansen, 2024; McKenzie, 2021). This pattern connects to the notion of academic housework (Lopes, & Camargo Santos, 2025), which refers to administrative, service, and mentoring activities that are essential for the functioning of institutions but undervalued in productivity metrics. As Collins (2000) observes, the care work historically assigned to Black women has been naturalised as an extension, so to speak, of their social identities, reinforcing structural marginalisation. Within the prosuming academia circuit, this translates into the reproduction of hierarchies that, under the guise of engagement and ethical-political commitment, keep certain bodies and voices occupied in supportive roles while freeing those in positions of prestige to focus on activities that are more highly recognised and rewarded. Thus, the issue is not only that participation in the circuit of unpaid work is unequal, but that the system itself converts gendered and racialised inequalities into symbolic capital for academia, sustaining a model that benefits from and perpetuates these asymmetries (Mirza, & Gunaratnam, 2019).

Following these examples and concerns, which call for both critical attention and concrete action, it is equally important to acknowledge that the mere existence of free academic work is not enough to suggest a relation between prosumption and academia within the same debate arena. We argue that prosuming academia refers to a circuit of unpaid work in the academic environment.

Arriving at “Prosuming Academia”: Findings About the Unpaid Academic Work

Carah and Brodmerkel (2020) argue that the legacy of the creative revolution is fundamentally to understand customers as active participants and meaning-makers in the social process of creating brand value. Lury (2004) calls ‘programming devices’ the

infrastructure for anticipating and productively appropriate consumer creativity, resulting in the brands just modulating consumer action. So, in terms of infrastructure, digital media, for example, can be seen as “participatory, algorithmic and logistic tools for monitoring, pre-empting, and organizing consumer culture” (Carah, & Brodmerkel, 2020, p. 6). Although the authors are specifically discussing brands and media culture, we understand that it is possible to adapt this infrastructure perspective to the academic spaces, not precisely as an infrastructure but as a circuit.

The circuit of prosumption in academia can be exemplified by several time-consuming and unpaid activities. Frequently, academics are invited to act as reviewers, preparing evaluations and feedback for conferences and journals. However, they know they will be barred from accessing the same articles they evaluated – barred from consuming the material they help to produce. Chen (2015, p. 447) argues that “although academic institutions enable prosumption by paying the salaries and benefits of researchers, their libraries must purchase expensive licenses for access to the gated content produced by their researchers; the prohibitive costs of the licenses can ironically limit the circulation of content.” It is important to mention that master’s and doctoral students carry out a significant number of these activities, some supported only by scholarships, and others receive no payment at all.

The hope of building a better future through a curriculum with as many lines as possible is one of the mainstays of this circuit – an endless search for increasing productivity while building a career. “The burden of academic labor” continues in temporary and freelancing activities, lacks economic stability, and often requires moving to another city and postponing personal desires (like parenthood) to pursue a permanent and stable position (Coin, 2018, p. 310). By engendering capital for the future, the consumption of work is a significant investment (López-Ruiz, 2007). Uncertainty is the driving factor of this investment: nothing guarantees a formal and paid employment contract, even if a lot of unpaid work is done.

Dusi and Huisman (2020, p. 4) present a literature review of students’ roles in HE systems. They explain that, at first, the studies focused only on the human capital perspective. However, recently, it has been possible to find studies showing students as labor contributors (Halbesleben et al., 2003), co-producers (McCulloch, 2009), and co-creators (Bovill et al., 2011). Students’ participation in co-creating “teaching approaches, course design, curriculum, and overall learning experience” is often associated with positive outcomes. However, the concepts of labor contributor, co-producer, and co-

creator have already exposed their fragilities: these social categories can explain the phenomenon, but also can limit it. Dusi and Huisman (2020) use the notion of Ritzer's continuum about the role of students in the HE systems to overcome these social categories.

We understand that Ritzer's continuum idea (prosumption-as-production and prosumption-as-consumption) brought by Dusi and Huisman (2020) in the role of students in the HE systems, takes place in the circuit of unpaid work in academia and involves all academics, not just the students or beginners. This circuit is related to the entanglement of work and consumption and the value realization process (Arvidsson, 2006), which also tries to anticipate and unblock (Carah, & Brodmerkel, 2020; Zwick et al., 2008) the creative potential of the academics-prosumers.

Immersed in this unclear and indefinite academic environment, they (we) cannot exactly see what is acceptable and what is not regarding the academic activities – they (we) only know it is necessary to keep participating. It is also a matter of enhancing the academic-personal capital, intellectually and socially, by developing social skills to get in and stay in certain influential circles, expanding networking, and seeking to be known and recognized among peers. In the end, some driving force keeps all of us in the circuit: a “hope that love and sacrifice will somehow be rewarded” (Coin, 2018, p. 319).

To illustrate this path, with no clear exits and arrivals, we chose an Escher image, which translates this illusion of space and time, crossed by the notion of prosumerism (Figure 1):

It is impossible for the inhabitants of different worlds to walk or sit or stand on the same floor, because they have differing conceptions of what is horizontal and what is vertical. Yet they may well share the use of the same staircase. On the top staircase illustrated here, two people are moving side by side and in the same direction, and yet one of them is going downstairs and the other upstairs. Contact between them is out of the question because they live in different worlds and therefore can have no knowledge of each other's existence (Escher, 2009, p. 14).

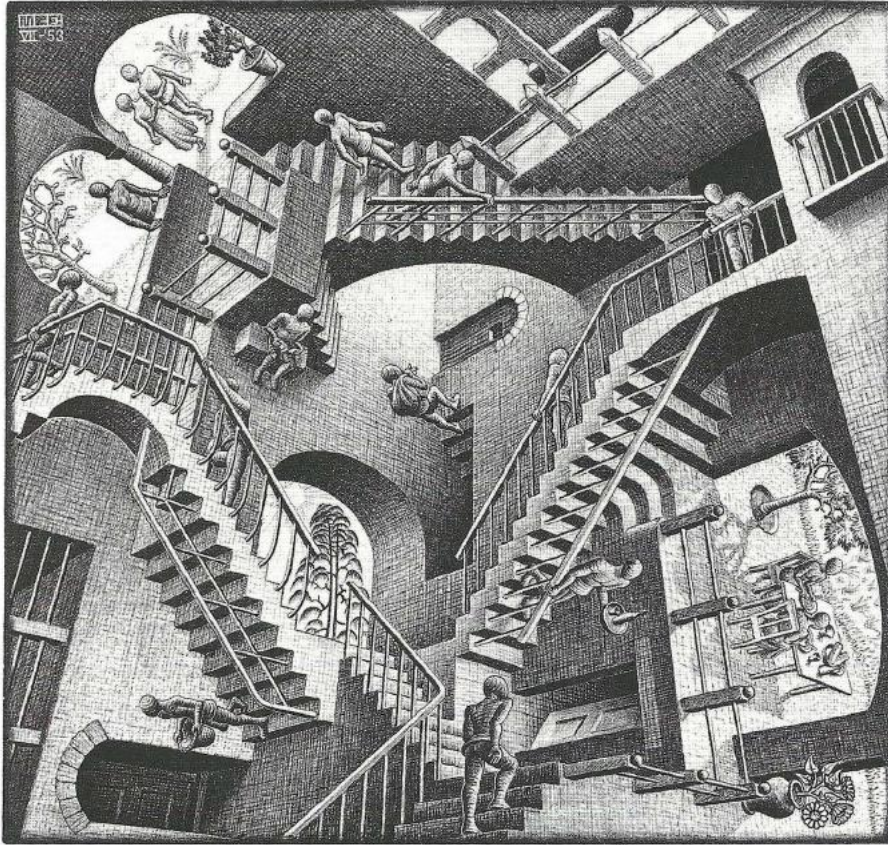


Figure 1: Relativity.

Source: Escher (2009 [1953], figure 67.

Escher’s image of infinite stairs gives us the notion that we are moving toward something higher and better. It is like a “rocky staircase” at the beginning of the journey as PhD students, hoping it could become an “escalator” over the years as lecturers, associate professors, or achieving tenured positions. Nevertheless, a staircase is always a staircase, and, as in Escher’s image, we cannot clearly see the starting point or the finish line. So, what keeps academics inside this circuit of entangled roles? We believe participation is key, and we should continue to participate, even if it means doing unpaid work.

In this circuit of unpaid work, participation has significant importance – a role similar to that already discussed in studies related to digital media, media audiences, and algorithmic culture (Carah & Brodmerkel, 2020). Marketers are always worried about designing new “regimes of engagement” to access consumers’ creative self-expression in ways that strategically benefit the brand and give an impression of preserving their freedom and autonomy (Zwick et al., 2008). We understand this phenomenon is not

exclusive to the relationship between Marketing and consumers, but also manifests in academia.

That is why we arrived at “prosuming academia”: these entangled roles manifest inside a circuit of participation (often with no payment involved), an investment of the self with no guarantee of return. Participation occurs based on the premise of willingly unlocking the creative potential of academics, which is authorized and exercised collectively, and in an emotional dimension.

However, it is also important to highlight that “prosuming academia” points to a kind of naturalization of volunteer culture. That is, an institutional culture that normalizes unpaid work as a “proof of commitment” to the academic environment. Once this type of culture takes hold, it potentially also transforms engagement in academia into a moral obligation, creating an environment of guilt and self-demand (Santos, & Silva, 2023). At the same time, maintaining a “prosuming academia” presupposes the operation of a cycle of dependence on goodwill, through which the academic environment depends on the voluntary disposition of workers to remain operational (Cavalcanti, & Silva, 2024). This suggests that “prosuming academia” embodies an unsustainable model that shifts the burden entirely onto individuals, offering no guarantee of reciprocation or tangible return for the unpaid labor performed by those who sustain the academic enterprise as a whole.

Concluding Remarks: Embracing a Critical View to Fostering Change

This essay was developed to explore the boundaries of prosuming academia as a circuit process of unpaid work in the academic environment. The theoretical framework focused on concepts of presumption and unpaid work, connecting them to the higher education context. From there, it was possible to develop conclusions that achieve the main objective of this paper.

It is undeniable that prosumerism, as a product of contemporaneous times, brings many contributions (Lang, Dolan, Kemper, & Northey, 2021) to help us understand our world. We adopted the prosumerism lenses to present and discuss the notion of “prosuming academia” and the circuit of unpaid work in the academic environment. Further investigations into the role of academic-prosumers and how they shape and interplay in the academic system are needed. Based initially on Chen’s (2015) and Dusi and Huisman’s (2020) discussions, the idea we present here also opens up a fruitful space

for empirical investigations. Using Coin's (2018, p. 314) question, "do you work for free?" as a starting point, it is possible to deepen the understanding of the complexities that involve the whole circuit of prosuming academia. In addition, empirically understanding the question "Why do you work for free?" is another way to explore the phenomenon and advance its comprehension. After all, as pointed out by Escher (2009, p. 14), "the distinction between ascending and descending is eliminated." At the end of the day, they (we) are just trying to survive within an endless circuit.

The discussion on the relationship between unpaid work, academia, and prosuming academia put forward in this paper reveals the impact of the circuit of unpaid work in the academic environment. Adopting a critical perspective was central to addressing presumption in the academic sphere, contributing to increasing our understanding of academia as an endless and incomplete circuit of prosumerism, mainly linked to free (although intellectualized) academic work.

The discussion developed in this article also advances our understanding of academia in important ways. First, the notion of "prosuming academia" demonstrates that there is no genuine separation between intellectual labor and technical or organizational labor, as all members of the academic enterprise are subject to demands for unpaid work. This suggests that the distinction between "intellectual production" and "bureaucratic work" is artificial, mainly when considering the broader circuit of unpaid labor in academia. Indeed, the very attempt to maintain such a division in a highly intellectualized environment like academia may expose an elitist and fragmented conception of what constitutes "academic work," thereby revealing how the knowledge production industry itself is structured and perpetuated.

Second, it can be concluded that the practice of "prosuming academia" contributes to the naturalization of institutional inequalities within the academic environment. The circuit of unpaid labor sustains a hierarchical and exclusionary academic culture, as such labor is often perceived as work of lesser value. When it is socially understood in these terms, those with greater academic prestige may avoid or delegate these tasks, leaving individuals in more precarious positions to assume them. While our intention here is to problematize and challenge the persistence of systematic unpaid work in academia, it is crucial to recognize that the culture of "prosuming academia" ultimately reinforces the normalization of institutional inequalities by perpetuating asymmetries in academic hierarchies.

Third, recognizing that all individuals engaged in the academic enterprise contribute to the knowledge production it generates – even if they are not directly associated with the authorship of “publishable knowledge” – the absence of remuneration or formal acknowledgment for unpaid work results in a systematic underreporting of the actual volume of academic labor. This underreporting distorts productivity indicators, misguides the allocation of resources, and undermines the design of professional development policies that could, for instance, address entrenched racial and gender inequalities within academia.

The reflection on prosuming academia as the circuit of unpaid work in the academic environment allows us to suggest possible directions for future research. First, we recommend theoretical investigations that revisit and critically examine the concept of work in contemporary universities, considering that the circuit of unpaid labor has significantly shaped the nature of academic work in recent decades. Second, we suggest further studies focused on understanding the empirical experiences of people involved in the academic environment and the possible impacts of recognizing their unpaid work as prosuming academia. Third, we suggest the development of future studies aimed at deepening awareness of the scope of “prosuming academia” and the conflicts it generates, with a view to rethinking the current academic environment. While our paper offers valuable insights to advance this debate, we acknowledge that there remains considerable potential to explore this dimension more extensively as part of our theoretical contribution.

Finally, reflecting on prosuming academia as the circuit of unpaid work in the academic environment highlighted alternative ways of thinking about the relationship people are establishing between and within the academic environment. The unpaid work involved in prosuming serves as an alternative lens through which this paper develops a critical perspective on the relationship with the academic environment in contemporary times.

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