

Cultural Industry in the Age of Digital Platforms: A Critical Reading in the Light of the Frankfurt School

صناعة الثقافة في عصر المنصات الرقمية: قراءة نقدية في ضوء مدرسة فرانكفورت

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Abstract:

This article seeks to redefine the discourse surrounding cultural industry through a critical lens within the scope of Frankfurt School research. This academic perspective critiques the realities of modern societies, subject to technological dominance within the framework of contemporary capitalism. In this context, modern capitalism has leveraged mass media channels to promote cultural commodities as symbols of social power and tools for shaping thought and behavior. However, with the advent of the digital revolution, the trajectory of cultural production has shifted, giving rise to a digital cultural industry characterized by diverse producers and consumers. This shift stems from changes in audience dynamics, where virtually everyone becomes a content creator due to pervasive integration and extensive usage of digital communication platforms. These platforms have facilitated the emergence of various phenomena, including individualism, alienation, and a pervasive consumerist culture. In this landscape, commodities transcend their material worth, assuming symbolic significance consumed for both psychological and social gratification. The intertwining of culture with economic commodification and technology serves to obscure critical perspectives, thereby facilitating the imposition of hegemonic control to safeguard conditions conducive to profit generation and social dominance.

Keywords:

Cultural industry, digital platforms, Frankfurt school, digital culture, alienation, consumption.

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الملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى إعادة بناء النقاش حول موضوع صناعة الثقافة استناداً إلى المقاربة النقدية في إطار بحوث مدرسة فرانكفورت التي نقدت واقع المجتمعات المعاصرة الخاضعة للسيطرة التقنية والتكنولوجية في ظل الرأسمالية الحديثة التي استغلت وسائل الاتصال الجماهيري للترويج لمنتجات هذه الثقافة واعتبرتها كنماذج للسلطة الاجتماعية ووسائل لتشكيل الفكر والسلوك، سلكت صناعة الثقافة مساراً مغايراً بظهور الثورة الرقمية فتحوّلت لصناعة ثقافية رقمية تتسم بتعدد المنتجين والمستهلكين نتيجة للتغير في طبيعة الجماهير أين أصبح الكل منتج للمحتوى نتيجة الاندماج المكثف والاستخدام المفرط لمنصات التواصل الرقمي التي ساعدت على بروز العديد من الظواهر مثل الفردانية والاعتراب والسقوط في هوس الاستهلاك الذي تتجاوز فيه السلعة قيمتها المادية لتصبح ذات دلالة رمزية تستهلك لاعتبارات نفسية واجتماعية فربط الثقافة بمنطق التسليع الاقتصادي والتكنولوجيا يعمل على تغييب الرؤية النقدية وتسهيل عملية فرض الهيمنة للمحافظة على الشروط الضرورية لاستمرار تحقيق الربح والسيطرة الاجتماعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

صناعة الثقافة، مدرسة فرانكفورت، المنصات الرقمية، الثقافة الرقمية، الاعتراب، الاستهلاك.

1. Introduction

The German Frankfurt School is situated within the Marxist intellectual tradition, seeking to evolve it by offering a fresh interpretation of classical Marxist philosophy and critiquing capitalism during the early twentieth century. This movement aimed to align with the cultural, social, economic, and political shifts experienced by its first-generation philosophers, notably Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. They laid the groundwork for a critical endeavor aimed at understanding contemporary life molded by Western modernity and dismantling its intellectual and historical constructs. They scrutinized the conditions faced by humanity post-Industrial Revolution. The emergence of this perspective wasn't accidental but rather a product of a historical backdrop characterized by the proliferation of technological innovations across various life domains, including media and communication channels like radio, cinema, and television.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer sought to establish a multidisciplinary critical theory to grasp the human phenomenon and analyze the existing situation through sharp philosophical critique of industrially advanced societies. In these societies, dominant classes sought to impose their hegemony by controlling the means of production and dominating the social system in all its components, including human beings. They found mass media to be the most suitable method to penetrate minds and disable sources of awareness and perception by simplifying thought and freezing it in service of Western imperialistic principles. Adorno observed that media content increasingly obscured the true vision of the world by disseminating mass-oriented content aimed at promoting the interests of ruling classes. This phenomenon was

termed "cultural industry," a false culture imposed on the masses subject to market laws to meet the requirements of consumerist society. It offers fleeting pleasure and promotes messages that manipulate individuals unknowingly to maintain the necessary conditions for profit sustainability and marketing of media products with a commercial tint aimed at spreading globalization aspects and undermining human intellectualism.

Our era is marked by the widespread proliferation of modern technologies that have touched various aspects of human life and infiltrated contemporary societal formations. The digital revolution has facilitated the emergence of new communication means that align with the spirit of the age, transitioning from traditional to new media, with digital platforms being one of its most significant manifestations. They represent an innovative form of communication and an essential driver for knowledge dissemination and influencing attitudes and trends. These platforms today serve as vital interfaces for media content dissemination and directing audience attention. Moreover, they play a role in shaping collective thought due to their characteristics and ability to reach a large number of recipients as they are accessible to the public. Despite their importance as influential means of information exchange and opinion, they contribute to presenting superficial and debased content that undermines individuals' ability to think critically by penetrating awareness and obscuring original culture in favor of artificial and debased culture with an economic character through standardization, molding, and audience engineering. Capitalism primarily aims to transform culture into a form of consumption manifestation.

Digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram wield exceptional influence in shaping culture today. They serve as ideological apparatuses, adhering to specific agendas to regulate and organize society. The notion of control within virtual digital realms has taken on a new dimension, exploiting technological instruments that now constitute a subtle and invisible force, effectively molding individuals' perceptions of their social and cultural surroundings. The cultural industry has adapted to modern shifts, with new media and digital technologies facilitating the swift and expansive dissemination of content across these platforms, often without oversight. This underscores the importance of employing critical theoretical frameworks to understand the nuances of cultural production in the digital age and examine its impact on user audiences.

Given the preceding discussion, this research paper seeks to explore the transformations witnessed in the cultural sector due to the rise of digital platforms as substitutes for conventional media channels.

1- 1. - Historical Context of the Cultural Industry:

2.1. Frankfurt School:

Critical theory has deep roots in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which

was established in 1923 by a group of philosophers, sociologists, economists, psychologists, and literary critics who envisioned it as an independent institution dedicated to exploring issues related to socialism, Marxism, racism, and labor movements. Embracing a Marxist analytical approach, the institute operated outside traditional academic structures, attracting prominent intellectuals and literary figures during the 1920s and 1930s. Among them were renowned individuals such as Marxist literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), along with social philosopher Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) (Yahyaoui, 2022, p. 176).

Critical theory posits that the role of media is to aid power holders in society in asserting their influence and bolstering the existing status quo. Consequently, their critical inquiries focused on media scenarios and the dissemination of popular culture rather than "high" or refined culture that uplifts the tastes of the masses, providing unique interpretations of the spread of media content aimed at furthering the interests of dominant societal groups. (Fawzi, 2014, pp. 107-108) Thus, the school's function materialized in creating philosophical analyses to explore the shifts affecting Western societies, interconnecting the trinity of human, society, and technology, commencing with instrumental reason and technology's dominance over societies and popular culture. Adorno and Horkheimer endeavored to shed light on these matters in their collaborative work "Dialectic of Enlightenment," viewing media offerings as degraded works that divert individuals from reality and subject them to the dominion of power by inundating them with false depictions of reality. Consequently, the Frankfurt School embarked on a task of philosophical critique aimed at uncovering the essence of these changes and subsequently redirecting and transcending them.

2.2. Cultural industries According to Adorno and Horkheimer:

Adorno's research focus during his years in the United States primarily centered on cultural and ideological aspects. The discourse intensified when he observed that media production largely constituted a form of commercial entertainment controlled by major industrial conglomerates, resulting in the emergence of a mass culture characteristic of capitalist societies and the subject of critical examination. In 1947, Adorno introduced the concept of cultural industry in his essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," closely linked with the Frankfurt School. This notion reflects the school's interest in cultural phenomena within consumer societies that undermined individual creativity by being assimilated into a consumerist context. It represents an exploration of the relationship between culture and the institutional apparatus of society, aiming to demonstrate that mass culture becomes homogenized due

to monopolization and disintegrates because of the fusion of culture with pleasure. Thus, culture as a form of production becomes a conventional means of influencing people and manipulating their perceptions. (Toufik, 2017, pp. 52-53)

Adorno's conception of cultural Industry emerged from the notion that media ceased to function as instruments for information and education. Dismissing the functionalist viewpoint, Adorno contended that these media aimed to restructure society and legitimize existing capitalist systems by assimilating individuals into a lifestyle dictated by providing the public with a common framework facilitating control and manipulation. The Frankfurt School emphasized that ideological class control is inherently tied to economic underpinnings and emphasized individuals' dependence on media-influenced perceptions, viewing culture not merely as a derivative but as an independent industry and a socially autonomous institution operating within the societal framework. (AL Saadia, 2020, p. 811)

Popular culture content predominantly characterizes itself by entertainment appeal, often marked by shallowness, simplicity, and sensationalism. These characteristics are frequently evident in television shows, series, radio programs, movies, fashion, advertising, and other media offerings. This culture artificially replicates high culture to meet market demands and audience preferences, often resulting in the dilution of authentic cultural content. While popular culture tends to promote conformity and standardization for broad consumption, high culture emphasizes individuality. Critiques of popular culture include its manipulative and exploitative nature, which imposes itself on the masses unknowingly. Horkheimer encapsulated these ideas by juxtaposing popular entertainment and cultural industries, suggesting that light art becomes the dominant form, reflecting a poor social perception of serious art. Thus, media perpetuates a consistent pattern of cultural standardization, imprinting everything with a singular stereotypical character, serving as a tool for social control and reproducing prevailing societal norms. (Khaira, 2022, p. 111)

Adorno and Horkheimer did not directly condemn popular culture, but rather analyzed its production mechanisms, distribution channels, and the way it is enforced upon individuals by those in economic power. They observed cultural activities have

expanded, turning culture into a commodity that stifles individual creativity. According to the Frankfurt School, this suggests that technological rationality has become a form of control in its own right. When technology wields significant power over society, cultural production becomes a clear sign of culture's commodification. Converting cultural endeavors into exchange values dilutes their critical potency and strips them of their original experiential impact. The cultural industry becomes emblematic of the decline of culture's existential philosophical role. (AL Saadia, 2020, p. 817)

Herbert Marcuse offered his unique critique of contemporary technologically dominated society. Despite proclaiming the surpassing of classical Marxism, it remained the fundamental backdrop for his assessment of various phenomena. In his work "One-Dimensional Man," he scrutinized the individual's relationship with technology, particularly focusing on mass media. Marcuse argued that liberal systems act through a symbolic apparatus-turning individuals into controlled and subjugated population, this apparatus channels their spiritual energy to preserve the existing social structure. This structure, devised and executed by the ruling class, encodes expressions of desire and underlying motives based on stereotypical models from films, songs, advertisements, and mass media. (Dono, 2020, p. 264) Marcuse argued that the crisis of humanity in contemporary society arises from the rational nature of controlling humans, transforming culture into mass-produced commodities that domesticate individuals and flatten their thoughts, erasing any inclination for revolution or change.

It can be argued that the philosophers of the Frankfurt School did not merely analyze cultural, intellectual, and historical narratives. Their approach involved deconstructing the foundations upon which Western societies were founded. The trailblazers of this school were marked by a revolutionary inclination, rejecting all forms of power and hegemony that emerged with modernity and technology, which they deemed contrary to human essence. According to cultural sociology, the media are technological instruments and extensions specific to the capitalist framework, posing a threat to individual liberty and eroding human identity. Adorno, one of the leading radical cultural critics, meticulously analyzed the content, nature, and intricate

impacts of media, concluding that the cultural industry does not reflect authentic reality but rather reproduces it to perpetuate feelings of alienation, estrangement, and consumerism.

3. The reality of cultural industry via digital platforms:

Studies focusing on cultural industry face fresh challenges with the onset of the digital revolution and the ascendance of digital platforms with their groundbreaking features commandeering the media landscape. Digitalization permeates all societal domains, from cultural output and music to cinema, TV, and literature. Platforms like Google, Facebook, Twitter, and corporate giants such as Amazon and Apple have surged to the forefront (Colombo, 2018, p. 141) ushering in novel possibilities for re-defining discourse on the relevance of the critical model in the information age. The advent of digital technology has instigated seismic shifts, leading to profound alterations in communication methodologies, knowledge generation, and exchange. The domain most profoundly impacted by these transformations is the media and communication sphere, necessitating adaptation commensurate with the era's essence and the ramifications of globalization, particularly in the transition from traditional to new media. Consequently, the contemporary conceptualization of cultural industry is anchored in the universal dissemination of cultural goods, not solely restricted to symbolic output but spanning all facets of existence. (Khaira, 2022, p. 114)

Various digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok represent indispensable tools of contemporary mass communication. Statistics reveal that 56% of the global populace utilize these platforms, which serve as decentralized digital arenas facilitating swift interpersonal communication and interaction across diverse digital mediums like audio, visuals, videos, and more, facilitated by the Internet. In this milieu, the digital media expansion has engendered the creation of a transcultural and digital culture characterized by myriad producers and manufacturers, possessing a commercial disposition subject to the dynamics of supply and demand. These products metamorphose into pure industrial commodities showcased for consumption, trade, and interchange via digital communication platforms that have become conduits for cultivating awareness and global culture.

Numerous challenges have emerged due to globalization, with culture industry being among the most prominent. Digitization has not extinguished this creative process; rather, it has restructured it to align with new means of communication. Digital cultural production relies on catering to artificial and illusory needs to ensure continuity and profit generation through the content it offers to users. Pop culture, promoting superficial and debasing content, has supplanted refined culture. Edgar Morin posits that the cultural industry isn't merely an ideological tool but a giant laboratory where collective desires and expectations shape its products—industrial outputs molded by the active audience's desires and needs, resulting in a cultural decline and

irreversible transformation (Khaira, 2022, p. 112) The unrestricted flow of information has spawned a digital culture industry characterized as hybrid and global, aiming to impose uniformity on all social constructs, thereby contributing to the dismantling of original cultural frameworks in favor of a market-ready, commodified culture. Consequently, critical approaches to digital platforms have sought to analyze the cultural consequences of modernity and the shifts arising from the broadening scope of production and consumption.

Within the digital landscape, cultural industries have exponentially multiplied processes of replication through their ability to reproduce individual works and creations via technology, manufacture matching media, provide unlimited accessibility online, and reach vast, boundless audiences, consequently overturning the economic dynamics of these industries. Cultural industries have consistently regained strength from new technologies to revitalize their sectors and open new markets. Within the virtual environment, these industries have become more creative in conveying ideas, emotions, and attractions through their symbolic content (Khaira, 2022, p. 113) This discussion raises a profound question: whether audiences impose the production and distribution of specific content types on digital platform owners, or if such content types inherently assert themselves on the audience.

Within this framework, contemporary critical approaches focus on inspecting digital platforms, noting their role in shaping public consciousness to align with the Western cultural industry apparatus, which operates under comprehensive management. These platforms widely disseminate their products across all levels, exerting essential influence on millions of daily users and contributing to the formation of collective unconsciousness, where individuals instinctively conform to the dictates of mass media. Two key aspects emerge firstly, the unprecedented dominance of large corporations, which have achieved unparalleled global reach, compared to traditional cultural industry practices. Secondly, their *modus operandi* relies on leveraging the economic advantage of users, who, for instance, enjoy access to information or entertainment content via platforms like Google and Facebook. These characteristics have empowered companies to wield monopolistic control over demand rather than supply, diverging from conventional monopolies 2011. (Colombo, 2018, p. 142)

The shift of media ownership to multinational corporations has expanded the realm of cultural influence subject to economic control. In this materialistic landscape, institutional owners are driven by profit motives. Economically speaking, profitability primarily hinges on grasping audience needs and preferences, with the identification of these elements playing a pivotal role in companies' economic success. This process has been facilitated by the emergence of digital platforms, which offer various technological means to gauge user-preferred content through algorithms. Content shared on these platforms, be it images, links, texts, or advertisements, is monitored by display controllers. In this digital marketplace, individuals are targeted based on pre-determined preferences using diverse technical tools and precise methodologies to

discern habits. Audience classification by type and category is then used to determine consumer demographics, guiding the precise presentation and demand strategies within defined timeframes. The underlying concept revolves around the notion that multiple browser requests shape consumer desires, allowing marketers to target potential and anticipated customers by aligning advertisements with expressed desires using keywords. This process is further facilitated by the utilization of small files known as cookies, which contain tracking indicators placed on websites and store information about each user's visits, preferences, and habits. (Rieffel, 2018, p. 45)

In these new cultural production contexts, characterized by their unique features and intricate relationship with traditional media, a commodified perspective has emerged regarding media products. We are currently witnessing a cultural revolution marked by a communicative pattern that surpasses conventional modes of transmission and reception. This transformation in communication mediums has yielded a potent cultural impact, influencing the nature of content, which may not necessarily align with audience preferences but significantly contributes to producers' bottom line. Socially and culturally, the role of new media extends beyond content delivery to shaping public perspectives and providing them with a shared framework about the world, fostering globalized thinking. Mass media not only imposes its ideas on the audience but also fosters the belief that its dictates stem from individuals' own deep reflections.

Modern cultural production continues to draw upon traditional mechanisms including celebrity endorsement, reliance on tradition, fostering conformity, and focusing on consumption and entertainment. However, it has taken a sharper trajectory with the emergence of the information revolution, emphasizing its ideological character more prominently when linked to the prevailing societal dynamics. This society is characterized by technology's complete dominance over production structures, prompting us to scrutinize the role of cultural production within the broader societal framework. Rémy Rieffel highlights that digital broadcasting channels have disrupted traditional cultural sectors, destabilizing their customary functional logic, and altering content distribution methods, resulting in a profound reshaping of the cultural landscape under digital influence. (Rieffel, 2018, p. 47)

The continuous expansion of digital platforms raises questions about cultural inclusivity, blurring the boundaries of privacy between societies and individuals, evident in the nature of content disseminated across social networks, often aimed at broad audiences. This reconstruction of the user-medium relationship influences how users engage with content, as the virtual realm encourages excessive interaction and deep immersion, ultimately leading to the erosion of critical thinking and constraining individuals' freedom of thought, rendering them passive recipients devoid of interest in genuine societal issues.

The ease of individual adaptation and molding has been facilitated by the emergence of technology, transforming cultural production from traditional media

logic to a broader, more complex media paradigm. Each aspect of cultural production tends to reproduce individuals according to industry standards, aligning with the demands of the dominant social power controlling mass media. The infringement on authentic art has aimed to stifle individuals' creative potential, ensnaring them within a standardized framework where genuine art becomes a mere productivity gimmick, eradicating creative distinctions and principles of differentiation. Within this acquisition-driven society, culture exercises its authority over consumers through entertainment, resulting not only in dictation but also in aggression. (Amari & Manan, 2023) From this perspective, it is fallacious to believe that capitalism leads to free societies, as technological rationality and the shift towards instrumental reason deprive humans of their freedom and self-stability. This led Horkheimer to assert that the subjugation of the human mind is the crisis plaguing humanity in contemporary society, leading to its decline and decay.

4 -Transition from traditional culture industry to digital culture industry and its implications on audience:

4-1-Promoting consumer culture:

The notion of consumer culture is a fundamental concept discussed by critical theorists, used to denote the prevalence of consumerist tendencies in modern societies where production has expanded due to the industrial revolution and its aftermath. In this milieu, contemporary individuals are inclined towards acquiring goods and commodities to meet the prerequisites of their existence. Consumption levels have also been correlated with notions of prosperity and contentment. This consumerist inclination aims to solidify the values of consumption as a means to spur economic growth through media channels. Adorno cautioned against the proliferation of a consumption-oriented model aimed at homogenizing and conforming the masses according to the societal ideologies governing this industry

The contours of this culture shifted from conventional media such as radio, cinema, television, and print journalism to a digital medium merging the features of these diverse mediums. It is noteworthy that digital platforms serve as the primary conduit through which this culture is peddled to the masses. In a consumerist society, the individual's relationship with the commodity evolves into an interaction surpassing the tangible and material utility of need. Individuals within this context tend to procure

goods to engage and align with the lifestyle projected through the screens of smartphones and computers encountered on a daily basis. Herbert Marcuse's ideas serve as a pivotal reference point for dissecting and comprehending the nature of the transition towards a consumerist society and its complexities that have reshaped the trajectory of contemporary societies.

Consequently, the process of consumption commenced in the era of globalization and the widespread utilization of media and communication technologies has assumed novel dimensions. This conduct is no longer confined to select goods and services but has evolved into consumption itself becoming a mode of self-expression. In essence, the capacity to consume has become an element of gratification for the consumer, with taste, fashion, or lifestyle emerging as criteria for societal differentiation. (Riad & Nacima, 2022, p. 1130)

The emergence of changes in consumption patterns began with the increased use of digital communication platforms, where the audience transitioned from mere consumers of goods to consumers of popular culture promoted through advertising, which accelerates the cycle of production and consumption. This has led users to find themselves trapped in an endless cycle of desire to acquire the showcased products, surpassing the notion of material consumption to symbolic consumption. Consumerist culture drives individuals to acquire products beyond their material means just to integrate into a lifestyle. Moreover, it blurs the boundaries between wants, needs, and necessities, aiming not to satisfy existing needs but to create more needs based on emotional arousal and impulses, thereby achieving short-term gratifications. There is significant diversity available through these networks, requiring consumers to engage with products during their leisure time, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Consequently, consumers find themselves ensnared in a cycle of advertisements presented by producing companies, even if they do not desire it, ultimately leading to their manipulation and redirection towards purchasing activities (Bailie & Yildiz, 2017, p. 07) This transforms them from potential consumers to actual consumers, with advertising serving as the soft culture that subliminally prompts them to actively participate in consumption processes.

This societal behavior lacking rationality, as described by Marcuse, unmistakably aims to manipulate individuals by saturating their leisure time with superficial and fleeting pleasures, driving them to incessantly pursue these pleasures to uphold the necessary conditions for the prevalence of consumerist discourse. The production apparatus, along with its commodities and services, "markets or imposes the social system as both means of transportation and communication, housing, food, clothing, and entertainment products. It not only generates but also enforces certain attitudes, habits, and specific intellectual and emotional responses that establish connections between consumers and producers, either favorably or unfavorably" (Howe, 2010, p. 65)

With the advent of new media technologies, companies can now inundate various digital platforms with a plethora of advertisements, directed towards millions of users in the form of promotional rhetoric. Advertisers exploit the capabilities offered by digital technology, including instantaneous and comprehensive communication transcending geographical and temporal barriers, as well as the ability to engage with content through comments, likes, and shares, in order to bolster brand recognition and dissemination on a broad scale. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard scrutinizes the ideological structure of the consumption system and its subjects, observing that consumption-related topics have become more intricate than people's behavior related to them. The worth of objects now hinges not only on their utility but also on other variables that actively influence purchasing behavior. For instance, the coveted car no longer serves merely as a mode of transportation but has evolved into the epitome of luxury, style, and power. The conventional role of the car has shifted, and its acquisition has detached from its original purpose, entering a different and altered sphere, which is mirrored in the essence of the product itself and the consumer's conduct (Mustaafa, 2018, p. 258)

In this context, collaboration with celebrities and influencers has become widespread, as they promote a certain lifestyle centered on extensive consumption of products. This is achieved through the optimal utilization of filtered and modified images and other elements of fascination to exert the necessary influence on the

followers, who often seek to belong and enhance their social status through consumerist practices. The phenomenon of influencers across digital platforms is one of the most controversial trends, as their activities have significantly expanded in recent years. This term refers to individuals who possess a wide audience base acquired by displaying details of their daily lives across various social media networks. The internet has enabled them to engage rapidly and continuously with the audience, which interacts with them in many forms. It can be said that they have a unique way of presenting content that makes them closer to the audience, which now relies on their opinions regarding social and political issues and takes into account their experiences with brands.

Given this digital openness and the dominance of influencer activity, many companies have resorted to using a modern marketing approach by collaborating with this group for advertising and promoting their products. This is because of their ability to influence followers' decisions regarding purchasing processes. Followers admire the influencer's personality and trust them more than the product itself, especially since influencers primarily rely on individuals' emotions and behaviors. This may lead followers to feel compelled to purchase the items they promote, and the feeling of happiness lies in increased consumption, even if the individual does not necessarily need it. Social media users perceive influencers - as they portray themselves - as having a fabulous lifestyle in everything they do. They consume the best foods, wear the finest clothes, and endorse top-notch products, placing followers in a comparative circle that gradually pushes them towards adopting a consumerist lifestyle (nasar, 2023)

The recent digital expansion has sparked significant shifts in the fundamental structures of society and the inherent cultural norms, marking a departure from traditional, rigid cultural paradigms towards a more fluid, virtual digital culture. This transition has given rise to a consumerist society where traditional values are swiftly replaced by ephemeral virtual ones, crafted and marketed through digital platforms that now serve as both social channels and efficient mediums for exchanging ideas, services, and crafting symbolic and moral narratives, catering to diverse

demographics. Consequently, this dynamic reinforces social stratification by imbuing lifestyles and modes of existence with commercial attributes.

Yet, these transformations extend beyond surface-level changes, affecting the ethical, social, and cultural fabric of communities, demanding a comprehensive deconstruction and understanding of their essence and ramifications. According to Pierre Levy, virtual cultures encompass a complex system of technologies, practices, orientations, cognitive patterns, and values, eliciting emotional responses, adaptive behaviors, and exploitative tendencies aimed at assimilating consumerist culture and promoting individualistic inclinations. This trend towards standardization extends to leisure time, which is now commodified as a lifestyle in the contemporary world, intensifying overall consumption patterns through technological innovations and instantaneous production and updates. (Khaira, 2022, p. 120)

4-2 -Social alienation:

The critics of capitalism have analyzed the modern society where economic production forces and technological dominance wield power, posing a threat to individual autonomy and undermining human essence. This has resulted in the emergence of a mass society characterized by uniformity and conformity in needs, ideas, and behavior, facilitating control over individuals. The advent of new media forms, instrumental in controlling the audience and shaping their consciousness, further exacerbates feelings of alienation when technology permeates cultural, social, and economic realms.

Although the concept of alienation is nuanced and often overused, there is a prevailing tendency in critical discourse to adapt it to contemporary contexts. Alienation entails a detachment from one's identity and essence, leading to separation from others and the world, driven by barriers hindering self-communication. The notion of consciousness alienation, as advocated by the Frankfurt School, contributes significantly to the individual's estrangement from themselves and subsequently from society and others. (Mustafa, 2022)

Despite the remarkable technological advancements dominating the world today, crises persist in modern societies. Despite humans adapting these tools for their benefit, it has heightened feelings of isolation and alienation. The advent of the internet, coupled with digital communication platforms, has exacerbated this phenomenon. A significant portion of individuals' interaction with the world now occurs through screens, replacing traditional forms of communication. The widespread use of these platforms has made them central players in contemporary communication scenes.

Digital platforms today have the ability to generate a sense of detachment of

individuals from their communities, separating them from their actual reality. This excessive use can lead to isolation, the loss of self-awareness and identity, and the weakening of social relationships. Users no longer feel the need for personal interaction with others, as these platforms convince them that they are engaging in real interaction, when in fact, they are promoting detachment rather than connection.

Gray Crooke argues that the invention of virtual reality and its electronic worlds has led to the breakdown of social relationships, affecting society negatively by dismantling relationships based on traditional direct communication. Albert Borgman also agrees with this notion, seeing the new virtual world as distancing us from our real world. Consequently, the excessive use of digital communication platforms has undoubtedly affected social relationships negatively, as these groups are unconstrained by identity or specific nationality, but rather gather individuals with different identities and multiple nationalities, united only by their common interests, leading users to lean towards individualism and isolation from social context. (Kiyous, 2022, p. 110)

In his cognitive excavations, "Archaeology of Knowledge," Michel Foucault predicted decades before the emergence of the internet and digital platforms as extensions of the media, a rupture in societal awareness due to the contents of culture production and its intellectual systems embodying rationality and thought, leading to alienation and destructive disillusionment of humanity, ultimately proclaiming its demise (Awad, 2013, p. 118)

Alienation extended from the economic sphere, from which Marx originated, to the political and social-cultural domains, where new media outlets continue to assert their dominance over daily human life by imposing social and cultural systems characterized by change and discontinuity, making it harder for individuals to integrate into society. The contradiction between the actual and the virtual leads to a state of detachment and loss of individual and collective identity, fostering a sense of futility. Since capitalism disregards the value of the individual as a fundamental unit of society, it now sees its power lying in corporations and institutions as major production units, reinforcing individualistic tendencies and the necessity of reducing traditional social interaction by promoting detachment from reality and directing towards virtual communities for material gain. This clearly explains the modern transition to digital beings, where digital technologies define their culture, thinking patterns, relationships with others, and their status in the social environment, all mediated through screens, narrowing the scope of interaction with the real world. (Kiyous, 2022, pp. 109-110)

Today, individuals rely on digital platforms as a primary source of information and knowledge about the external world. The content disseminated through these networks often conflicts with reality, as individuals' perceptions of their social reality are now based on the content published on these platforms. The excessive use of digital technologies blurs the boundaries between the real and the virtual, eroding

individuals' intellectual independence. Social media platforms are technological pillars carrying specific ideologies aimed at subjugating individuals and dissipating human needs for critical thinking by involving users in repetitive thoughts that disrupt the concept of truth through bias and distortion, driven by those who control the media industry. Therefore, today's problem of alienation is not limited to the feeling experienced by workers within the capitalist system, as Marx addressed, but is attributed to the expansion of the cultural and technological system subject to economic control, distorting individual identity and imposing profound changes in the nature of human existence.

4-3 Spread of Low-Quality Content:

The overemphasis on disseminating media messages via digital platforms and subjecting them to the commercialization logic tied to the industrial production format controlling contemporary artistic and cultural trends has induced a shift in the essence of these messages. They are now widely distributed to extensive audiences without considering the potential impacts on recipients and users. This represents a culture crafted for all-encompassing consumption and geared toward achieving commercial objectives. Within this framework, entertainment has evolved into an independent culture and a lifestyle centered on mere consumption and the pursuit of fleeting pleasure. It delivers continuous doses of apathy and exaggerated vitality. Previously scattered events highlighted by sensationalist journalism-digital media content now relies heavily on sex drama, excitement, and crime to captivate viewers offering them an escape from refined and sophisticated culture.

Digital technologies have become ubiquitous in modern societies, exerting influence not only on communication methods but also on the format and substance of information and media content (including music, literature, film, television, podcasts, newspapers, magazines, and advertising). Social communication philosophy suggests that these technologies serve as platforms primarily, with content playing a secondary role. They are not merely neutral digital tools and platforms; rather, they are structured to promote specific ideologies by embedding ideological discourse within their framework. This imposes certain communicative contexts, daily consumption hours, and the types of content users are exposed to (Society, 2020, p. 79) This is driven by carefully considered productivity standards that prioritize entertainment, triviality,

and the neglect of creativity, resulting in the proliferation of shallow and superficial content at the expense of more substantial material. Regarding social networks as a liberating digital endeavor, one could argue that they have blurred the boundaries between high culture and popular culture, serving primarily for entertainment and leisure. This is evident in the erosion of public taste, the reinforcement of negative values, and the decline of the arts due to audience responses to such content.

The openness facilitated by these platforms is seen as one of the primary threats to high culture, as discussed by Adorno and Horkheimer in their critique of mass communication, which has turned cultural production into standardized, low-quality commodities bearing the stamp of the cultural industry. This industry has found in the consumer an excuse to disseminate and encode triviality in line with the demands of contemporary consumerist society. This shift, brought about by digital technologies, has altered the nature of the audience, resulting in a departure from traditional social structures. Today, we are confronted with "crowds" of senders and receivers, who, according to this perspective, contribute to societal chaos by integrating the individual's personality and engagement to the point of diluting consciousness. Consequently, individuals are in a perpetual state of receiving ideas rather than generating them, drawn to impressions, simplistic, superficial, and illogical notions. They are offered what the dominant authority desires through the media to serve its interests and objectives by distorting the tastes of viewers, who are heavily exposed to visual allure and high-impact techniques employed through these platforms. (Muattouq, 2021, p. 376)

The shift in the nature of audiences has influenced media content significantly. While production was previously confined to media outlets as standalone institutions, today it is intertwined with users who go beyond mere receivers of discourse. They now have the ability to generate, share, and interact with content and others through various digital communication applications and platforms. This transformation has diminished the role of cultural elites, who once led and influenced people through their expertise in political, social, and scientific domains. In contrast, we have witnessed the emergence of what is known as digital content creators—users who lack

specialization in a particular field but continuously publish their content around the clock in the form of advertisements, stories, tweets, and short videos. This industry requires minimal effort and largely relies on practices aimed at disseminating trivial material to the public, much of which revolves around celebrity lifestyles, scandals, dancing, singing, and other superficial and entertainment-focused content. (Dono, 2020, p. 47)

Thanks to the broadening scope of freedom of expression and the capabilities offered by advanced technology, users now possess both the means and the content. We are now confronted with an infinite array of content representing a form of social control over individuals' minds. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube provide a vast stream of entertaining and rapidly consumable messages, keeping the audience glued to the screen for extended periods without realizing it. This has led to the emergence of new behaviors where the audience mediates media production processes. Consequently, we are witnessing the collapse of cultural discourse and the deterioration of quality standards associated with serious and high art. Additionally, there is a sidelining of elite culture, as the cultural industry prioritizes profit and material gain over the nature of content (Dono, 2020, p. 47)

Thus, it appears that the digital cultural industry, with its excessive tendency towards promoting low-quality content, is not merely an ancillary activity but a consciously orchestrated endeavor with specific objectives. Critiques from the structuralism school have focused on the super structural aspects of capitalist society, particularly regarding the symbolic dimensions associated with phenomena arising from modern media and communication technology. These phenomena have also disrupted the fundamental tenets that once distinguished bourgeois Western cultures. Essentially, mass communication tools are seen as essential instruments for ideological and cultural domination, delivering manufactured programs and themes to audiences. Adorno, in particular, argued that cultural industries serve as a successful model for the decline of culture, transforming cultural acts into commodities and thereby eroding their critical capacity. What mass communication platforms offer is a distortion of high art, aimed at diverting people from rational thought and

constructive understanding of social reality. Through popular culture, these platforms contribute to achieving the goals of capitalist monopolies, reinforcing ideas favoring the wealthy and dominant class in society (Muattug, 2021, pp. 378-379)

CONCLUSION

The cultural and social transformations resulting from technological hegemony necessitate a reevaluation of the mechanisms of cultural industry through digital media in light of critical theory which often focuses on issues related to technology and capitalist systems that exploit production means to serve their economic interests, including media. With the emergence of digital platforms, considered extensions of traditional media, the strategies, conditions, clients, and production mechanisms of this industry have undergone radical changes due to the dominance of the digital dimension in the media and economic fields. From this perspective, it can be argued that there is a profound and structural impact on societies, resulting in the decline of elite culture in favor of a culture with degraded content that appeals to instincts and encourages consumption. That has become a measure of existence and a means of enhancing status and gaining social approval within virtual communities, where individuals become detached from themselves and estranged from their reality due to excessive immersion in the digital environment, which now shapes our representations and perceptions of the world around us. Therefore, analyzing the strategies of cultural production in the digital age is a clear manifestation of the dominance of instrumental reason, which aims to exploit technology and technological tools to control individuals and society.

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