Commodification of Culture, the Frankfurt School and Instagram

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ABSTRACT

There is still a lot of research to be done on the effect of social media on society in general and on individuals in particular. Social media platforms are a kind of network platforms where users interact with each other and use the platform for various purposes. On February 4, 2004 Facebook was launched, it marked the start of a new kind of socialization, which was then specialized in other media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, to name the most prominent of them. This essay looks at the changes brought about by Instagram on society through the lens of the Frankfurt School critique. The concepts of alienation, homogeneity and authenticity are extracted from critical theory for the purpose of critically analyzing the social impact of the widespread Instagram use on public and private space. It is presupposed in this essay that we live in the era of late-capitalism where technology is not seen as an exception to the global order that could liberate us from the throes of pathologies arising from capitalism, it is the most advanced stage of capitalism where exploitation is technically more advanced than before. Hence, it is concluded that social media, like Instagram, is a catalyst in the capitalist process that provides the means to achieve its end more efficiently.

Keywords: Society; Alienation; Homogeneity; Authenticity; Capitalism

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is usually considered a firefighting service, when the damage has already been done then the philosophers are called upon to assess the reparations and guide the way forward, but the critique of culture and technology has been an exception to this rule. Decades before the internet transformed our social fabric, Benjamin brought to our attention the threats technological production posed for us, he said: "What shrinks in an age where the work of art can be reproduced by technological means is its aura." Apart from Benjamin his colleagues at the Frankfurt school like Adorno and Lukacs were carrying out studies about the nature of transformation unfolding before their eyes, especially related to the development of technology and its effect on culture. In this essay the Frankfurt school critique, which is not just confined to the originators of this school because thinkers living in contemporary times like Jameson and Zizek align themselves with the Frankfurt school critique, will be analyzed and employed for the purposes of understanding the recent phenomenon of online platform capitalism with focus on the commodification of culture? [1-5].

There are many concepts in the Frankfurt school critique, also called critical theory, that have been extrapolated by various scholars like Bauman, Fromm, Fuchs, Jameson and Zizek to provide a detailed analysis of the commodification of culture in contemporary times. Amongst them the concepts of alienation, homogeneity and authenticity will be delineated and applied to analyze the role of platform capitalism and its impact on the commodification of the presentation of the self in the culture industry. The case study of Instagram, in this essay, makes pertinent the choice of concepts relating to the particular commodification of the self and public space in the general commodification of culture. The mentioned concepts have gone through various transformations within the last decades at the hands various scholars, though their origin can be traced back to Marx's oeuvre, but that is the only unifying factor amongst them; therefore throughout the essay rather than pinning down each concept to a thinker, the focus will be on the concepts themselves and their analyses would entail discussion of different thinkers, at times a single concept might involve discussion of a group of thinkers.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture, platform capitalism and the Frankfurt school

Culture is defined as ideas, customs and social behavior of a particular people or society. The Frankfurt school theorists look at culture through a Marxist lens, and Fromm provides a functional definition of social character, which is integral to culture, in these terms: "It is the social character's function to mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued function of this society." This definition is helpful as the starting point to deconstruct the cultural mechanisms that are important for a critical theorist. The Frankfurt school critique does not approach culture abstractly as a concept or a mere ideology that can be analyzed objectively, its approach is subjective and action oriented, what matters to a critical theorist is the daily ossification of ideology in the day to day functioning of society [6,7].

This in turn requires an account of a subjective individual who is channeling his energy every day to sustain himself and to sustain society. Following Fromm in this trail gives us the description of man that could be considered the foundational definition for a Marxist, and hence for the Frankfurt school. Fromm quotes Marx verbatim: "The whole of what is called world history," says Marx, "is nothing but the creation of man by human labor, and the emergence of nature for man; he therefore has the evident and irrefutable proof of his self-creation of his own origins." Man is a historically contingent being who is not only responsible for the ideas about history, but history itself; he is history internalized, as much he is a product of history, history is also a product of his labor. Such a description of man does not allow culture a transcendental, ahistorical existence, because culture is a spatio-temporal category of a conjunction of ideas, customs and social behavior embedded within history and if the Frankfurt school critique assumes the above mentioned function of human labor as a producer of history, then it follows that one important function of human labor is the production of culture. Culture is not given, it is produced by human labor, and since human labor is an economic activity, ultimately the nature of production of culture and its commodification is determined by economic interests [8].

Following the above argument in conjunction with the role of technology projects technology as a mode of production, a means to further economic interests and a means to commodify and produce culture. Understanding the concept of platform capitalism under the Frankfurt school critique designates network platforms as a symptom of what Fromm calls "technological fetishism". For Fromm: "Technological fetishism includes the uncritical acceptance of technology as it is the assumption that everything that is technologically possible should be realized and will have positive effects on society." The trend of technological development asserts that the internet age is not a post-capitalist age, as Jameson points out quoting Mandel, that "this new society is a purer stage of capitalism than any of the moments that preceded it." As the nature of network platforms requires aggregation of users on a single platform, it

does not escape the logic of capitalism; it provides the means to radically reduce the spatio-temporal dimension of culture by connecting users globally through the use of technology, thereby fanning the development of the commodification of culture at a faster pace than ever before. In other words, the financial burden of communication has been eliminated, which is a positive effect, as now there is a possibility of reaching out to the other side of the globe without paying a significant fee, apart from having a mobile phone, an internet and a network platform. Space and time have contracted significantly, but this positive effect ought not to blind a critical theorist to the possibility of hyper commodification of culture because of the removal of financial and technological obstructions. Furthermore, the development in platform capitalism with the introduction of artificial intelligence has heightened the concerns of cultural and technological analysts. Since the economic dynamic of capitalism still underlies the introduction of AI into network platforms, their proliferation is also a proliferation of the economic interests of the hosts of network platforms. Kissinger et al., underscore this issue: "The dynamics of positive network effects will tend to support only a handful of participants who are leading the technology and the market for their particular product or service." The fulfillment of economic interests has been outsourced to algorithms that can think faster and provide more efficient economic solutions than a human is capable of [9].

DISCUSSION

There are different kinds of network platforms: Social media platforms, discussion platforms, cloud-based entrepreneurial platforms. Amongst them the most pertinent platforms where the commodification can be seen immediately are those that the public can access and use easily and for free, *i.e.*, social media platforms. Even within social media platforms there are differences in usages, Instagram is a peculiar case in them. Instagram is primarily a media sharing platform, with images being its prime product. An Instagram user is mainly concerned with the aesthetics of self-representation or product representation through images. In the tradition of Frankfurt school criticism, Jameson posits a relation between aesthetics and commodification that helps situate Instagram in our culture industry today.

Jameson states "What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: The frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation."

The image uploaded on Instagram is an aesthetic commodity to be consumed by the public that assumes an autonomous status in the digital space. It becomes a commodified version of the self where the logic of commodification is provided by the rules and characteristics of the network platform. In the like economy of Instagram the better the aesthetics of the uploaded commodity the better the chances of success, where the like economy is considered as the quantification of authenticity and

success on a network platform judged according to the number of reactions a certain post can amass. Instagram is a limiting case of Jameson's thesis: On Instagram commodity production is aesthetic production, the better the aesthetics the better the chances for the commodity to be considered successful and authentic [10].

Alienation and platform capitalism

Alienation is the structural component of the capitalist social machinery sustaining itself through the economic logic of the markets. It is the sine qua none of our contemporary society and at the same time it is the root problem of sickness in our society according to Fromm. When addressing the issue of a sick society and a sick individual Fromm provides the following definition of alienation.

"What does Marx mean by alienation (or "estrangement")? The essence of this concept, which was first developed by Hegel, is that the world (nature, things, others, and he himself) have become alien to man. He does not experience himself as the subject of his own acts, as a thinking, feeling, loving person, but he experiences himself only in the things he has created, as the object of the externalized manifestations of his powers. He is in touch with himself only by surrendering himself to the products of his creation."

The ontological self-reference of the subject is not towards himself but towards the objects that he has created, which are traded, exchanged, and consumed in a social market and their worth designated according to the social wealth they represent. For example, one's identity in the digital world is as valuable as the digital objects that one creates. Alienation is not just a process in Marx that explains the detachment of the labor from his products, it is not just an economic concept, it is also a normative concept. Self-worth is not a subjective value attached by the person to his own self; it is the value that the social market has objectively decided by valuing the objects created by him [11-13].

Extending the concept of alienation to platform capitalism is not a distortion of the concept if platform capitalism is assumed to be one of the technological means of production. All network platforms are corporations and ultimately their aims are economic monopoly over digital space. Wu explains the aims of network platforms thus:

"Facebook wants to bring everyone closer, for that it needs global monopoly. Google wants to organize the world's information for that it needs access to all the information in the world. Amazon wants to serve the customer, you can check out, but you can never leave."

These gigantic aims, which do not seem gigantic in a globalized world now, require rampant digitized commodification of self and culture so that the information set becomes as inclusive as possible and that requires a hysteric usage of the network platforms every minute of the day. The underlying logic of these grand aims is accumulation. Network platforms have to strategize their algorithms such that they can accumulate as much data as possible with users recurrently using the platforms, and because algorithm is the logic of platform capitalism, it is

responsible for shaping the behavior of online users who subconsciously learn to adapt and habituate themselves to the logic, thereby producing through their actions online and offline a culture whose cloth is cut out from the economic interests of the network platform corporations. The user of online social networks participates in the like economy where "the higher the number of reactions, followers, the higher the perceived value of the user." Therefore the digital space becomes for the user a proxy of accumulating social wealth where he participates like corporations participate in the market economy [14]. Faucher explains the relationship between digital commodified self as an extension of market logic in the following words.

"Social wealth maybe seen as intrinsic use value, whereas its mediatization and commodification in online social networks gives it a new status as exchange value in the form of social capital. What is being traded and gained, generally at a perceived profit, is the commodity form of the digital self and its associated production."

Faucher argues that while online social media platforms project themselves as a potential of freedom from the capitalist logic, but when seen through the analytic lens of critical theory, which focuses on the logic of platform capitalism, there seems to be a certain conclusion that network platforms are working as stimulants of capitalist logic. Since one of the constitutive elements of this logic is alienation, contrary to the promise of ownership of commodified digital selves, network platforms founded on the algorithms that work for capitalist aims have accelerated the process of alienation [15].

He concludes: "The new techno-social reality of social media emulates market logics and redefines users as microcapitalists of the self. This occurs within a unified social economy that is global, out of which a new and virtualized form of wealth can be produced through strategic social partnerships online."

Instagram is a good example of visually perceiving the process of alienation on social media networks. On Instagram users are allowed to use filters and other image modifying techniques to present a commodified version of themselves in the form of posts that take on a digital life of their own. Because aesthetics of photography is essential to be successful in the like economy of Instagram, it is not just the filters that matter but also other details of the image, the background, the pose and the outfit, to name a few. There is not just an online commodification of the self, there is also a real commodification of the self before the picture can be taken, which is influenced by the rules of success in the like economy to be followed by the user. The commodified representation of the self on Instagram images is not a one-way street; the user does not just upload the commodified representation of the self and then forget about the autonomous digital life of the uploaded commodity. The digital commodification of the self refers back to the user's life offline. In Fromm's explanation of alienation there is a very strong element of "surrendering" to the created object. In the case of Instagram it means that the alienated, commodified representation of the self becomes an extension of the user's identity offline as well and affects his behavior in society. He follows the reactions, the comments, the possible multiplication

of his images into creation of memes and the like, which would not have been possible without the commodified representation on the network platform [16]. Therefore alienation on Instagram with its social repercussions for culture at large, since there are currently over two billion active users on Instagram, portrays the complete cycle of alienation. The relationship between the commodified representation of the self and the real social self becomes that of pseudo-master slave relationship, where the commodified self becomes the master and the real self a kind of a slave whose actions and reactions in offline social life is at the mercy of the public judgment of his commodified self and also at the mercy of the algorithmic logic of Instagram to which he would adapt in the posting of the next commodified representation of himself. The participation in the like economy modifies one's self-perception radically and quickly, because of repetitive involvement in it. Rudd and Lenon provide evidence that it is not just the metaphysical aspect of anxiety or the choice of clothes that result from this alienated relation with the commodified representation of the self on Instagram, it also results in the physical modification of the self through cosmetic surgery amongst college women. Hence, the alienated, digital representation on Instagram entails a physical and mental surrender of the user to it. To conclude, the commodification of the self on Instagram necessitates significant changes in our social behavior that are etched on our skin physically at times, which in turn generates a certain kind of production and commodification of culture, fueled by the logic of algorithm used in the network platform with the sole aim of accumulation of economic profits [17,18].

Authenticity and homogeneity

A society that has alienation structurally built into it is sustained through a certain kind of rationality. Adorno terms it as technical rationality and further elaborates: "Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination. It is the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself." The logic of network platform as described above is an extension of this technical rationality. Adorno is particularly disturbed by one consequence of technical rationality: Homogeneity of society. His analysis of homogeneity underscores another critique of network platform pertinent to the case study of Instagram, and related to homogeneity is the concept of authenticity, which will also be analyzed simultaneously.

"Culture today is infecting everything with sameness each branch of culture is unanimous within itself, and all are unanimous together." The aim of the culture industry is to dominate the public and manufacture consent on the basis of technical rationality. This aim is achievable if the public consumes the products of the culture industry en masse sans reflection. For that to be achievable, Adorno claims, it is important that the products "are so constructed that their adequate comprehension requires a quick observant, knowledgeable cast of mind but positively debars the spectator from thinking, if he is not to miss the fleeting facts." The nature and frequency of the appearance of the products allow the culture industry to convince the consumer that he could outsource thinking and even physical and emotional reactions to the products. The inclusion of canned laughter in TV serials

and the inclusion of background music to make the audience feel are some obvious examples that support Adorno's thesis that the infection of sameness is one of the key elements in the culture industry. Canned laughter is a homogenous product, whereas each individual's laughter differs from the other individual. These modifications that are made possible through the introduction of technology in films convince Adorno that the technical rationality of the culture industry is an extension of the technical rationality of the economic domain.

He asserts: "These adverse effects of technology… should not be attributed to the internal laws of technology itself but to its function within the economy today." In other words, the rationality of economic laws has extended over to the rationality of the culture industry. Just as economic laws are extension of the interests of the economic and political ruling class, in the same way the consumer of the culture industry is a soft prey to the ideas of the ruling class of culture industry.

Alongside the nature of the product itself the widespread, hyper-frequent proliferation of cultural products keeps the consumer in a paradox of choice: He becomes a 'picker' rather than a chooser. Schwartz describes the difference between a chooser and a picker thus:

"When faced with overwhelming choice, we are forced to become "pickers," which is to say, relatively passive selectors from whatever is available. Choosers have the time to modify their goals; pickers do not. Choosers have the time to avoid following the herd; pickers do not."

According to Adorno, the abundance of choice is one of the most successful tactics for the culture industry to keep the public occupied with the conundrum of choice so that they do not get occupied with thinking. Both the nature and frequency of the presentation of cultural products are employed for the purposes of homogenizing the public thought, because heterogeneity arises through individuals thinking differently; once the capacity to think has been drained out of the public then they become passive receptors of thought whose task remains to choose one thought over the other, one idea over the other, amongst their manifold representations on offer in the form of cultural products.

Bauman extrapolates Adorno's analysis of the culture industry on to the reproduction of the consumerist, economic system. He emphasizes upon how the thoughtless consumer, who maybe at a loss as far his personal choices are concerned, becomes a necessary cogwheel of a consumerist society. He declares: "The secret of all successful 'socialization' is making individuals wish to do what is needed to enable the system to reproduce itself." The thoughtless picking of different cultural products creates meaning for the individual because he has become a part of the consumerist spectacle where it matters more to have much than to be much. Human motivation in a capitalist society is dictated by having more and not by being more; the accumulation of cultural products adds to the social value of consumer because in this society it is all about "speed, excess and waste." The quicker the waste, the more the spending, and hence the more the economic interests of the culture industry are achievable.

Being an authentic consumer means to lay off one's agentic powers as much as possible. There is now a gradual separation of power to act, which now drifts to the markets and politics, which remains the domain of the state. Authenticity does not mean to act on one's basis because if making one's own decisions and acting upon them that do not correspond to the values accepted in the market then the individual is not conforming to the thoughtless participation required in the market, which proves that he is not healthy for the market; therefore he will be excluded from the market, relegated as an outcast. Bauman describes the logic of the excluded individual in market terms.

"The 'underclass' of the society of consumers, 'flawed consumers', is presumed to be an aggregate composed of the individual victims of wrong individual choices, and taken to be tangible proof of the personal nature of life's catastrophies and defeats, always an outcome of incompetent personal choices."

For an individual it is a choice of either/or. Either become a healthy, homogenous, authentic participant of the market who conforms to its rules for its self-propagation or become a nobody. Authenticity is only possible if the individual follows its definition as laid down by technical rationality of the market or else become a sorry victim of capitalist 'collateral damage'.

Social media network platforms are embedded in the logic of the markets; they have become an integral part of the mechanism placed for the sustenance of the market. Instagram works like a mini billboard advertisement platform for the marketers because it portrays the visual aesthetics of the culture product. For example, it allows the potential customer to easily search how a certain outfit looks on a body with the ease of a swipe or a click. Also, since big physical billboards are not movable only the potential buyers of a certain local area can access the promotion, while on the other hand Instagram with billions of users all around the globe helps the marketer to possibly reach the whole world. With it there is the comfort of not just posting one product at a time, multiple images of multiple products can be uploaded at a time with just a few steps on the mobile phone. The effect of the paradox of choice on Instagram is multiplied to an even higher extent, as the potential buyer can not only see but also buy items with a touch.

In Adorno's analysis the rapidity of diffusion of cultural products can be discerned as one of the main impediments to thinking, whereas with the advent of Instagram the rapidity has accelerated manifold. The homogenization effect resulting from the hyper-frequent proliferation of cultural effect has also accelerated manifold. The introduction of influencer industry in the like economy of Instagram surpassed valuation of 16 billion dollars in 2022. Influencers are usually celebrities or socially popular people who use their personalities as brands to promote a particular product. Tomovska has proved through her research on the effect of fashion influencers on Instagram on a group of youngsters aged 16 to 23 that: "New mass communication technologies, such as Instagram, present a hereby unparalleled channel for the distribution of fashion information, providing a possibility for democratization in the fashion sector and a rapid diffusion of fashion." By democratization she means homogenization of fashion. The digitized version of fashion

presented on Instagram is used as a means to manifest one's own taste in fashion in the real, social world, because, as Faucher highlights, in the like economy "the competitive nature is not linked to money, but according to the premium attributed to quantified social wealth." In the digital like economy "quantified social wealth" refers to the number of reactions on a certain post. The higher the number of likes and followers a certain influencer can amass the more authentic his or her opinion becomes. Authenticity of opinion on Instagram is proportional to the quantification of likes and followers. The more authentic the digitally commodified product the more it is likely to be reified in real world. Bauman summarizes the relationship of social behavior patterns and the objects of consumption, which in this case are posts on Instagram, when he says: "In a gruesome parody of Kant's categorical imperative, members of the consumer society are obliged to follow the self-same behavior patterns they wish the objects of their consumption to obey." The desire that the digital representation ought to follow is inhered into the individual's behavior because of the surrender of the alienated subject to its desired object in this case.

A user's authenticity is also commensurable with the reproducibility of his created object, *i.e.*, the uploaded post; he becomes authentic when he participates on the network platform with the possibility of widespread reproducibility in mind. The statistics of shares on Instagram, that is the number of times a certain post is sent by a person to either someone else or to a group of people, is another important yardstick of the authenticity of the post; because it is assumed that the more profitable, real, and authentic a certain post is the more it will be shared. Benjamin foresaw this kind of reproducibility, he posits: "The reproduced work of art is to an ever-increasing extent the reproduction of a work of art designed for reproducibility." Conclusively, the widespread use of Instagram has done an enormous favor to technical rationality, whose one important objective is the reign of quantification, because it has provided the foundation for a like economy where authenticity has become synonymous with the frequency of the reproduction of digitally commodified products.

Heyd and Puschmann have shown that commodification of culture is not just restricted to objects or brand names; they affirm that with the advent of network platforms there is a homogenization of the linguistics of public space and digital space.

They assert: "The continued spread of social media, mobile devices and the Internet of Things (IoT), digital use has become ever more integrated into everyday life and the 'real' world. Early conceptions of online communication as a purely virtual 'cyberspace' that is removed from the contingencies and affordances of the material world and face-to-face interaction have been replaced by a model of offline-online convergence." More particularly the use of hashtag sign has become more prevalent in public spaces, even though this linguistic sign was specifically used in the digital sphere up until now. As mentioned earlier the commonality in the foundational elements of logic of both market and network platforms allow for the reproduced, commodified object, in this case a hashtag,

to be torn apart from its tradition and take its own autonomous existence that is now autonomous from the digital usage. Benjamin describes the same process thus: "Reproductive technology removes the thing reproduced from the realm of tradition and in allowing the reproduction to come closer to whatever the situation the person is apprehending it is in, it actualizes what is reproduced." The monotonous, widespread repetition of hashtags for various purposes on various social media platforms has normalized the usage of hashtags in public spaces, to put it differently the functionality of digital linguistics is permeating public spaces. Looking at the larger picture of the introduction of network platforms and its effect on public and private life: homogenization is affecting our language, our use of public spaces, marketing strategies, campaigning, and fashion, to name the obvious changes that can be discerned in our daily lives.

CONCLUSION

The Frankfurt school critique dissects and analyzes the culture industry with the aim of exposing its logic as a brainchild of economic means of production. While doing so it presents the hidden motivations of the industry which are clothed with the prospects of freedom of expression and handing power to the public, but from within works like a capitalist propaganda machine. Adorno goes as far as to anticipate "Hollywood Studio film as akin to Nazi propaganda". The Frankfurt school has a pessimistic view of the potentials of the culture industry because they have a pessimistic outlook of the economic motives of the capitalist machinery. Unbridled desire for growth provides the motivation for unbridled growth, where morality is decimated from virtue and is defined in terms of social acceptance. It results in widespread alienation in public and private life, where surrendering to the alienated project becomes a kind of normative duty. In the digital sphere platform capitalism with the use of high-tech apparatus, like AI, becomes a catalyst for a hyper-frequent self-reproduction of the capitalist economic model, alienating the users of network platform at a faster pace through the promotion of the logic of "speed, excess and waste". In this logic is also incorporated the concept of authenticity, where a user becomes as authentic as much he participates on network platforms where social value is determined in quantified terms and not through its genuineness or traditional value. Such logic detaches authenticity from heterogeneity and wed it with homogeneity.

One of the reasons the Frankfurt school critique is still relevant in the age of platform capitalism, is because now it is performing the philosophical firefighting service for what they already foresaw decades before this age.

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