

Research on Social Inequality Behind Dehumanization and Objectification in Media Context

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Abstract

Digital media has seeped into almost all areas of our lives. This has, in turn, changed how we socially communicate and how we think. There are new forms of dehumanization and objectification. This article aims to adopt Frankfurt School's criticism of the cultural industry and help understand the media context of objectification. We will analyze five areas: theoretical origins, algorithm suggestions, social media images, digital labor, stigmatization and social inequality. We will articulate how these areas are interconnected. Based on multiple sets of empirical data analysis, as of December 2024, the number of short video users in China reached 1.04 billion, accounting for 93.8% of the total number of internet users; according to the 2025 Global Media Monitoring Project, women only account for 26% of news reporting subjects and sources; a study of digital platforms in Ibero-America finds that women earn 40% less per hour than men, with a weekly income gap of 67%; as of December 2024, there are 313 million rural internet users in China, and the urban-rural digital divide remains prominent. Media objectification cannot be simply attributed to technology itself. It is intertwined with and mutually reinforces existing structures of social inequality, and the logic of capital and power relations lie at the root.

Keywords

Media objectification; Dehumanization; Social inequality; Algorithm recommendation; Digital labor; Culture Industry.

1. Introduction

When browsing short videos, browsing social media platforms, and shopping, algorithms seem increasingly to "know what you want", and recommendations are becoming more and more appealing. But convenience comes at a cost—dehumanization and objectification operate beneath the surface. Media technology was originally designed to expand communication boundaries and enhance interpersonal understanding, but under the dual effects of capital logic and technological rationality, it actually reduces people to quantifiable, exchangeable, and controllable objects in a more covert way [1].

Media objectification is hardly a new subject of critique. Horkheimer and Adorno proposed a critique of the cultural industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pointing out that art is reduced to a commodity in industrial production, and public taste is standardized in service of ideological manipulation. Media technologies have evolved from print and broadcast to today's internet and smartphones, and so have the forms of objectification. Where audiences once passively consumed mass-produced cultural products, algorithms now infiltrate daily life under the banner of "personalized recommendations", and platforms extract unpaid labor in the name of "empowerment". There is a common notion that people are able to make their own decisions, but, in actuality, they are absorbed in the logic of capital accumulation.

Not everyone is objectified the same. Gender, class, race, and region will situate people differently in relation to their objectification, or lack thereof, in the media system. The media

places women in the position of things that can be looked at and judged. Low-waged people become the subject of value extraction and are controlled by the media through the use of strict algorithms. Furthermore, the media places stigmas on socially marginalized persons. All the different forms of objectification, and the lack thereof, strengthen and maintain social places and the hierarchy of social structures as they are today. Social media is a testament to this fact. This question is especially relevant in the Chinese case. China is home to the largest amount of internet users in the world: as of December 2024, there were 1.108 billion users and a penetration of 78.6%. Discussing media objectification and social inequality in the Chinese context cannot simply copy Western critical theories, but must be analyzed in conjunction with local media ecology and social structure. This paper examines this issue through five dimensions to reveal the underlying logic of inequality.

2. Theoretical origins and contemporary forms of media objectification from the perspective of cultural industry

The idea of objectification dates back to Lukács' 1923 book *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács continues Marx's critique of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, pointing out that under capitalism, commodity exchange permeates social life, and relations between people are obscured by the veil of relations between things. The objectification structure not only objectifies workers, but also invades cognition and weakens social critical ability. The Frankfurt School carries forward this theoretical lineage and extends it to media and cultural critique.

In the 1947 book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno dedicated a chapter to "Culture Industry", based on observations of American popular culture after World War II, and directed objectification criticism towards mass media. In their view, cultural products like film, radio, and magazines have been brought under a standardized production regime, and cultural products are no longer created by individual artists, but have become standardized commodities produced in bulk. Cultural forms look diverse on the surface, but they all follow a computable, replicable production logic. Consumers' so-called freedom of choice is just an illusion.

The objectifying effect of the culture industry also penetrates into consciousness. Media entertainment may seem like a break from work, but in reality it serves to retrain workers to fit the rhythm of industrial society. In entertainment, people shed the burden of critical thought and become accustomed to accepting ready-made answers. *One-Dimensional Man* is a book by Marcuse from 1964 wherein he describes how, in advanced industrial societies, people lose their capacity for negation, criticism, and transcendence, and instead become one-dimensional [2].

Digital media has reshaped this picture. In classical cultural industry, top-down, industrial-style, one-way indoctrination is what marks the process. In the era of Web 2.0, user-generated content gives the false impression of a two-way, participatory culture. While Web 2.0 users appear to be the content producers, the objective of the industry remains unaltered. Through a false sense of participation, people become objectified to an even greater extent. The behavior of users is tracked, and, based on this, content and advertisements are prepared. The new reality is the complete objectification and dehumanization of people [3]. This new form of objectification is called "datafied objectification", and it is a form of objectification that does not rely on forced ideological indoctrination.

Apart from the new forms of datafied objectification, the concept of "immaterial labor" introduced by Lazzarato in 1996 also offers examples that can be used to describe reality. In the post-industrial society, the limits of labor stretch beyond the traditional workplace, and it is the knowledge, emotions, and creativity of people that serve as the basis for value creation.

Within this context, media platforms provide the essential infrastructure upon which immaterial labor is performed.

3. Information cocoon and cognitive dehumanization in algorithm recommendation mechanism

Now that algorithmic recommendation is pervasive in digital media, it is clear that it is imbedded in nearly every aspect of information acquisition, whether it be social media, e-commerce, news browsing, or even browsing videos. It is easily mistaken for a benign filtering tool; however, like all so-called neutral tools, its function is ultimately embedded with corporate purpose and value judgments. It alters users' communication and cognition without their knowledge [4].

One observed consequence is the information cocoon effect. Sunstein described this in his book *Infotopia*, where he states that in the information overload situation, people select the information they agree with, and become increasingly isolated from heterogeneous information. It is no surprise that this is the most noticeable effect of algorithmic recommendation systems. In fact, the 2023 report for Tsinghua University, entitled *Breaking the Cocoon or Building the Cocoon?*, states that over 90% of users of short video applications have enabled personalized recommendations, and 70% of users have a positive opinion of personalized recommendation systems, which implies that users are in favor of algorithmic recommendation.

The closing of cognition that results from this system causes further dehumanization. Continuous exposure to a similar information environment will dull the ability to interpret and empathize with diverse positions. Divergent views are perceived as "wrong", "evil", "stupid", and so forth. Online group polarization is a manifestation of a lack of communication, and ultimately, a lack of understanding. This is a recipe for hostility.

One way to dehumanize is through the strict datafication of each individual. Algorithms collect sufficient data on an individual and dehumanize them in the name of collection. Surmised data is used to define a person's behavior, worth, and even the specific content an individual is targeted with. A manifestation of this discriminatory logic is the concept of "user profiling", which describes the process of digitally disaggregating users to serve targeted advertisements [5].

It is important to note, however, that data driven digital user profiling is a biased practice perpetrated by biased algorithms. Systems and Modeling algorithms practiced by the media are guilty of sustaining discriminatory stereotypes. Content algorithms reinforce social stereotypes and biases. These frameworks exclude marginalized groups of society and deepen existing social inequalities.

4. Gender dimension: objectification of women and power inequality in media presentation

Gender reveals explain the connection between the media's objectification of women with social inequalities. Since early 20th century's print ads to contemporary digital advertisements, women's images and bodies have long been instrumental in the logic of the market [6]. This is not a merely aesthetic problem; it reproduces the gendered patriarchal structures of power.

In the Chinese case, the media's objectification of gender is a relevant problem. In 2025, the UN Women and UNICEF will be publishing the "Gender Representation Analysis Report in Chinese Advertising". This study used the top 1000 TV, online, and social media advertisements with the highest viewership in China in 2022 as a sample, and found that women had lower screen appearances than men, with their images mostly being slender and their roles concentrated in the fields of family and caregiving; men are more likely to appear in paid professional settings

and hold a higher proportion of leadership positions. This stereotypical presentation is not neutral, but subtly shapes traditional gender norms of "women as homemakers, men as breadwinners".

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2025 report presents a more macro global picture. This project is led by the World Association of Christian Communication (WACC) and supported by UN Women. It is the largest and longest-running media gender equality monitoring project in the world. Data shows that women only account for 26% of the reporting subjects and sources in television, radio, print, and online news. Over the past thirty years, this proportion has only changed by 9 percentage points, and progress has almost stagnated.

The digital age has not automatically improved things—if anything, it has given rise to new forms of gender objectification and violence. According to a study by UNESCO, 73% of female journalists have experienced online violence [7]. Meanwhile, the UN Women's November 2025 report warns that artificial intelligence is exacerbating technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

The phenomenon of "manosphere" that has emerged in recent years reflects gender inequality in the media space from another dimension. The 2025 report by the United Nations Office at Geneva points out that this network of misogynistic communities has become a serious threat to gender equality, and its toxic discourse is permeating from online to offline. Strong feelings generate longer user engagement and result in greater profits for the platform. This extreme content is likely to be further spread via automated recommendations.

5. Subject alienation and class differentiation in digital labor and platform economy

Digital platforms have emerged as the central infrastructure organizing labor today. Online car hailing, food delivery, online crowdsourcing and other business models have incorporated large numbers of workers into the digital system. While expanding employment channels, the platform economy has spawned new forms of labor alienation, deepening class divides and widening social inequality.

The theory of digital labor can be traced back to the concept of "immaterial labor" in Italian autonomist Marxism. Lazzarato proposed in 1996 that the core of post-Fordist labor has shifted from material product manufacturing to the production of information, symbols, emotions, and communication. Hart and Negri subdivided it into three categories in *Empire*: information technology industrial production labor, creative and symbolic analysis labor, and affective labor of interpersonal interaction. In this theoretical perspective, digital platforms have become a key mechanism for organizing and absorbing immaterial labor [8].

Nowhere is platform inequality more visible than in income distribution. In 2026, the International Labour Organization, the Ibero-American Secretariat, and UN Women jointly issued a report analyzing digital platform labor conditions in 22 Ibero-American countries. Findings indicated that, on average, women's hourly earnings were 40% lower than men's, while the income gap on the weekly pay reached 67%. Additionally, around 25% of working hours were spent on waiting or searching for orders, which is considered unpaid work.

The North-South divide of global digital labor is a new facet of this inequality. More than 75% of the demand for digital work is within high-income countries, which include the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany, and New Zealand. The supply, on the other hand, is mostly from the global South, that is, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, which together, are more than 50% of the global digital labor. The value continues to shift from South to North, while workers in the developing countries face a situation of a complete absence of fundamental labor standards and a social safety net.

The conditions of platform workers in developed countries are more or less on the same level of negativity. The Amazon MTurk platform in the USA is a good example. Most gig workers on this platform are paid very low wages, with only about 4% of the gig workers earning above the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. A similar situation is evident with Uber drivers. The effective wage is only \$10 to \$15 when platform commission and vehicle operating costs are deducted.

Another important factor for digital work alienation comes with increased use of algorithmic control [9]. The European Foundation for Improving Living and Working Conditions shows in their 2026 study that digital monitoring of workers on platforms is widespread, and so is the use of algorithmic management. Algorithms can automate the distribution of work, determine payment, and carry out disciplinary actions. They also impact the workers' ability to access the platform. Workers end up being treated as action nodes within the system, and the organization of the system results in particularly strong alienation from their subjectivity and creativity..

6. Media stigmatization and social exclusion mechanisms of marginalized groups

Media is a means of spreading information, but it also creates social classifications and names. Users of drugs, immigrants, the disabled, sexually deviant, and other marginalized groups are often distorted and oversimplified in media, and are subjected to systematic stigmatization. Media also portrays them in a way that demonizes them and causes people to dehumanize them. Such stigmatization is an active means to socially marginalize and is not a neutral act. It gives ideological excuse to socially unjust structures and legitimizes social inequality that is the result [10].

The media presentation of drug users demonstrates the operation of stigmatization. Studies consistently show that prescription opioid users are often portrayed as white "biological victims", while heroin users are often portrayed as poor urban Black and Latinx people, as if lacking human emotions. This binary narrative not only distorts the overall picture of drug abuse, but also reinforces racial and class stereotypes.

Nixon advisor Ehrlichman's 1994 interview revealed the political intent behind the drug war. Linking black people and anti-war activists to drugs can justify raids on their communities, arrest their leaders, search their homes, and undermine their political power. In this situation, the media doesn't operate neutrally. Selective reporting and narrative framing trick the public into believing the moral and legal justification of racial oppression.

Muslim immigrant representation in the French media is concerning and suggestively indicates a hostile and aggressive media environment for Muslim immigrants in general. Portrayals of Muslim immigrants present them as "invaders" and socially pressuring immigrants in need of discipline. This narrative of oppression explains the absence of representations of immigrant groups and provides ideological space for the formulation of anti-immigration policies.

Media operations of discrimination and stigmatization are not single processes. Marginalized groups have very little representation in media and largely fail to express their voices. If they are represented, they are dictated to rigid frameworks of labeling. Narratively, the presence of marginalized groups is a social problem document that needs to be controlled and corrected.

Although there are now methods available for self-expression of marginalized groups via digital media, the framework for digital media traffic and the logic of digital media favors and privileges sensationalism and divisiveness [11]. The digital divide in China summarizes this. The 55th report of the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) states that as of December 2024, 313 million people accessed the Internet from rural areas. This represents 28.2% of the total Internet users, while 71.8% of users were from urban areas. In other words,

rural users of the Internet are underrepresented in the digital public sphere, while the Internet threatens to further solidify the urban-rural divide.

7. Conclusion

Combining these five dimensions brings us to a preliminary conclusion. Dehumanization and objectification in the media space are the results of interrelated and reinforcing elements in multiple dimensions. Theoretical frameworks, Critique of Algorithms, Gender Power Reproduction, Digital Labor Alienation, and Stigmatization of the Marginalized: It is the marginalization of women that is the focus of the intersection of class, gender, and stigmatization. The most significant impact of digital exclusion and information silos is the widening of cognitive gaps between groups. The objectification of women in the Media is a reflection of Social Inequality in the field of Communication.

Is there a way out of this situation? Technical solutions are part of the answer but by no means the whole answer. Algorithmic transparency, protection of data rights, and regulation of digital content are examples of interventions that can alleviate some symptoms but will not touch the core of the issue considering that capital and power relations are left intact. The way out of this situation is to think multidimensionally and act beyond the existing economic, social, and cultural constraints to transform the Media Ecology.

This issue has enormous practical implications for China as a major world power on the Internet. As the world's largest market for Internet services, its fast growing digital media has created a massive industry with unprecedented social reach. Safeguarding the subjectivity of humans, and preventing the spread of objectification and alienation during the digital economic development. How do we ensure that the advancement of technology serves the integrated development of individuals? And how do we ensure that all people in society enjoy the results of digital development? These questions do not have answers and require the cooperation of scholars and policy-makers.

Ultimately, this transcends the field of communication studies, as it offers a real political problem of social justice and of the condition of the people.

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