

Catalina Buitano

PHIL 235

Dr. Campisi

05 May 2022

Final Research Paper

Social Media, Capitalism, and the Death of the Individual:

Introduction

The digital age has undeniably opened new avenues for capitalist societies to prosper and has been shown to have contributed to the rapid spread of globalization in the 21st century. Social media and digital communication platforms have also helped create a more interconnected global network by facilitating people's means of communication; which has become increasingly more important, especially after the COVID-19 Pandemic unexpectedly forced businesses, schools, government institutions, etc., to transition to virtual communication and workspaces in order to reduce transmission rates. The COVID-19 pandemic's effects have been far-reaching and long-lasting, but the challenges this unprecedented crisis posed to all aspects of daily life were arguably significantly mitigated in technologically advanced societies (Mayo Clinic, 2021). With this in mind, although social media appears harmless and beneficial to the human condition prima facie, after thoroughly analyzing the framework, origin, and implications of social networking on Western society, in particular, it is apparent that the digital age has also helped reinforce the capitalist agenda, engrain social prejudices in the general public, and led to the alienation of the individual. This paper will thoroughly examine the use of social media in capitalist societies as well as argue that social media has been utilized to reproduce capitalist

ideals perpetuated by the dominant class in society at the expense of the individual. For the sake of brevity, however, this paper will solely analyze the relationship between social media and capitalism in the United States.

Background

In order to better comprehend how social media affects the human condition, it is important to have some prior knowledge regarding the historical development of this technology and how it has become popularized globally in the 21st century especially. Social media is defined to be various forms of communication such as social networking websites and microblogging, through which users create online communities and share information (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Since one of the most popular modes of social media is social networking, I will also define this term in order to provide a preliminary illustration of how this concept correlates with capitalism: social networking is defined by the same source as the “exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions; specifically the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business (Merriam-Webster, n.d).” This illustrates the relationship between capitalism and social networking, in which social networking is used to reinforce participation in the exchange of goods and services as well as stimulate more economic activity.

The first occurrence of social media in history can be traced back to the development of the telegraph in 1844. The telegraph was used to transmit or receive messages over long distances (Ritholz, 2010). Subsequently, the first social network was developed by Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tonnies in the late 1800s. Social networks have changed throughout history which has led to the modern-day use of digital media to facilitate communication over long distances at a low cost and with fast processing rates. However, most social networking

sites were created in the 1990s; BlackPlanet, Asian Avenue, and MoveOn were the first networking sites.

In 2000 social media received a great boost with the witnessing of many social networking sites springing up. This highly boosted and transformed the interaction of individuals and organizations who share common interests in music, education, movies, and friendship, based on social networking. Among those that were launched included LunarStorm, six degrees, Cyworld, Ryze, and Wikipedia. In 2001, Fotolog, sky blog, and Friendster were launched, and in 2003, MySpace, LinkedIn, LastFM, tribe.net, Hi5, etc. In 2004, popular names like Facebook, Harvard, Dogster, and Mixi evolved. In 2005, big names like Yahoo! 360, YouTube, keyword, and the Black planet all emerged (Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2011).

Now in 2022, the Statista Research Department reports that the six most used social media sites are: 1. Facebook 2. Youtube 3. Whatsapp 4. Instagram 5. WeChat 6. Tiktok. This further suggests that social media and networking sites have transformed and multiplied since the concept of this technology was introduced (Published by Statista Research Department and 8, 202).

Furthermore, it is also important to provide a brief outline of the capitalist framework before moving forward to the next section of this paper, which will focus on critiques of capitalism and elaborate on the relationship between social media, capitalism, and the individual. Capitalism, which is otherwise known as a free-market economy, is an economic system dominant in the Western world in which the means of production are privately owned, production is guided, and income is distributed through the operation of markets (Britannica, n.d.).

The Profit Argument

Most social media and networking sites also have “trends” that rapidly travel through different communities of online users. In simpler terms, a trending topic is essentially a subject

that undergoes a surge in popularity for a limited period of time (Big Commerce, 2010). Trends have also been used for the purpose of eCommerce which has risen in popularity after COVID-19 restrictions pressured businesses around the world to transition to selling goods and marketing their services on digital marketplaces such as Instagram and Facebook (UNCTAD, 2021). For example, the following subjects have become trends on social media: fashion, physiques, hair cuts, products, and virtually any other “object.” This section of this paper, however, will only focus on the relationship between social media fashion trends and the capitalist agenda.

The first premise of the profit argument is contingent upon the following two main premises: (i) Social media facilitates the acquisition of surplus value or capital by using trends to manipulate supply and demand. (ii) Social media is not a value-neutral technology in capitalist societies since the individuals that possess ownership over this industry also control the nature of its use. The first premise of this argument refers to the concept of surplus value as it is analyzed through the Marxist lens:

Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is essentially the production of surplus-value. The labourer produces, not for himself, but for capital. It no longer suffices, therefore, that he should simply produce. He must produce surplus-value. That labourer alone is productive, who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, and thus works for the self-expansion of capital. If we may take an example from outside the sphere of production of material objects, a schoolmaster is a productive labourer when, in addition to belaboring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation (Marx, Ch.7, p. 234).

In the above text, Karl Marx highlights that the desire to generate surplus value and overproduce, also known as ‘profit,’ is an inherent quality of capitalism. It follows that social media, which is

owned privately by a handful of corporations, facilitates the acquisition of surplus value through various consumer trends on social media. One example of how social media helps reinforce the capitalist agenda is by promoting indulgence in the fast fashion industry. Fast fashion is considered inexpensive clothing produced 'en masse' as an alternative to expensive, popular brands, and is a direct consequence of capitalism. Instagram and Facebook, for example, have an in-app marketplace/eCommerce site, which developers have utilized to popularize fast fashion trends through the use of advertisements that collect user data and personal information in order to cater to consumers' own unique interests and increase the likelihood that monetary transactions will occur. The reason that this industry has been able to prosper is because of infinite competition, exploitation of labor, and the capitalist conquest for profit maximization (Lakhiani, 2020).

Consequently, the second premise of the profit argument argues that social media technology is not valuable neutral when utilized in capitalist societies since the individuals that possess ownership over this industry also control the nature of its use. To substantiate premise (ii), I will refer to Karl Marx's 'Ruling Class Theory' and translate his account and convey its applications to social media in the Digital Age (21st Century):

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence

among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch (Marx, 1859, p. 268).

By this, Marx is trying to depict the nature of class relations in every historical epoch and can be applied to the digital age, which is also known as the 'Age of Anthropocene.' In his eyes, there are two classes in society: a ruling and an oppressed class. Marx would most likely consider social media to be a part of "intellectual life" and a reflection of the social consciousness in America. Social media networking sites are controlled by the 'bourgeoisie,' the class that is responsible for producing the ruling ideas of American society and reinforcing the capitalist agenda; since the exploitation of the working class have allowed members of the ruling class to accumulate such wealth. It follows that social media cannot be 'value-neutral' in the sense that the moral nature of its use is relative to the user, since the users that belong to these communities themselves do not control the collective social consciousness observed in the media; they are in America's case, controlled by capitalists whose interest are not aligned with those of the working class. Advanced capitalist societies no longer need to use physical force to get its citizens to subject, when they can use devices like social media to spread the ruling ideas and convince the oppressed class that these ideas are their own.

Consequently, since premise (i) and premise (ii) entail the following conclusions: those who own the mode of production determine the nature of their economic practices, and fast fashion is a harmful economic practice perpetuated by capitalism, and since social media sites are owned by the capitalist, social media will be utilized to reinforce capitalist values. Since capitalism is not value-neutral, it follows that social media is not value-neutral either and is used as a tool to promote overconsumption and the maximization of profit through the exploitation of cheap labour and the environment.

The Intersectional Argument

This section of this paper will focus on further developing the claim that social media entrenches social prejudices, as well as some of the other relevant points not thoroughly explored in the “Profit Argument” from that last section. The intersectional argument can be characterized by the following premises: (i) Social media is an ‘echo-chamber’ that aggravates the polarization of the general public. (ii) Social media further entrenches social prejudices. For example, the first premise of the intersectional argument claims that social media is used as an echo chamber that continues to fuel polarization in American society.

According to group polarization theory (23), an echo chamber can act as a mechanism to reinforce an existing opinion within a group and, as a result, move the entire group toward more extreme positions. Echo chambers have been shown to exist in various forms of online media such as blogs (24), forums (25), and social media sites (26–28). Some studies point out echo chambers as an emerging effect of human tendencies, such as selective exposure, contagion, and group polarization (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Starnini, 2021 13, 23, 29–31).

In other words, a social media echo chamber can be utilized to perpetrate existing opinions within a group and encourage the entire group to adopt more extreme positions. Echo chambers have also been associated with political polarization, which facilitated the organization of the Capitol Riot on January 6th, 2021 by white nationalists and neo-Nazis (History, n.d.). Although white nationalism appears to have become more prevalent in the digital age of social media, the reality of the matter is that this ideology has become more accessible, which has allowed white nationalists to become more comfortable voicing racist beliefs since the social media echo chamber is ready to coddle their egos (Asare, 2022). Moreover, the existence of social media echoes chambers can be likened to Soren Van Kierkegaard’s attack on “the press” since social media has also been subjected to censorship and is, therefore, no longer a reliable

source for information since members of the dominant class control the information that is disseminated to the general public. In Hubert L. Dreyfus's essay *Anonymity versus Commitment*, he argues that Kierkegaard's criticism of "the press" can also be applied to the internet because of the absence of responsibility in ensuring information is accurate and relevant, which makes the world wide web an ideal medium for slander and innuendo (Drefyus,1999). I argue that the Kierkegaardian criticism of the internet can thus, also be extended to social media--especially with the prevalence of echo chambers in American society in particular.

The Humanist Argument

This section of the paper will focus on unraveling the humanist criticism of social media and capitalism. "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx, 1859, p. 263)." In the text above, Karl Marx claims that the type of social and political consciousness dominating a particular historical epoch is determined by the mode of production, which subsequently determines its material conditions. In the United States, the mode of production is capitalism, and capitalists are characterized by class struggle, in which there is a dominant and oppressed classe. Under the assumptions of Marxist class theory, capitalism in American society controls just about every aspect of the individual's social, political, and intellectual life. Therefore, it follows that because social media is a capitalist apparatus, its social existence determines its consciousness. I argue that under capitalism, social media has been utilized as a tool to dissolve individuality in American societies and propose the following thought experiment to paint this narrative: A subject is given a multi-function device to facilitate basic activities in daily life such as telling time, reading the news, and connecting with other people. This device becomes so

useful to the user that the user forms an attachment to the machine, because it becomes overly dependent on the machine to provide information or 'knowledge.' The mind then gradually disengages from its material surroundings and becomes an extension of the device itself or co-dependent. This occurs because the subject's conception of self, personal history, and reality, become entrapped in the device and are stored as social media posts, financial transactions, web searches, reminders, and various other forms of information. It follows that the subject eventually becomes distrustful of their own cognitive processes in favor of machine processing, subsequently leading to an overdependence on social media for information about the subject's own concept of self. Social media assigns a fixed self to the subject, by working as a medium to compare the subject's subjective worldview and identity in relation to others part of the same 'herd' social networks. Social media devices reinforce a herd mentality because it pressures individual subjects to follow the ruling ideas dominant in that epoch; or risk ostracization. This creates a 'standardization' or homogenous conception of the "subject" by gradually merging thousands of minds into one mind through following social media trends. The subject then becomes a commodity or good on social media through capitalism, and business trade and sell the user's personal information (history). Consequently, capitalism reinforces its prerogative of the dispensibility of the labour force onto the subject tangible body itself, further undermining individuality. Different body types, fashion wear, ethnic physical attributes, and ideas become 'trendy' and then are quickly disposed and replaced by a new trend to buy into. However, the subject, whose complete conception of self is determined by the social media device, makes the desperate effort to replicate the behavior of the herd. Gradually, the subject begins to assimilate to this 'standardization' of human consciousness and identity. This process of assimilation

continues until the subject eventually becomes completely alienated from their original conception of personal identity and solely reflects the ruling ideas of the oppressive ruling class.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that social media is used as an instrument of capitalism that the dominant social class utilizes in order to reinforce commodity fetishism, exploitation, and inequality because (i) It promotes detrimental economic practices that exacerbate social disparities. (ii) Reinforces social prejudices and stereotypes. (iii) Promotes the standardization of a fixed social and physical identity and uses “social media trends” to limit individuality in society. Therefore it follows that the development of social media in the post-modern age has been shown to help reinforce the capitalist agenda and prevent the mobilization of an intersectional workforce in the late stages of capitalism. In order to mitigate the harmful effects of social media which have been magnified under capitalism, social media and networking sites must work towards the following goals: protecting user’s private information and data, decreasing censorship, adopting more sustainable and ethical economic practices, and reversing the privatization of the social media industry. Implementing these changes will drastically mitigate the adverse effects of social media on the human condition, however, while still living within a capitalist society, it is unlikely that they will ever undermine the existential argument against social media.

References

1. *The Charnel-House | from Bauhaus to Beinhaus*.
www.thecharnelhouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Marx-Engels-Reader.pdf.
2. “Covid-19 (Coronavirus): Long-Term Effects.” *Mayo Clinic*, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 22 Oct. 2021,
www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/coronavirus-long-term-effects/art-20490351.
3. “Capitalism.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.,
www.britannica.com/topic/capitalism.
4. Published by Statista Research Department, and Mar 8. “Most Used Social Media 2021.” *Statista*, 8 Mar. 2022,
www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/.
5. Dreyfus, Hubert L. “Anonymity versus Commitment: The Dangers of Education on the Internet - Ethics and Information Technology.” *SpringerLink*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1010010325208.
6. Edosomwam, Simeon J. “(PDF) the History of Social Media and Its Impact on Business.” *ResearchGate*,
www.researchgate.net/publication/303216233_The_history_of_social_media_and_its_impact_on_business.
7. “U.S. Capitol Riot.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 5 Jan. 2022,
www.history.com/this-day-in-history/january-6-capitol-riot.

8. “What Is a Trending Topic and How Can It Be Used in Ecommerce?” *BigCommerce*, 12 May 2022,
www.bigcommerce.com/ecommerce-answers/what-is-trending-topic-ecommerce/#:~:text=Definition%3A%20A%20trending%20topic%20is,capitalize%20on%20the%20current%20conversation.
9. Marx, Karl. *Economic Manuscripts: Capital Vol. I - Chapter Sixteen*,
www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch16.htm.
10. Cinelli, Matteo, et al. “The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media | PNAS.” *The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media*, www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2023301118.
11. Marx, Karl. “B. The Illusion of the Epoch.” *The German Ideology. Karl Marx 1845*,
www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm.
12. Menand, Louis, et al. “Karl Marx, Yesterday and Today.” *The New Yorker*, 3 Oct. 2016,
www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/10/karl-marx-yesterday-and-today.
13. Published by Statista Research Department, and Mar 8. “Most Used Social Media 2021.” *Statista*, 8 Mar. 2022,
www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/.
14. Asare, Janice Gassam. “Social Media Continues to Amplify White Supremacy and Suppress Anti-Racism.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 14 Apr. 2022,
www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2021/01/08/social-media-continues-to-amplify-white-supremacy-and-suppress-anti-racism/?sh=1b309ac94170.
15. Lakhiani, Karuna. “Lakhiani: Ethical Shopping Doesn't Exist under Capitalism.” *The Observer*, observer.case.edu/lakhiani-ethical-shopping-doesnt-exist-under-capitalism/.

16. Global e-commerce jumps to \$26.7 trillion, COVID-19 boosts online sales. UNCTAD.

(2021, May 3). Retrieved May 12, 2022, from

<https://unctad.org/news/global-e-commerce-jumps-267-trillion-covid-19-boosts-online-sales>