

Research on the Phenomenon of Consumption Alienation in Online Shopping from the Perspective of Marxist Theory of Alienation

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ABSTRACT

The new forms of online shopping driven by internet development have enhanced consumer convenience, while also giving rise to a series of issues related to consumer alienation. This study, from the perspective of Marxist theory of alienation, systematically analyzes various forms of alienation present in online virtual consumption, including the alienation between consumer goods and consumers, the alienation between consumption behavior and consumers, the alienation of the species-being of consumers, and the alienation in interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, it explores the underlying mechanisms of these phenomena from three dimensions: technological iteration, capital operation, and the penetration of consumer culture. On this basis, solutions are proposed in three aspects—technological governance, capital guidance, and the reconstruction of consumer subjectivity—providing theoretical reflections and practical insights that can serve as valuable references for promoting rational online consumption and curbing trends of consumer alienation.

KEYWORDS

Marx's theory of alienation; Consumption alienation; Phenomena of alienation; Online shopping

1 Introduction

Marx once pointed out: "A society cannot stop consuming."^[1] This profoundly reveals that consumption, as a basic form of human survival and development, not only affects individual growth but also deeply impacts the evolution of the social economy. However, many contemporary consumption behaviors have gradually deviated from their original purpose of meeting genuine needs, showing a trend of alienation. From the perspective of transaction methods, consumption can be divided into virtual consumption, primarily online, and physical consumption, primarily offline. With the rapid spread of technology, especially new media technology, online shopping has won widespread favor due to its speed and convenience, increasingly becoming the mainstream consumption model. While online shopping unleashes enormous economic potential and reshapes residents' consumption habits, it also gives rise to a series of problems, with the phenomenon of consumption alienation being particularly prominent. This phenomenon not only has negative effects on consumers but also restricts the healthy development of the economy. Therefore, in-depth analysis of the forms of consumption alienation in online shopping, clarification of its underlying logic, and the proposal of corresponding mitigation strategies are of significant practical importance for establishing a sustainable, high-quality, and multi-level rational consumption perspective.

2 Manifestations of consumption alienation in online shopping

2.1 Differentiation Between Consumer Goods and Consumers

Marx pointed out that in capitalist production, "the object produced by labor, that is, the product of labor, as an alien being, as a force independent of the producer, is opposed to labor"^[2]. This signifies that the products created by workers are appropriated by capitalists rather than belonging to the producers themselves, leading to a relationship of separation and opposition. The more labor the worker invests, the more they are dominated by their own products. In contemporary online shopping, commodities, as concrete forms of labor products, are imbued with new attributes, engendering a similar alienated relationship where consumers become subservient to goods. This alienation operates primarily through two mechanisms: the symbolization and the virtualization of commodities. Symbolization refers to the process where goods in online consumption are endowed with symbolic meanings—such as status, identity, or aspiration—that transcend their material use-value. Consumers are increasingly driven to pursue these constructed symbols rather than the practical utility of the goods, meaning commodities, which should serve human needs, end up dictating those needs. Virtualization denotes the presentation of goods through digital images and curated descriptions online, creating a mediated reality. This mediated representation acts as a form of "semblance", often obscuring the true qualities and functions of the physical item. Consumers, unable to inspect goods directly, must rely on these potentially misleading representations, leading to purchases that may not align with their actual needs. Thus, through symbolic construction and virtual representation, commodities in online shopping become an external, opposing force to the consumer,

perpetuating the logic of alienation that Marx identified.

2.2 Consumer Behavior is Alienated from Consumers

Labor, for Marx, is the purposeful activity through which humans realize their essential capacities. Under capitalism, however, it becomes an alienated, compulsory activity—a mere means of survival that stifles creativity and denies genuine fulfillment. Similarly, consumption, as a form of human activity, is also susceptible to alienation. Online consumption, which should be an autonomous process guided by real needs, is often distorted into patterns that contradict the consumer's autonomy and well-being. This is chiefly manifested in excessive consumption and conspicuous consumption. Excessive consumption occurs when individuals purchase goods far beyond their practical needs or financial capacity. In Marxist terms, every phenomenon has its proper "measure"; exceeding it alters its essential quality. When consumption surpasses its rational measure, it leads to waste, financial strain, and a distortion of its fundamental purpose. The digital retail environment, with its pervasive marketing and targeted advertising, makes recognizing and adhering to this measure particularly difficult, trapping consumers in cycles of compulsion. Conspicuous consumption is driven not by use-value but by the pursuit of symbolic social value, such as status or trendiness. In online shopping, this manifests in the pursuit of luxury brands, high-priced collectibles, or trendy items primarily for their social signaling power. This consumption is dictated by artificially stimulated desires and external validation, creating an insatiable "black hole" of demand where the consumer becomes subordinate to the symbolic value of commodities. In both forms, the consumer's agency is undermined. Consumption ceases to be a conscious act fulfilling genuine needs and instead reinforces patterns of compulsion, imitation, and passive desire shaped by external forces.

2.3 The Essential Alienation of the Consumer Category

Marx posits that humans distinguish themselves through "free, conscious activity" —their "species-being." The alienation of labor severs this, reducing life activity to a mere means of survival. Analogously, online consumption, which should be a free and conscious activity enriching life, is often reduced to a passive, manipulated process, alienating consumers from their essential creative and autonomous nature. This alienation manifests in the consumer's instrumentalization and objectification. Instrumentalization occurs when consumers, who should be the active subjects utilizing platforms for their needs, are instead used as instruments by platforms and merchants. Activities like browsing, comparing, and generating data constitute "digital labor" that creates value (traffic, data, sales) for capital, often without the consumer's full awareness or compensation. Thus, the act of consumption is covertly transformed into a form of productive labor for the platform. Objectification refers to the reduction of the consumer from a conscious subject to a passive object of manipulation. On one hand, purchasing decisions are shaped by pervasive advertising and marketing strategies. On the other, algorithmic recommendation systems create "filter bubbles" or "information cocoons" by predicting and limiting choices based on past behavior. This undermines the consumer's autonomy, spontaneity, and capacity for discovery, turning the conscious subject of consumption into a managed object within a pre-designed system. Consequently, the consumer's "species-being" —the capacity for free, conscious, and creative activity—is undermined in the digital marketplace, as they are systematically positioned as both a laboring instrument and a predictable object of control.

2.4 The Alienation Among People

The alienation between people is the culmination of the previous forms of alienation, representing a shift from the "alienation of things" to the "alienation of human relations" ^[3]. In online shopping, the virtual and mediated nature of interaction exacerbates this, leading to relationships characterized by inauthenticity and instrumentality. Firstly, communication loses authenticity. The inherent information asymmetry of online markets, combined with marketing strategies that may involve exaggeration or deception, erodes trust. Interactions between consumers and merchants are often based on incomplete or distorted information rather than transparent communication, undermining the foundation of genuine social relations. Secondly, social relationships become hyper-commercialized. Marketing mechanics like "group buying" or "sharing for discounts" explicitly monetize social connections. Consumers are incentivized to leverage their personal relationships for economic gain, transforming social ties into tools for traffic acquisition and sales conversion. This commercializes human connections, replacing authentic sociality with transactional logic and fostering a sense of instrumentalism and indifference between individuals. Thus, online shopping environments can foster a dual alienation in human relations: communication is stripped of authenticity, and social bonds are co-opted by commercial imperatives. This transforms interpersonal connections from ends in themselves into means for capital accumulation, deepening social atomization and estrangement in the digital age.

3 The Enhancement of Consumption Capacity and the Emergence of Alienation Empowered by Technology

The rapid development of science and technology and the resulting leap in productivity have significantly improved the overall material living standards of society. After the basic survival needs were generally met, profound changes occurred in the social consumption structure, and both consumption capacity and consumption desire expanded simultaneously^[4]. However, this improvement in consumption capacity driven by technological progress has not led to more free and rational consumption behavior under specific conditions; instead, it has become the breeding ground for the alienation of consumption. On the one hand, while material abundance alleviates the anxiety of scarcity, it may also stimulate the irrational expansion of material desires. When consumption no longer revolves merely around "natural needs", it is easy to shift towards the pursuit of "false demands" such as brand symbols and social status symbols. In the infinite shelves and convenient experience built by online shopping, a wide variety of products continuously stimulate consumers' purchasing impulse through carefully designed visual presentations and marketing pitches. Many people do not consume for actual needs, but rather attempt to confirm themselves, seek recognition or fill the void in their spiritual world by possessing more and more novel goods. This kind of consumption behavior, which shifts from material satisfaction to symbolic possession, has deviated from the intrinsic driving force of use value and shows obvious characteristics of alienation. On the other hand, the application of technology, especially big data and algorithm technology, has not only enhanced shopping efficiency but also shaped new forms of control. Online shopping is not only a transactional activity but also a continuous process of data production. Every click, browse, price comparison and collection by consumers is transformed into data traces that can be analyzed and predicted by the platform and merchants. The user portraits constructed based on these data enable algorithmic recommendations to achieve highly personalized product push. This push mechanism, on the surface, offers convenience, but in reality, it constitutes an implicit manipulation: through the filtering and customization of the information environment, it invisibly limits consumers' choice horizons, shapes their preferences, and even creates demands. In this process, the subjectivity and autonomous choice of consumers are quietly weakened, and their behaviors increasingly seem like the products of algorithmic logic rather than the expression of free will. The deep involvement of big data and algorithms has potentially transformed consumer behavior from an active choice into a passive response guided or even dominated by technological systems, intensifying the deviation between consumer behavior and their true needs.

3.1 Market Manipulation and Deepening of Alienation Driven by Capital Logic

The occurrence and deepening of consumption alienation are fundamentally driven by the inherent requirement of capital to pursue value proliferation. In the era of digital capitalism, the logic of capital not only permeates the production field but also dominates and reconstructs the consumption field in a highly sophisticated and covert way. Firstly, capital achieves the extraction of value from consumers through the systematic construction and marketing of the "symbolic value" of commodities. Merchants and e-commerce platforms employ various means such as advertising, social media, and content marketing to attach specific social significance, emotional connections, and identity labels to ordinary goods. What consumers purchase is often no longer their physical functions but the symbolic meanings they are endowed with, attempting to express themselves and distinguish social classes through consumption. This fanatical pursuit of symbolic value has led consumer behavior to deviate from the rational consideration of use value, turning it into a competition of meanings. Consumers, in an intangible way, pay a high premium for the symbolic coding of capital. Secondly, digital platforms themselves have become a new field for capital operation, and consumers' activities on the platforms are directly transformed into production materials. Browsing, liking, sharing, commenting and even a simple "digital footprint" all become data resources that the platform collects, analyzes and uses to optimize advertising placement, precise marketing and traffic distribution. While consumers are enjoying "free" services, their attention and behavioral data are commercialized. Their online activities essentially constitute a kind of "digital labor" that is not paid for, and the value generated is occupied by the platform capital for free. This form of exploitation is more covert, incorporating the consumption process itself into the chain of value proliferation. Finally, capital systematically guides irrational consumption by creating consumption festivals and creating "landscapes". The invention of shopping festivals such as "Double Eleven" and "618" has successfully transformed consumption into a carnival ceremony participated by all through time-limited discounts, complex promotion rules, social media hype and creating a rare atmosphere. Under the influence of dense marketing information and collective emotions, the utilitarian and planned nature of consumption gives way to impulsiveness and compulsion. Meanwhile, new business forms such as live-streaming e-commerce create a strong sense of immersion and trust through the host's script, scene construction, and real-time interaction, further stimulating immediate consumption decisions^[5]. Under the logic of capital, the core of these strategies lies in constantly creating and stimulating "desires" rather than satisfying "needs", causing consumption to deviate from its essence of serving people and instead make people serve the needs of capital circulation and accumulation, thereby solidifying and

intensifying the alienated state of consumption at a deeper level.

3.2 The Infiltration of Consumerist Culture and the Loss of Individual Value

The spread of consumption alienation cannot be separated from the shaping and dissemination of specific consumption cultures. In the era of globalization and networking, the consumerist culture originated from the modern industrial society of the West has interacted and integrated with the local context. With the help of media technology, it has formed a powerful conceptual influence and profoundly reshaped the social value orientation and the self-perception of individuals. On the one hand, globalization has accelerated the spread of a consumerist lifestyle centered on "more, newer and better", which values material possession and immediate satisfaction. This culture emphasizes the legitimacy and priority of personal desires and advocates defining oneself, achieving happiness and gaining social status through consumption. The accompanying credit consumption culture has lowered the threshold for immediate gratification and encouraged "enjoy first, pay later", which has led many consumers, especially the younger generation, to easily fall into overconsumption and debt burdens, overdrawing their future to satisfy their current symbolic desires. This consumption pattern, which is divorced from the actual payment capacity, has drawn individuals into continuous financial pressure and psychological anxiety, deviating from the original intention that consumption should enhance well-being. On the other hand, the Internet, especially social media platforms, has become the core field for the production and dissemination of contemporary consumer culture. The platform is filled with elaborately decorated "lifestyle" displays. Internet celebrities and Kols constantly set and raise the consumption standards for an "ideal life" by sharing high-end products, luxurious experiences and pictures of refined living. In this environment, consumption behavior is highly publicized and socialized. Purchasing and displaying specific goods have become important ways for individuals to engage in social interaction, seek group identity, and build personal image. Phenomena such as "grass-planting", "check-ins", and "Internet celebrity products" reflect the deep binding of consumption and social identity. Having been immersed in this for a long time, an individual's value judgment and self-identity tend to be closely linked to consumption behavior, equating "what kind of person I am" with "what I consume". When self-worth overly relies on external commodity symbols and recognition from others, it will lead to the weakening of subjectivity and the loss of the true self. In the process of chasing the constantly changing consumption trends and identity symbols, consumers may feel that they can never be truly satisfied and fall into a continuous state of scarcity and anxiety. This is precisely the value alienation caused by the infiltration of consumption culture, where the intrinsic value of individuals is replaced by external consumption indicators, and the possibility of free development is restricted by a single consumption competition.

4 Responses to the Phenomenon of Consumption Alienation in Online Shopping

4.1 Regulation of Technical Ethics and Recalibration of Algorithmic Rationality

As a key driving force for social progress, technology itself has value neutrality, and the goodness or evil of its social effects depends on the ethical boundaries and institutional constraints of the users. The phenomenon of consumption alienation in online shopping largely stems from the one-sided expansion of technological instrumental rationality, especially the erosion of consumers' subjectivity by algorithms and big data in commercial applications. Algorithms are like a precise and invisible net, an "invisible hand", which predicts, guides and even shapes users' preferences and behaviors, making consumption decisions seem free on the surface but carry the risk of being manipulated. Therefore, to eliminate consumption alienation at the technical level, the core lies in transcending the simple logic of technical efficiency, introducing the guidance of value rationality, and promoting the transformation of technical services from a "capital-oriented" to a "people-oriented" paradigm. The specific path should focus on the optimization, transparency and goodness of the algorithm. First of all, it is necessary to reconstruct the value logic and recommendation mechanism of the algorithm. The current recommendation algorithms, which take "maximizing click-through rate" and "user dwell time" as their core goals, are highly likely to give rise to "information cocoons" and "filter bubbles", constantly reinforcing users' existing preferences and even biases, and stimulating unnecessary desires. The optimization direction should be to develop "on-demand recommendation" and "value-sensitive" algorithm models. In data analysis, not only historical behavior data of users should be included, but also their feedback on the authenticity, sustainability and practicality of products, as well as the actively set interest boundaries, should be integrated, so that the recommendation system can shift from stimulating "false demands" to serving "real needs". Secondly, efforts should be made to vigorously develop and promote new digital tools that serve consumers' sovereignty. For instance, cross-platform intelligent price comparison and quality analysis tools can be developed. By leveraging public data, they can deeply mine and visually present the price history, ingredient materials, and real user evaluations of goods. This will help consumers penetrate the marketing fog and make rational decisions based on more comprehensive information, thereby saving the "cognitive labor" and time cost they spend on information screening and comparison. Finally, an ethical review and accountability

mechanism for the application of technology must be established. E-commerce platforms and technology service providers should assess the potential social impact of their core algorithms (such as inducing excessive consumption, price discrimination, and reinforcing social biases, etc.) and disclose the basic principles to regulatory authorities and the public. By embedding ethical principles such as fairness, non-manipulation, and respect for autonomy into technological design and management norms, technological progress can truly become a tool to enhance consumers' capabilities and defend their subjectivity, rather than an invisible shackle that alienates their consumption behavior.

4.2 Standardization of Capital Logic and Return to Human-oriented Values

The nature of capital in a market economy to pursue proliferation, if lacking effective regulation and value guidance, is highly likely to lead to alienation in the fields of production and consumption. The root cause of many chaos in the online consumption ecosystem lies in the excessive expansion of capital logic, which simplifies the relationship between people and society into elements for profit calculation. Therefore, to promote the dissolution of consumption alienation at the capital level, the key lies in using institutional power to restrain the unlimited expansion impulse of capital, guiding it to serve the real development of people and the overall well-being of society, and achieving a profound transformation from the supremacy of "economic rationality" to the priority of "humanistic logic". This transformation needs to be advanced in conjunction with strong external supervision from the two key links of production and exchange. In the production process, enterprises should be guided to transcend the short-sighted economic rationality of "supply creating demand". Merchants and platforms should abandon the model of infinitely stimulating desires through symbolic marketing and artificially creating "consumption festivals" to absorb excess capacity, and instead shift to production based on insights into consumers' genuine, healthy and sustainable demands. This means giving priority to "ecological rationality", advocating a circular economy model of moderate production, lean manufacturing and extending the product life cycle, to maximize the actual use value and durability of goods with less resource consumption and lower ecological costs. In the exchange and marketing links, it is necessary to curb excessive marketing and commercial fraud through a dual approach of rule of law and moral governance. Strong regulation is the foundation of a healthy market. Regulatory authorities need to accelerate the improvement of laws and regulations that are suitable for the digital economy, clarify the main responsibilities of platforms, and carry out precise crackdowns and heavy penalties on behaviors such as "price discrimination" based on big data, false advertising, order manipulation and credit manipulation, and the sale of counterfeit and shoddy goods, significantly increasing the cost of violations. At the same time, business ethics should be advocated, requiring merchants to operate with integrity and eliminating behaviors such as exaggerating the symbolic value of goods, creating a false sense of urgency, and exploiting human weaknesses for marketing. The platform should establish a more fair and transparent evaluation system, strictly control false evaluations, and ensure the authenticity and diversity of evaluation information. The ultimate goal is to purify the online consumption ecosystem, transforming the online market from a "traffic field" of disorderly capital competition into a benign space within the framework of the rule of law, based on providing high-quality products and services, respecting and protecting consumers' rights and interests, and making the exchange process once again a bond that meets people's real needs and promotes social trust.

4.3 Reconstruction of Subjectivity and Self-awareness of Value Rationality

In the web of consumption woven by technology and the field of desires driven by capital, the persistence of consumers' own subjectivity and the awakening of value rationality are the intrinsic fundamentals for resisting consumption alienation and achieving self-liberation. The regulation of the external environment merely offers the possibility of rational consumption, and the transformation of this possibility into reality ultimately depends on the change of individual consumer consciousness and the self-awareness of practice. This requires consumers to transform from passive and constructed "objects of consumption" to clear-headed and active "subjects of consumption", and to rebuild human autonomy and purposefulness in consumption practice. Clarifying and adhering to genuine needs is the first step in reshaping subjectivity. The "landscape" creation and symbolic implications that abound in the online environment constantly disguise "wanting" as "needing". Consumers must possess a profound ability for self-reflection. When the urge to shop arises, they should be able to identify whether its source stems from their internal practical functional needs or is driven by external social comparisons, identity anxiety or immediate pleasure. Establishing practical strategies such as "demand lists" and "consumption delays" can help break the inertia of impulse shopping and bring consumption decisions back to rational assessment centered on use value. Cultivating a stable and rational consumption concept is a long-term project for building a value defense line. Concepts guide actions. We must abandon the quantitative logic of "more is better" and the illusory cognition of "symbol is value". First of all, a consumption philosophy of "emphasizing quality over quantity" should be advocated, focusing on the functionality, durability and environmental friendliness of goods, rather than blindly pursuing the superposition of brand, style and quantity. Secondly, it is necessary to be vigilant against the implicit deprivation of time and energy by consumption, consciously manage the time spent on

digital consumption, avoid becoming a "digital laborer" of the platform in the endless browsing and price comparison, and reinvest life energy into more creative and diverse activities. Finally, and most fundamentally, it is to restore the subject value of human beings in consumption. Consumers should deeply understand that human value, dignity and happiness are not defined by the symbols of the goods they possess. The recognition gained through consumption is fragile and external, while the growth and satisfaction achieved through creation, learning, interpersonal relationships and public participation are solid and internal. Therefore, consumption should be positioned as a means to serve a better life, rather than the purpose of life itself. When consumers establish a value rationality centered on their own true well-being and development, they can be liberated from the alienated state dominated by material things and maintain spiritual independence and subject freedom in the consumer society.

6 Conclusions

Online consumption, especially the two main forms of live-streaming sales and shopping on e-commerce platforms, has become an important force that profoundly influences the social economy and daily life through the Internet. They play an indispensable role in stimulating market vitality, promoting economic growth, and meeting the diverse needs of the people. However, this study reveals that behind this prosperous scene, the phenomenon of consumption alienation is quietly emerging - consumption behavior deviates from its essence of meeting real needs and is instead profoundly shaped by symbolic values, algorithmic manipulation, capital logic and consumerist culture, leading to the weakening of consumer subjectivity, the estrangement of interpersonal relationships and the loss of social values. To this end, this paper systematically proposes a resolution path from three dimensions: technology, capital and consumers: guiding algorithms towards goodness through ethical regulation, standardizing the logic of capital through institutional constraints, and rebuilding the subjectivity of consumption through value awareness. These discussions not only aim to provide theoretical references and practical inspirations for building a healthier, more transparent and fair online consumption environment, but also have a deeper significance in calling for a consumption ecosystem centered on "people" rather than "profits", so that technological development, business progress and the free and all-round development of people can be coordinated. Only by promoting the return of online consumption from "alienation" to "humanization", and making it truly serve the people's needs for a better life and the sustainable progress of society, can this emerging business form develop steadily and achieve a harmonious unity of economic benefits and social value.

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