



TRENDS IN ECONOMICS, FINANCE
AND MANAGEMENT JOURNAL



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DOI: <https://doi.org//10.69648/LNIP6122>

Trends in Economics, Finance and Management
(TEFMJ), 2024; 6(2): 43-51

ijtns.ibupress.com

Online ISSN: 2671-3365



Application : 03.12.2024

Revision : 10.12.2024

Acceptance : 24.12.2024

Publication : 16.01.2025



Celik, B. (2025). Intertwinement of Culture Industry, Technology and Mass Consumption: A Scoping Review. Trends in Economics, Finance and Management Journal, 6(2), 43-51. <https://doi.org//10.69648/LNIP6122>



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The author(s) declare no conflicts of interest.

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Intertwinement of Culture Industry, Technology and Mass Consumption: A Scoping Review

Bilal Celik

Abstract

This essay uses Horkheimer and Adorno's work on the culture industry to analyze the link between technology and mass consumption. While the digital world has enormous potential to facilitate communication, transcend spatial boundaries, and promote free expression, the utopian promise of this world is undermined by their mirroring of real-world market systems, the exploitation of labor, and the blurring of the line between entertainment and consumption. The culture industry thesis provides a useful starting point for theorizing the digital world and explaining why this place has become a mirror of mass consumption. Within this scope, this study aims to provide conceptual clarity and to contribute to efforts of theorization, considering three main concepts, namely, culture industry, technology, and mass consumption, and correlations between them, which were analyzed based on existing literature.

Keywords: culture industry, technology, mass consumption.

Introduction

Consumption is not just about buying extravagant goods or liberating wants and/or needs, but it is also a system of the manipulation of signs, a system of communication, such as language, and an exchange system or ideological values system (Baudrillard, 1998). In other words, “consumption is not, contrary to conventional wisdom, something that individuals do and through which they find enjoyment, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Rather, consumption is a structure (or Durkheimian social fact) that is external to and coercive over individuals” (Baudrillard, 1998, p.15). Moreover, according to Veblen (1899) consumption is a sort of performance that entails the priority of prestige. In sociological terms, consumption is not merely the act of using goods but rather encompasses a multitude of activities that occur before, during, and after the usage of an item.

Mass consumption entails the general buying behavior of individuals towards items and services offered in the marketplace. This trend of purchasing is expanding as an increasing number of products and services become standardized and accessible to all (Sassatelli, 2007; Hochschild, 2011; Boström, 2020). In this context, it may be suggested that the culture industry and mass consumption are deeply intertwined because the culture industry fuses time-honored concepts with well-known ideas to craft entirely new works. In all areas, products designed for large numbers of people are made mostly according to a plan, which greatly affects how they are used (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975). Thus, this theoretical study aims to explore the concepts of culture industry and mass consumption in the context of technological empowerment while contributing new insights to the existing literature.

The Culture Industry

The concept of culture industry was developed by critical theorists Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895–1973). The core idea of the culture industry involves transforming culture into marketable goods and converting individual emotions and ideas into profitable commodities (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). The culture industry primarily critiques the homogeneity observed in mass media forms such as films, television programs, and mainstream music (Gunster, 2000). In another explanation, the culture industry precisely refers to “products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan.” (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975, p. 12). All the branches have a uniform shape

and can interlock like a puzzle. They form a system with very few gaps. This has become achievable by contemporary technical capabilities or in other words advancements in modern technology (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975). As Shi (2022) claims, individuals in the cultural industry typically assume a weak and non-active position. Even, individuals have become mere cogs in a machine created by the culture industry that encourages incessant consumerism (Akdemir, 2016).

The culture industry, which is a significant component of modern capitalist society, encompasses all aspects of entertainment, like Hollywood films and the ambient music played in elevators. Because the integration of culture and entertainment arises from a growing disregard for cultural values and the transformation of enjoyment into an endeavor that necessitates profound reflection (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Thus, its effect on consumers arises from entertainment. Culture is now simply used to improve industrial performance, and the main target of production is profit. Art products, for example, are prepared for mass consumption and profit without any concern for aesthetics. As also stated by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), media in the culture industry creates standardized experiences for anyone who consumes it. The diversity of content in mass media is not genuine. Although the slight variations among different text types give them an impression of uniqueness, this notion is misleading. It primes individuals to make use of products derived from the culture industry. Long hours of hard work can exhaust individuals, making it difficult for them to fully appreciate their leisure time. Consequently, they find joy in whatever forms of entertainment the culture industry provides.

Advertising as an Elixir of the Culture Industry

Advertising not only drives people to crave certain items but also affects how individuals view themselves as objects of consumption (Akdemir, 2016). In this regard, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) state that advertising might be seen as an elixir of the culture industry. Because in this system, every product is able to benefit from advertising. The power of the system is hidden behind advertisements. Anything without advertising is seen as worthless in terms of money (Akdemir, 2016). Even in wartime when products are unobtainable, they are still advertised just to keep the industrial power. For example, in 1943, Parker's Pen Company launched an advertisement to inform the public that their pens remained available for purchase, although supplies were reduced due to metal shortages (WCSU Archives, 1943).

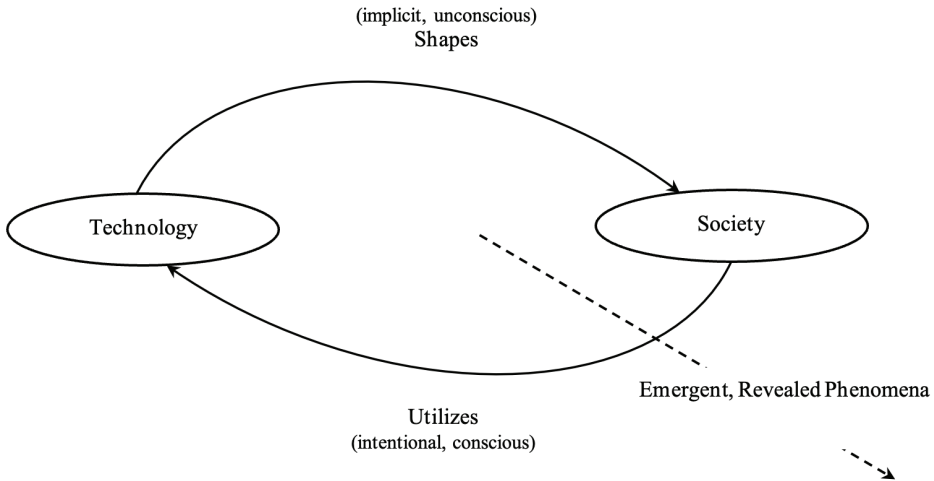
The culture industry operates similarly to an assembly line, systematically and methodically creating its products much like a manufacturing facility. This phenomenon occurs not only in studios but also when producing low-cost biographies, fictional documentary novels, and mainstream music. This method proves to be quite efficient for advertising by allowing significant sections to be isolated and adjusted. They become disconnected from any real meaning and can be used for purposes outside of the original work (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Marcuse (2007), in the “One-Dimensional Man,” supports that these kinds of products create a new way of life, and this has been embraced by a number of people who are from different classes of society. As a result, advertisement values create new and different lifestyles. In other words, “most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisement, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs” (Marcuse, 2007, p.7). Kline and Leiss (1978) state that advertisers engage in activities beyond merely presenting products for sale. They also foster a sense of identity that is linked to the significance of those products. Consequently, it is accurate to assert that a central tenet of the culture industry, which highlights the impact of advertising, has been substantiated.

The Culture Industry and Technological Empowerment

Technology is clearly important in how some people view modern society in a negative way. Feenberg (2005) thinks that the Frankfurt School’s idea about this is “*dystopian*,” meaning it sees a very dark or scary future. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) share Heidegger’s (2013) perspective that technology contributes to the detrimental elements of a society that prioritizes numerical data and control mechanisms. They contend that an emphasis on control may diminish the deeper significance of life despite the fact that meaning is crucial to the human experience (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Mesch (2009) says that technology is not only an integral component of society but is also created by individuals within it. The example by Berthon et al. (2005) provided below clarifies the links between technology and society. This figure indicates that technology and society have a reciprocal impact on one another. According to this viewpoint, technology affects the ways in which individuals make their purchases. Consumers not only consume but also produce.

Figure 1

Technology and Society (Berthon et al., 2005, p. 111)



The term “*posthuman consumption*” signifies the interaction of desires and goods within settings profoundly impacted by technological advancements and media influences (Giesler, 2004). Thus, today’s marketers utilize digital platforms to impact the buying decisions of consumers (Mesch, 2009). Technology, combined with current media, is allowing music and media companies to find novel methods for making money (Aydin, 2020). The rationale behind the technology is the rationale of control itself. What remains unmentioned is that the increasing power of technology in our lives is largely driven by those who possess the greatest wealth and influence in society. Today, technical rationality signifies the use of technological means and decision-making processes to exert control and influence over people (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002).

Fuchs (2014) suggests that the tools of social media are seen as a statement of alternating time regimes which contemporary society has been exposed to, in particular, in relation to leisure and labor time (play labor), and time of production and consumption “*prosumption*”. Therefore, the time spent on social media is not only consumption or leisure time but also productive time (Fuchs, 2014). The culture industry theory supports this notion. As stated by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), individuals not only create items but also purchase and utilize them. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) try to demonstrate their basic belief that modern society has become extremely mechanical, and the influence of technology over this cannot be

denied. For instance, technology has created a new generation. “*The Net-generation*” (Mesch, 2009). Net-generation means that people use technology, and at the same time, these people are shaped by technology into a different structure of the community, and this is the result of the technology of the culture industry. “*NetSlaves*” also support the criticism of Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) about the culture industry: “The NetSlaves are not simply a typical form of labor on the Internet; they also embody a complex relation to labor that is widespread in late capitalist societies” (Terranova, 2000).

The Culture Industry and Mass Consumption

According to Marcuse (2007) the main target of the culture industry is to dominate society in order to exploit effectively mental and natural resources. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) argue that the advanced industrial society employs the culture industry to manipulate and dominate people in innovative ways. People are not just using their free time. They are also finding ways to make more free time to enjoy products from the culture industry. In the meantime, companies and creators in the cultural field are focused on devising new strategies to capture the interest of a broader range of people. For producers and business owners, free time means having extra resources or money that they can use to improve or increase their production. In contrast, free time for most people is about having fun and enjoying products from the culture industry (Laskar, 2021).

Gilbert (2013) states that;

“[T]his trend spilled out of the cultural realm and into economics. What began as the modernist revolution in aesthetics became a revolution in lifestyle, as advertisers and manufacturers took up the trend toward self-fulfillment now ubiquitous in art and transformed it into a business model, which celebrated hedonistic mass consumption and individual possession.”

Society today is profoundly affected by technological advancements derived from the culture industry. Users feel a greater sense of autonomy when they navigate the digital world, including the Internet. Yet, technology embedded in popular culture often restricts individuals in society, transforming them into mere cogs within a system to enable greater creation and purchasing of goods. The rise of digital technology has created an era in which information holds great significance and can be traded like any other commodity. People engage with them even when they recognize that they are designed to market something. Individuals are anticipat-

ed to behave authentically according to a specific standard and select the kind of mass-produced product that suits their preferences. Research organizations show charts that look like political ads, dividing people into groups based on how much money they make. They use colors like red, green, and blue to represent different income levels (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Nowadays, the culture industry features social media, cinema, and music, contributing to the development of numerous additional markets for consumer goods. This also helps businesses to grow. Our daily lives are filled with pictures, products, and experiences promoted by the culture industry (Laskar, 2021).

Conclusion

This article primarily focused on the culture industry at the level of technological empowerment that serves to reproduce mass consumption. Boström (2020) states that social life is permeated by mass and excess consumption. Therefore, it is predicted that understanding these mechanisms may help reduce mass/excess consumption. Digital technology is evolving at a rapid pace. Staying current with the rapidly changing conditions poses a major difficulty. To remain competitive, organizations must quickly adjust to the ever-changing nature of digital technology (Rezigue, 2023). This scenario prompts individuals to purchase numerous items, resulting in mass consumption. Another example is social media platforms that find users (consumers) at an unpredictable pace with digitalization. These platforms have not been considered a huge industry in the time of Adorno and Horkheimer. However, today, social media platforms have a number of effects on society, so much so that it has led to the development of a new consumer culture. This appears to provide evidence for the theory of the culture industry. Because it supports Adorno and Horkheimer's argument that the influences of the culture industry over consumers are created by entertainment. Society is encouraged to produce more and consume more by means of entertainment. Thus, people are becoming cogs in the machine to an ever greater extent, even though they think they are free (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Research conducted in the future might enhance our understanding of the ways in which ideas from the culture industry will adapt as technologies by focusing on more specific areas such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and virtual reality continue to advance.

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