



# The New Media Age: Alienation and Dissolution of Youth Values by Online Social Media Influencer Culture

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**Abstract.** The phenomenon of cultural alienation of online social media influencers has become prevalent with the development of new media. The main research objective of this paper is to explore the impact of cultural alienation of online social media influencers on the values of adolescent groups afterwards. The perspective is analysed in the context of new media and based on alienation theory. The study focuses on qualitative research methods, specifically using the online documentation method and content analysis to analyse the data. After analysing the data, it was learned that there are two stages of alienation. The first stage is the alienation of the culture of online social media influencers themselves, i.e. the stage of being held hostage by the logic of capital. The second stage is the alienation of adolescent values, i.e. the stage of alienation caused by the influence of capital-influencers of online social media. In order to restore the human logic to its place and enable Chinese youth to return to the mainstream culture, the author also proposes countermeasures to eliminate the alienation phenomenon.

**Keywords:** alienation theory · Online social influencer culture · Youth Values · human logic · capital logic

## 1 Introduction

With the rapid development of the new media era, the culture of online social media influencers has gradually penetrated into various industries, and at the same time enriched people's spiritual world. However, along with the enrichment of the spiritual world, many features of cultural alienation have emerged, such as non-mainstreaming and pan-entertainment. This has had a significant impact on young people in their formative years, both positively and negatively. Why does it have such an impact on young people? The reason is simple: the rapid development of social media has led to early exposure to social media, and the culture of online social media influencers has come into close mental contact with young people through social media. The extent of its influence no longer falls into the realm of non-mainstream cultural significance, but has begun to erode the values of mainstream culture and has had a significant impact on people's cultural confidence. There are various theoretical perspectives on the interpretation of the phenomenon of online social media influencers, such as coating theory, geriatric

communication theory, post-metaphorical culture theory and carnival theory, but few scholars have started to study it from the perspective of alienation theory, so this paper sets out to investigate this perspective. Data were collected and analysed through a qualitative web-based literature research method and content analysis.

## 2 Literature Review of Alienation Theory

Hegel first introduced the concept of alienation into philosophy in his 19th century book *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and argued that alienation could lead to the continuous progress of the human mind [1]. However, Feuerbach's view was quite different from Hegel's, who believed that alienation would lead to the loss of man's original pure nature, and that it could not be repaired. Marx, on the other hand, absorbed their ideas and put forward the idea of the alienation of labour in his *Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics* of 1844. It can be simply understood that alienation theory Marx's motivation and starting point for creating the doctrine of surplus value was a sharp weapon in Marx's critique of capitalism and argument for communism [2]. Later, in *Capital*, Marx introduced the concept of commodity fetishism, i.e. that the relationship between people had changed from that between people to that between people and things, and that this had given rise to various negative social phenomena in society. In general, Marx's theory of alienation is primarily a theory of the alienation of production created by labour. But in Lukács' case, alienation theory is further sublimated into a theory of objectification, i.e. the alienation of commodities. Lukács argues that people are controlled, dominated and suppressed by the alienated products of labour. The object becomes the master of the human being, as reflected in the digitisation, atomisation, averaging and objectification of the human being [3]. And this phenomenon is further deepened. Marcuse's, on the other hand, incorporates a new perspective on the theory of alienation, namely from the perspective of consumption, and proposes a theory of consumer alienation. Both the commodity alienation theory and the consumption alienation theory are a critique of Marx's view of the theory of materialised alienation. This debate continued until it allowed Baudrillard to integrate the theory of alienation into the field of semiotics by taking a semiotic perspective and proposing the concept of semiotic alienation theory, which led to the theory of alienation stepping into the brand of postmodernism. The concept of alienation theory can be understood by combining the various views mentioned above, namely the mainstream and non-mainstream positions. The fact that people carry out activities in the mainstream culture and derive non-mainstream culture from it, and that this non-mainstream culture gradually expands and slowly becomes another mainstream culture with the intention of dominating the original mainstream culture, is the basic concept of alienation theory [4]. From the above, it can be seen that alienation theory has undergone a dynamic evolutionary process of production alienation theory - commodity alienation theory - consumption alienation theory - symbolic alienation theory.

### **3 Processes and Types of Cultural Alienation of Online Social Media Influencers**

The alienation process of online social media influencer culture on youth values includes twofold alienation, firstly, the alienation of online social media influencer culture itself. The second is the alienation of young people's values by the culture of online social media influencers [5]. In a broader sense, online social media influencer culture includes online social media influencer groups, online social media influencer works, online social media influencer individuals, online social media influencer fan groups, online social media influencer attractions, online social media influencer objects, online social media influencer food, etc. that are radiated by their cultural scope and form a culture. This paper focuses on the online social media influencer community and the cultural perspective it has formed, and focuses from the online social media influencer community to the online social media influencer culture as a whole.

#### **3.1 The Process of Cultural Alienation of Online Social Media Influencers Held Hostage by Capital**

The process of alienation is mainly reflected in the three processes of passively approaching capital, actively approaching capital and being controlled by capital. Firstly, the passive proximity to capital is caused by the general social environment. At the same time, online social media influencers need the support of capital to operate and develop, so there is not much exclusivity. Secondly, after gaining fame and fortune with the help of capital, online social media influencers will start to approach capital on their own initiative. They target teenagers, focus on their preferences and habits, and use big data technology to target their messages, ultimately reaping the benefits of both fame and fortune. This process of online social media influencers is willingly taken in by capital [6]. Finally, it is reduced to capital manipulation. Because online social media influencers have become overly dependent on the dividends brought by capital at this stage, they are unable to leave capital and can only be manipulated by it. Once the online social media influencers are held hostage by capital, they will gradually fall into the pawn of capital. Among them, the MCN (Multi-Channel Network) model is the most representative. When the human logic is kidnapped by the logic of capital, a new alienated relationship is created, and this relationship is established, and this new alienated relationship is the alienation of the culture of online social media influencers. In this alienated relationship, an important measure of the influence and communication effectiveness of online social media influencers is more than 100,000 followers, because only those who have more than 100,000 followers can be called online social media influencers. In this sense, the products produced by online social media influencers are cultural products, and these cultural products are able to attract traffic. These cultural products attract traffic, which in turn attracts capital, and thus the alienation process of online social media influencer culture is born: online social media influencers originally conveyed personal values, but with the support of capital, they gradually became alienated and turned into the logic of online social media influencer-capitalisation, where online social media influencers can only succumb to capital for the sake of traffic and produce more profitable cultural

products. The social media influencers have to yield to capital in order to produce more profitable cultural products.

### **3.2 Types of Negative Alienation of Online Social Media Influencer Culture**

Mainstream media such as CCTV, People's Daily and Guangming Daily have all begun to pay great attention to the cultural landscape of online social media influencer culture. These mainstream media have begun to pay attention to the risks behind the prosperity of online social media influencer culture. This is because the alienation of online social media influencer culture involves not only the alienation of production, but also the alienation of commodities, consumption, symbols and other aspects, and it also takes the form of vulgarisation.

#### **Mourning Culture**

"Bereavement culture is a subculture popular among teenagers, characterised by the expression of negative emotions. It represents a self-deprecating way for young people to escape from the real world. The "funeral culture" has now taken the form of emoji packs, pop music, text quotes and merchandise, creating an impact and deconstruction of positive mainstream culture. On the one hand, the culture of mourning reflects young people's sense of powerlessness in relation to social reality. It also fits the description of the Birmingham subculture of resisters. On the other hand, the dissolution of online social media influencer culture into a culture of mourning can seriously dissipate people's motivation to pursue their dreams and struggle on, increasing their pursuit of a positive mindset. The use of negative terms such as waste by young people to denote their current state of generation is also an indirect expression of the irony put forward by a subject who sees the world clearly. Some of the values promoted by the culture of mourning are also sought after by many young people, which can also strengthen the youth group's identification with the new symbols. This is also a reflection of one of the manifestations of symbolic alienation. To a certain extent, therefore, the culture of mourning has a negative impact on the growth and value formation of young people.

#### **Culture of Ugliness**

Ugly culture is an aberrant form of aesthetic culture that is characterised by catering to the ugliness of its audience, even to the extent of making ugliness the standard of beauty. In this culture, refined culture is marginalised and classic culture is ignored, while vulgar culture is promoted. This ugly culture has moved away from the essence of cultural ritual and has become an ugly cultural mutant. Although some people believe that the presence of ugliness can express the dark side of the personality, some ugly cultures show a particular penchant for the pathological pursuit of a negative life experience and the morbid pursuit of ugliness. The purpose of this ugliness is no longer to deny and criticise irrational behaviour, but to make the ugly unusually prominent, even overriding beauty [7]. However, since the pursuit of beauty is the nature and desire of all people, it would be better to combine ugliness with beauty. Therefore, online social media influencers do not have a heartfelt preference for ugly culture [8]. But they still show a fervent enthusiasm for its production, such as the Big Wolf Dog couple's account on DOUYIN, who often pretend to be ugly to attract traffic. This is because ugly culture

has become a product, a means by which money can be made. Capital and online social media influencers initially did not accept the inclusion of ugly culture, but when they found that spreading ugliness was more likely to attract traffic, spreading evil was more stimulating to the masses, and spreading morbidity was more likely to attract attention, capital demanded that online social media influencers produce more ugly culture for profit. This alienation has led to the existence of “ugly culture”, which has also become a force that governs itself. In addition to the above, I believe that ‘ugly culture’ can have a number of negative effects on society and individuals alike. Firstly, it may lead to a reduction in the pursuit and appreciation of beautiful things, which in turn may lead to an impoverished and shallow culture. Secondly, it may lead to a distortion and dysfunction of individual aesthetics, and may even lead to psychological problems such as low self-esteem, anxiety and misanthropy. In addition, the fervent pursuit of “ugly culture” may also lead people to ignore moral and ethical boundaries, and may even bring about some social risks and problems.

## **4 Processes and Types of Alienation of Adolescent Values**

The alienation of adolescent values is the second stage in the spread of the alienation of online social media influencer culture, as it is only after this step that the values of adolescents can finally change. In the current social environment, online social media influencer culture is widely spread through various media, and its values have permeated the lives of young people. Therefore, we need to carefully study the impact of this cultural phenomenon in order to better guide the growth and development of young people.

### **4.1 The Process of Alienation of Adolescent Values**

In delving into the issue of the alienation of youth values by online social media influencer culture, it is easy to see that in order to create 100,000+ user accounts, online social media influencers need to rely on the support of capital. But in reality, it is the fans who are the key force in creating online social media influencers, and capital [9]. Thus, from the perspective of alienation theory, the second logic of alienation of online social media influencer culture lies in the fact that fans as subjects create the object of online social media influencers, but in turn are controlled and dominated by online social media influencers who are intervened by capital. Thus, the logic of double alienation has been revealed in its entirety. Simply put, fans produce online social media influencers, online social media influencers attract capital, and capital in turn controls online social media influencers to attract fans and generate more benefits.

### **4.2 Types of Alienation of Adolescent Values**

The alienation of the culture of online social media influencers also leads directly or indirectly to the alienation of adolescents’ values, which is mainly reflected in the following three aspects.

#### **Negative View of Knowledge**

Because of the influence of online social media influencers, many believe that they can

earn hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars a month and gain fame just by broadcasting the following live on the internet and scratching their heads and posing. Some middle or high school students have even dropped out of school to become online social media influencers [10]. The same can be said of university students in higher education, who once aimed to become scientists, teachers, doctors and other respected and contributing professionals. Nowadays, some university students even say that they only want to be social media influencers, and that they do not take their major courses seriously, but just pass them. These social phenomena have also led the Half Moon to issue a stern warning to this effect: don't let the wrong view of knowledge start to resurface.

### **Odd Aesthetics**

On the one hand, there is the standard aesthetic of snake faces, cone faces and bony bodies, all of which are typical of oddball aesthetics. On the other hand, there is the low quality and rudeness of speech and behaviour, and the fact that young people feel proud of this as a display of their individuality. In the process of alienation, it has gradually become fashionable to look at ugliness, and it has become popular to spoof a certain image or culture, which not only challenges the traditional concept of aesthetics, but also challenges people's aesthetic boundaries.

## **5 Eliminating Ways of Cultural Alienation**

An important aspect of the Marxist system of thought is the critique of capital and its logic. This critique encompasses the value that labour and the working man should be at the centre. Marx saw this critique as an important path for exploring the transcendence of the logic of capital. To overcome this alienation, therefore, it is necessary to make full use of the positive aspects of capital while limiting its negative aspects.

### **5.1 The Favourable Side of Choosing Capital**

What we should see is that online social media influencers are in fact only a part of China's cultural industry. It is impossible to completely exclude capital from the Chinese landscape, so effective regulation is all that is needed to use capital to develop the cultural industry while also domesticating it. Simply put, it is only necessary to provide favourable conditions and supportive policies for private capital through institutional arrangements to increase the scope for capital to finance the cultural and entertainment industry, which will further revitalise the stock of capital and at the same time enable the capacity of capital to be increased. At the same time, the government will also be able to develop the awareness and competence to serve capital well and prosper online cultural services.

### **5.2 Breaking the Alienating Relationship of Capital Controlling the Culture of Online Social Media Influencers**

Capital is profit-seeking, while online social media influencers are profit-seeking and youth are curtain-raising. As long as the relationship between the three is clearly understood, corresponding strategies can be found to break the manipulation of online social

media influencers by capital. In his speech at the symposium on the work of literature and art on 15 October 2014, Xi Jinping stressed that literature and art should not be slaves to the market. In fact, the relationship between capital and online social media influencers does not necessarily have to go down the path of alienation in order to be profitable. This is why the relevant government departments will deal with tainted online social media influencers and not allow them to resurface on the internet to bring down the values of young people. This also has a direct grip on the soft underbelly of capital, which deters it from acting rashly, and allows online social media influencers to put more thought into mainstream positive energy.

### 5.3 Returning the Human Logic to Its Place

Only by eliminating the control of capital logic and restoring the cultural dominance of human logic can the culture of online social media influencers return to its original intent and stop pursuing profit, traffic and conversation. Instead, it will concentrate on creating core and positive content, content that can reach people's hearts and minds and contribute to social development. Therefore, only by pursuing human-centred logic can we achieve better human development.

## 6 Conclusion

The alienation of the culture of online social media influencers, if left unattended, will certainly lead to the poisoning of the values of the youth population. The impact of alienation therefore needs to be taken into account. Firstly, it is important to understand the process and types of cultural alienation of online social media influencers. Secondly, it is important to understand the processes and types of alienation of adolescent values. Finally, it is important to propose the best ways to eliminate alienation so that it does not get out of the control of the dominant culture.

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