



# The Generative Logic and Resolution Pathways of Consumption Alienation in the Era of Digital Capitalism: A Production-Oriented Perspective

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**Abstract.** In the era of digital capitalism, consumption activities increasingly deviate from people's genuine needs, while the alienation of consumption continues to expand and manifest in a series of new forms and characteristics. Critique of consumption alienation in the era of digital capitalism must transcend superficial appearances and delve into the underlying logic of production to discern the deep-seated drivers of alienation and grasp the true direction of struggle. The root of consumption alienation under digital capitalism lies in the process of digital labor—as productive consumption—and platform capital accumulation. This paper approaches the subject from a production perspective, exploring the theoretical origins, contemporary manifestations, and generative mechanisms of consumption alienation in the era of digital capitalism. The research aims to critically examine and reflect upon the issue of consumption alienation in this era, while exploring potential pathways to transform digital consumption from an alienated, manipulated tool for capital appreciation into a subject-oriented activity that fulfills genuine, rational human needs and promotes free, comprehensive human development.

**Keywords:** digital capitalism, alienation of consumption, symbolic consumption

## 1 Introduction

Digital capitalism draws society deeper into market logic, transforming consumption—originally intended to satisfy genuine needs—into a tool for expanded reproduction. Consumers become increasingly entangled in the process of capital appreciation, deepening the alienation of consumption. Currently, academic discourse on the alienation of consumption in the digital capitalist era has entered a phase of deepening and refinement. Researchers have precisely identified the operational mechanisms of technology-capital collusion, deeply analyzing the distortion of consumption motivations and the erosion of consumer agency by psychological discipline mechanisms such as algorithmic recommendations and symbolic value. However, existing analyses have primarily focused on circulation and consumption stages, relatively neglecting their fundamental connection to the production sphere. Throughout the development of

digital capitalism, technological innovation has continuously liberated social productive forces, bringing the abundance of goods and services to unprecedented historical levels. Against this backdrop, returning to the theoretical framework of Marxist political economy to critically examine the generative logic of consumption alienation in the era of digital capitalism from the perspective of the production sphere, and exploring possible pathways to overcome consumption alienation, has become a timely task of significant theoretical value and practical relevance.

## 2 Theoretical Origins and Contemporary Manifestations of Consumption Alienation

Under capitalism, consumption is deeply integrated into the overall process of capital's value accumulation. The general formula of capital G-W-G' reveals that the fundamental purpose of capital movement is to achieve value appreciation. This final realization of surplus value depends on commodity capital successfully completing the "dangerous leap" of gaining societal recognition through consumption. "Each strives to create an alien, mastering force over others from which to derive satisfaction of his own selfish needs" <sup>[1]</sup>. To maximize profits, capital continuously expands production while suppressing workers' wages. However, human consumption capacity is constrained by wage levels, preventing full absorption of these commodities. Consequently, capital must stimulate consumption by manufacturing demand to sustain the smooth flow of value appreciation. As Zhao Lei note: "The hidden source of the subject's consumption desires lies in the capitalist economic system itself, which perpetually expands production, stimulates consumption, and disciplines desire." <sup>[2]</sup>

Marx observed: "Production is directly consumption, consumption is directly production." <sup>[3]</sup> The production process simultaneously constitutes consumption of both labor power and means of production. Through the consumption of products, workers achieve the reproduction of their labor power. This latter process is also termed productive consumption, wherein the act of consumption itself is integrated into the creation and reproduction of value. Here, consumption not only guides product production but also constitutes the intrinsic mechanism of value production. The generation of surplus value directly depends on the consumption of the labor commodity, meaning consumption simultaneously constrains the realization of capital accumulation and value creation.

As capital accumulation deepens, consumption gradually transforms from "satisfying genuine human needs" into a stage for capital appreciation. Sun Weiping observes: "The alienation of consumption refers to its transformation into the opposite of humanity—where consumption activities become alien or antagonistic forces. Rather than being controlled by humans, they instead dominate and enslave people according to the nature of commodities." <sup>[4]</sup> Marx summarized labor alienation as a progressive process involving "alienation from one's own products of labor, one's own life activity, and one's own species essence" and "alienation from fellow humans." <sup>[5]</sup> Under capitalism, workers' wages are compressed to the bare minimum required for labor power

reproduction. The key means to achieve this goal is to lower the value of the means of subsistence consumed by workers.

Entering the digital age, with the rapid development and widespread application of algorithmic technology and intelligent systems, consumption alienation has proliferated under the catalysis of capital and technology, manifesting new characteristics. First, the erosion of consumer autonomy through data manipulation. Trapped within “information silos” by platform data and algorithms, individuals experience a gradual erosion of autonomy. Platforms collect user data—including browsing habits, search queries, and dwell times—to construct “digital avatars” that understand users better than they understand themselves. Second, interface design simplifies consumption to the extreme, inducing irrational spending. Features like one-click ordering, installment payments, and “flash sales” during livestream shopping drastically shorten the path from desire to fulfillment. This instant gratification stimulates dopamine release, creating conditioned reflexes and addictive consumption patterns.

### **3 The Mechanisms Generating Consumption Alienation in the Era of Digital Capitalism**

#### **3.1 The Alienation of Consumption Needs: From Authentic to Artificial Demands**

The alienation of consumption demand refers to the replacement of genuine human needs for survival and development with fabricated, manipulated false needs that serve the logic of capital accumulation. Genuine needs encompass the totality of what humans objectively require for survival, development, and the realization of their essential capacities. Marx long ago discerned this alienation, noting that under private property, capital exerts control by creating “new needs” for others. The strategic orientation of digital capitalist production is shifting from manufacturing goods that satisfy human needs to manufacturing the very demand that accelerates capital appreciation. First, the mode of production has shifted from responding to demand to predicting and manufacturing demand. Digital capitalism leverages data collection and algorithmic analysis to create user profiles and forecast behavior. Second, the ownership of goods has undergone a transformation through the proliferation of the subscription economy, shifting consumers from owners to renters and thereby locking in sustained consumption demand. Third, the gamification of consumption and the alienation of motivation. Sebastian Deterding and others provided the classic definition of gamification: “‘Gamification’ is the use of game design elements in non-game contexts.” [6] Platform capital employs gamified elements like points, badges, and rankings to transform consumption into a performance-driven competition for rewards. As Xia Ying et al. note, “It is evident that gamification was never intended to satisfy participants’ spiritual needs from the outset, but merely to alter their behavior according to predetermined commercial objectives—using isolated game elements to make consumers consume more and workers labor more” [7]. The peculiarity of consumption

alienation in the era of digital capitalism lies in its emergence within highly efficient, intelligent production systems.

### **3.2 The Alienation of Consumption Purpose: From Utility to Symbol**

The original purpose of consumption was to satisfy genuine human needs through goods—their use value. An item becomes a consumer object due to its inherent functional attributes. Under digital capitalism, however, the purpose of consumption has gradually expanded beyond pursuing an item's functionality to chasing the socio-cultural meanings it carries. First, the core of capital appreciation has shifted from production to circulation, compelling consumption to serve accelerated capital turnover. Under traditional models, profits primarily stemmed from enhanced production efficiency and cost control. However, amid widespread overproduction and product homogenization, realizing the value of goods has become significantly more challenging. Second, platform algorithms, as a new market access mechanism, redefine the criteria for product success, elevating symbolic visibility above functional utility. By continuously collecting and analyzing supply-demand data, these algorithms establish novel rules governing product visibility and circulation. Their consumption behavior increasingly becomes a confirmation and execution of algorithmic recommendations. Thus, consumption no longer targets the functionality of specific goods but degenerates into an endless pursuit of fluid symbols. This alienation of consumption's purpose exposes the dichotomy between production and life under digital capitalism. When production prioritizes creating easily disseminated, desire-triggering symbolic labels over durable physical goods, innovation is misdirected. Resources flow into symbolic packaging rather than quality enhancement, ultimately undermining the foundations of a healthy real economy. While symbolic consumption dramatically accelerates capital turnover, it comes at the cost of sacrificing product durability, consumer rationality, and societal cultural depth.

### **3.3 The Alienation of the Consumer Subject: Integration of Production and Consumption**

In the production phase of digital capitalism, the alienation of consumers is most strikingly manifested in the phenomenon of "prosumerization." Consumers are thus constructed into new productive roles—unpaid, implicit laborers within the capital accumulation process—deepening their alienation within production relations. First, users' daily platform activities—browsing histories, click paths, social interactions—continuously generate massive data streams. These data are not meaningless consumption traces but are captured in real-time by platforms and fed into reproduction processes. Second, through carefully designed interactive mechanisms, platforms transform content creators' consumption and leisure activities into productive labor. The traditionally distinct spheres of consumption and production converge within the digital individual, turning consumers into "prosumers" whose agency is eroded through the collusion of technology and capital. This integration of production and consumption not only alters labor forms but also induces profound alienation in subjects'

self-perception and daily lives. It blurs traditional boundaries between work and leisure, production and consumption. Platforms leverage participation-driven engagement, community belonging, and instant feedback mechanisms to make users willingly invest in digital labor.

## **4 Pathways to Resolving Consumption Alienation in the Era of Digital Capitalism**

### **4.1 Public Ownership Reform of Digital Means of Production**

In the era of digital capitalism, new forms of production resources—such as big data, algorithms, and computing power—have become core drivers of economic development. Yet within the framework of capitalist private ownership, these digital production resources are monopolized by a handful of platform capitalists, serving as tools for their uncompensated appropriation, deep exploitation, and control over consumers. Sun Weiping's research reveals that digital enterprises, through coercive collection and appropriation, "effectively exploit their technological advantages and platform resources to violate consumer privacy, depriving consumers of their right to freely enjoy digital products, technologies, and even digital civilization" [8]. Advancing the transformation toward public ownership of digital means of production requires, first, establishing a people-centered data property rights system that strengthens the state's leading role in data governance. Through school education, vocational training, and social education, enhance the public's data processing capabilities and algorithmic understanding, equipping people with the basic skills to participate in the management and use of digital means of production. Cheng Enfu et al. point out: "We must uphold and improve the basic socialist economic system, construct a fair and reasonable distribution system for the digital era, break the private monopoly and forced appropriation of consumer data by digital platforms, leverage the leading role of state-owned enterprises, enable China's public data resources to participate in distribution, and guide data capital to genuinely serve the high-quality development of the real economy under socialism with Chinese characteristics." [9] Ultimately, platform objectives, algorithm design, and data usage logic will undergo fundamental shifts.

### **4.2 The Construction of Subjectivity in New Consumption Patterns**

Under the implicit regulation of data capital over consumption, consumer behavior increasingly exhibits characteristics of non-autonomy. Cheng Enfu et al. note: "Digital platforms collect user data—including browsing histories, purchase records, search habits, and interactive behaviors—to precisely pinpoint user interests and consumption tendencies, thereby establishing data hegemony in the consumer sphere." [10] This manipulation often leads consumers to unconsciously submit to capital's logic, engaging in consumption behaviors that "voluntarily unfold into extravagant, wasteful digital consumption activities aligned with capital's logic of accumulation, while drifting away from their own genuine consumption needs." [11]. Consumers should

proactively understand the operational mechanisms and capital logic behind digital platforms, recognizing how algorithmic recommendations and emotional marketing subtly shape individual desires and behavioral preferences. On the other hand, we advocate for a return to rationality in practice. Based on a clear understanding of their genuine needs, consumers must strive to establish consumption principles centered on use value and quality of life, guarding against the masking and substitution of real needs by the symbolic value of commodities. In the digital consumption environment, the symbolic meaning carried by goods often obscures their actual functionality, causing consumption behavior to deviate from the essence of fulfilling genuine needs. The reconstruction of consumer agency holds profound significance not only for individual liberation but also for substantial social value.

### 4.3 Exploring New Platform Production-Consumption Models

Firstly, establish a socialized algorithm service platform to strengthen genuine demand orientation and curb consumption alienation. As the core production tool of digital platforms, algorithms' design logic directly shapes the nature of consumer behavior. Specifically, platforms can disclose the principles and parameters of key recommendation mechanisms through open-source algorithm codes and transparency reports, enhancing the knowability and trustworthiness of algorithmic operations. Algorithm optimization should incorporate diverse value metrics—such as user satisfaction, product durability, and socio-ecological benefits—to replace the entrenched logic prioritizing user dwell time. This transforms algorithms from desire-stimulating tools into rational decision-making assistants. Secondly, promote the shared model and public ownership transformation of digital platforms, establishing institutional foundations resistant to alienation at the ownership level. In service sectors prone to inducing passive consumption—such as e-commerce, social media, and search engines—actively advance platform cooperativism pathways and explore establishing new public-owned platform organizations. As new infrastructure for the digital society, public platforms could foster consumer autonomy, offering an alternative solution to combat consumption alienation at its root. In advancing this approach, it is essential to fully recognize the differences between the digital economy and the industrial economy in terms of production organization, behavioral logic, and value creation.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper analyzes the generative logic and deconstruction pathways of consumption alienation in the era of digital capitalism from a production perspective. This alienation takes root in novel production mechanisms involving digital labor, data production, and platform capital accumulation. It manifests as: - Consumer demand becoming distorted from genuine needs into artificially created false demands by capital; - The purpose of consumption shifting from the pursuit of use value to the worship of symbolic value; - The objects of consumption expanding from material goods to commodified time; - And consumers themselves becoming implicit digital laborers within integrated pro-

duction-consumption structures. These forms of alienation collectively cause consumption to deviate from its essential purpose of fulfilling genuine human needs and promoting free, comprehensive human development, instead serving the logic of capital appreciation. To resolve this alienation, this paper proposes advancing public ownership reforms of digital means of production to break data monopolies, constructing subjectivity within new consumption models to enhance consumer rational autonomy, and exploring new platform production-consumption models to reconstruct algorithmic and service orientations.

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