

# Materialization Criticism of Social Media Interpersonal Interaction from The Perspective of Marx's Interaction Theory

Zhen Zhang

Guangzhou Modern Information Engineering College, Guangzhou, China

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**Abstract:** Grounded in Marx's theory of communication, this study examines the reification of social interactions in social media. The findings reveal three manifestations: instrumentalized relational dynamics, quantified value systems, and alienated subjectivity, with root causes tracing back to three key factors: the permeation of capital logic, the expansion of technological rationality, and the path dependence of human agency. Building on the principle that "humanity is the sum of social relations," the paper proposes a de-reification approach through reshaping communicative value orientations, establishing rational technological frameworks, and cultivating autonomous subject consciousness, offering actionable strategies for fostering a healthier social ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Marx's communication theory; social media; interpersonal interaction; reification; communication alienation.

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## 1. Introduction

Driven by digital technology, social media has become a crucial arena for interpersonal interaction. While its ability to transcend time and space expands communication boundaries, it also fosters reification phenomena that erode the authentic nature of social engagement. Marx's theory of communication reveals the essence of social relations, emphasizing that interaction constitutes humanity's fundamental activity. The critique of "reification" provides a scientific lens for analyzing this issue. Current academic research predominantly focuses on the forms and effects of social media interactions, lacking systematic critique of reification. Therefore, this paper analyzes manifestations, causes, and paths to de-reification based on this theoretical framework, offering both theoretical depth and practical significance.

## 2. The Core Connotation of Marx's Communication Theory and The Essential Connection with Social Media Interpersonal Interaction

### 2.1. The core connotation of Marx's communication theory

Marx's theory of communication revolves around human essence and social relations. Firstly, communication constitutes the essential activity of humanity. The "Theses on Feuerbach" states that "humanity is the sum total of all social relations," indicating that communication serves as the foundation for constructing social relationships, through which individuals affirm their essential nature. Secondly, the essence of communication lies in autonomous interaction within a "free association of individuals." In an idealized form, communication should transcend exploitation, aiming to achieve equal understanding among subjects through comprehensive human development. Thirdly, reification represents a significant manifestation of communicative alienation. Within capitalist society, the logic of capital distorts authentic communication, replacing interpersonal

relationships with material-object interactions, thereby depriving people of their subjective agency.

### 2.2. The essential connection between social media interpersonal interaction and Marx's communication theory

Social media interpersonal interactions demonstrate profound alignment with Marx's theory of communication. Fundamentally, both theories center on constructing social relationships, where users expand their networks through actions like liking and commenting, aligning with the notion that "communication builds social relations." Objectively, social media interactions should aim for emotional fulfillment and spiritual exchange, consistent with Marx's principle of "human development as the goal" in communication. However, in reality, the intervention of capital logic and technological rationality reduces communication to mere tools. Marx's theory provides a framework for analyzing this alienation phenomenon, while the practical challenges faced by social media validate its contemporary relevance. Together, these elements form the research foundation.

## 3. Specific Manifestations of Interpersonal Animalization on Social Media

### 3.1. The instrumentalization of interactive relationships

The instrumentalization of interactive relationships epitomizes the materialization of social relations. Human connections have been stripped of their emotional and spiritual essence, reduced to tools for capital accumulation and personal gain. Under the dominance of capital logic, social media platforms transform user interactions into "data commodities" through algorithmic systems and traffic mechanisms, prioritizing advertising revenue and platform value. This process alienates human relationships into mere capital instruments, eroding their emotional significance. Some users even exploit these interactions as profit-making

schemes—boosting visibility through engagement with "traffic influencers" and building "social circles" to secure resources. Human connections are reduced to transactional exchanges, distorting the authentic essence of social interaction.

### **3.2. Interactive value quantification and subject alienation**

In the digital-animalization of social media interactions, the quantification of engagement value and subject alienation intertwine and escalate in tandem. The former manifests as emotional exchanges and spiritual connections being replaced by data metrics like likes, comments, and follower counts. Data becomes the sole criterion for measuring interaction value, with users' self-worth increasingly dependent on these metrics. This leads to deliberate content production catering to algorithmic preferences, fabricated trending topics, and interactions that become "data commodities." User selection of engagement partners also prioritizes numerical metrics over emotional resonance [1]. Such excessive data obsession further causes subject alienation, reducing communicators to passive "interactive tools" and "data producers": algorithms push content based on user habits, trapping users in "information cocoons" that restrict interaction choices and erode agency. Some users, to conform to platform rules and others' expectations, craft false self-images while neglecting genuine needs and emotional expression. Through these interactions, they lose their sense of self and complete control over their behavior, ultimately becoming objects controlled by external forces.

## **4. Analysis of the Causes of Interpersonal Animalization in Social Media**

### **4.1. The penetration of capital logic into the social media field**

The permeation of capital logic constitutes the fundamental cause of interpersonal objectification in social media. Capital, driven by the core objective of profit maximization, transforms the social media space into a "battlefield" for capital accumulation, integrating human interactions into capital growth through various means. Firstly, social media platforms, as capital vehicles, prioritize profitability by attracting users and boosting engagement frequency to increase traffic. They then convert this traffic into capital through advertising and paid services. To achieve this, platforms design quantifiable interaction metrics like likes, comments, and shares, transforming user behaviors into measurable traffic data that turns interpersonal interactions into tools for capital accumulation [2]. Secondly, capital further reinforces the objectification of social interactions by funding industries such as "internet celebrity economy" and "live-streaming commerce." In these sectors, human connections become directly tied to product sales and profit acquisition. The interaction between hosts and audiences shifts from genuine emotional exchange to transactional purposes, with the inherent value of human connections being completely overshadowed. The infiltration of capital logic ultimately reduces social interactions to mere appendages of capital accumulation, making objectification an inevitable outcome.

### **4.2. The excessive expansion of technical rationality**

The excessive expansion of technological rationality has become a key driver behind the dehumanization of social media interactions. Centered on efficiency, quantification, and control, this mindset reduces human connections to mere technical "operations," neglecting the emotional and human dimensions of communication. First, social media platforms prioritize speed over depth by simplifying complex interactions into basic clicks, swipes, and text inputs. While this enhances convenience, it erodes the authenticity and warmth of human connections. Users increasingly substitute meaningful dialogue with "emojis" and "quick replies," resulting in fragmented, superficial exchanges that fail to build genuine emotional bonds. Second, the obsession with quantifiable metrics like "likes" and "followers" distorts social value into numerical statistics. This approach overlooks core elements like emotional resonance and shared identity, distorting the true value of human interaction. Ultimately, technological rationality's unchecked growth has steered social media interactions away from humanistic principles, reducing them to technical artifacts and fostering a culture of objectification.

### **4.3. Path dependence of communication subjects on social media**

The path dependence of social interaction subjects on social media stems from the subjective reasons behind the dehumanization of interpersonal relationships in digital spaces. In modern society, social media has become the primary channel for information acquisition and communication. Some individuals over-rely on social media, losing their capacity and awareness of autonomous interaction, thereby falling into a dehumanized predicament. Firstly, some subjects regard social media as their sole communication platform, neglecting real-world interpersonal interactions. This leads to gradual deterioration of their communication skills, forcing them to adapt to simplified, quantified interaction patterns on digital platforms while struggling to engage in deep emotional exchanges or intellectual exchanges [3]. For instance, some people remain socially active yet withdrawn in real-life interactions, unable to establish genuine relationships. They rely solely on social media interactions to fulfill their communication needs, passively accepting its dehumanized interaction rules and finding it hard to escape its influence. Secondly, some individuals lack critical awareness of social media, blindly following "interactive trends" like chasing high likes and follower counts. They mistake data metrics for self-worth, gradually losing their ability to make independent judgments and becoming slaves to data. The path dependence of interaction subjects reinforces the dehumanized interaction patterns of social media, further intensifying the dehumanization of interpersonal relationships.

## 5. Depersonalization Path of Social Media Interpersonal Interaction Based on Marx's Communication Theory

### 5.1. Reshaping the value orientation of communication

Reinventing the value orientation of social interactions is the core path to decartelization in interpersonal relations on social media. Guided by Marx's theory of human essence, this approach redirects communication focus from utilitarian and profit-driven aspects to emotional and spiritual dimensions, restoring the authentic significance of human connections. First, communicators should adopt a people-first philosophy, prioritizing genuine needs and emotional expressions over transactional benefits or data metrics. Through sincere dialogue, they can build relationships rooted in shared emotions [4]. For instance, instead of merely clicking "like" or "share," users should actively care about others' daily lives and emotional states, returning interactions to their essence of emotional connection. Second, social media platforms must fulfill their social responsibilities by redesigning algorithmic frameworks. They should reduce excessive focus on data metrics while enhancing recommendations for meaningful content that fosters deep emotional exchanges and intellectual debates. Platforms could create dedicated "Deep Interaction Zones" to encourage original perspectives and heartfelt narratives, with algorithmic recommendations highlighting these authentic works to cultivate a community focused on genuine human connection. By redefining interaction values, social media platforms can free interpersonal relations from utilitarian constraints and steer them toward authentic development-oriented trajectories.

### 5.2. Construct rational technology use model

Establishing a rational approach to technology utilization is crucial for decoupling social media interactions from material constraints. Guided by Marx's theory of communication, we must harmonize technological rationality with humanistic rationality, ensuring technology serves human interaction needs rather than dominating behavioral patterns. First, social media development should integrate humanistic considerations by prioritizing emotional dimensions and deep engagement in design, avoiding oversimplification of interactions into technical operations. For instance, features like "voice chat" and "video conversations" could provide richer communication channels to compensate for fragmented interactions. Simultaneously, algorithmic mechanisms should be optimized to reduce information echo chambers, while diverse content recommendations expand users' social circles and foster multifaceted interactions [5]. Second, users must enhance their technological literacy and critical thinking, rationally assessing social media's capabilities and limitations. They should avoid overdependence, consciously manage interaction frequency and duration, balance online-offline engagement, and maintain autonomy over technological use. By establishing this rational framework, we achieve equilibrium between technological and humanistic rationality, ultimately enabling technology to authentically serve genuine human interaction.

### 5.3. Cultivate the subject's awareness of independent communication

Cultivating self-directed awareness among social media users is the fundamental approach to achieving de-materialization in interpersonal interactions. This requires centering on the "human subjectivity" concept from Marx's communication theory, enhancing participants' autonomy and capabilities to regain control over interactions and break free from materialistic constraints. First, we should strengthen education about Marx's communication theory, helping users recognize its essence and the dangers of materialization. This will foster self-directed engagement in social media, encouraging users to pursue authentic relationships rather than passively accepting platform or capital-driven guidance. For instance, through school programs and community outreach, we can educate the public about core Marxist communication principles, prompting reflection on materialized patterns in social media interactions and promoting genuine connections. Second, we should encourage users to expand their social circles beyond digital platforms, reducing path dependence on social media while strengthening real-world interactions. By practicing self-directed communication in physical settings—such as organizing offline events and community gatherings—users can develop authentic relationships and cultivate deep engagement habits, avoiding passive materialized interactions on social media. Through nurturing self-directed awareness, we empower users to reclaim control over their social behaviors, ultimately achieving de-materialized interpersonal interactions.

## 6. Epilogue

This paper examines the objectification of interpersonal interactions in social media through the lens of Marx's theory of communication. The study reveals three manifestations of objectification: the instrumentalization of relationships, the quantification of values, and the alienation of agency. Rooted in capital logic permeation, technological rationality expansion, and path dependence of agency, these issues can be addressed through a proposed path of deobjectification that restores authentic social interactions. In the digital age, achieving this deobjectification requires collaborative efforts from individuals, platforms, and society. Future research should explore practical implementation strategies through case studies, providing targeted guidance to build a healthy social ecosystem. This approach would transform social media into a platform that fosters the free and comprehensive development of individuals.

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