From “Ascent” to “Alienation”: A Philosophical Examination of Digital Consumption through the Lens of Information Philosophy †

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Abstract: The rapid development of digital technology not only outlines the prospects of digital consumption but also intensifies the phenomenon of digital consumer alienation, which involves information processing, information presentation, and the subject’s perception of information. In the perspective of information philosophy, the world is a dual unity of matter and information, where every object is both a material entity and an informational entity. Only by cultivating information thinking can the consumer subject avoid alienation in the process of digital consumption. The ideal blueprint of digital consumption should be one where technological advancements accompany the fulfillment of the subject’s needs while also stimulating their creative thinking.

Keywords: digital technology; digital consumption; information activity; subject thinking

1. Introduction

According to the data from the “Digital China Development Report”, we can see the vigorous development of the digital economy in China. Digital consumption, as one of the important factors driving steady growth in the digital economy, has made significant contributions. The research, development, and application of information technologies is leading to a revolution in consumer behavior and the rapid infiltration of digitalization into people’s lives. However, the alienation phenomenon in the past consumption process will continue to exist in the new consumption ecology. Only by philosophically recognizing the motives behind consumption, can we gain insights into the essence of digital consumer alienation and propose possible solutions.

2. The Conceptual Definition and Categories of Digital Consumption

Digital consumption is a form of consumption that relies on data, is supported by information technology (encoding and processing of information), and utilizes digital platforms or digital environments to showcase and transmit product content and information, thereby triggering purchasing behavior. The realization of digital consumption is inseparable from the development of digital infrastructure in areas such as transportation, communication, and healthcare. However, we exclude from our discussion the public services that rely on shared data and digital platforms for the purpose of convenience, as they do not involve commercial transactions. Additionally, we do not include discussions on digital payment behavior, which solely focuses on digital transactions without the display and transmission of product content and information.

By narrowing down the scope of digital consumption to products, we can identify two categories of consumption:
Consumption of tangible products (physical entities/object) facilitated by digital technology and platforms;
Consumption of virtual digital products enabled by digital technology and platforms. This includes consumption related to games and their digital derivatives, as well as the consumption of digital audiovisual products and digital collectibles supported by blockchain technology.

The digital platforms in these types of consumption serve not only as e-commerce trading platforms but also as multimedia platforms for promoting and showcasing tangible products (physical entities/object) and virtual digital products, as well as platforms for disseminating product information. Moreover, the objects of digital consumption are not limited to products alone: they also encompass digital services that complement real-world and digital environments. These services help consumers better perceive and utilize products, thereby promoting repeat consumption.

3. Prospects of Ascension Outlined by Digital Consumption

3.1. Technological Perspective

From a technological perspective, communication technology is the prerequisite for convenient and cross-regional consumption, e-commerce ensures digital consumption across time and space, and internet media serves as the foundation for enhanced community interaction and the intuitive presentation of product information. Holographic projection provides immersive experiences for consumers, while virtual reality technology upgrades the consumer experience. Blockchain technology enhances the security of the consumption environment and guarantees the quality of consumption.

The concentration of consumption online enables the traceability and digital recording of consumer behavior. Major consumer platforms use technologies such as big data and cloud computing to capture consumer preferences and behavior during web browsing and product selection. They analyze and manage these massive amounts of data, establish their own data warehouses, and create consumer profiles based on behavioral preferences and consumption habits. This enables them to provide accurate product recommendations and targeted promotions [1].

3.2. Perspective from Information Philosophy Theory

From the perspective of information philosophy, the world is a dual unity of matter and information [2] (p. 469).

In conclusion, the object of consumption is not only tangible products (physical entities/object) but also information. Initially, people consumed solely to satisfy basic physiological needs, which could be achieved through the “enjoyment” of physical entities themselves, as reflected in aspects of life such as clothing, food, shelter, and transportation. Although physical entities have their own ways and states of existence, they display not only their appearance and color but also “the happiness they bring is not the acquisition of commodity value but the enjoyment of symbolic value [3]”. The physical entities people see are the manifestations of the characteristics of objects in the information field. It provides macro perception to the subject, establishes connections in the brain, activates existing stored memories (self-information activities), and imbues them with a present-embedded judgment, reasoning, and logical deduction in the form of a concept or symbolic information (regenerative information activities).

An object itself not only satisfies the usage needs of the consumer but, more importantly, it exists as an information field that can be grasped by the subject and reflects material characteristics, and an information entity that is generated after historical deduction through the interaction of the information field, stimulating the subject’s information creation activity, that is, the subject’s thinking activity. With the support of digital technology and online platforms, the processing of information becomes more precise and the communication of information becomes more effective, optimizing the subject’s grasp of information in terms of quantity and channels. The consumer, through various digital con-
sumer products, obtains complex information that expands their thinking and even allows for the emergence of new thoughts, thus stimulating creativity. Additionally, services based on digital technology have the ability to enrich the consumer experience and fully mobilize their emotions, triggering the subject’s regenerative information activities. The process of digital consumption enables a positive interaction between the consumer and the object of consumption.

4. Potential Alienation Risks and Essence Analysis of Digital Consumption

4.1. Digital Media Aggravates Information Confusion

Digital consumption may appear to present product information in a more comprehensive and transparent manner, but it may actually hide excessive packaging behaviors by brands to promote consumption. The digital platforms, which serve as the “main battlefield” of digital consumption, utilize eye-catching visual symbols, catchy slogans in advertisements, and various display channels to capture the fragmented time of consumers in elevators and subway stations, grabbing their attention and invading them with product information. Brands also closely follow social hot topics, create discussions through self-media, or implement “hunger marketing” tactics before product releases to increase consumer attention. Sometimes they recruit key opinion leaders/key opinion consumers (KOL/KOC) in the self-media field to publish product evaluations and feedback, endorsing the brand and increasing consumer trust. These practices can lead consumers into consumption traps and trigger impulsive buying.

The exaggerated product information presented by sellers in the digital space is merely aimed at generating traffic and does not truly reflect the main characteristics of the products. The product information is upside down, even fabricated out of thin air, fundamentally due to the separation between the essential information of the object itself and the product information conveyed by the brand. The digitalized methods and processes of information dissemination interfere with the effective output of inherent information that highlights the essential characteristics of products.

4.2. Digital Products Cause Cognitive Obstacles

There should be a macro-to-micro conversion process between our perception of macroscopic phenomena and the microelectrical pulse activity in our nervous system. This conversion process can only be mediated by the micro-energy field generated by macroscopic phenomena. Otherwise, the conversion from external energy activities to internal neural energy activities cannot be achieved [2] (p. 490). The first intermediate link between the subject and the object is the object’s information field. Digital consumption differs greatly from traditional methods in terms of product presentation. Even for tangible products (physical entities), their presentation is often in the form of online images or live videos. The presentation of digital products may utilize virtual reality devices to provide a “panoramic” experience. However, all of these presentations rely on information encoding and information networks, and are digitally displayed on electronic devices, which can only be perceived by the subject through the intermediary photon field of vision and the intermediary vibrational wave field of hearing. On the other hand, tangible products can be perceived not only through the subject’s visual and auditory intermediaries but also through the subject’s olfactory and gustatory intermediaries of molecular fields, as well as tactile thermal fields, mechanical force fields, and chemical neurotransmitter fields. Therefore, digital consumer products may affect the subject’s grasp of information.

4.3. Digital Technology Leads to Subject Loss

During the process of digital consumption, the preferences of the consumer subject greatly influence the transmission of information. The consumer subject may only receive product recommendations of the same type, while other information is “automatically filtered out,” creating an “information cocoon”. Intelligent algorithms, due to the predetermined inputs during model training, may lead to “data biases,” causing deviations in the
analysis of consumer preferences. The end result may be that the products recommended by the intelligent system do not satisfy the consumer subject, prompting the system to continuously attempt to “relearn”. This repetitive cycle confuses the consumer subject with a multitude of purchase recommendations from the system, leading to anxiety and a loss of understanding of their true needs. They become uncertain if their purchasing behavior can truly bring them satisfaction.

Digital technology and devices have enhanced the materialization of consumer subject’s understanding of products. Intelligent products and services create novel consumer experiences, and intelligent algorithms gradually grasp the information output of the consumer subject during the process of deep learning, even assisting in decision-making. However, once the consumer subject is no longer satisfied with observing and understanding the world through their own physiological structures and autonomous cognitive thinking, and instead relies on technology for everything, the agency of the subject in the consumption process gradually diminishes. Critical thinking, analytical skills, and emotional perception all correspondingly decline, and the subject may even become a servant to technology.

5. Strategies to Address the Alienation of Digital Consumption

5.1. Embrace Technological Rationality and Enjoy Digital Experiences

In the process of digital consumption, it is important to approach digital technology with rationality and avoid becoming a tool completely controlled by digital systems, becoming “objectified data streams [4]”. Within the framework of technological rationality, individuals can free themselves from the alien needs and possibilities imposed on them by the labor world [5].

The digital landscape constructed by the accumulation of digital commodities is a digital semblance constructed by technological rationality, while the visual scene is an illusion constructed by perceptible visibility. The internet and online marketplaces provide immense potential for a spectacular sense of space and its utilization [6]. The multidimensional observation, all-round interaction, and immersive scenes created by digital technology offer a different kind of enjoyment for the consumer subject. However, tangible products and physical environments play an irreplaceable role in the process of the consumer’s understanding of the in-itself information of the physical entity. Therefore, the integration of physical and online experiences and the fusion of multiple scenarios can better facilitate the exploration, understanding, and creation of inherent information (including in itself information of digital products) by the subject.

Enterprises should respect the in-itself information of the object and consciously avoid the irrational application of digital technology, and avoid “consumers becoming free labor for the proliferation of digital capital in a pleasant consumption experience”.

It is crucial to protect the rights and interests of consumer and ensure that their creative thinking is not stifled by the long chain of digital consumption. In addition to the efforts of enterprises, government departments need to establish corresponding laws and regulations to create a favorable digital consumption environment.

5.2. Foster Information Thinking and Activate Subject Creativity

Digital consumption, born out of the information revolution, has disrupted traditional consumption patterns and triggered various levels of consumer alienation. As the subjects of digital consumption, people should strengthen their information thinking. This means that when engaging in consumption, they should not only consider the functional satisfaction provided by digital products or services but also fully consider the product information that reflects the essence and attributes of the products. As an information entity, the object itself contains objective and free information that is the manifestation of the evolution of the object itself, and it (object itself/product) may also be the perceptual external storage of the culture created by the subject in historical evolution. (Virtual digital products also have their in-itself information and regenerative information.) Consumers
engage in digital consumption with information thinking, which, after reviewing history and comparing horizontally, helps to clarify their own needs, ensure independent thinking, and avoid falling into consumption traps.

Consumers can relax their emotions, evoke memories, trigger associations, initiate self-information activities, stimulate creative thinking, engage in production, generate regenerated information activities, and even produce cultural products that carry regenerated information activities, enabling the cultural world of the subject to prosper and develop. This is the most beautiful blueprint for information thinking to run through the consumption process.

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