

Formation logic, alienation representation and dissolution path of emotional capitalism

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Abstract. Emotional capitalism represents a new capitalist paradigm where emotional and economic relations are deeply intertwined. Under the collusion of digital technologies and capital, this phenomenon manifests in three key dimensions: In production sectors, the boundaries between entertainment and labor become increasingly blurred, with emotional labor gradually transforming into a critical tool for capitalist exploitation. In consumption spheres, people shift from material possession to the pursuit of symbolic meaning, with symbolic consumption replacing material consumption as the dominant trend. Within social interactions, pure emotional connections are weakened and virtual interactions increasingly dominate relationships. These challenges urgently require solutions through technological empowerment, institutional regulation, and conceptual transformation to achieve genuine emotional liberation and the comprehensive development of human potential.

Keywords: emotional capitalism, emotional alienation, emotional fetishism, emotional labor

1. Introduction

The new wave of information technology revolution, epitomized by the internet, big data, and artificial intelligence, is advancing at breakneck speed, driving structural transformations in human society's production and lifestyle. Concurrently, capitalism has evolved to a new stage through the mutual shaping and coupling of modern technology and global capital. As capital deepens its appropriation for technology, its logic of exploitation has expanded from material production processes to "non-material labor" dimensions [1], intensifying the emotionalization of commodities and the commodification of emotions. This has increasingly revealed the alienation characteristics of emotional capitalism. Eva Illouz observes that "emotions have become entities that can be evaluated, examined, discussed, negotiated, quantified, and traded" [1]. Byung-Chul Han, analyzing from the production perspective, views the emotional economy as a product of the meritocratic society under neoliberalism, noting that while human cognitive and emotional guidance capabilities are valued, this may lead to complete exploitation. Comprehensive analysis reveals that emotional capitalism is a new form of capitalism in which emotions and economic relations mutually shape each other, with capitalist production and consumption dominating people's emotional and social interactions. Given that emotions are increasingly becoming vital production factors, how did emotional capitalism emerge? What are the manifestations of emotional alienation under capital manipulation? Where lie the solutions to emotional

alienation? In-depth analysis of these questions not only addresses the inherent need to counter new forms of capitalist colonialism but also responds to the practical demand for social beings to return to their essential human nature.

2. The generative logic of emotional capitalism

As an important form of the new stage of the development of capitalism, the emergence of emotional capitalism is due to the change of the social self-concept, the wide application of digital information technology and the capital's maximal appropriation of surplus value.

2.1. Self-slavery under spiritual power

In the process of reshaping production models, information technology has also profoundly intervened in collective spiritual and emotional lives, giving rise to new theoretical paradigms of power and reconstructing the existential conditions of subjects.

Bernard Stiegler once positioned technology at the core of philosophical inquiry, viewing it as the externalization of human memory patterns. While animal mortality signifies the complete dissipation of individual life experiences, Humans can use digital retention to record their thoughts and experiences throughout their finite lifespans, ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage across generations. As generative AI continues to emerge, technology not only serves as a means of memory preservation but also facilitates the objectification of emotions. Consequently, ubiquitous supercomputing systems increasingly influence human behavior and decision-making processes, subtly eroding autonomy while constructing an "external subjectivity" consciousness that stands in opposition to self-awareness.

Byung-Chul Han posits that in the digital age, capital power no longer centers on physical discipline. Instead, emotions generated from the subject and externalized become "effective tools for controlling individuals," a paradigm termed spiritual power. Han argues that 21st-century society is transitioning from a "disciplinary" to a "performance-driven" model. In disciplinary societies, "people must function like machines, where emotions become obstacles requiring complete eradication" [2]. In meritocracy societies, emotions are viewed as drivers for maximizing productivity. Capitalists no longer control everything through prohibitions; rather, "the body must be 'liberated and granted freedom' to enable rational development for productive purposes" [3]. They employ positive, freedom-promising rhetoric, using phrases like "can" and "may" to mask the pain of self-exploitation as self-fulfilling happiness, hypnotizing and numbing performance-oriented individuals. Digital media amplifies this "can" discourse's influence through repeated dissemination, subconsciously internalizing capital's "desire for maximum production" into a "social collective unconscious" [4]. Han contends that this approach gradually erodes individual autonomy. Compared to external exploitation in disciplinary societies, self-exploitation is more efficient as it fosters a false sense of freedom, perpetually enticing subjects to embrace either enforced liberty.

Under the powerful influence of digital technology, emotions have been separated from the subject and transformed into objectified regulatory objects. People pursue performance maximization in the pleasure of self-exploitation, while their positive psychological states are alienated into tools for capital to exploit the surplus value of labor.

2.2. Panoramic emotional monitoring under digital technology

By capturing users' emotional preferences and data, digital capital gains the ability to guide and create emotional demands, resulting in a digitalized panoramic prison that enables comprehensive emotional

monitoring of users.

Historically, society's criminal punishment mechanism functioned by confining individuals to a system of coercion, deprivation, obligation, and restriction, suppressing and preventing the punished [5]. British philosopher Jeremy Bentham designed a circular architectural structure: "In the outer ring, people are entirely under surveillance without ever seeing anything; in the central tower, they can see everything without being seen by others" [6]. This design conceals the violent form of power, instead imposing daily discipline on individuals, subconsciously internalizing external surveillance into conscious behavior.

In the digital age, humanity has entered a digital panopticon constructed by capital power. "Its uniqueness lies primarily in residents actively participating in its construction and operation through self-revelation and self-exposure" [7]. While this open-view panopticon eliminates physical architectural structures, it invisibly restricts spatial mobility, manipulates emotional trajectories, and renders private domains transparent. Unlike traditional circular prisons that merely monitor prisoners' external behaviors, digital panopticon surveillance enables meticulous deconstruction of individuals—delving into their deepest thoughts and core emotional needs. Under digital surveillance, human emotional desires are being driven by code. Social media platforms deliver content tailored precisely to user preferences, thereby constructing "information cocoons" and "echo chambers". Confined within a narrow virtual space, users continually reinforce their emotional inclinations and forfeit the capacity to perceive and embrace affective diversity. As Illos observes, digital monitoring erodes emotional authenticity by blurring traditional boundaries between emotionless public spheres and emotionally charged private spheres. While seemingly offering infinite possibilities for social interaction, it simultaneously depletes emotional and physical resources essential for human relationships, stripping interpersonal connections of their inherent subjectivity and privacy.

The proliferation of digital panoramic emotional surveillance essentially represents capital's deep colonization of the emotional through digital technologies. It erodes the authentic value of emotions and the privacy of interpersonal interactions, trapping individuals in an invisible cage woven by capital and technology.

2.3. Emotional fetishism under the dominance of capital logic

Confronting increasingly atomized individuals, capitalism has seized upon the widespread emotional consumption demands of society and organized them extensively. Emotional capitalism emerged precisely under this context, with the production and exploitation of surplus value serving as its fundamental objective.

In the midst of modern society's structural transformation, "the old order and traditional patterns are being cast into the furnace, with the norms and principles that guided human behavior undergoing fundamental changes". This has given rise to what Zygmunt Bauman termed "fluid modernity" [8], where individuals detach themselves from traditional kinship and placebased communities yet remain unprepared for new social connections. Consequently, a sense of belonging diminishes. Anxiety, loneliness, and unease proliferate, making emotional consumption a primary means of seeking immediate solace.

However, under the manipulation of capital logic, "emotional experiences are generated and controlled by commodity laws and consumerism" [9]. Capital directly transforms emotions into marketable commodities through marketing strategies, thereby commodifying emotions. Consumers purchase products carrying specific emotional symbolism, projecting their subjective emotions, gaining social recognition, and further symbolizing emotions as commodities. Baudrillard pointed out that in today's era of relative material abundance, "the consumption system is not based on urgent demands for needs and enjoyment, but rather on certain symbolic and differential codes" [10]. The usefulness of commodities has far exceeded the scope of "material utility", yet the more they deviate from practical value, the greater the possibility of alienation is.

Capital extracts emotional products like love, friendship, and familial bonds from real interpersonal interactions, constructing virtual cultural narratives that induce attachment or addiction among lonely modern individuals, fostering blind worship and dependence on emotional commodities. Thus, humanity has transitioned from "commodity fetishism" to "emotional fetishism".

Facing the dilemma of traditional markets approaching saturation, capital leverages the fluidity and uncertainty of modern emotions to create emotionally charged physical products, provide emotional services, and offer virtual experiences, thereby pioneering new value-added spaces.

3. The alienation manifestation of emotional capitalism

From the Marxist critical perspective, the essence of capitalist alienation lies in obscuring and substituting interpersonal social relations, ultimately transforming them into relationships between objects. Emotional capitalism follows this same logic but proves more deceptive. Capital exploits people's focus on self-emotion, driving workers to excessively indulge in self-production, self-display, and self-consumption for "self-actualization", thereby creating new forms of labor alienation. By leveraging people's fear of relational pain and algorithmic manipulation, it induces infinite expansion of self-territory at the conscious level, leading to the marginalization of others. Within these self-defined domains, consumerism is cloaked in the emotional guise of "pseudo self-care", perpetuating an endless cycle of consumer demand.

3.1. Production alienation: "playful labor" and emotional labor

Emotional capitalism constructs a new paradigm of capitalist production relations centered on emotional elements, giving rise to "prosumption" of emotional products, while emotional labor has become a new form of exploitation against labors.

On the one hand, "play labor" obscures capital accumulation in production processes. Within the production paradigm of managerial capitalism, working hours are painful and oppressive, while leisure time is considered sacred [10]. Nowadays, the boundary between entertainment and work has become increasingly blurred. People often treat gaming, chatting, and online shopping as leisure activities, yet these behaviors can all be categorized under capital-driven "play labor", leading to "the laborization of entertainment" [11]. Nearly all of people's life time and emotional experiences are incorporated into the process of capital accumulation, making exploitation and pleasure inseparable. For example, in open-world games, players must complete daily quests and collect materials to obtain virtual resources like characters and weapons, continuously generating online time and data traffic. This repetitive mechanical labor is often not driven by personal interest but rather constrained by task bars serving capital accumulation. Digital capital transforms users' emotional output and social relationships in entertainment into tradable commodities, achieving the "prosumption" of emotional products [12].

On the other hand, emotional labor has emerged as a new form of exploitation targeting workers. Take the e-commerce live streaming industry as an example: during the broadcasting process, capital deprives workers of their personal emotions, subjecting them to digital conditioning. Streamers are required to maintain an enthusiastic, excited, and empathetic emotional state while promoting products, engaging in familial-style emotional displays to ensure emotional marketing aligns with market demands. Emotional workers are compelled to continuously invest emotions under such surveillance, constantly performing self-editing and emotional performances, resulting in significant mental exhaustion. As Marx observed, "Human species essence—whether in nature or in the species capacity of the human spirit—has become alien to humans,

turning into a means to sustain their individual survival" [13]. Under digital technology's conditioning, emotional labor functions as an alien force that persistently suppresses the authentic emotions of individuals.

Under capital control, people's attention and imagination are constantly captured, leaving emotions no longer free. Shaped and refined by technology and capital, emotions gradually lose their creativity and transcendence, reduced to abstract commodities serving capital accumulation.

3.2. Consumption alienation: postmodern consumerism

The advent of post-industrial society and the rise of postmodernist culture have driven the aestheticization of daily life, with emotional needs being continuously created by capital, thereby stimulating the symbolization of consumer behavior.

The evolution of aesthetic paradigms has driven shifts in core consumer demands. During the early stages of capitalist development, consumer activities focused on pursuing material utility at the subsistence level, primarily addressing basic survival needs for labor reproduction. Marx identified inherent contradictions in this period: while mass consumption remained constrained, capitalist production systems relentlessly expanded productive forces. In the post-World War II era, Bell proposed that Western societies entered a new social structure—post-industrial society. As transitioning from industrial to post-industrial systems, cultural capital gained increasing prominence, blurring the boundaries between art and daily life. Traditional high culture and mass consumer culture became increasingly intertwined, with aesthetic pleasure and creative expression once exclusive to refined culture now captured by everyday consumer goods. With the aestheticization of daily life, experiential pursuits have been elevated to sublime status [14]. Consumer demands have expanded beyond material utility to encompass emotional value and self-actualization, transforming commodity accumulation into "infinite accumulation of spectacles" —where shopping behaviors themselves become more pleasurable than purchased items, serving as vehicles for self-expression and identity definition. Contemporary daily life is thus saturated with "flows of symbols and imagery".

The shift from material consumption to symbolic consumption has dramatically expanded the boundaries of consumer behavior. This paradigm shift often leads people to confuse genuine emotional needs with artificial demands. Authentic needs remain inherently finite—people quickly become tiresome once satisfied. Meanwhile, artificial demands exceed practical survival requirements, being not spontaneously generated but constructed by the consumer society. The consumer world systematically prevents boredom by maintaining perpetual emotional dissatisfaction through constant expectations, thereby perpetuating new visions and models that stimulate to generate "happiness". However, these artificially manufactured needs not only hinder personal freedom development but trap individuals in perpetually created anxieties and desires. Dominated by consumer ideologies, people remain ensnared by endless product illusions, gradually losing autonomy in consumption choices while chasing so-called "happiness". Ultimately, human control over material objects transforms into objects controlling humanity.

From the display of 'scenery' to the 'happiness' experience induced by obsession with 'symbols', people achieve pseudo self-care through emotional consumption, ultimately falling into the trap of consumerism dominating human behavior.

3.3. Communication alienation: virtual presence and utilitarian communication

In Theses on Feuerbach, Marx posited that humans are the sum total of all social relations, with production—the very foundation of human existence—being predicated on mutual interaction. Social engagement constitutes the essential condition for human existence, and individuals can only achieve comprehensive

development through such interactions. Yet emotional capitalism has completely alienated human social relations, resulting in the paradoxical reality where increased social engagement leads to greater isolation.

On one hand, interpersonal emotional connections have transformed into consumer-produce relationships. Modern mate selection criteria increasingly adopt stereotypical labels, with love being disciplined by alien forces. Dating apps like Tinder exemplify this trend through their "left-swipe dislike, right-swipe like" fast-food selection mechanism, where quantifiable indicators such as MBTI personality types, zodiac signs, educational backgrounds, and family histories replace authentic self-expression, allowing economic rationality to prevail over emotional authenticity. As Illouz notes in *Cold Intimacy*, intimate relationships require privacy. Yet emotional capitalism reduces intimate connections to producible commodities, turning public markets into intruders into private lives. Under capital intervention, intimate interactions become prime material for traffic generation, while romantic relationships become entertainment show commodities. Emotional attachments once confined to personal domains are distorted into public spectacles through social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram, giving rise to absurd phenomena like "live-streaming wives' painful childbirth processes". Intimate relationships can no longer fulfill their original functions of comforting others or providing emotional solace, ultimately evolving into a superficially close yet inherently alienated state of "cold intimacy" [1].

On the other hand, social robots are increasingly permeating social interactions, making emotional connections more virtual. The rapid advancement of AI has intensified interactions between human subjects and virtual entities. Particularly when real-world relationships remain uncertain, this creates greater appeal for the stability and controllability of emotional exchanges in virtual spaces. The rise of AI companionship products like Glow and Character AI directly addresses this demand, allowing users to create "virtual partners" tailored to their emotional needs through self-defined settings. However, love and pain are inseparable. A world devoid of suffering and setbacks would paradoxically lead to emotional numbness, potentially resulting in emotional dysfunction. As Sherry Turkle notes in *The Loneliness of the Crowd*, people "immerse themselves in a second life on the internet", prioritizing self-centered gratification over interpersonal connections. Consequently, excessive reliance on digital socialization weakens real-world communication skills, intensifying fears and aversions toward physical interactions. When people return to offline life, they often experience deeper emotional voids, pushing those seeking emotional solace further toward the brink of "collective loneliness".

Emotional capitalism digitizes intimate relationships, substituting authentic connections with virtual presence. Individuals appear closely connected in online interactions, yet in reality fall into emotional alienation and collective loneliness, losing their authentic emotional experiences.

4. Pathways to dissolving emotional capitalism

In his seminal work *Politics*, Aristotle posited that humans are inherently social beings, with our existence, development, and well-being fundamentally dependent on emotional connections with others. Yet under the impetus of capital, digital algorithms have strayed from the principle of "technology for good". The marriage of emotions and capital not only renders people's psychological states both fragile and highly manipulable but also exacerbates individual mental exhaustion while eroding societal cohesion and centripetal force. Thus, resolving the dilemma of emotional capitalization and reviving the human-centered value system has become an urgent priority.

4.1. Technology empowerment: solving the algorithmic dilemma of emotional capitalization

Emotional capitalism leverages algorithms to exert comprehensive control over the production, dissemination, and consumption of emotions. To address this predicament, only by adhering to the principle of technology for good—reconstructing algorithmic logic, reinforcing value guidance, and promoting algorithmic transparency—can we achieve genuine human liberation.

First, we should establish a human-centered algorithm design framework to harmonize technological rationality with humanistic values. As philosopher Byung-Chul Han observed: "Society cannot tolerate the existence of negative emotions. A person loses the capacity to process suffering" [7]. To prevent algorithms from disciplining emotions, we must promote diversity and inclusivity in algorithm design logic, reduce the labeling of emotional content, respect differences in emotional expression, and ensure data genuinely serves authentic emotional expression and pure communication. For instance, in comment functionality design, we could transform likes into rating systems that allow users to express varied emotional attitudes.

Secondly, algorithmic recommendation systems must adhere to mainstream value orientations to ensure technology serves positive societal purposes. President Xi Jinping emphasized: "We are engaged in a great struggle with distinctive historical characteristics, facing unprecedented challenges. It is imperative to consolidate mainstream ideologies, promote positive narratives, disseminate constructive energy, and harness collective social momentum". Core values form the foundation of human-centered algorithm design, embodying shared emotional aspirations, ethical standards, and value consensus that effectively counteract the erosion of emotional capitalism. Platforms should integrate these values into algorithmic mechanisms, implementing proactive guidance in content curation, traffic distribution, and risk assessment. By eliminating vulgar or inflammatory content, algorithms can play a constructive role in shaping societal values and fostering social cohesion.

Third, employ technological countermeasures to address algorithmic opacity, transitioning from "algorithmic black boxes" to algorithmic transparency. Emotional labor inherently exhibits characteristics such as difficulty in measurement, strong subjectivity, and high dependency. Inadequate algorithmic transparency further delegates labor value assessment entirely to capital-dominated platforms, exacerbating the disadvantaged position of emotional laborers. Therefore, it is essential to explore reverse approaches for personalized recommendations. During the initial phase of algorithmic data collection, implement "counter-preference" strategies that not only satisfy users' personalized emotional needs but also proactively deliver conflicting information to them, thereby leveraging technology to counteract algorithmic black boxes.

4.2. System construction: establishing a multi-stakeholder co-governance framework

The profit-seeking nature of capital determines that any entity capable of generating proliferation potential may serve as its instrument, including emotions. Relying solely on platform self-regulation and individual conscious resistance is insufficient to curb capital's alienation of emotions. Therefore, it is imperative to establish a multi-stakeholder governance framework involving coordinated efforts from the state, government, and platforms.

First, strengthen top-level design and uphold the guiding principles of the socialist system. At the national level, we must establish a digital resource ownership and distribution mechanism that prioritizes public interests, preventing private platforms from monopolizing data, algorithms, and other production resources. This will promote open sharing of digital resources and ensure that technological achievements benefit all citizens. Essential emotional services vital to human well-being should be integrated into public service systems, with non-profit platforms for emotional exchange being established to enhance the public and non-profit nature of emotional products. Such efforts will stimulate social innovation and creativity, advance the

building of a community with a shared future in cyberspace, and collectively pave the way for a brighter digital future.

Second, strengthen legal constraints to establish clear boundaries for emotional capital. "Law is the cornerstone of governance, and sound legislation is the prerequisite for effective governance". As the ultimate safeguard for personal emotional rights, the law must clearly define the rights and responsibilities of consumers, workers, and businesses in emotional domains. It should effectively protect user privacy, uphold personal dignity, and ensure emotional capital operates within legal frameworks. This provides a solid legal foundation for fostering a healthy emotional environment and achieving sound governance. Additionally, the government should enhance ethical oversight of emotional platforms, strictly prohibiting harmful content such as extreme emotional manipulation, emotional manipulation, and PUA (Psychological Manipulation and Abuse) pedagogy. Positive social interactions should be encouraged, helping people truly understand the essence of emotions.

Third, strengthen platform accountability to foster a healthy online ecosystem. Platforms should proactively address user concerns, encourage active participation in creating quality emotional content, and consciously serve as advocates, builders, and guardians of a positive digital environment. They must establish efficient complaint channels for malicious hype and incitement that violate mainstream values, enhance the processing efficiency of reported content, while respecting individuals' emotional autonomy. Platforms should ensure users' rights to information and choice in data collection and content production, and implement measures such as encrypted storage, security audits, and access controls to safeguard user interaction data security.

4.3. Conceptual reconstruction: returning to the authentic core of emotional value

Illouz defines emotion as "the aspect of action 'carrying energy', which can simultaneously and intricately influence human cognition, emotions, evaluations, motivations, and even physical well-being" [1]. Therefore, adolescents who are in the critical period of value formation and heightened emotional needs—often referred to as the "jointing and heading stage"—particularly require enhanced critical analysis of scientific theories, the establishment of correct value pursuits, and resistance to the infiltration of emotional capitalism.

First, we must expose the deductive logic of emotional capitalism and fortify ideological defenses against emotional alienation. Capitalism often disguises emotional alienation as the veneer of "emotional value", spreading through digital platforms like short videos and social media. This gradually erodes the public's ability to perceive and judge genuine emotions. Therefore, grounded in Marxist perspectives on emotions, we must recognize that what we perceive as emotional resonance may not be authentic human connection, but rather a value extraction orchestrated by capital, power, and technology. Our mission is to help the public—especially the youth—develop clear self-awareness and autonomy, thereby dismantling capital's monopoly on emotional discourse.

Secondly, we must guide teenagers to develop healthy perspectives on emotional connections and establish genuine, non-utilitarian relationships. Intimate emotional bonds remain fundamental human needs. Even in today's highly developed digital society, people still crave physical presence, mutual understanding, and authentic connections in real-life interactions. However, driven by instinctive self-interest, individuals often overanalyze gains and losses in intimate relationships, ultimately falling into the trap of emotional exploitation. Therefore, it's crucial to help society maintain a balance between virtual and real-world interactions, encouraging people to consciously move away from superficial, utilitarian digital engagement and return to warm, meaningful human connections rooted in authentic experiences.

Third, we must move beyond symbolic worship and steer emotional consumption toward a human-centered philosophy. Theoretically, we should recognize that the symbolic appropriation driven by consumption alienation primarily serves capital accumulation rather than the "free and all-round development" of individuals. Labor remains the sole source of value creation and the practical activity that defines human essence. Furthermore, we must vigorously promote the social ethos that "labor is the most glorious, noble, great, and beautiful". This involves respecting the status of emotional laborers in practice and honoring the spiritual wealth they create.

5. Conclusion

Emotional capitalism has emerged against the backdrop of flourishing emotional psychology, socio-economic structural transformations, and digital technologies that infinitely extend spatiotemporal dimensions. As a product of capitalist production relations alienation, it does not alter the fundamental profit-seeking nature of capital. Instead, through unchecked capital expansion, emotions have been reduced to non-material vehicles for extracting surplus value, functioning as covert instruments for maintaining capitalist production relations reproduction. Guided by Marxist historical materialism and the theory of surplus value, we must discern the exploitative essence of emotional capitalism, expose the emotional illusions manufactured by consumerism, and transcend utilitarian emotional relationships. This approach will break capital's emotional constraints, enabling self-emotional liberation and holistic personal development.

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