

Simulacra and Digital Media: A Study on Baudrillard's Media Theory

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Abstract: In the context of digital capitalism, the mode of information dissemination and consumption behaviour are undergoing profound changes. The theory of mimesis proposed by the famous French thinker Jean Baudrillard provides an important theoretical framework for understanding this change. This study centres on Jean Baudrillard's theory of mimesis and explores its application in the context of digital media and capitalism. Baudrillard argues that the boundaries between the real and the analogue are increasingly blurred in modern society, with mimesis gradually replacing reality itself. In the context of digital capitalism, media technologies have been found to profoundly change the mode of social and economic functioning. Mediums such as social media continue to reinforce the symbolic attributes of commodities through algorithms and data analytics, fuelling the cycle of symbolic exchange. Consumers consume signs and symbolism more than the objects themselves in this mediated environment. It has been found that digital technologies have not only accelerated the rise of the symbolic economy, but also trapped consumers in a cycle of analogue desire and consumption. This paper aims to provide theoretical references for understanding the consumer culture in the digital age and the media mechanisms behind it.

Keywords: Simulacra, Baudrillard, Digital Capitalism, Media Theory

1. Introduction

One of the most controversial and influential thinkers in contemporary critical theory, Jean Baudrillard's ideas have influenced a wide range of fields, including philosophy, sociology, cultural theory and media studies. Baudrillard's work has been recognized as a continuing challenge to the fundamental structures of modern capitalist society, always with a particular emphasis on symbolic and media systems, which in Baudrillard's view no longer represent only reality, but also form a new form of 'hyperreality', in which the relationship between reality and simulacra takes on a new form, that is, the relationship between the real and the simulated. In Baudrillard's view, these systems no longer represent only reality, but also a new 'hyperreality', in which the distinction between reality and simulation becomes increasingly blurred. The concept of simulacra, as theorised by Baudrillard, has had a profound impact on postmodern thought. The theoretical framework proposed by Baudrillard challenges the conventional conception of reality as a 'fixed, objective entity', thereby introducing a novel perspective that has profound implications for postmodern discourse. He posits that these simulacra are self-referential in nature and can produce their own reality. This theoretical inversion has also been observed to challenge the conventional frameworks of semiotics and Marxist

theory, thereby offering novel insights into the dynamics of signs and symbols within the contemporary capitalist economy.

Concurrently, Baudrillard's theory of mimesis provides a divergent perspective for the analysis of postmodern society. In postmodern society, the primary motivation for consumerism is no longer the utility or necessity of products, but rather their symbolic value. The consumption of products has become a means of expressing identity, status and lifestyle, thereby creating a more fluid boundary between reality and the analogue realm. This shift has been accelerated by the advent of the digital age. The accelerated reproduction and dissemination of symbolic representations in media and digital technologies has had a profound impact on society. The role of media in reflecting and shaping our perception of the world has undergone a significant transition, transcended mere reflection and entered a new paradigm where it actively influences our engagement with reality. In this paradigm, information, as an element of the symbolic economy, is propelled by the consumption of images, symbols and representations, the value of which is detached from material production. Digital capitalism has further amplified this dynamic, with digital technologies evolving from mere tools of economic production to means of creating and managing hyperreality. Consequently, consumers may find themselves ensnared in a perpetual cycle of analogue desire and consumption.

2. Simulacra and capital logic

2.1. Symbolic value and hyperreality

Symbolic value constitutes a fundamental concept proposed by Baudrillard, denoting the symbolic meaning and cultural symbols embodied by objects and commodities. It pertains to the aspect that transcends the actual use value or exchange value of objects. In contemporary society, however, the production and consumption of commodities are no longer based solely on their physical function and utility, but on the social significance and cultural value they embody [1]. The advent of this new paradigm has precipitated the evolution of a symbolic political economy, one which exerts a profound influence on the formation of consumer needs and desires, whilst concurrently engendering transformations in social structures and power relations. In this context, Baudrillard propounds the concept of a 'simulacral' state, wherein the production, consumption and dissemination of symbols transcend traditional material and pragmatic logics, giving rise to a self-referential symbolic system that contributes to the notion of 'hyperreality'. The production, consumption and dissemination of symbols far exceed traditional material and pragmatic logic, forming a self-referential symbolic system and contributing to the so-called 'hyperreality'. Symbols function not only as vehicles for commodity exchange, but also as instruments of capitalist control and exploitation. In capitalist society, the process of symbolisation endows commodities with specific social meanings, thereby elevating them from mere exchanges to complex social entities [2]. The role of symbols in the transmission and creation of specific cultural identities, identities, and values enables the operation and control of society by capitalism. For instance, the appeal of luxury goods for consumers is predicated on the assumption that acquisition of these goods will engender a sense of symbolic status and belonging by way of the portrayal of specific cultural symbols and social identities. The reinforcement of such symbolic values has been shown to exacerbate social stratification, thus rendering symbols themselves an important tool for social differentiation and identity.

Digital codes play a crucial role in this process. The advent of digital codes has enabled the construction of 'simulacral' societies on a broader level. Technologies such as social media and virtual reality support digital symbols to generate new realities through data and algorithms, providing users with a 'hyperreal' experience that seamlessly connects the virtual and the real [3]. Concurrently, these digital platforms have been shown to enhance the dissemination of symbolic value through the utilisation of algorithms, recommendation systems and data control, thereby reinforcing the hyperreal

state of society [4]. Digital platforms and technologies accelerate the spread and virtualisation of the hyperreal phenomenon created by symbols, further blurring the boundaries between reality and the virtual.

2.2. Symbolic logic and digital capitalism

A change has already taken place when considering symbolic value in the context of digital capitalism. With the emergence of digital platforms, the production, dissemination, and consumption of symbols has steadily moved beyond the domain of traditional commodities, and symbols have become the core form of capital accumulation. The symbolic value in digital capitalism is more complex and fluid, relying heavily on media technology operations. Social media, e-commerce platforms, and other digital environments not only transmit information and advertisements but also enhance symbolic value through algorithmic recommendations, data analysis, and customized marketing strategies. As symbolic value expands through virtual worlds and digital platforms, it permeates consumers' everyday lives, creating a capitalist economy dominated by symbols and data [5].

In this process, symbols not only sustain the functioning of the capitalist economy but also enable capitalism to construct an inescapable consumer culture and social structure through the constant reproduction of symbols. The essence of digital capitalism lies in transforming personal data, social interactions, and online behaviors into exchangeable symbols. Platforms track users' interests, consumption patterns, and behavioral habits to build highly precise recommendation systems that drive continuous consumption. Every click, like, comment, or share is converted into data symbols, becoming part of the symbolic economy of capitalism [6].

At the same time, Baudrillard's concept of "symbolic exchange" is newly reflected in digital capitalism. In traditional capitalist exchange, goods and money functioned as the primary drivers of social flow. However, in the post-capitalist society, Baudrillard argues that the focus of exchange has shifted from material commodities to symbolic and symbolic exchange. The symbolic exchange mechanism in digital capitalism significantly differs from traditional material exchanges. On digital platforms, the exchanged objects are no longer concrete goods but rather digital symbols, personal data, social interactions, and virtual products. Consumers on these platforms are not merely purchasing physical commodities; instead, they are consuming the social meaning and cultural identity associated with those commodities. For example, NFT (non-fungible token) artworks, virtual avatars, and digital fashion exist as digital assets whose value stems not from physical properties but from their scarcity, social value, and cultural significance. In these cases, symbols themselves become the primary carriers of capital appreciation, further driving the expansion of digital capitalism.

Media technology plays a pivotal role in this process. Social platforms, short video applications, and e-commerce platforms use data algorithms and user behavior analysis to precisely control information flow and shape consumer behavior. This algorithm-driven symbolic dissemination model traps users in information cycles. Every action a user performs on these platforms — clicks, likes, comments, or shares — can be converted into digital symbols that become part of the platform's capital, further driving the cycle of digital capitalism [7]. In summary, digital capitalism continuously reshapes consumer behavior and social relationships through symbolic logic. The reproduction and replication of symbols have become the core mechanism of capital accumulation. By transforming commodities and consumer experiences into symbols, digital capitalism reinforces the structure of the hyperreal society, driving people into a consumption and social system dominated by symbols and data.

3. The expansion of simulacra in contemporary digital culture

3.1. Simulacra and digital media

Jean Baudrillard's concept of "simulacra" reveals how, in a technologically advanced media society, reality is gradually replaced by symbols and images, ultimately leading to a state of "hyperreality." Baudrillard divides the development of simulacra into three stages: (1) Simulation: At this stage, symbols faithfully reproduce the real world and still retain a reference to reality. (2) Production: Media technologies intervene, making images and symbols exist independently from the objective world, gradually dissolving the essence of reality into a symbolic system. (3) Simulacrum: In this stage, symbols no longer refer to any reality but instead refer only to themselves, constructing an independent "hyperreal" world that exists beyond reality [1]. In the digital media environment, the production and dissemination of simulacra has accelerated significantly, resulting in a marked blurring of the boundary between the virtual and the real, and the immersion of humanity in a "simulacra space" constructed by media.

The development of digital media has further promoted the construction of this simulacra space. Technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and any AI-generated content have rendered the replication and creation of reality increasingly intricate. VR technology has been shown to create immersive environments that resemble or surpass the real world, providing experiences that may feel even more authentic than reality itself [8]. This media environment not only alters traditional information transmission modes but also constructs a new mode of spatial production where reality is no longer physical but instead composed of codes, algorithms, and digital imagery [9]. For example, the Metaverse, as a highly digitalized media environment, has evolved into a social space that transcends reality. Users can engage in socializing, entertainment, consumption, and production within it, gradually establishing a simulacra world parallel to real society [10]. Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality" is further validated in this context—where virtual worlds not only replicate reality but, through digitization and symbolization, create an imitation reality that appears even more attractive than the real world. People may even prefer to live in this "hyperreal" environment [11].

During the expansion of the simulacra world, the way humans perceive their bodies has also transformed. Traditional visual experiences relied on direct observation through the eyes, but in the digital media environment, bodily perception and visual experience are reshaped by media technologies. Baudrillard believed that postmodern visual culture has entered a technologically dominated phase where the body is no longer merely a physical entity but can be virtualized and digitized [12]. Digital media has turned viewing into an interactive experience, and the body itself has become a "data-body" [13], entering the digital world through avatars, holograms, and other forms. This phenomenon is especially apparent on social media platforms, such as live streaming and short video sites, where users interact with others through virtual personas. The use of filters and Photoshop effects serves to further obfuscate the distinction between the physical and virtual body [14]. Moreover, the advent of VR and AR technologies has facilitated the transcendence of bodily experiences beyond physical space, thereby entering the realm of "simulacra space." For instance, in the context of VR games or virtual social platforms, users' physical actions can be digitised and projected onto virtual characters. This embodiment experience enhances the immersion of virtual reality, allowing individuals to experience the virtual world as if it were physically real [15]. Consequently, the concept of the body in the digital age necessitates re-evaluation. Media has a dual role in this process: it not only reshapes the way the body is represented but also changes how humans interact with the world. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy posits that the body serves as the basis for human perception of the world [16]. However, within the paradigm of simulacra, the nature of the body undergoes a fundamental metamorphosis, characterized by its ability to be digitized, replicated, and even to transcend physical limitations, thereby giving rise to a "disembodied body" [14]. This

paradigm shift signifies that human experience in the digital media environment is no longer contingent on the physical body; rather, it is contingent on sensory systems constructed by technological media. This ultimately leads to a world dominated by simulacra.

3.2. Media and seduction

As demonstrated above, the phenomenon of 'hyperreal' can be defined as the dissolution of the physical body in the digital age, with the creation of a 'simulacra space' characterised by the prevalence of symbols and images. Building upon this concept, Baudrillard's theory of 'seduction' offers a deeper insight into the manipulation mechanisms employed by media in this process. The media, it can be argued, functions not only as a conduit for the propagation of mimesis but also as a mechanism that fosters individuals' indulgence and dependence on this hyper-real space.

The mechanism of seduction is particularly evident in media environments. Baudrillard emphasises that the seductive nature of these environments is rooted in their ability to create illusory impressions, or "surface appearances," which function as a form of symbolic interaction. In this paradigm, symbols transcend their concrete referents, becoming autonomous entities that merely refer to themselves [1]. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in the context of consumerism. Advertisements, films and social media are instrumental in the manufacture of "idealised life scenarios", binding products, identities and symbolic meanings together in a continuous process of sensory stimulation designed to entice consumers in pursuit of fulfilment and self-identity [17]. The seduction mechanism in modern consumer society has distinct characteristics. Media strategies such as short videos, live streaming, and interactive games use exaggerated images, colors, and sounds to heighten the allure of products. For example, social media users often curate idealized personal images, creating an illusion of a "perfect life" that captivates viewers and reinforces dependence on virtual identities. Moreover, the fragmented mode of information dissemination continuously creates brief yet stimulating sensory experiences, making it easy for people to become trapped in cycles of short video consumption and other pleasure-driven mechanisms [18]. Influencers and virtual idols also further strengthen the hyperreal simulacra space, deepening audiences' immersion in media-induced seduction [19].

Moreover, modern media advance seduction mechanisms through technical means. Baudrillard's concept of "object strategy" emphasizes that media reconstruct reality through data, algorithms, and images, gradually dissolving and reshaping the stable meaning of the real world [17]. The core of technological seduction lies in the manipulation and re-encoding of information. Platforms such as short video apps and news feeds utilize precise algorithmic recommendation systems, immersing users in information streams aligned with their personal interests, blurring the boundary between reality and virtuality. Algorithms have been shown to serve to reinforce existing interests, thereby creating an "echo chamber" that manipulates users' cognition and behaviour. The advent of immersive media technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) has further augmented the intensity of hyperreal experiences. For instance, Metaverse platforms reconfigure social interaction models in virtual spaces, proffering sensory stimulation that eclipses that of the physical world. The utilisation of fragmented information and excessive symbolisation by media entities has led to the transformation of real-world events into a perpetual symbolic game. Consequently, reality ceases to be a stable presence, instead being continuously reshaped into a fluid "hyperreality."

In conclusion, the media's seduction mechanism serves to further intensify human engagement with hyper-real space, a process that is facilitated by the integration of symbolic manipulation, consumerist shaping, and technological means. In contradistinction to the exclusively visualized domain of mimesis, the seduction mechanism accentuates individuals' psychological engagement in media interactions, leading to a diminution of their critical discernment of reality. This process

culminates in a descent into a domain of sensory disorientation, characterised by the predominance of appearances and illusions.

4. Conclusion

Baudrillard's theory of simulacra provides an important theoretical framework for understanding digitally mediated societies and is particularly relevant in analysing the interactions between modern capitalism, media technology and consumerism. This paper focuses on the expansion of the theory of simulacra in digital media, the logic of capital, and socio-cultural contexts, and reveals how simulacra construct a 'hyper-real' social environment in which the boundaries between the real and the virtual, and between the material and the symbolic, are increasingly blurred. As Baudrillard famously said, 'The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth-it is the truth which conceals that there is none. simulacrum is true.' [1].

Firstly, symbols are no longer found to carry only the use value of material goods; rather, they are increasingly becoming cultural signs and markers of social identity. Nowadays, digital environments such as social media and e-shopping platforms continue to amplify the symbolic attributes of commodities to attract consumption, and this mode of consumption has also led to the gradual replacement of the physical attributes of commodities with their symbolic meanings. As a result, in this environment, consumers are actually increasingly consuming symbols rather than the physical objects themselves [20]. At the same time, the development of digital technology has not only changed the meaning of symbols but also accelerated the spread and penetration of mimesis. Digital technology has enabled virtual worlds to provide users with a 'hyper-real' experience that is more enticing than reality, allowing users to gain a stronger identity and emotional stimulation in this virtual world. For example, with the emergence of Virtual Reality (VR) or Augmented Reality (AR), these technologies further blur the boundaries between the real and the virtual by creating immersive sensory experiences [8]. Furthermore, it can be concluded from the above that media seduction mechanisms also reinforce the hyperreal phenomenon. For example, media forms such as TikTok tend to make use of visual stimuli and pleasure loops to guide users to continuously immerse themselves in a hyperreal world centred on symbolic pleasure. In conclusion, this paper explores simulacra theory to reveal how the media use symbolic creation and algorithmic control to construct a 'hyperreal' society in the present. For individuals in this hyperreal media environment, it is necessary to develop critical thinking and enhance media literacy.

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