

Transformation of Mass Aesthetics Involved by Social Media: the Formation and Alienation of Popular Trends

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Abstract. In the context of the digital age, social media platforms play a significant role in reconstruct mass aesthetics. This paper discusses the transformation of mass aesthetics involved by social media, with a concentration on formation and alienation of popular trends. Through interaction of users, algorithmic recommendation and capital operation, social media platforms have accelerated the dissemination and rigidity of trends and have deeply reshaped contemporary social aesthetic standards. Aesthetic system dominated by traditional elite class has been broken by technological empowerment, which enabled that average users also gain aesthetic discourse power through content creation and interactive participation. This change has benefited the democratization of aesthetics and diversification of individual expression, but has also led to aesthetic homogenization, symbolization, and commercialization, producing a fast-food style consumerist aesthetic culture. The study further reveals the influence of social media on mass aesthetics is not only reflected in the following blindly of trendy signs and self-objectification but also extended to individual cognition and self-identity level. The rise of short videos and the other sensory-stimulating media have fragmented users' attention and weakened their capacity to receive aesthetic content in depth. Simultaneously, social media platforms guide users to adjust their self-image to cater to popular trends with industrial aesthetic formula, which has even caused a disconnect between virtual identity and real self, exacerbating identity anxiety and the loss/erosion of aesthetic judgement.

Keywords: social media, mass aesthetics, alienation, identity.

1. Introduction

In the digital era, social media has already become a crucial platform for information dissemination, culture exchange and the formation of popular trends. For example, "fashion" traditionally referred to clothing and accessories, while it is expanding the range to makeup, hairstyle and the related field of skincare under the influence of digital social media, synthetically forming particular aesthetic styles on public social media platforms (such as Instagram, TikTok and Youtube), makeup, outfit and "check-in" locations can rapidly evolve into global trends within a short period of time. The interaction function for users on platforms allows every person to participate in the dissemination and shaping of aesthetic trends.

With the widespread use of algorithmic recommendation mechanisms on public social media platforms, some certain aesthetic styles can quickly become famous and gain popularity of users. As social media platforms deeply take part in people's daily life, such as "livestream e-commerce", popular trends are highly attached to commercial activities.

This study centers on how social media makes a difference to the formation of popular trends, with particular emphasis on the driving force of trends, the shaping of aesthetic preferences and the phenomena of aesthetic alienation. Existing scholarship on aesthetic transformation has largely concentrated on the art, fashion and consumer culture, while in-depth investigation about how social media shapes it remains limited.

Drawing on perspectives from communication studies, sociology and aesthetics, this research is deep into how public social media platforms participate in the transformation of mass aesthetics. By analyzing the characteristics of aesthetic homogenization, commercialization and symbolization, as well as the challenges to self-identity, and by exploring the formation and alienation of trends, this study further investigates how such dynamics influence individual identity, illuminating the ways in which social media shapes personal aesthetic values and how people are constrained by the homogenized aesthetic standards.

2. Social media platforms driving popular trends

2.1. User interaction facilitates consensus

The public sphere is a space of public discourse situated between the private domain and the realm of the state, characterized by openness, rational debate, decentralization and a public-oriented nature. Citizens are able to freely discuss social, political and cultural affairs in this space, thereby influencing public decision-making [1].

While constructing a digital public sphere, contemporary social media platforms not only confer rights for users to freely express opinions by decentralizing but also strategically delegate partial control through technological ways, fostering a recentralization for key opinion leaders (KOLs). Both of the approaches maintain a balance between openness and concentration after which users can exchange ideas and express points more simply and freely in this field.

KOLs on social media platforms have a huge impact on public opinion to make sure their own perspectives become mainstream. As a manifestation of the two-step flow of communication theory in the time of digital media, the opinions of KOLs are disseminated efficiently through the highly developed interactive mechanisms from social media, which enables them generates strong community effects, accelerating the homogenization of information [2]. Those users who hold the similar views with KOLs come into the discussion of topics so that personal thoughts manage to transfer to collective opinions. After that, a sense of group identity arises within durable interactions.

2.2. Algorithmic recommendations pioneer trends

Algorithmic recommendation systems have emerged as a vital force to direct trends on public social media platforms. As the core technology of information filtering systems, algorithmic recommendation analyzes user behaviors, content attributes and contextual data with collaborative filtering, content filtering, hybrid models, and deep learning to predict user preferences and push personalized content, widely applied by most of social media platforms [3-6]. Some platforms build precise user profiles based on excavating multi-dimensional data such as users' interests, scrolling histories, interactive behaviors to continuously reinforce specific aesthetic preferences and

consumption tendencies. At the same time, social media platforms encourage users to produce high-quality content through reward mechanisms that can be disseminated among different circles efficiently by combining algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. Once the audience size reaches a critical mass, creators will get a chance to lead trends.

Besides, platform mechanisms make originally unpopular outfit styles and certain topics be spread and imitated constantly in user communities through continuous exposure and reinforcement, subsequently entering the public horizon and becoming a new trend.

2.3. Platform commercialization and capital boosting

The commercialization of social media platforms epitomizes social economic transformation in the digital age, breaking its traditional mode whose function was primarily based on interpersonal communication. Instead, social media platforms evolve into a integrated commercial system including large marketing, advertisement putting and use consumption. For instance, Instagram users can directly make purchases through shopping links after looking through products shared or recommended by influencers. However, under capital investment boosting, social media platforms have not only accelerated market expansion but have also bound deeply to capital, then interpersonal relationships are converted into quantifiable commercial assets through the datafication of the social graph [7]. Concretely, platforms deliver promotional content precisely toward targeted user groups with paid advertising mechanisms, and increase popularity to turn popular trends into visualized consumer goods. This commercial operation pattern effectively generates topics, guides consumer trends and accelerates the turnover of fashions, while intensifying the consumerism intentions in society. This commercial transformation driven by capital has shifted social media platforms away from their original public value limited in information exchange toward a profit-oriented and commercialized pattern. Finally, the functional alienation of social media platforms has been finished—from a “public sphere” gradually evolving into an “attention market” focused on the maximization of interests [8].

3. Social media platforms shaping mass aesthetics:

3.1. The power to define aesthetics shifts downward: from traditional professional institutions to average person

In the cultural sphere dominated by traditional media, the discourse power to define aesthetics was almost completely controlled by authoritative institutions: professional art academies established elite academic aesthetic standards through systematic aesthetic education, such as fashion magazines defining trends relying on the authority of editorial expertise and television media shaping public taste by programming during prime time [7]. This “from top to down” mode about unidirectionally aesthetic validation means that the public were positioned in a passive status as merely accepters in this aesthetics-shaping activity. Social media platforms in digital age have lowered the barriers to produce content by technology; the openness of the internet has compensated the knowledge gaps through free aesthetic education. Hence individuals have more equality to express, gradually breaking the aesthetic monopoly of authoritative institutions. Consequently, average user is encouraged to freely produce content by platforms, while likes, comments and reposts now have become new criteria for “beauty”. This change achieves that every user has the chance to initiate a new popular trend.

This transformation shows that democratization of aesthetics, advancing cultural equity and partly rising multidimensional aesthetics, cross-cultural expression and individual styles. This participatory and interactive cultural mode disrupts the unidirectional, authority-validated hierarchy of traditional aesthetics, overturning the dissemination order of the traditional media age, and moving the power to define aesthetic values from elite institutions downward to the public.

3.2. Audiovisual communicative systems stimulate senses of the public

According to Marshall McLuhan's proposition that "the medium is an extension of man," different media affect specific human senses to reshape modes of cognition and the structure of society. For instance, visually oriented media such as print are characterized by linearity, logic, and fragmentation, while aurally oriented media, such as radio and music, enhance the immediacy of acoustic information and the transmission of emotion [9]. Social media platforms make use of this sensory-driven mode of communication to gradually habituate users to aesthetic criteria centered on "visual appeal" and "auditory rhythm", with the value of aesthetics largely depending on intensity of sensory stimulation.

This sensory-dominant aesthetic logic disciplines how users receive "beauty", also called as "aesthetic sensory hegemony". As a result, there is a phenomenon of "self-amputation" for users, manifesting in diminished natural memory capacity and a fragmented attention toward physical reality, during the time of short videos. Users only pay attention to instantly simplified feedbacks and frequently intense stimuli from this kind of audio-visual culture [10].

Mass aesthetics slowly get close to shallow and homogenized features, while complex and deep styles are probably marginalized. Therefore, visual stimuli and auditory environments consistently reinforce to reshape users' cognition of "beauty", turning the attention of mass aesthetics from content-oriented depth toward superficial layer, then weakening underlying exploration and thinking of "beauty".

3.3. Aesthetic homogenization: re-emergence of the culture industry

Aesthetic homogenization refers to the phenomenon that the aesthetic standards, preferences, and modes of expression of different groups and individuals gradually become similar, leading to a reduction in stylistic diversity in contemporary society. The culture industry transfers serious art into products available for purchase, evaluating their artistic value according to their popularity in market. Then art is alienated into reproducible merchandises to satisfy market demands instead of a medium for individual expression, making mass culture increasingly uniform and superficial [11].

The culture industry acquires decentralized and globalized characteristics with the community-oriented operational model of social media. At the same time, cultural merchandises are significantly virtual and interactive in this new phase of the culture industry. The digital content that is the easiest to get accepted is selected with the help of new technology, disseminated and recreated over the world via major social media platforms. Therefore, users are not limited to only buy physical cultural commodities anymore, but choose digitally mass-producible virtual products. Unfortunately, mechanical reproduction enabled by technological innovation deprives "aura" from artistic works, disorganizing the traditional aesthetic relationship between audience and art [12].

The mass aesthetic preferences are fixed in narrow range of options, purchasing mainstream merchandises without distinctiveness and cultural depth instead of trying non-mainstream but novel things. Compared to traditional media era, the culture industry enter the public life combining with new technology and capital as a more efficient way, homogenizing the public's aesthetic logic and

shrinking creativity, destroying cultural diversity under the high-pressure percolation of mainstream aesthetics.

4. The impact of social media platforms on mass aesthetics

4.1. Alienation of aesthetics

The concept of “alienation” originates from Marx’s philosophical system, referring to the appropriation of human essential powers by external forces [13]. In contemporary cultural and aesthetic contexts, this notion has been extended to describe the phenomenon in which individuals in consumer society lose their authentic aesthetic judgment and autonomous aesthetic capacity [14]. One of the main manifestations of aesthetic alienation is the blind following to popular signs—directly appropriating certain cultural signs while ignoring their original contexts and cultural backgrounds, then reducing the serious cultural symbols to be entertained. For example, the “Bohemian style,” which originally referred to 19th-century European romanticized imaginaries of marginalized ethnic groups, has been simplified into some certain stereotypical visual elements through circulation on social media platforms. In consumer society, signs are no longer representations of reality but circulate as self-referential signs. Beauty is not a natural experiential quality anymore. Instead, it becomes an accessory to the commodity “sign” [15].

Art and culture are commercialized driven by capital and aesthetic value gives way to exchange value. For example, a limited range of clothing styles is endlessly rebranded with new names and recirculated in the market to stimulate consumption again and again. There are some similar outfits styles based on brown such as “earth tones,” “Maillard tones,” and “caramel canelé style”, repeatedly pushed into the public eye through differentiated naming strategies.

Besides, aesthetic alienation may also result in self-objectification at the individual level that the person becomes a passive object, subjected to the shaping of aesthetic capacities by external forces.

Social media platforms output “stereotypes of beauty” to domesticate public taste, leading users to misunderstand what is “popular” as what is “beautiful.” As a result, individuals increasingly evaluate aesthetic value according to “popularity” rather than through subjective emotional judgment.

4.2. Challenges to self-identity

Aesthetic trends on social media weaken personal styles and promote individuals to continuously adjust their actions to conform to various labels, which deprives self-exploring ability. Many labels in different time on social media platforms roughly classify outfits styles, then advertised into popular trends. Through it, users can gain an efficient way to define themselves, trapping individuals in flattened labels and then losing the self-exploring capacity.

In the era of liquid modernity, society becomes rapidly fluid, uncertain, and flexible, and individual identities are also unstable, fluid, and indeterminate. Social media amplifies this instability for self identity [16]. As new aesthetic labels emerge, users’ self-definitions change all the time along with evolving trends, causing them to remain temporarily in any style. This makes it difficult to cultivate a coherent and stable sense of self-identity.

The aesthetic alienation in the social media era transforms identity from an internal affirmation of selfhood into a single, symbolized, externally defined standard shaped by the platform’s mechanisms. Social currency like the number of likes or shares comes to determine whether an individual is perceived as “successful”. Users adjust their profile personas to accord with

mainstream aesthetics, while also being passively forced to adjust their own ways of expressing 'beauty' due to other users' judgments.

In modern society, individuals must constantly construct a "self-narrative" based on a lot of social information, strongly paralleling the continual self-image adjustment in the social media era [17]. This mode of aesthetic expression serves external public opinion rather than authentic internal needs, ultimately widening the gap between an individual's online persona and their offline self, causing a result of personality fragmentation.

5. Conclusion

In the digital social media era, platforms have reshaped the logic of trend formation and the shaping of mass aesthetics driven by interactive models, algorithmic recommendation, and capital. While enabling aesthetic democratization and personal expression, they have also fragmented attention and weakened critical capacity. Platform commercialization has transformed aesthetics into industrialized consumer goods, homogenizing content and accelerating the turnover of symbolized, label-based trends. This compels individuals to continually update their self-image to fit the mainstream, deepening the gap between virtual and real identities and producing anxiety—an aesthetic alienation masked by exterior freedom.

In the face of this crisis co-created by technology and capital, it requires multi-level responses. From a technological ethics perspective, optimizing recommendation algorithms to reduce their dependence on commercialization and monetization can encourage platforms to emphasize transparency, fairness, and the cultivation of critical engagement. Social collaboration between platforms, governments, educational institutions, and cultural organizations can improve aesthetic literacy, marginalize superficially homogenized commodities, facilitate cross-cultural exchange, and break through "information cocoons."

Through interdisciplinary research and operation, deeper insights into aesthetic alienation from various dimensions can help with targeted solutions, encouraging platforms to become a place for free expression and cultural vitality, helping users overcome identity anxiety and escape the aesthetic trap of symbolic consumption.

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