

Signifier Games and Consumption Alienation: A Critical Analysis of Semiotic Economics

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Abstract: This article focuses on the phenomenon of signifier play and consumer alienation from the perspective of semiotic economics. By analysing the theoretical context of semiotic economics, it reveals the operating mechanisms of signifier play in consumer society and its alienating effects on consumers. Applying the critical framework of Marxist political economy, it analyzes the inherent connection between the production of symbolic value and consumer alienation, highlighting the erosion of subjectivity, social relations, and cultural values by symbolic fetishism. Through critical analysis, it proposes possible paths to transcend symbolic alienation, providing theoretical insights for understanding the essential characteristics of contemporary consumer society.

Keywords: Can Refer to a Game; Consumption Alienation; Symbolic Economics; Symbolic Fetishism; Critical Analysis

1. Introduction

1.1 The Theoretical Context of Symbolic Economics

The theoretical origin of symbolic economics can be traced back to structuralist linguistics and semiotics in the early 20th century. Saussure's theory of the "signifier - signified" binary relationship [1] laid the foundation for understanding the arbitrariness and systematicness of symbols. In the context of a consumer society, Baudrillard further pointed out that the value of commodities has shifted from use value to symbolic value, which, through the operation of signified games, constructs a symbolic system independent of material production [2]. For instance, the value of virtual game skins as symbolic commodities does not depend on their physical attributes, but rather on their status as symbols of identity, class and cultural capital [3]. The production of this

symbolic value relies on the encoder-decoding mechanism of the medium: advertisements transform products into symbolic carriers through visual rhetoric (such as color and composition) and narrative strategies (such as "successful life" stories), while consumers complete their recognition of the symbolic meaning through consumption behavior [4].

The theoretical evolution of symbolic economics is closely related to the changes in the consumer society. When material demands are met, consumption behavior gradually shifts towards the satisfaction of spiritual desires, and the operation of material goods transforms into the operation of symbolic goods [5]. This process has been accompanied by the expansion of the symbolic system - from monetary symbols to financial derivatives, and then to virtual currencies and NFTS (non-fungible tokens) in the digital age. The operational logic of the symbolic economy has permeated every aspect of economic activities [6]. For instance, the value of virtual land transactions in the metaverse is entirely constructed by community consensus and scarcity, demonstrating the breakthrough of the symbolic economy over the boundaries of the real economy [7].

1.2 Operational Characteristics of Contemporary Symbolic Economy

The contemporary symbolic economy exhibits three core characteristics: dematerialization, accelerated iteration and global circulation. Firstly, dematerialization is manifested as the separation of symbolic value from physical carriers. Take virtual game skins as an example. The essence of their consumption is the possession of symbolic meanings rather than the domination of digital pixels. This separation enables the symbolic economy to break free from the constraints of material production and enter the hyper-reality domain - the symbolic system builds consumption scenarios that are more "real" than reality through simulacra production.

Secondly, accelerated iteration is the survival rule of the symbolic economy. In the era of the attention economy, symbolic value needs to maintain its appeal through continuous innovation. For instance, luxury brands create an "illusion of scarcity" by launching limited edition designs every year, forcing consumers into a cycle of "consuming for symbols" [8]. This iterative mechanism not only accelerates the depreciation of cultural symbols but also leads to the dullness of consumers' genuine demands.

Finally, global circulation benefits from the empowerment of digital technology. Blockchain technology makes the copyright confirmation and transactions of symbolic goods transparent, while cross-border e-commerce platforms break geographical boundaries, enabling the value of symbols to flow globally. However, this circulation has also exacerbated the "center-periphery" structure of the symbol economy - developed countries dominate symbol production by virtue of their cultural capital advantages, while developing countries fall into the predicament of "symbol dependence".

2. Theoretical Context of Semiotic Economics: The Transformation from Use Value to Symbolic Value

2.1 The Dilemma of Classical Political Economy's Theory of Value

Classical political economy, centered on the labor theory of value, holds that the value of a commodity is determined by the human labor embodied in the production process. However, this theory cannot explain the rise of symbolic value in consumer society. Marx pointed out that the mystification of "form" in the process of commodity exchange (such as the universal equivalence of money) obscures the social relational nature of labor. Baudrillard further extended this critique, arguing that in the era of the semiotic economy, the value of commodities has shifted from "exchange value" to "symbolic value," which, through the arbitrary association of signifier and signified, constructs a symbolic system independent of material production.

2.2 Theoretical Construction of Semiotic Economics: The Logic of the Signifier Game

Baudrillard defines semiotic economics as "the study of the production and circulation of symbolic value." Drawing on Saussure's

linguistic theory, he proposed that symbolic value is produced by "difference": the value of a commodity is determined not by its material properties but by its position in the symbolic system. For example, luxury goods establish their high value through symbolic differences from ordinary goods (such as brand logos and design language). This production of difference, through the synergistic effects of advertising, fashion, and media, forms a set of rules for the "signifier game." Consumers participate in the competition for social status and the construction of identity by purchasing specific symbolic combinations (such as "accessible luxury" styles).

2.3 The Generative Mechanism of Symbolic Fetishism

Symbolic fetishism is a core concept in semiotic economics. It refers to consumers' belief that symbolic value is the essential attribute of commodities, and they subsequently identify themselves with the symbols they consume. This process involves a double alienation: first, the alienation of consumers from the use value of commodities (e.g., buying designer bags solely for their logos, not their practical functions); and second, the reification of consumers' social relationships (e.g., class divisions based on the use of symbols). Symbolic fetishism constructs a "hyper-real" world through the production of "simulacra" (e.g., idealized life scenes in advertising), causing consumers to lose sight of their true needs amidst the illusion of symbols.

3. The Mechanism of the Signifier Game: The Production and Consumption of Symbolic Value

3.1 The Production of Symbolic Value: The Cycle of Encoding and Decoding

The production of symbolic value does not emerge out of thin air; rather, it relies on a sophisticated encoding-decoding system. Within this system, advertising, fashion magazines, and social media play the primary role of encoders. Advertisements use carefully crafted visual rhetoric, such as color combinations and clever compositional arrangements, to quickly capture consumers' attention and convey specific messages. For example, cosmetics advertisements often use soft, bright colors to create a fresh, beautiful atmosphere, suggesting that consumers can achieve such a captivating

image by using the product. Narrative strategies are another important means of encoding, and the "successful life" story is a tried-and-true method. In car advertisements, the protagonist drives a luxury car, navigating both career and personal life, achieving career success and a happy love life, leading consumers to equate owning the car with achieving a fulfilling life. Emotional mobilization is also essential, with "limited edition" anxiety being a prime example. By claiming that a product is limited in quantity, brands stimulate consumers' sense of urgency and possessiveness, prompting them to place an order quickly. As decoders, consumers, after receiving these coded messages, identify with the symbolic meaning through their consumption. For example, when purchasing "environmentally friendly" products, consumers are not only purchasing the product's inherent value but also acquiring the symbol of a "green lifestyle," thereby demonstrating their environmental awareness and social responsibility.

3.2 Rules of the Signifier Game: Reproduction of Difference and Hierarchy

The core rule of the symbolic economy lies in "difference production." Baudrillard profoundly pointed out that the symbolic system possesses a powerful exclusionary nature, excluding "non-symbolic" elements. Simple, unmarked designs on ordinary products are often excluded from the symbolic competition, forcing all products to participate in the symbolic contest. This difference production creates a constant flow of consumer demand, instilling in consumers the "must have the latest" mentality, as if not pursuing the latest symbols would be considered disconnected from society.

At the same time, the symbolic system reproduces social inequality through the division of symbolic hierarchies. Luxury brands, for example, transform symbolic value into a symbol of class barriers through high pricing and limited production. High-end products are expensive and scarce, accessible only to a select few, becoming a symbol of wealth and status. Basic products, on the other hand, cater to a wider consumer base but still maintain a certain price threshold and brand identity, further reinforcing social class distinctions.

3.3 The Alienated Characteristics of Symbolic Consumption: The Deconstruction of Subjectivity and Social Relations

The alienation of symbolic consumption is evident on multiple levels. Regarding the dissolution of subjectivity, consumers, under the powerful discipline of symbols, gradually simplify their self-identity into a collection of symbols. For example, some define themselves as "trendsetters," blindly following various fashion trends and purchasing a large number of popular items, while ignoring their true preferences and needs. Others consider themselves "minimalists," deliberately pursuing a minimalist consumption style simply because minimalism is a popular symbol, losing the ability to reflect on their true needs.

The objectification of social relationships is also becoming increasingly serious. Symbolic consumption has become a crucial medium for social interaction, reducing interpersonal relationships to symbolic exchanges. For example, the practice of exchanging gifts, once a deeply emotional exchange, has become ritualized. People prioritize the symbolic value of the gift's brand and price over the thought behind the gift itself, mercilessly replacing emotional connection with symbolic value.

The hollowing out of cultural values is also a cause for concern. The symbolic economy, fueled by the "fast fashion" and "influencer economy," is accelerating the evolution of cultural symbols. Fast fashion brands frequently release new clothing styles, chasing short-term trends while neglecting to explore the quality and cultural connotations of the garments. The influencer economy has spawned an endless stream of popular products, yet most lack depth and longevity. This has led to the erosion of traditional values, such as craftsmanship and aesthetic depth, by the immediate and superficial consumption of symbols, gradually eroding the richness and depth of culture.

4. A Critical Analysis of Consumption Alienation: A Marxist Political Economy Perspective

4.1 The Intrinsic Connection between Labor Alienation and Consumption Alienation

In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx revealed four dimensions of labor alienation: alienation between the worker and the product of labor, the labor process, the species, and others. Baudrillard extended this critique to the sphere of consumption, arguing that consumption alienation is a continuation of

labor alienation—when the sphere of production is controlled by capital, the sphere of consumption also becomes a tool of capital's discipline. By purchasing symbolic commodities, consumers indirectly participate in the cycle of capital's reproduction, thereby reinforcing their own exploited position.

4.2 False Demand and Capital's Strategy of Domination

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse argued that consumer society maintains its rule by creating "false demand." Through the play of signifiers, the symbolic economy disguises capital's interests as consumers' "free choice" (e.g., "personalized customization" services). This disguise misleads consumers into believing that symbolic consumption is a path to self-realization, while in reality they fall into a demand trap set by capital. For example, the rapid iteration of smartphone models is not based on technological breakthroughs, but rather on symbolic differences (such as camera pixels and screen design) that stimulate consumption.

4.3 The Symbolic Economy and the Deepening of the Capitalist Crisis

The prosperity of the symbolic economy masks the inherent contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. On the one hand, the production of symbolic value is detached from material constraints (e.g., the unlimited reproduction of digital goods), creating an illusion of "abundance"; on the other hand, the alienation of symbolic consumption exacerbates social inequality (e.g., the widening gap between the rich and the poor in the symbolic realm). This contradiction may ultimately lead to a deepening capitalist crisis—when symbolic value cannot sustainably support consumption growth, the economic system faces the risk of systemic collapse.

5. Possible Paths to Transcending Symbolic Alienation: Critique and Reconstruction

5.1 Critical Awakening: Deconstructing the Hegemony of Symbols

The first step in transcending symbolic alienation is to awaken consumers' critical consciousness. This requires the education system and public discourse to emphasize the arbitrariness and construction of symbols, exposing the capitalist logic behind their value.

For example, through media literacy education, the public can be helped to distinguish between "real needs" and "false needs" and resist the discipline of symbolic fetishism.

5.2 Reconstructing Consumer Ethics: Returning from Symbolic Consumption to Use Value

The core of transcending symbolic alienation is to reconstruct consumer ethics, shifting the focus from symbolic value to use value. This requires consumers to re-examine the purpose of their consumption behavior—purchases should be based on real needs rather than symbolic symbolism. At the same time, policies should narrow income disparities and reduce the dependence of different social classes on symbolic consumption through measures such as tax regulation and labor protection.

5.3 Reconstructing Social Relationships: From Symbolic Exchange to Emotional Connection

The ultimate goal of transcending symbolic alienation is to rebuild authentic social relationships. This requires promoting non-symbolic forms of communication, such as community building and public cultural activities, and weakening the mediating role of symbols in interpersonal communication. For example, through sharing economy models (such as tool libraries and community farms), we can emphasize resource use over possession, thereby weakening the social function of symbolic consumption.

5.4 Reviving Cultural Values: Resisting the Homogenization of the Symbolic Economy

The global expansion of the symbolic economy has led to a loss of cultural diversity. To transcend symbolic alienation, we must protect local culture and traditional values and resist the homogenization of the symbolic economy. This can be achieved through practices such as cultural heritage preservation and the revival of handicrafts, while also encouraging local brands to explore cultural connotations rather than simply imitating Western symbolic models.

6. Conclusion

Semiotic economics reveals the underlying logic of contemporary consumer society: the game of signifiers, through the production and consumption of symbolic value, draws

consumers into the cycle of capital's reproduction, thereby exacerbating the crisis of alienation. From the perspective of Marxist political economy, semiotic alienation is an extension of the capitalist mode of production in the consumer sphere. Its essence lies in the domination of capital over subjectivity, social relations, and cultural values. Transcending semiotic alienation requires a critical awakening, the reconstruction of consumer ethics, the rebuilding of social relations, and the revival of cultural values, achieving a return from symbolic consumption to authentic needs. This process not only concerns individual freedom but also social equity and the sustainable development of human civilization.

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