

A Study of Media Culture with Special Reference to Pseudo-Individuality of Theodor. W. Adorno.

¹Pompi Kalita,

PhD. Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Cotton University, GHY, Assam, India

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Lakhimpur Kendriya Mahavidyalaya, Lakhimpur, Assam, India

²Dr. Sabitri Devi,

Associate Professor Department of Philosophy, Cotton University, GHY, Assam, India

Corresponding Author: Pompi Kalita (Email: pompikalita283@gmail.com)

Abstract: -

The concept of 'culture industry' was propounded by Theodor. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer together in their influential work 'Dialectic of Enlightenment' which was published in the year 1944. It is within this framework that the concept of pseudo-individuality is being highlighted. Pseudo-individuality is a concept according to which in the modern capitalistic world of industrialization, everything is manufactured with the sole motive for profit generation. In exercising their freedom of choice in purchasing the desired goods and services by the consumers, they are robbed of their original consciousness. Their genuine individualism is taken over by the standardised products of mass-consumption. This paper is an attempt to discuss in detail the concept of pseudo-individualism of Adorno in the light of media culture. Media culture is an emerging concept and is significant from the point of view of media studies.

Keywords: - Culture industry, pseudo-individualism, media culture, mass consumption, industrialization

1. Introduction: -

Communication plays a pivotal role in our lives for it helps in sharing and understanding our thoughts, ideas, opinions etc through the help of language. With the emergence of media, communication has taken a revolutionary form. For now people can interact with each other with ease and also within a very short span of time. The advancement in technology has also facilitated a lot of remarkable changes with regard to media uses and communication now has reached the height of ultimate success. Media through its various forms reaches out to its wide audiences and caters to the interest and needs of every individual. Thus media accessibility has helped in bridging geographical barriers across the globe. People can now get connected with each other sitting in any part of the world.

The dynamics of media influence has exerted a remarkable influence upon the society and culture as a whole. The evolution of media with time has also helped in shaping and developing the society and culture in a most remarkable way. With the emergence of electronic media in the modern times, information can now be disseminated to the mass audiences in a click of time and thus this process has led to the formation of a global mediated culture.

1.1. Objectives of the Study: -

The primary objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To critically analyze Theodor W. Adorno's concept of pseudo-individuality as a central concept within the critical theory of 'Culture Industry' propounded by Theodor .W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

2. To examine the basic knowledge and contents of media culture
3. To highlight upon the fact as to how media culture leads to the creation of pseudo-individuality.
4. To examine how pseudo-individuality outshines the authentic identity of individuals.

2. Methodology: -

In order to carry out the proposed research work in a systematic way, both analytic and descriptive method has been used. The interpretation is based upon the analysis of primary and secondary sources related to the emergence of media culture and Theodor. W. Adorno's concept of 'culture industry' where we can have a brief and a descriptive explanation of the concept of pseudo-individuality. The secondary sources are compiled from a variety of articles, periodicals and websites.

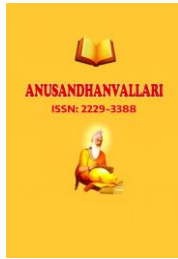
2.1. An Insight into the concept of media culture: -

Media culture in a way can be described as a process in which media can be seen as a significant factor that has a tremendous impact in shaping, developing and transmitting the values and norms associated with our cultures and also in establishing and promoting our cultural identities. Print media (e.g. Newspapers, magazines etc.), broadcast media (e.g. television, radio etc.), digital media, social media etc. all have their own crucial role in performing their assigned functionalities. It also deals with the way as to how the interaction between the media and the masses takes place, the strategies undertaken in adopting the various contents of media, and also the various structural forces such as the economic, political or the technological etc. that inserts a significant impact upon the various portrayals of media.

If we take note of the term culture with regard to the study of media then it can be asserted that it is a complicated term that has not received the kind of attention that it possess and is often taken in a light-hearted manner. Sommier (2014) conducted a literature review of over 100 papers and found that many studies use 'culture' without a clear, operational definition; culture is often treated either as a background given or as something to be represented rather than questioned. Critical approaches, especially those from intercultural communication, social constructionism, and cultural studies, argue that culture is not static but is constructed through practices, discourses, power relations, and media.

Media acts as a representative agent, whose role is to represent the identities of various social groups and in maintaining and promoting their ideologies. Media representations help us to navigate and shape our perceptions towards the various important concepts like gender, caste, nationality etc. associated with the various social groups. But the media representations cannot be said to be evenly distributed at all times. For media at one time although helps to strengthen the existing or biased beliefs associated with a particular group of people but at the other time it seems to challenge or oppose the same belief system that once it had supported.

In the modern world which is driven by the capitalistic motive of profit generation, media culture has emerged as the most significant concept that has proved to be influential in shaping not only public discourse but also in forming and developing the thought process and belief systems of every individuals. The media including radio, films, television, magazines, books etc. transmit messages and information to its audiences on a wider scale and it also acts as a strong powerful ideological mechanism demonstrating and strengthening or fortifying the dominant cultural values. Adorno and Horkheimer through their critical work have talked of and have described media culture as a consequential outcome of culture industry. Culture Industry is described as a system whereby the culture is being commodified to endure the market mechanism under capitalism. It is within this critical framework of culture industry that the most important concept of pseudo-individuality has come to the forefront. Pseudo-individuality provides an illusory vision of unique personality while in real or actually confirms to a homogeneous conformity.



Media culture can be defined as an interactional process that takes place in between media technologies, cultural production and the various social practices that remarkably helps in shaping the explanatory view of the world. According to Douglas Kellner (2003), media culture represents 'a form of culture that emerges from the symbiosis of media technologies and consumer capitalism' (p.5). Thus the role of media culture is just not to distribute the contents carrying information through the application of media platforms but also to transfer the meanings, values and ideologies that remains implanted within these contents.

In capitalistic driven societies, media culture works both as an ideological and an economic system. It operates upon the logic of commodification where the non-commodified goods are now transformed or are treated as a commodity and where cultural products are now created solely for profit generation and thus these cultural goods no longer possess the genuine artistic or intellectual enrichment in it. As Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/2002) argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the 'culture industry' standardizes cultural production to maximize consumption, replacing genuine art with mass-produced entertainment that pacifies the masses.

2.2. A study into the concept of Pseudo-Individuality of Adorno: -

The institute for social research which later came to be known as the Frankfurt School of thought was established during the early years of 20th century in Germany. Many prominent theorists had made their significant contribution in this school of thought. One of the important theories that developed in this school was the 'critical theory' of thought. The theory offers a multidisciplinary approach and it is concerned with the study of various social conditions of domination under the light of capitalism. Prominent scholars of the school such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin had investigated as to how culture, ideology and technology reinforced capitalist power structures (Jay, 1973). It is within this framework that Adorno and Horkheimer together coined the term 'Culture Industry' in their book '*Dialectic of Enlightenment*'. The concept of culture industry mainly emerged as a critique against the capitalist economy. Through this term, both the scholars had maintained that the products of culture are manufactured only with the sole motive of generating profit from them, thereby shaping consciousness and reinforcing social conformity. In their work '*Dialectic of Enlightenment*' both of them had asserted upon the fact that art and culture is being treated as a commodity under the capitalist societies and thus they become the instruments of ideological control rather than their original intention to develop and promote the tools of critical thought. Culture industry flourishes on the basis of its predictable nature, the orderly form that it enhances and because of the appeal of its mass receptors. According to Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), the industrialization of culture mirrors the production processes of capitalist factories: every cultural product is standardized, rationalized, and designed for maximum consumption. The real innovative art forms have lost its proficiency and have come to be replaced with the mass produced culture. It is within this framework of industrial process that the concept of pseudo-individuality originated. In a capitalistic economy pseudo-individuality has a dual role to perform. Firstly it disguises the monotonous uniformity of cultural products and secondly it maintains the ideological function of capitalism by perpetuating the illusion of personal freedom and self-expression.

Pseudo-individuality in a way can be termed as an illusory process where the rational consciousness of humankind is robbed off by the dominating forces of mass production, the various forms of advertising and the contents of entertainment industries. It mainly throws light upon the fact that the uniqueness of human thought and human action is lost in this form of consciousness. Man seems themselves to inhabit in a free society where they have the full authority to exercise their freedom but the real scenario is something else. The capitalist mode of production determines the taste, preference and lifestyle choices of every single individual. Humans are made to believe that they are living in a real world where all their desires and interests are met according to their own self will and according to one's own preferences but in reality they are living in an illusory world where nothing is real. They are only holding to the predetermined rules and customs set up the processes of industrialisation. The real agenda

of these capitalist industries is simply not revealed or is kept hidden before the masses. Thus pseudo-individuality is understood as a deception of the original appearance of the mankind or as the deceptive appearance of uniqueness within a standardized system of mass culture. Adorno (1991) defines it as the way 'individuality' is simulated or manufactured by the culture industry to conceal uniformity and passivity. During the time of the production of popular music, cinema, fashion and advertising, variations in a smaller scale is always done with the aim of presenting the same thing with the slight moderations that have been conducted upon it in order to make it appear as something different from the previous one. However these changes are only at the peripheral state for the underlying system remains the same. By doing so people are made to believe that they are witnessing something different or in a way it can be stated that the humans are simply deceived of having made their personal choices. For example if we talk of the popular music, then it can be seen that they may differ with regard to their composition in their lyrics or melody but the real intention behind their composition is to ensure commercial success and generation of profit. As Adorno (1991) observes, the audience is invited to feel personally connected to these products, believing in their distinctiveness, while they are in fact consuming the same cultural forms repeatedly.

Pseudo-individuality at its core can be termed as an ideology and its important function is to promote the capitalist forces of production by serving the individuals unique needs and desires as a medium of consumption. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) argue that capitalism commodifies not only goods but also emotions, identities, and aspirations. Pseudo-individuals always encourage the individuals to possess unique consumption preferences in all walks of life. They are to exhibit distinctness in buying certain products, adopting a different lifestyle and following a particular ongoing trend. In this process the individuality of every human being is being commodified and the reality underlying behind their unique possession is simply concealed conforming to the same logic of exchange and competition. Consumers purchasing branded clothes, listening to a trending song or any item that they are consuming under a brand name led them to think that they have their own preferred unique choices but in reality all their choices are being generated through the processes of marketing, advertising and the pervasive influence of mass media. Thus the sense of human beings as having their own self individuality is not an independent entity but solely a manufactured entity that is produced for the interest and the profit of the corporate sector. The famous essay 'On Popular Music (1941) authored by Adorno provides a practical illustration of pseudo-individuality. The personal choice of every human being is simply manipulated and they are having a controlled consumption pattern. This process produces passive consumers who accept what the industry provides rather than seeking authentic artistic experience (Adorno, 1941).

In this sense, pseudo-individuality contributes to what Herbert Marcuse (1964) calls 'one-dimensional man', where individuals internalize the values of capitalist society and becomes incapable of critical thought or resistance. The appearance of freedom and diversity becomes a tool of domination, preventing genuine emancipation. Adorno (1991) insists that true individuality cannot exist under such conditions because authentic subjectivity requires autonomy and critical self-reflection –qualities undermined by the culture industry's manipulation.

2.3. Influence of media culture upon pseudo-individuality: -

With the advancement in technology and media accessibility, Adorno's concept of pseudo-individuality is still considered as the most relevant and reliable concept in the age of digital media although the concept has its origination in the middle years of the 20th century. However these digital environments reproduce the same dynamics of pseudo-individuality described by Adorno.

Moreover, in the modern times influencer culture is a trending thing and it exemplifies pseudo-individuality. The influencers always present themselves as having a unique and a genuine identity but their contents always adheres to a standardized form, they take up brand partnership and promotes viral trends. The success of these influencers

always depends upon the marketable identities rather than the genuine differences. Pseudo-individuality in the 21st century has come to the forefront in the form of advertisements that are in a customised form, brand partnerships with the influencers, creating digital identities and through the application of algorithms to identify and analyse the online contents viewed by the data users. The presence of various alternative consumerable choices in the market according to Adorno 'the freedom to choose what is always the same' thus leads to a creation of a false sense of consent. Consumers are made to believe that by choosing their own products they are portraying their individual self but in actual it is the products itself that defines the identity of these consumers. Thus what Adorno has cautiously put forward in his concept of culture industry is anticipated to extend competitive market economy in all areas of life where humans are no longer their own self but treated as just a mere commodity. As Baudillard (1998) notes consumption now signifies identity rather than utility: people buy not to fulfil needs but to perform difference. Pseudo-individuality thus can be regarded as the specific driving factors, principles or motive that lies behind the diverse purchasing decisions and consumption in the present modern world from frequent change in fashion trends to the social platforms that are created to promote and manage the identity, values and norms associated with every particular brand.

Thus in this system, individuality is being identified as a commodity. The audiences are made to believe that whatever they are consuming may it be music, films, clothing style, etc. are all signifying their unique identities and they are not a part of a homogenous whole. According to them, they all are different in their individual approaches but the reality is far from what they believe in. The actuality is that while making their personalised choices they are in real adhering to the already set up or pre-structured market forces. Media culture does in a way do not promote or generate original or genuine individuality. But they in turn lead to the creation of a mass of pseudo-individuals, who believes themselves to have an independent identity which is just a mere appearance of their thinking or believing aspect; but in real they are confirming to the norms and values of consumer capitalism.

The concept of pseudo-individuality, as theorized by Adorno, refers to the illusion of uniqueness and self-expression within a system that enforces conformity. Adorno (1991) defines it as the 'halo of free choice; surrounding standardized cultural products (p.32). This illusion is central to the culture industry's success: consumers believe that their tastes and preferences reflect personal freedom, when in fact; they are determined by the cultural market's structural homogeneity.

In essence, pseudo-individuality reconciles the contradiction between individualism-a key ideal in liberal capitalism- and the standardization required by mass production. It sustains the illusion of freedom and choice, while in practice; individuals remain confined within pre-determined frameworks of cultural participation.

In media culture, standardization is central to the production of pseudo-individuality. As Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) noted, 'The culture industry perpetually promises.' (p.139). The media industry recycles familiar narratives, genres, and character types while presenting them as innovative. This process mirrors what Herbert Marcuse (1964) described as 'one-dimensionality', where individuals are trapped within a closed system of needs and satisfactions defined by consumer capitalism. Media consumers are not encouraged to think critically or seek genuine novelty: instead they are offered pre-packaged differences that create the feeling of choice.

2.4. Advertising acts as a mediator between media culture and pseudo-individuality.

Advertising acts as a mediator between media culture and pseudo-individuality. It is through advertisements itself that the identity is being constructed through the medium of commodities and where the consumers get to learn and experience their unique purchasing skills through their personalised selection of products. As Jhally (2006) explains, advertising transforms goods into symbols of personal meaning and social distinction. The particular brands simply do not display their practical utility and functionalities but rather they become an extended version

of the consumer's identity. But the important thing to notice here is that it is an entirely paradoxical or contradictory process for on one part advertising promises individuality and on the other part standardizes our desires. Everyone is seeking uniqueness by confirming to the same products but only under a different brand name. Thus the products and services are same but only the brands promoting them are different. The individual becomes a reflection of market segmentation- part of a demographic category targeted by marketers-rather than an autonomous being. This mechanism of identity production underpins Adorno's concept of pseudo-individuality: the consumer mistakes conformity for individuality because the system provides structured options that leads to a virtual or artificial technologically created freedom.

As Zuboff (2019) notes in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, digital platforms transform user behaviour into data that can be predicted and manipulated for profit. Users believe they are freely choosing what to watch or follow, but algorithms subtly guide their attention toward profitable content. This algorithmic mediation further entrenches pseudo-individuality by equating personal expression with participation in standardized media formats.

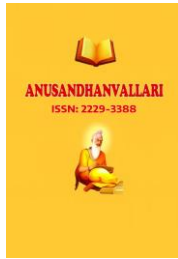
Media culture also manufactures individuality through the construction of celebrity figures. Celebrities embody the ideal of self-made success and personal uniqueness, yet their images are meticulously produced and managed by media corporations. According to Marshall (1997), celebrity culture functions as a 'public pedagogy of individuality' teaching audiences how to perform identity within capitalist frameworks.

Fans are encouraged to emulate the lifestyles, fashion, and attitudes of celebrities, believing that such imitation affirms their individuality. However, this mimicry reinforces conformity to consumer ideals. Adorno (1991) observed that even rebellion in popular culture is commodified- the 'rebel' or 'outsider' persona is packaged as a marketable identity, available for purchase through specific cultural products or styles. Hence, pseudo-individuality operates even in subcultures that claim to resist mainstream norms.

3. Conclusion: -

Pseudo-individuality of Adorno is regarded as one of the most critical and durable analysis that provides a suitable insight into the modern cultural world. The concept points to a significant contradiction with regard to the concept of individualism in a capitalist form of economy and states that the more people tend to exercise their autonomy and freedom, the more they become standardized i.e., they are entrapped into homogeneity. In the name of providing ultimate freedom, the culture industry is pointing to the fact that the individuals are actually dwelling and is confirming to an illusion created by capitalism. In today's digital era and where everything is controlled and determined by algorithm, Adorno's critical theory of thought is gaining more prominence and is being treated as the most relevant one. An authentic self adhering to one's own principle and who executes unique capabilities than the rest of the human beings according to Adorno can be achieved only by having a sound mind that is capable of thinking and analysing every aspect in a critical way and one who is able to oppose the act of transforming every genuine objects into a commodity and one who exercises real individual freedom without any external pressures dictated and controlled by the market economy.

Thus the relationship between media culture and pseudo-individuality is complex. Media culture seeks to promote and generate confirmation for the standardized and homogeneous cultural products making the concept of unique and authentic individuality a mere illusion. Being critically aware, acquiring media literacy and alternative forms of cultural production remains the important tools for reclaiming authentic subjectivity. The enduring relevance of Adorno's critique lies in its warning that true individuality cannot exist without resistance to the totalizing forces of the culture industry.



Conflict of Interests: -

None

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