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CRITICAL THEORY RECONSTRUCTION IN THE ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji tentang teori kritis dan budaya populer merupakan dua konsep yang saling terkait dalam kajian sosial dan budaya. Teori kritis, yang berakar pada pemikiran sekolah Frankfurt, berfokus pada analisis struktur kekuasaan, ideologi, dan budaya dalam masyarakat kapitalis. Teori ini menyoroti bagaimana budaya populer, sebagai produk dari industri budaya, berfungsi untuk memperkuat status quo sosial dan ekonomi. Budaya populer, di sisi lain, merujuk pada bentuk-bentuk budaya yang diproduksi, dikonsumsi, dan disebarkan secara luas dalam masyarakat, seperti musik, film, televisi, dan media digital. Teori kritis memandang budaya populer bukan hanya sebagai hiburan semata, tetapi sebagai alat ideologis yang dapat mereproduksi dominasi sosial, memperkuat stereotip, serta memanipulasi keinginan dan persepsi publik. Melalui analisis terhadap representasi dalam budaya populer, teori ini mengeksplorasi cara-cara di mana nilai-nilai dan norma sosial dibentuk dan dipertahankan oleh media dan industri budaya. Studi ini menunjukkan ketegangan antara produksi budaya yang ditentukan oleh pasar dengan potensi resistensi yang muncul dalam karya-karya budaya populer yang bersifat subversif atau kritik terhadap sistem yang ada.

Kata Kunci: *Teori Kritis, Budaya Populer, Industri Budaya, Hegemoni Budaya, Ideologi dan Perlawanan.*

Abstract

This paper examines critical theory and popular culture, which are two interrelated concepts in social and cultural studies. Critical theory, which has its roots in Frankfurt school thought, focuses on the analysis of power structures, ideology, and culture in capitalist societies. This theory

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highlights how popular culture, as a product of the culture industry, functions to reinforce the social and economic status quo. Popular culture, on the other hand, refers to forms of culture that are produced, consumed, and distributed widely in society, such as music, film, television, and digital media. Critical theory views popular culture not just as mere entertainment, but as an ideological tool that can reproduce social domination, reinforce stereotypes, and manipulate public desires and perceptions. Through analysis of representations in popular culture, this theory explores the ways in which social values and norms are shaped and maintained by the media and culture industries. This study shows the tension between cultural production determined by the market and the potential for resistance that emerges in works of popular culture that are subversive or critical of the existing system.

Keywords: Critical Theory**,** Popular Culture, Culture Industry, Cultural Hegemony, Ideology and Resistance

INTRODUCTION

Critical Theory is an approach in social sciences that aims to critique existing social, political, and economic structures, focusing on injustice and domination. One of the most influential streams within this theory is the Frankfurt School, which includes thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. The Frankfurt School criticizes the culture industry, which is perceived to produce ideologies that oppress individuals and sustain existing power structures. They are skeptical of mass culture, which is considered to divert attention from critical reflection and promote consumption and entertainment (Yan, 2007),(Markov, 2018),(Hammer, 2019). They developed this theory to evaluate the threats to democracy posed by current authoritarian trends (Boucher, 2021), emphasizing epistemological and methodological critiques of positivism, as well as the ideological influence of science and technology in creating new forms of technocratic-bureaucratic domination (Chandran, 2016). It provides strong criticism of positivist and administrative mass communication research and has influenced the development of media political economy (Glynn, 2020), analyzing economic power, the state, and ideology in contemporary contexts, such as the analysis of power during

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the Donald Trump era (Fuchs, 2017). The Frankfurt School criticizes the commercialization of culture and the repression of individual consciousness, aiming for radical social change toward human emancipation (James, 1987).

Critical theory plays a significant role in the analysis of popular culture by combining methods from critical theory and literary sociology. This approach enables a deeper analysis of issues within popular culture, as carried out by Lowenthal of the Frankfurt School (Feng, 2007). In addition, critical theory is also used to understand popular music through sociolinguistics, emphasizing the importance of multimodality in the content analysis of popular music (Matović & Lazić, 2018). Digital media has become a key player in promoting and reinforcing popular culture. Media plays an essential role in cultural transformation, and the relationship between media and pop culture is interdependent. Popular culture has a significant influence that can be utilized for agenda-setting and cultural diplomacy (Rafique et al., 2022). Moreover, recommendation algorithms in digital media contribute to cultural homogenization and the personalization of cultural experiences (Pilkevych & Pilkevych, 2024).

One of the main challenges in popular culture research is the lack of critical debate concerning research methodology, especially in sociological studies of the relationship between youth culture and popular music (Bennett, 2002). There is also a need to integrate various theoretical approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of popular culture on society (Pilkevych & Pilkevych, 2024) Research on contemporary popular culture emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understand its impact on cultural norms, identity, and social dynamics. By combining critical theory and various other disciplines, this research seeks to provide deeper insights into how popular culture shapes future cultural practices and social structures (Feng, 2007),(Pilkevych & Pilkevych, 2024).

Critical theory has long been used to analyze the phenomenon of popular culture, focusing on how it reflects and influences social structures and ideologies. In the context of contemporary popular culture, critical theory seeks to understand the dynamics of power, identity, and resistance manifested in various forms of media and cultural expressions. Several

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studies indicate that popular culture is often regarded as a critical arena where complex and contradictory relationships between individuals and the organizations in which they work are played out. Popular culture can reflect organizational knowledge more compellingly than traditional theory and holds critical potential to reflect the spirit of resistance and rebellion (Rhodes & Westwood, 2007). Furthermore, popular culture in the United States has grown rapidly over the past two decades, influenced by globalization and digital transformation, which emphasize cultural homogenization and the personalization of cultural experiences (Pilkevych & Pilkevych, 2024). This theory needs to be reconstructed to remain relevant in the current postmodern context (Kellner, 1990). In China, critical theory has been adopted to understand the new cultural reality following economic reforms, although scholars have begun to recognize its limitations (He, 2016).

THEORETICAL BASIS

Theoretical Foundations of Critical Theory

Critical Theory is an analytical approach rooted in a non-positivist epistemology, focusing on immanent critique to detect social contradictions and to offer the possibility of emancipatory social change. It was further developed by the Frankfurt School, which emphasised the importance of criticising closed philosophical systems and advancing theory through a series of critiques of other thinkers and philosophical traditions (Ryan & Sfar-Gandoura, 2018). Critical Theory assumes that reality possesses an ontological basis that exists independently of the researcher's empirical observation, as articulated in critical realism (Bukowska, 2021). It highlights reflexivity and critique of instrumental rationality, while drawing attention to the discrepancies between what is actual and what is possible (Iwasiński, 2020). Critical Theory provides a robust framework for analysing and criticising existing social and political structures, with the ultimate aim of fostering more just and emancipatory social transformation. With deep roots in philosophical traditions and further development in modern contexts, this theory remains highly relevant in addressing contemporary social and political challenges (Bukowska, 2021).

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Theoretical Foundations of Popular Culture

Popular culture has been the subject of significant academic attention since the 1950s, with a variety of theoretical approaches developed to understand it. Studies on popular culture encompass multiple disciplines and methodologies, including cultural theory, sociology, and media studies. These approaches situate popular culture as part of broader cultural traditions, often focusing on the distinctions between high and low culture. Such theories stress the importance of understanding popular culture within its historical and social contexts (Storey, 2014: Storey, 2021). Marxist theories, as developed by Raymond Williams, critique elitist views of culture and emphasise the importance of interpreting popular culture as part of class struggle and social change. Williams introduced a novel perspective that diverged from the critical cultural theory of the Frankfurt School (Hua-Jun, 2005). This approach underscores the analysis of structure and meaning in popular culture, with figures such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault contributing to an understanding of how meaning is constructed and sustained within society (Storey, 2021).

Popular culture is a highly dynamic phenomenon, constantly evolving and taking new forms. It reflects transformations within society and technology, while highlighting the crucial role of commercial institutions in shaping its development(Pilkevych, 2021). Research on popular culture is often fragmented by separate disciplinary agendas, indicating a need for interdisciplinary approaches that can integrate diverse perspectives and provide more comprehensive insights (Lexhagen et al., 2022). Although classical approaches remain relevant, there is a necessity to reinterpret concepts and theoretical models in order to grasp the key elements of popular culture in contemporary realities (Pilkevych, 2021). Analysing popular culture may reveal common narratives and cultural resources of both positive peace and resistance, illustrating how it can serve as a tool for peacebuilding(McEvoy-Levy, 2018). Thus, the study of popular culture requires diverse and interdisciplinary methods to capture its complexity and dynamism. By integrating multiple theories and perspectives, we can better understand the role of popular culture in contemporary society.

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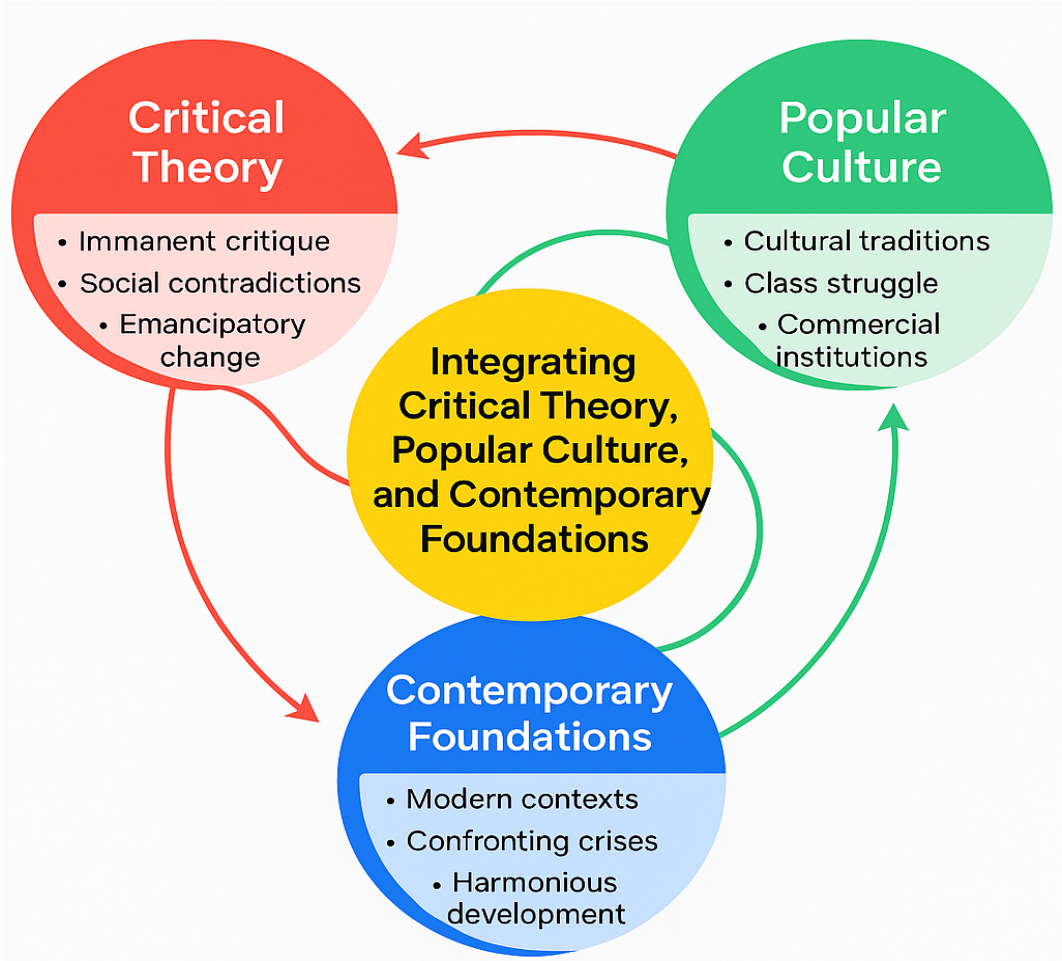
Contemporary Theoretical Foundations

Research on contemporary theoretical foundations encompasses diverse fields, including education, art, music, and politics. Each of these domains faces unique challenges in developing and applying theories relevant to modern contexts. Contemporary theory often struggles to engage directly with present crises, instead tending to look towards the past or imagine utopian futures as ways of avoiding the immediacy of current challenges. This orientation is influenced by the thought of Heidegger and Nietzsche, who often dismissed the present as insignificant and framed current conditions as a civilisational crisis resolvable only through subjective will. In contrast, Mario Tronti's work seeks to understand the rhythm of crises as a dispersed struggle that disseminates knowledge and awareness (Noys, 2024).

In education, contemporary theoretical foundations emphasise the harmonious development of individuals, highlighting the growing importance of education in global competition, where quality of education is increasingly prioritised over purely economic or military power. Contemporary pedagogy also underscores the development of students' intelligence, not merely in transmitting knowledge but also in teaching how to learn and in cultivating their capacity to learn (Zhenzhou & Yang, 2019). Across various domains, contemporary theoretical foundations reflect the challenges of confronting current crises while developing theories relevant to modern contexts. A more critical and integrative approach is required to connect past, present, and future within contemporary theory, and to address the rapid pace of social and technological change.

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Figure 1 Integrating Critical Theory, Popular Culture, and Contemporary Foundations



The radial concept map visually illustrates the integration of Critical Theory, Popular Culture, and Contemporary Foundations. At the center, the title represents the core framework connecting the three domains. The red branch highlights Critical Theory's focus on non-positivist epistemology, social critique, and the pursuit of emancipatory change. The green branch represents Popular Culture, emphasizing class struggle, cultural narratives of resistance, and interdisciplinary approaches. The blue branch depicts Contemporary Foundations, focusing on addressing modern crises, integrating temporal perspectives, and emphasizing educational development. Curved lines between branches indicate the interrelatedness of these frameworks, illustrating how each informs and reinforces the others in theoretical and practical analysis.

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RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs the library research method to reconstruct Critical Theory within the context of contemporary popular culture analysis. The library research approach was chosen as it allows the researcher to explore and analyse relevant literature, including books, journal articles, and academic documents, in order to understand the relationship between Critical Theory and popular culture (Hamzah, 2020). The primary focus of this research is to examine how Critical Theory can be applied to uncover the mechanisms of ideology, hegemony, resistance, and representation embedded in various forms of popular culture, such as film, music, social media, and subcultures.

The data collection process began with identifying relevant literature through academic databases such as JSTOR, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. The selected literature includes the works of key Critical Theory scholars such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Stuart Hall, and Antonio Gramsci, as well as contemporary studies linking Critical Theory to digital cultural phenomena. Once the literature was gathered, the data were analysed using content analysis to categorise key concepts, including the role of popular culture in sustaining capitalism, the process of hegemony through mass media, and the spaces of resistance that emerge within digital culture.

During the analysis, the data were categorised according to major themes aligned with the framework of Critical Theory. These themes encompass the dominant ideologies within popular culture, the dynamics of resistance against power structures, and the ways in which digital media creates new spaces for the dissemination of ideology or resistance. Interpretation was carried out to understand how Critical Theory, originally developed in the twentieth century, can be reconstructed and applied within the context of contemporary popular culture. This approach enables the research to identify the continuing relevance of Critical Theory in analysing evolving modern cultural phenomena.

The validity of the study was ensured through the use of reliable academic sources, including reputable journals, expert-authored books, and relevant prior research. To maintain reliability, the literature was evaluated through cross-comparison of different sources to minimise bias and ensure

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the consistency of findings. This process provides a robust foundation for constructing a theoretical synthesis that explains the relationship between Critical Theory and popular culture, particularly in the digital era characterised by the dynamics of global capitalism and technological advancement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study demonstrates that popular culture functions as a mechanism for maintaining dominant ideologies, particularly capitalism. Media such as film, music, and social media are employed to normalise values like consumerism and individualism, in line with Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the "culture industry". According to this concept, the culture industry exists to uphold and reinforce capitalist ethos. Through various media, popular culture commodifies all aspects of life, transforming them into marketable goods(Heryunda, 2023). Popular media often promotes consumerist lifestyles in which personal value and identity are measured by the ownership of goods and services, thereby creating a social environment where consumerism becomes the normative order. Beyond consumerism, the media also highlights the significance of individualism, reinforcing the notion that success and happiness are outcomes of personal effort—an ideology aligned with capitalist values (Heryunda, 2023).

Popular culture plays a crucial role in sustaining and disseminating capitalist ideology by normalising consumerist and individualistic values (Guha, 2020). Through film, music, and digital media, Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the "culture industry" remains highly relevant in explaining how popular culture serves as a tool for reinforcing existing social and economic structures (Malyshko, 2024). Cultural hegemony, as articulated by Antonio Gramsci, operates subtly and often unconsciously through popular media such as films, advertisements, and digital content (Shah et al., 2022). This process allows dominant values to be internalised by society as universal truths. Media and social institutions are instrumental in disseminating these dominant values, which are then perceived as common sense by the wider public (Malyshko, 2024; Shah et al., 2022; Guha, 2020). Hegemony is achieved through ideological control that naturalises particular values and norms, rendering them unquestionable (Guha, 2020; Sardar, 2024)

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Society unconsciously internalises values presented through media, reinforcing the status quo and diminishing the likelihood of resistance (Shah et al., 2022; Guha, 2020). Hegemony shapes mass consciousness, embedding media-driven norms into collective awareness (Malyshko, 2024; Shah et al., 2022). While hegemony is pervasive, there remains potential for resistance from subaltern groups capable of challenging and transforming dominant structures(Guha, 2020). Critiques of the culture industry reveal how media can sustain hegemonic power while simultaneously creating spaces for resistance (Malyshko, 2024). Gramsci provides a powerful framework for understanding both the maintenance of power and the emergence of resistance. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model further highlights how media messages are produced and interpreted, shaping public perceptions and identities. Hall posits that media messages are encoded with dominant ideologies but are decoded by audiences based on their cultural contexts, resulting in divergent interpretations.

Media producers encode messages with ideologies—often dominant or hegemonic—that audiences decode in three ways: dominant-hegemonic (accepting the intended message), negotiated (partially accepting it), or oppositional (rejecting it) (Bełkot, 2016). Audience decoding is shaped by cultural background, social position, and personal experiences, generating diverse interpretations of the same media text (Bełkot, 2016; Rosino, 2021). While media can serve as a tool of social control, it also offers opportunities for resistance. Audiences may resist dominant ideologies by interpreting media in ways aligned with their own beliefs and experiences, thereby shaping their identities (Li, 2019; Woodstock, 2016). Hall argues that media constitutes a site of ideological struggle, where hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies collide. This ongoing struggle influences how individuals perceive themselves and the world (Bełkot, 2016; Rosino, 2021). In digital media, audience reception is increasingly active, with individuals engaging in decoding practices that reflect and shape racial politics and identity (Rosino, 2021). Some limit their media consumption as an act of resistance against dominant cultural messages, underscoring the active role audiences play in interpreting media (Woodstock, 2016).

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model underscores the complex interaction between media messages and audience interpretation. It

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demonstrates how media can simultaneously reinforce and challenge dominant ideologies, shaping public identities and perceptions. This dynamic process is informed by cultural, social, and personal contexts, making popular culture a site of both ideological reproduction and resistance. Subcultures, alternative media, and grassroots movements use various forms of expression to contest dominant norms and present counter-narratives.

In Indonesia, global popular culture fandom subcultures exemplify resistance against industry-produced cultural texts, even though they are often entangled within the very capitalist system they oppose (Sugihartati, 2020). The skateboarding subculture resists capitalist social relations but faces internal contradictions such as sexist practices (Beal, 2016). The internet provides technical advantages for oppositional groups to disseminate subversive culture, but also poses challenges of commodification and exploitation (Debies-Carl, 2015). China's slash fanfiction communities employ digital platforms to resist orthodox heteronormativity within nationalist discourses, demonstrating cultural resilience through platform migration and social media activism (Xiao, 2023). Black celebrities mobilise their identities as forms of resistance, using popular culture to challenge racial inequalities and transform entertainment moments into political mobilisation opportunities (Allen & Miles, 2020).

Popular culture and subcultures thus act as important vehicles of resistance against dominant ideologies. While often co-opted by the very systems they oppose, they nonetheless create innovative ways of contesting and reshaping existing power structures through diverse expressions and digital platforms. Resistance within popular culture frequently encounters paradoxes, whereby challenges to capitalism are reabsorbed into the capitalist system itself. For example, anti-establishment movements such as punk music eventually became commodified, reducing their revolutionary potential. Capitalism frequently neutralises critiques directed against it—a phenomenon Gramsci terms "passive revolution"—by modernising and stabilising itself through the absorption of criticism (Schoppek, 2020). In subcultural contexts, resistance must be understood as not merely political or economic but also as socially and discursively complex. For instance,

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under communist Romania, cultural resistance reflected paradoxical socio-political dynamics. Discursive analyses of power relations can thus reveal the layered complexities of such forms of resistance (Ştefănescu, 2017).

The paradox of cultural resistance illustrates how oppositional efforts are often reabsorbed by capitalism, thereby diminishing their revolutionary potential. This is evident across contexts, from subcultures to cultural resistance under totalitarian regimes. Resistance is not only symbolic but also contextual and multilayered, challenging traditional notions of opposition to dominant systems. Digital media, including social media and streaming platforms, has transformed the production and distribution of popular culture by democratising access and participation. This technology empowers individuals to create content that challenges dominant ideologies while also shaping new cultural norms and values. Social media reshapes communication and self-expression, enabling micro-level social change(Chandra et al., 2024). It facilitates greater participation in media production, transforming users into content creators such as citizen journalists and video artists (Burwell, 2010). Social media amplifies marginalised voices and shapes cultural values, thereby reinforcing its role in the cultural politics of modern society (Chandra et al., 2024).

Streaming platforms have similarly acted as catalysts of change in the media industry, democratising access to content creation and distribution (Mekhonoshin, 2024). Services such as Netflix have revolutionised film distribution, enabling on-demand access across contexts, albeit with challenges such as illegal streaming (Irfandianto et al., 2024). Streaming and live music collaborations support sustainable growth in the music industry, fostering participatory creativity (Naveed et al., 2017). Streaming services are also applied in education to support learning and cultural memory, though sustainability risks must be considered (Heuman & Rampazzo Gambarato, 2023). While digital media has democratised production and access, challenges remain, including piracy and the dominance of large platforms. Research indicates that digital media algorithms tend to prioritise commercially profitable content, reinforcing capitalist structures while marginalising alternative voices. Content creators are often compelled to follow popular trends to achieve visibility

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and professional success, leading to instability in their creative labour (Duffy et al., 2021;Zhang et al., 2020;Prodnik, 2021).

Table 1Analytical Findings on Popular Culture, Ideology, and Resistance

No	Main Theme	Key Theoretical Frameworks	Empirical / Analytical Findings	Theoretical and Social Implications
1	Popular Culture as an Ideological Tool	Adorno & Horkheimer (Culture Industry)	Media such as film, music, and social media normalize consumerism and individualism, reinforcing capitalist values through commodification of everyday life.	Popular culture serves as an ideological instrument that upholds and legitimizes dominant socio-economic structures.
2	Cultural Hegemony	Antonio Gramsci	Dominant values are subtly internalized by society through media, becoming perceived as "common sense" and thus rarely questioned.	Hegemony operates through cultural and ideological control, shaping collective consciousness without explicit coercion.
3	Audience Decoding and Resistance	Stuart Hall (Encoding/Decoding Model)	Audiences interpret media messages in dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional ways, creating spaces for resistance within cultural production and reception.	Media functions as a site of ideological struggle, not merely a top-down mechanism of domination.

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4	Subcultures and Counter-Narratives	Guha; Xiao; Allen & Miles	Subcultures (e.g., fandoms, skateboarding, slash fiction communities, digital activism) challenge dominant narratives but are often co-opted by capitalist systems.	Cultural resistance is paradoxical and contextual—while it opposes dominant ideologies, it is frequently absorbed back into the capitalist framework.
5	Algorithmic Capitalism	Fuchs; Prodnik; Nazarov	Digital algorithms prioritize commercially profitable content, marginalizing alternative voices and fostering "filter bubbles" that shape cultural discourse.	Algorithmic structures reinforce digital capitalism by automating content distribution, limiting diversity, and exerting structural control over public communication.
6	Conspiracy and Ideological Struggle	Douglas; De Wildt & Aupers	Conspiracy theories spread rapidly via digital media, increasing polarization and challenging epistemic stability within popular culture.	Contemporary popular culture is vulnerable to ideological manipulation, illustrating the complex interplay between media, ideology, and public belief systems.

Social media and digital platforms frequently employ algorithms designed to maximise commercial gain by prioritising content that enhances user engagement, such as likes and shares (Duffy et al., 2021;

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Nazarov, 2020; Prodnik, 2021). These algorithms reinforce existing social phenomena—including individualism and populist politics—potentially contributing to polarisation and misinformation (Metzler & García, 2023; Nazarov, 2020; Mohamed et al., 2024). Content creators report pressures to "appease the algorithm" in order to secure greater visibility, often at the expense of creativity and alternative voices (Zhang et al., 2020; Prodnik, 2021). The dependence on algorithmic distribution creates uncertainty and instability for creative labour, as algorithmic changes drastically affect reach and success (Duffy et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). Algorithms thus reinforce digital capitalism by automating and rationalising content distribution, frequently overlooking social and ethical values (Prodnik, 2021; Timcke, 2021). There are concerns that algorithms create "filter bubbles", restricting exposure to diverse perspectives and narrowing the scope of public discourse (Nazarov, 2020; Mohamed et al., 2024).

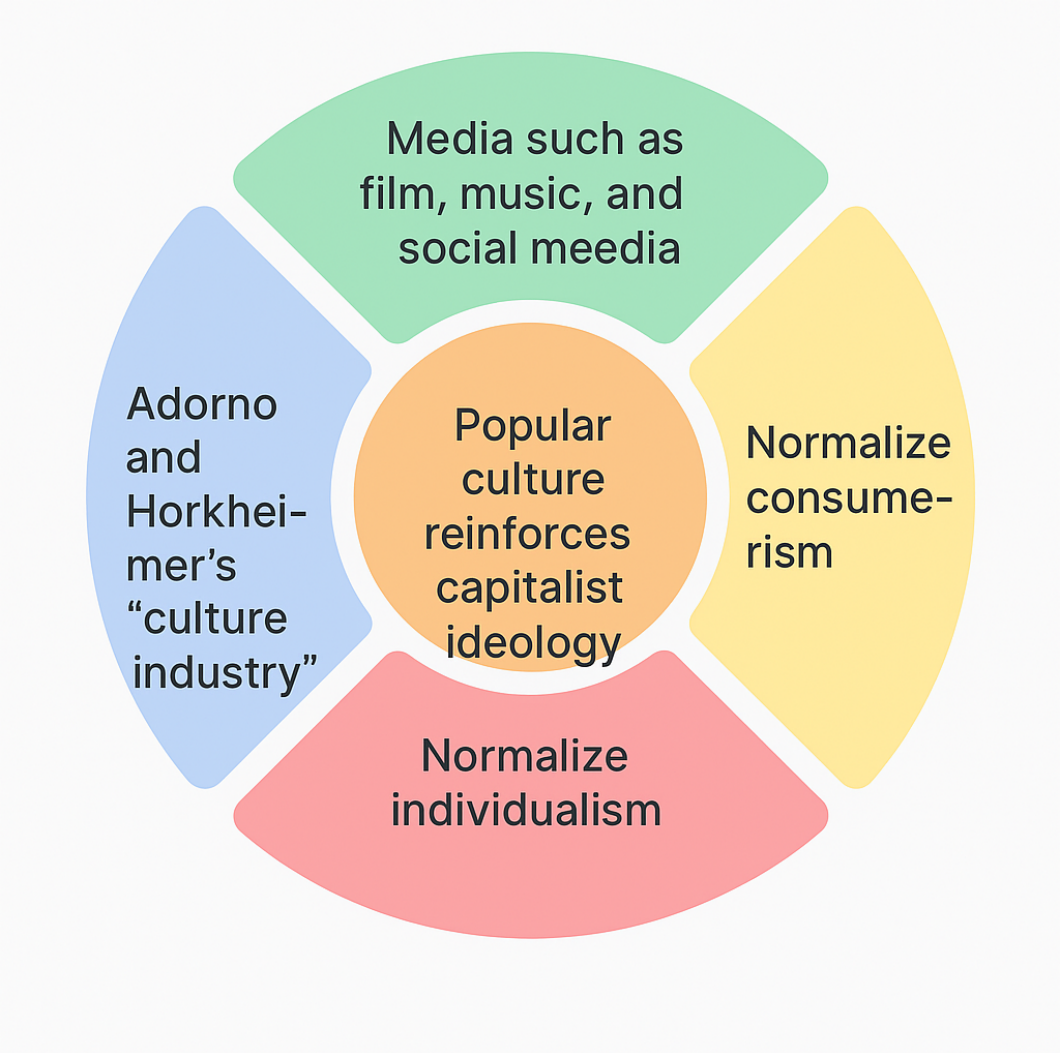
Digital media algorithms play a pivotal role in prioritising commercially aligned content, often at the cost of creativity and alternative voices. This reinforces digital capitalism while presenting challenges for creators seeking originality and diversity. The spread of conspiracy theories through popular culture exacerbates social polarisation. Although some conspiracy theories may stimulate critical thinking, many disseminate misinformation that undermines social stability. Conspiracy theories can fuel extremist behaviours, as seen in the 6 January 2021 US Capitol riots, where narratives of a "stolen election" incited violence (Allain et al., 2023). Such theories also reduce political participation and influence health and environmental decisions (Douglas & Sutton, 2018). Discussions of conspiracy theories are often conflict-laden, with participants discrediting each other's beliefs (De Wildt & Aupers, 2023).

Belief in conspiracy theories is often driven by psychological needs to make sense of the environment, feel secure, and preserve a positive self-image and group identity (Douglas et al., 2017). Conspiracy theories are appealing partly due to their entertainment value, which can increase belief in them (Van Prooijen et al., 2021). Social media accelerates their spread and expands their reach (Douglas et al., 2019). On platforms such as Reddit, conspiracy theories are widely debated, showing that participatory culture is not homogeneous but marked by contention and scepticism (De Wildt &

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Aupers, 2023). While occasionally prompting critical thought, conspiracy theories more often intensify social polarisation by spreading misinformation and fuelling extremism. Psychological factors and entertainment appeal play key roles in their dissemination, particularly via digital platforms.

Figure 2 Radial Conceptual Framework: Popular Culture and Ideological Dynamics



The radial diagram visually illustrates the dynamic interaction between key elements that shape the relationship between popular culture and ideology in contemporary society. At the center is Popular Culture,

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which functions as both a mechanism of ideological reinforcement and a site of resistance. Radiating outward are four interconnected components: Capitalist Ideology, Media and Cultural Hegemony, Audience Interpretation, and Digital Media & Algorithmic Influence. Capitalist ideology is maintained through media's promotion of consumerism and individualism, aligning with Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry. Media and cultural hegemony, drawing on Gramsci's framework, illustrate how dominant values are subtly internalized as common sense. Audience interpretation, based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, highlights how individuals can accept, negotiate, or oppose media messages depending on their cultural contexts. Finally, digital media and algorithmic influence demonstrate how technology reinforces commercial priorities while also offering spaces for counter-hegemonic practices. Together, these elements form a complex, circular system where ideology is both reproduced and contested through cultural processes.

Critical Theory remains relevant in analysing contemporary popular culture, especially through the frameworks developed by Adorno, Hall, and Fuchs. These perspectives assist in understanding the complexities of media, ideology, and society today. Adorno critiqued the culture industry as a profit-driven structure that manipulates and controls society through standardised, easily consumable cultural products that reinforce established ideas (Rekha & V, 2023; Shen, 2021). He argued that popular music cannot be regarded as a "monad without windows" because it is heavily influenced by the social and economic structures that standardise it (Shen, 2021). Although Adorno's critique is often deemed elitist, his insights remain pertinent for understanding capitalism's impact on cultural production and consumption (Rekha & V, 2023). Hall emphasised the significance of representation in media as a means of shaping and influencing social ideologies, a perspective crucial for analysing how contemporary media frames public perception (Misgeld, 1984). Fuchs applies Critical Theory to digital media, stressing the importance of continually reassessing the contributions of Frankfurt School thinkers within the context of modern media (Esch, 2018). Collectively, the frameworks of Adorno, Hall, and Fuchs highlight the enduring relevance

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of Critical Theory in analysing contemporary popular culture, offering analytical tools to examine how media and ideology interact in modern societies.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary popular culture plays a crucial role as a vehicle for reinforcing dominant ideologies, particularly capitalism, through the normalisation of values such as consumerism and individualism. Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the "culture industry" highlights how media commodifies cultural products in order to sustain the socio-economic status quo. In this process, capitalist norms become embedded within the collective consciousness of society, making resistance to the prevailing system increasingly difficult. Furthermore, Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony demonstrates how dominant values are subtly internalised by society through media and social institutions, functioning as an often-unnoticed form of ideological control.

Although digital media provides opportunities for resisting dominant ideologies through more democratic content production, significant challenges remain. The algorithms employed by digital platforms frequently prioritise commercially oriented content, thereby reinforcing digital capitalism and marginalising alternative voices. Within this context, cultural resistance becomes paradoxical, as oppositional movements—such as subcultures and alternative media—are often reabsorbed into the capitalist system they seek to challenge. This phenomenon illustrates capitalism's capacity to modernise and strengthen itself by absorbing critique, a process Gramsci described as "passive revolution."

Critical Theory, as developed by Adorno, Stuart Hall, and Fuchs, remains highly relevant for understanding the complexities of contemporary popular culture. Their perspectives illuminate how media shapes and influences societal ideologies while demonstrating that popular culture is a dynamic arena of ideological struggle. Although often employed to reinforce dominant ideologies, popular culture also offers spaces for resistance, social transformation, and the construction of new identities. Consequently, the analysis of contemporary popular culture requires approaches that acknowledge the complex interplay between

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media, ideology, and society, as well as the potential for fostering change amidst enduring structural challenges.

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