

The Evolving Culture Industry: From Mass Production to Digital Nationalism

Mrs Phula Jyoti Saikia

Assistant professor

Department of Assamese

Duliajan college

Email: Phulajyotikhaund@gmail.com

Abstract:

This review article examines the enduring relevance and evolution of the concept of the "Culture Industry," first formulated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Initially, the concept described a top-down system of cultural mass production that standardized content to pacify audiences and reinforce capitalist ideologies. However, it has since been significantly challenged and refined. This article synthesizes literature that critiques the model of the passive consumer, highlighting theories of active audiences, prosumption, and cultural resistance. It then explores the digital transformation of the culture industry, where algorithms create filter bubbles and user-generated content becomes a form of free labor. Crucially, the review examines how the culture industry serves as a battleground for nationalism, analyzing how music, television, and digital media are leveraged to forge emergent, resurgent, and imagined national identities. The findings confirm that while the centralized factory model is outdated, the culture industry's core function—integrating individuals into consumerist and nationalist frameworks—persists in new, decentralized, and interactive forms, making its critical understanding more vital than ever.

Keywords: Culture Industry, Adorno and Horkheimer, Nationalism, Digital Media, Hegemony, Prosumer, Standardization, Algorithmic Curation

1.0: Introduction

The concept of the "Culture Industry," coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their seminal work, represents a critical lens through which to analyze the production, distribution, and consumption of culture in modern societies. They argued that culture had ceased to be an organic, bottom-up expression of the people ("folk culture") and had instead become a manufactured commodity, produced from above like any other industrial product (Markus, 2006). This system, they contended, serves to integrate consumers into the prevailing socio-economic order, promoting passivity and discouraging critical thought.

The core characteristics of the traditional culture industry model include:

1. **Standardization:** Cultural products—from pop songs to film genres—follow predictable formulas and conventions, creating a comforting familiarity that negates the challenging nature of authentic art (Babich, 2014; Witkin, 2000).
2. **Pseudo-Individualization:** The illusion of choice is offered within a tightly controlled framework. Just as consumers choose between different branded burgers made from the same standardized ingredients, they choose between cultural products that offer superficial differences but ultimately reinforce the same underlying values (Witkin, 2000).
3. **Top-Down Integration:** The culture industry does not respond to authentic human desires but instead creates and manipulates them to ensure conformity and the smooth functioning of the consumer capitalist system.

The central research argument of this review is that while Adorno and Horkheimer's foundational critique remains powerfully insightful, the concept of the culture industry has evolved necessarily. It is no longer adequate to view it solely as a monolithic factory producing for a passive audience. Instead, contemporary scholarship portrays it as a dynamic, contested, and adaptable battlefield for hegemony, a space where top-down control is constantly negotiated and resisted from below (McCarthy, 2013).

The rationale for this review stems from the urgent need to understand the transformed landscape of cultural production in the 21st century. The rise of digital platforms, social media, and algorithmic curation has fundamentally altered the mechanisms of the culture industry, presenting both new forms of control and new avenues for resistance. Furthermore, the persistent and potent use of cultural forms to fuel various nationalisms—emergent,

resurgent, and imagined—demonstrates the continued utility of the concept in analyzing identity politics and geopolitical conflict.

This review article is guided by the following Research Questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** How have critiques of the "passive audience" model, such as Bourdieu's cultural fields and studies of prosumers, challenged and refined the original concept of the culture industry?
- **RQ2:** In what ways has the digital revolution adapted the logic of the culture industry, particularly through algorithms, data extraction, and platformization?
- **RQ3:** How is the culture industry deployed as a tool for constructing and maintaining national identity across different contexts (emergent, resurgent, imagined)?

2.0: Objectives

The objectives of this article are:

1. To synthesize key scholarly developments that has expanded upon Adorno and Horkheimer's original thesis.
2. To analyze the dual nature of digital media as both a new factory for standardisation and a new playground for cultural resistance.
3. To systematically review and present evidence of how the culture industry machinery is explicitly used in nationalist projects worldwide.
4. To provide an updated, holistic understanding of the culture industry as an indispensable critical tool for the 21st century.

3.0: Methodology

This paper is structured as a comprehensive narrative review article. The methodology involved a systematic analysis of the provided review manuscript, which itself constitutes a synthesis of a vast body of scholarly literature on the culture industry. The approach was qualitative and thematic, focusing on identifying, extracting, and synthesizing the core arguments, theoretical frameworks, and empirical case studies presented within the document.

The process involved:

1. **Familiarization:** A close reading of the entire manuscript to understand its scope and key themes.

2. **Thematic Identification:** Key themes were identified, including the original Frankfurt School critique, challenges to the passive audience model, the impact of digitalization, and the relationship between the culture industry and nationalism.
3. **Data Extraction:** Relevant arguments, theoretical concepts, and empirical examples (e.g., Estonian Song Festivals, Kurdish music, algorithmic curation) were extracted and organized according to the pre-defined structure of a standard review article (Abstract, Introduction, Methodology, Findings, Discussion, Conclusion).
4. **Synthesis and Structuring:** The extracted data were synthesized to construct a coherent narrative that traces the evolution of the culture industry concept, supported by the original citations from the manuscript. All citations and references have been retained verbatim from the source document to ensure academic integrity.

This method enables the holistic integration of the manuscript's dense content into a more conventional and accessible academic format, thereby fulfilling the urgent need for a prepared review article.

4.0: Findings of the Study

The analysis of the provided manuscript reveals several key findings regarding the evolution and operation of the culture industry.

1. **The Foundational Critique: Standardization and Passivity:** The original thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer posits a culture industry that produces standardized goods to create a passive and integrated consumer base. Adorno's analysis of the radio, for instance, viewed it not as a democratizing force but as a centralizing technology that transformed live performances into repeatable, standardized commodities, thereby draining art of its critical and unique power (Babich, 2014). His controversial critique of jazz as "pseudo-individualization" stemmed from this view—he heard not true improvisation but a series of predictable flourishes within a rigid commercial framework, mirroring the illusion of freedom within a controlled society (Witkin, 2000).
2. **Challenging the Passive Audience: Resistance and Prosumption:** A significant body of work has challenged the notion of the cultural "dupe." Scholars argued that audiences actively interpret and repurpose cultural products.
 - i. **Cultural Fields:** Pierre Bourdieu and his followers conceptualized a complex "cultural field" where artists, producers, and corporations

negotiate between artistic value and commercial imperatives, a messier and more contested space than a simple top-down command chain (Hesmondhalgh, 2006).

- ii. **Subcultural Resistance:** Studies of subcultures, such as the 1970s punk movement, demonstrated active rebellion against the slick corporate culture industry. Punk's "do-it-yourself" ethos and raw sound constituted an authentic, bottom-up "field of cultural production" (Moore, 2007).
- iii. **The Prosumer:** In the digital age, the line between consumer and producer has blurred. Fans are now "prosumers," actively creating fan fiction, memes, and video edits, thereby reshaping the narratives they receive (Siuda & Troszynski, 2016; Sugihartati, 2020).
- iv. **Glocalisation:** On a global scale, the process of "glocalisation" shows that global cultural forms are often adapted to express local identities. For example, Caribbean artists infuse the global music video format with local landscapes and rhythms, resisting total standardization (Balaji & Sigler, 2018).

3. The Digital Double-Edged Sword: Algorithms and Free Labor: The digital revolution has transformed the culture industry into a decentralized, interactive ecosystem.

- i. **Algorithmic Standardization:** Streaming platforms and social media use algorithms to create "filter bubbles," recommending content that aligns with a user's existing preferences. This represents a high-tech, personalized form of the standardization Adorno warned against (Wiggins, 2013). Furthermore, the pursuit of viral content has led to the development of new, data-driven formulas.
- ii. **The Data Commodity:** Our leisure time is monetized as our clicks and interactions are monitored and sold, with privacy becoming the price for curated entertainment (Seubert & Becker, 2019).
- iii. **Free Digital Labor:** The ability for anyone to become a creator on platforms like YouTube or TikTok can be framed as "free digital labour." Users generate content and data that enrich platform corporations, making them unwitting workers in the digital factory (Sugihartati, 2020).

4. The Culture Industry as a Nationalist Forge: A paramount finding is the systematic use of the culture industry to construct and sustain national identity. This can be categorized into three distinct types:

A. Emergent Nationalism: Forging a new nation, often in opposition to a ruling power.

- i. **Estonian Song Festivals:** These mass singing events were "rituals of political mobilisation" during the Soviet era. The collective performance of songs like "My Fatherland is My Love" by hundreds of thousands physically manifested the Estonian nation and was crucial to the non-violent "Singing Revolution" (Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2014).
- ii. **Kurdish Nationalist Music:** For the stateless Kurds, music functions as a "counter-mapping discourse." Songs referencing mountains like Qandil and Agri are sonic claims to a denied territory, fostering an emergent national consciousness that transcends the borders of existing states (Hongur, 2022).
- iii. **Revolutionary Satire in Bahrain:** Activists during the 2011 uprising used satirical videos and songs as "revolutionary cultural production" to mock the regime and forge a collective identity opposed to the ruling power (Jones, M. O., 2017).

B. Resurgent Nationalism: Reclaiming a suppressed or eroded identity.

- i. **Folk-Nationalist Hegemony in Hungary:** Between 1930 and 1944, the Hungarian right-wing incorporated folk songs into the Boy Scouts to construct a racially pure, resurgent national identity, linking urban youth to a romanticised rural past (Hirsch, 1997).
- ii. **Rebel Music in Belfast:** Irish republican communities use "rebel music" as a cultural weapon ("my AK-47") to perform resistance, memorialise martyrs, and reinforce a resurgent nationalist identity against British rule (Millar, 2018).
- iii. **French WWI Songs:** The periodic resurgence of WWI songs in France reactivates a memory of national sacrifice and unity, reinforcing a resurgent patriotism during times of reflection (Evans, 2017).

C. Imagined Nationalism: The daily reinforcement of an established nation-state.

- i. **Indian Television (Doordarshan):** The state broadcaster used nationalist songs like "Mile Sur Mera Tumhara" for decades to standardise a vision of "Unity in Diversity," actively imagining the nation for its citizens (Khasnabis, 2024).
- ii. **Swedish Sailor Songs:** The popularisation of sailor songs through radio and records in 20th-century Sweden helped sustain an "imagined" maritime national identity, even as the country modernised (Arnstad, 2023).
- iii. **Indonesian Television Commercials:** Modern advertising constructs an imagined national community where the ideal citizen is a neoliberal, entrepreneurial actor, linking national pride to market values (Nugroho, 2025).

5.0: Discussion

The findings confirm that the culture industry is not a static relic but a highly adaptable apparatus. The discussion integrates these findings to address the research questions and highlight the complex realities of contemporary cultural production.

1. Beyond Passivity: A Contested Field

In response to RQ1, the model of the passive audience is indeed insufficient. The work of Bourdieu (Hesmondhalgh, 2006) and the empirical examples of punk (Moore, 2007) and digital prosumers (Sugihartati, 2020) demonstrate that consumption is often an active, meaning-making process. The culture industry is better understood as a "cultural field" or a "battlefield for hegemony" (McCarthy, 2013) where dominance is never absolute and is always met with some form of resistance, appropriation, or subversion. This does not invalidate Adorno's critique but complicates it, showing that the industry's power lies in its ability to absorb and commodify even these acts of resistance.

2. The Digital Panopticon and its Playful Inmates

Addressing RQ2, the digital revolution represents both the perfection and the fragmentation of the culture industry's logic. On one hand, algorithmic curation (Wiggins, 2013) creates a more efficient and insidious form of standardisation than Adorno could have imagined, one that feels personally tailored. The commodification of the self through data extraction (Seubert & Becker, 2019) and the exploitation of free digital labor (Sugihartati, 2020) mark a new frontier in the industry's profit model. On the other hand, these same platforms enable

unprecedented grassroots cultural production and mobilization, as seen in Bahrain (Jones, M. O., 2017) and in global fan communities. The centralised factory has been replaced by a diffuse, participatory network. However, the economic and ideological imperatives of the industry have seamlessly migrated to this new environment, creating a state of what Seubert and Becker (2019, p. 930) term "enlightened false consciousness"—we know we are being monitored and sold to. However, we play along for the benefits of connection and entertainment.

3. The Lyrical Forging of Nations

The findings related to RQ3 reveal the culture industry's profound role in the politics of identity. The mechanism is astutely visualized as a "circuit of emotional resonance":

- i. **The Power Source:** A group's lived context (e.g., Kurdish statelessness, British imperial history).
- ii. **The Conduit:** A charged symbolic entity that encapsulates that context (the Mountain, the Sea).
- iii. **The Switch:** The culture industry's standardized product (a song, anthem, festival).
- iv. **The Output:** The engineered emotion (defiance, pride, unity) that reinforces the desired identity.

This circuit operates across all forms of nationalism. It is used to bring nations into being (Emergent), to revitalise them against perceived threats (Resurgent), and to make their daily existence feel natural and eternal (Imagined). The case studies show that this is not an abstract process but a concrete one involving specific songs, images, and rituals. The industry's power in this realm depends on its ability to identify and tap into these powerful, pre-existing sources of collective emotion.

6.0: Conclusion

This review has traced the evolution of the culture industry from its origins as a critique of mass-produced daydreams to its current status as a complex, digitally-enabled ecosystem of hegemony and resistance. The core warning of Adorno and Horkheimer remains indispensably relevant: our leisure and entertainment are powerful political forces that can encourage acceptance of the status quo. The standardized formulas, the illusion of choice,

and the integration into a consumerist way of life are more pervasive than ever, now hidden behind the appealing facade of digital interactivity and personalized feeds.

However, the original model is insufficient on its own. The culture industry is not a perfectly successful machine of control but a contested space. Audiences are not purely passive; they are active, resistant, and productive, even if their activities are often co-opted back into the commercial system. The digital realm has shattered the monopoly on cultural production, allowing for powerful counter-narratives and resistance movements to flourish, from the satirical videos of Bahrain to the counter-mapping songs of the Kurds.

Ultimately, the culture industry's most enduring function may be its role as the primary forger of national identity in the modern world. By standardizing narratives and harnessing potent symbols, it provides the emotional soundtrack and the visual landscape for the ongoing construction of nations, whether they are fighting to be born, struggling to survive, or working to maintain their dominance. The battle for consciousness is no longer waged solely by radio broadcasters and film studios, but also by algorithms, prosumers, and viral campaigns. Understanding this evolved machinery—in all its decentralized, interactive, and algorithmic complexity—is the essential first step for anyone seeking to reclaim their critical voice and imagine a world beyond its curated menus.

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