Proceedings of ICEIPI 2025 Symposium: AI Am Ready: Artificial Intelligence as Pedagogical Scaffold
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB24784

From Cultural Capital to Traffic Capital: On the Transformation Mechanism of Class Symbols in Platform Society

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the transformation mechanism of cultural capital into flow capital in the digital society and reveal the internal motivations leading to the formation of digital stratification. This study conducts an in-depth analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's classic interpretation of cultural capital theory. Combined with the evolution of capital forms in the digital environment, this paper systematically demonstrates how cultural capital is reshaped into flow capital in digital platforms, thereby affecting the social identity and status of individuals. In the process of research, it is found that the differences in the paths of capital acquisition among different groups, especially the structural exclusion phenomenon in the operation of platform algorithms, have contributed to the solidification and mobility of digital identity. With the help of multiple dimensions such as economy, culture, politics and society, this study explores the social consequences of this class stratification, including potential threats to social cohesion and justice. Finally, the study proposes a governance path for building an inclusive digital society, emphasizing algorithmic transparency and responsible regulation, rationally redistributing capital, and focusing on the importance of cultural reconstruction, advocating transcending the logic of flows and achieving the return of value in an algorithm-dominated environment. The research results provide a new perspective for understanding class dynamics in the digital age and promote the deepening and expansion of relevant theoretical frameworks.

Keywords: Platform society, digital class segmentation, algorithmic mechanism, cultural capital, traffic capital.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of rapid globalization and digitalization, the rise of platform society has gradually become one of the core topics of sociological research. The concept of cultural capital was first proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, referring to the knowledge and abilities accumulated by individuals through education, cultural literacy, and social relationships, thereby gaining a corresponding status in society [1]. However, with the development of the digital economy, the transformation of cultural capital into flow capital has gradually become increasingly important [2].

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB24784

Flow capital not only reflects the visibility of individuals in cyberspace but also plays a bridging role in the construction and transformation of middle-class symbols.

Understanding the mechanism of transformation from cultural capital to traffic capital has far-reaching significance for revealing the evolution of class structure in today's platform society. At present, social media and various digital platforms provide the middle class with opportunities to display their cultural capital, thereby accelerating the flow and transformation of symbols. For example, platforms such as WeChat public accounts and Douyin have not only become carriers of information dissemination, but also created new cultural identities and social discourse power for the middle class. In this process, users' cultural products, creative content and interactive feedback can all be regarded as the substantive embodiment of traffic capital, thus affecting their positioning in social networks and class identity.

Studying this transformation mechanism helps analyze how platform society reshapes the classic theory of social stratification. In traditional social structures, economic capital and cultural capital are often the fundamental driving forces of class mobility, while in the digital age, traffic capital has become a new focus of social competition. For example, some individuals who originally belonged to the middle class can quickly rise to the upper echelons of society through the accumulation of network traffic, and vice versa. This rapid and complex class change challenges people's cognition of inherent social concepts.

In the context of today's platform society, the process of transforming cultural capital into traffic capital has gradually shown complex multidimensional characteristics. Based on Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory, a correlation model between "cultural participation" and "online influence" was constructed, and then hypothesis testing was conducted, revealing a significant positive correlation between the two, indicating that the richness of cultural capital can significantly improve the performance of an individual's traffic capital in the platform society [3].

2. Literature review and theoretical tracing: paradigm shift from cultural capital to digital capital

2.1. Classic interpretation of bourdieu's theory of cultural capital

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is an important basis for understanding the relationship between social class and cultural symbols. Its core concept defines cultural capital as the knowledge, skills and educational background acquired by an individual in social interaction. This theory emphasizes that cultural capital is not only a reflection of social status, but also an important medium for mobility and transformation. In the traditional social structure, the accumulation of cultural capital is often achieved through family background, educational experience and other channels, which in turn affects the position and role of individuals in social practice.

However, in the context of the digital age, social structure and communication methods have undergone profound changes. The class symbol transformation mechanism in the platform society has revitalized the analysis of cultural capital. As a new form of capital, digital capital carries the value created by information technology and has become an important attribute in contemporary society. Bourdieu's theory can provide an interpretation model for generalized digital capital, making it easier for people to understand social power relations and symbolic meanings in the digital field. This perspective is particularly suitable for exploring how digital social platforms reshape class symbols and their role in social competition.

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2.2. Evolution of capital forms in digital society

In today's digital society, the form of capital has undergone significant evolution, especially the transformation mechanism between cultural capital and digital capital, which deserves in-depth discussion. By analyzing the data, we can conduct a comprehensive analysis of this transformation process and its influencing factors.

From the data, the per capita expenditure on education, culture and entertainment of the national residents was RMB 827 in 2018, and increased significantly to RMB 2,599 in 2021 [4]. It soared to RMB 24,538 in 2022, and slightly dropped to RMB 2,904 in 2023. This trend shows that residents' investment in cultural consumption is extremely volatile, and its fluctuation is mainly affected by multiple factors, including economic development level, residents' consumption capacity, diversification of cultural activities and policy orientation. In the concept of cultural capital, the consumption of education and culture and art not only involves personal knowledge accumulation and artistic cultivation, but also reflects the ability of individuals to show themselves in social media and form symbols and identity. For example, the obvious growth of cultural consumption may be closely related to the popularity of digital social platforms. Using these platforms is not only to share life, but also to build personal brand and social status.

2.3. Critical extension of the marxist perspective

In the process of exploring the transformation of cultural capital into traffic capital, the critical extension of the Marxist perspective provides a unique theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between capital and class [5]. The capitalist mode of production proposed by Marx not only focuses on the material basis of the economic structure, but also emphasizes the dialectical relationship between culture, ideology and social relations. In the contemporary digital society, traffic capital, as an emerging form of capital, embodies the class symbolism and social mobility model unique to the platform economy.

In the Marxist analytical framework, the essence of capital is not limited to economic interests. It also has cultural and ideological dimensions in social structure. Flow capital has become a form of capital that relies on user-generated content and social network interactions. The realization of its value depends on the redefinition and reproduction of cultural capital by the platform [6]. For example, social media platforms attract user participation through algorithms and data analysis, and then convert user attention and behavior into economic value. This process reveals the class differences and inequality inherent in flow capital.

3. The formation mechanism of digital class segmentation

3.1. Differences in capital acquisition paths

In the complex ecology of modern society, the formation mechanism of digital class segmentation has become increasingly prominent, especially in the differences in capital acquisition paths, which reflect unique socioeconomic dynamics. This phenomenon not only involves individual cultural capital (CC) and economic capital (EC), but is also more profoundly reflected in the impact of structural factors on different classes [7]. The analytical framework is based on the "capital acquisition and path dependence analysis model" to explore the multiple obstacles and opportunities faced by different social groups in the process of obtaining capital.

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Differences in socioeconomic background (SEB) are one of the core factors that affect the path to capital acquisition [8]. Superior socioeconomic status usually provides individuals with more abundant resource advantages, enabling them to more efficiently acquire and transform cultural and economic capital. For example, individuals who grow up in families with more educational resources (ER) are often able to access a better education system, which not only improves their competitiveness but also enhances their advantages in the future capital accumulation process.

Unequal platform participation opportunities (PPO) are also an important mechanism leading to digital class differentiation [9]. As digitalization gradually permeates our lives, individuals' opportunities to participate in various platforms (such as social media, knowledge sharing websites, etc.) are often restricted by their existing class status. For example, young people from high-income families are often able to establish a wider range of interpersonal networks and information acquisition channels due to their early access to the Internet and high frequency of use, thus taking a proactive position in the process of capital transformation.

3.2. Structural exclusion of platform algorithms

In today's digital society, the role of platform algorithms is undoubtedly an important mechanism for forming digital class divisions. The design of platform algorithms is not only based on the logic of data processing, but is embedded with more complex social and cultural factors, which leads to structural exclusion of certain groups in information circulation and resource acquisition. This exclusion not only affects the visibility of the middle class, but also has a profound impact on the transformation mechanism of its cultural symbols.

Platform algorithms strengthen the boundaries of specific groups through data screening and their recommendation mechanisms. For example, when recommending content, algorithms often rely on users' historical behavior data and interaction patterns, creating a "homogenization" effect. This type of effect results in the social networks, information reception, and production of middle-class individuals being confined to a narrow framework, thereby limiting the opportunity for their cultural capital to be converted into traffic capital. According to the "network effect" theory, when the visibility of a group decreases, the possibility of its social interaction and resource exchange also decreases. This interaction further suppresses social diversity and inclusiveness.

The structural exclusion mechanism of platform algorithms strengthens the imbalance of information through complex feedback loops. Take a social media platform as an example. Its algorithm settings give priority to content that matches the interests of users. This potentially creates an "information island" (Echo Chamber), which makes the middle class lack the influence of diverse perspectives when participating in social discourse. This isolation not only weakens the interaction between individuals, but also deepens the cultural gap between groups, causing the middle class to gradually lose the right to speak and the right to guide topics in the creation and dissemination of cultural symbols.

3.3. Solidification and mobility of digital identity

In today's digital age, the solidification and mobility of digital identity have become important topics in exploring social class differentiation. With the development of technology and the rise of social media platforms, an individual's digital identity is not only a self-expression in the virtual space, but also an interactive reflection of their social status, cultural capital, and traffic capital. Starting from the theoretical model of identity recognition and mobility, we can deeply analyze the characteristics of digital identity and its transformation mechanism in social dynamics.

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The solidification of digital identity is manifested in the stable self-cognition and social labels formed by individuals in a virtual environment. For example, the content posted by users on a social platform, the discussions they participate in, and the groups they follow constitute the core elements of their digital identity. This solidification of identity enables individuals to gain recognition and belonging in a specific community, thereby strengthening their cultural capital. Research shows that the user's activity on a social platform is positively correlated with the attractiveness of their digital identity, that is, the degree of solidification of digital identity complements the accumulation of their traffic capital.

However, digital identity is not static, and its fluidity reflects the rapidly changing nature of the digital environment. In different social contexts, an individual's identity may change, which includes both the reconstruction of content and the reorganization of social relationships. For example, an individual user may be redefined by participating in discussions on a specific topic, thereby gaining new social recognition and cultural capital. In this process, the fluidity of digital identity not only reflects the individual's ability to adapt to change, but also reveals his strategy for acquiring resources in the flow capital environment.

4. The social consequences of digital class division

The discussion of the phenomenon of digital class segmentation is not limited to the superficial social stratification. In fact, this segmentation has far-reaching impacts in multiple dimensions such as economy, culture, politics and society. From the economic dimension, the uneven distribution of digital technology in resources directly leads to differences in economic opportunities and access for different classes. Specifically, low-income groups are at a disadvantage in the job market due to their lack of access to high-quality digital resources (such as high-bandwidth Internet and high-level digital skills). The resulting "digital divide" has further increased social economic inequality. A study in the United States found that only 48% of low-income households have high-speed Internet access, while this proportion reaches 95% in high-income households. Obviously, this unbalanced allocation of digital resources will significantly restrict the economic development of individuals.

At the same time, the impact of the cultural dimension is reflected in the inequality of digital consumption methods and opportunities to participate in digital cultural production. In modern society, the rise of user-generated content (UGC) has made Internet users not only recipients of information, but also creators of content [10]. However, differences in education level and cultural capital have directly led to the restriction of certain groups' opportunities to speak out in digital cultural scenes. Specifically, individuals with high cultural capital are more likely to master digital technology, thus occupying a dominant position on social media and creative platforms, and the cultural products they create often attract wider attention and praise. This deviation in cultural production not only deepens the gap between classes, but also subtly shapes the sense of social identity.

5. Governance path: possible directions for building an inclusive digital society

5.1. From technology to good: algorithm transparency and responsible regulation

In the development of digital society, the operation mode of algorithms has had a profound impact on the lives of individuals and groups. Especially today, when information flow and social participation are increasingly dependent on technology, it is particularly important to build an inclusive digital society. Algorithmic transparency, as one of the key governance paths, can

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effectively promote social fairness and inclusiveness, and avoid the abuse of technology and the spread of false information (disinformation) [11]. Therefore, exploring the necessity of algorithmic transparency and responsibility regulation is of great significance for a deeper understanding of the governance structure of the digital society.

Algorithmic transparency requires technology companies to disclose the basic principles and decision-making processes of their algorithms. This requirement not only helps to enhance the public's understanding and trust in the operation of algorithms, but also promotes the identification and correction of algorithmic bias. Studies have shown that when the public can understand how algorithms affect their lives, their acceptance of technology is significantly improved. For example, on social media platforms, if information recommendation algorithms can clearly indicate their selection criteria, users can more accurately understand the flow of information and thus choose more diverse sources of information. This transparency can not only effectively reduce the information bubble effect, but also enhance users' autonomy and sense of participation, thereby promoting a more inclusive social participation environment.

5.2. Institutional innovation: capital redistribution and social security

In modern society, especially in the context of the digital age, institutional innovation is considered an important way to achieve capital redistribution and enhance social security. Based on the "institutional economics analysis framework", we can explore in depth how institutional innovation plays a key role in the digital society, especially in implementing social security to mitigate the impact of segmentation between different classes.

Capital redistribution can promote balanced economic development by improving the efficiency of resource allocation. New policies brought about by institutional innovation, such as the "Universal Basic Income" (UBI) program in the digital economy, can ensure that all members of society, especially low-income groups, can obtain reasonable economic support in the prosperity of the digital economy. With the rapid development of information technology, the rise of online education and vocational training platforms has enabled members of society to enhance their capital by improving their skills and continuously improve their competitiveness in the digital society. Studies have shown that participation in these platforms can significantly increase wage levels and employment rates, reflecting the positive impact of institutional innovation on capital redistribution.

The role of social security in protecting vulnerable groups cannot be ignored. By adjusting the institutional design of economic security, the government can provide necessary support to those groups most vulnerable to the digital economic transformation. For example, with the help of data analysis technology, the needs of vulnerable groups can be accurately identified to formulate more targeted assistance policies. At the same time, with the help of social insurance, medical security system and unemployment assistance measures, the government can provide a stable safety net for different classes in the face of potential economic uncertainties, thereby reducing the risk of social unrest.

5.3. Cultural reconstruction: value return beyond traffic logic

In today's platform society, the dominance of traffic logic has not only reshaped the way information is disseminated but also deeply influenced the symbolic system of social classes. Therefore, cultural reconstruction has become an urgent task, which emphasizes transcending traffic-centered values and restoring more comprehensive humanistic care and social value orientation.

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The prevalence of flow capital has prompted society to adhere to the absolute amount of information, often leading to a phenomenon of quick success and instant benefits. However, this single value orientation may obliterate the inherent needs of cultural diversity and social inclusiveness. Through cultural reconstruction, people can identify and explore the unique value of local traditional culture and personal experience [12]. This process is not only a return, but also a redefinition of cultural capital, making it go beyond simple flow-based display and emphasizing the reproduction of knowledge and the diversity of social identity.

For example, in some community projects, by exploring local art and crafts, people gradually build up a sense of pride in their own culture. This reconstruction of cultural identity not only gives individuals a sense of value but also promotes social cohesion and community consciousness [13]. Cultural reconstruction also demonstrates its profound impact on personal development, especially in the field of education. The improvement of cultural heritage helps shape individuals' social symbols and enhances their soft power required for social mobility.

6. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of rapid globalization and digitalization, this study explores the complex mechanism of the transformation of cultural capital into traffic capital and its social impact. Taking "platform society" as the starting point, this paper reveals the dynamic characteristics of the transformation of class symbols in the digital environment, systematically analyzes the relationship between cultural capital and traffic capital of different social classes on digital platforms, and verifies the significant impact of the richness of cultural capital on the accumulation of traffic capital. This paper explores how individuals achieve the transformation of cultural capital in cultural practice, aiming to reveal the socialization mechanism of this process. From a macro perspective, the increase in traffic capital is closely related to changes in class structure. The rapid development of the digital economy has reshaped the traditional theory of social stratification, making the connection between individual visibility and social status on digital platforms increasingly complex.

This study explores the role of platform algorithms in digital class differentiation, pointing out that the structural exclusion mechanism of algorithms limits the opportunities of certain groups in information circulation and resource acquisition, which in turn leads to the phenomenon of separation between digital classes. The study found that the construction of algorithmic transparency and responsibility regulation is an important path to achieve social equity and inclusiveness. Through the analysis of the mobility and solidification characteristics of digital identity, the study clarifies the dual role of digital identity in social dynamics, calling for policy guidance to promote the positive mobility of individual identities and the fair development of social classes.

Institutional innovation is seen as an important way to achieve capital redistribution and enhance social security. Through reasonable policy design, the segregation of different classes in the digital society can be effectively alleviated. This study not only enriches the theoretical framework of cultural capital and flow capital research, but also provides a new perspective for understanding class differentiation, cultural reconstruction and social governance in contemporary digital society. This study is expected to point out the direction for future related research and provide theoretical support for the formulation of practical policies to promote the equality and harmonious development of the digital society. It is hoped that the results of this study will inspire more scholars to pay attention to and study this field, and continuously promote people's in-depth understanding of the evolution of social structure and cultural identity in the digital age.

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