

THESIS / DISSERTATION SUBMISSION

Digital colonialism in the Global South: A critical analysis of the instrumental view of technology.

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Declaration_Masters Student

I, Desireè Diane Prins declare that the Master's Degree research dissertation or interrelated, publishable manuscripts/published articles, or coursework Master's Degree mini-dissertation that I herewith submit for the Master's Degree qualification in Philosophy at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.



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Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between the Kantian Enlightenment concept of autonomy, its ideals, and how it has been eroded by traditional and new forms of media. It also explores how these practices have led to the emergence of new forms of capitalism, specifically surveillance capitalism, which has underpinned new forms of colonialism, notably digital colonialism. Some of the themes addressed in this dissertation are the Culture Industry, technological rationality, techno-capitalism, information surveillance capitalism, digital colonialism, and the Global South as subjugated in the digital age. The study aims to show how in the digital age, digital colonialism poses a significant threat to autonomy and global fairness. Importantly, digital colonialism refers to the exploitative relationship between the Global North and Global South, where valuable data is extracted and controlled by powerful companies mostly from the Global North. The dissertation will show how Big Tech companies (such as Meta, Google, Microsoft, Apple and Amazon) have resulted in poor countries, especially from the Global South, relying on external platforms for digital services, which are then economically and culturally exploited. Thus, this dissertation contends that the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy has been undermined in the digital age, with the focus being on individuals from the Global South. Methodologically, the dissertation employs a conceptual and critical-philosophical analysis, drawing on Kantian ethics, critical theory, and contemporary political philosophy to examine how autonomy is reshaped within digital infrastructures.

Abbreviations

Immanuel Kant

KrV / CPR =Critique of Pure Reason (Kant, [1781] 1998)

KpV / CPrP = Critique of Practical Reason (Kant, [1788] 1996)

GMS/ G = Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (Kant, [1785] 1997)

MS/ MM = The Metaphysics of Morals (Kant, [1797] 1996)

Anth = Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (Kant, [1798] 2006)

David Hume

EPM =An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (Hume, [1751] 1912)

Introduction

New technological developments (such as electricity, the printing press, and the internet) have historically been viewed with scepticism due to their potential to change the way individuals live and make decisions (Williams cited in Freedman, 2002:427). Through these technological advances, where information has been shared mostly through modern forms of media (social media and the internet), humans have been shown to become more easily deceived and manipulated (Frankfurt, 2005:53-55). This theme is not new, as noted by members of the Frankfurt School, who already argued in the 1940s that individuals have been manipulated by the Culture Industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, [1944] 2002:95). Even in the twenty-first century, with the most recent forms of media developments, modern technology has given rise to the internet and advanced connected devices[1] and services underpinning a global architecture of behaviour modification (Kwet, 2019:10). This then already raises concerns about individuals' capacity for rational self-determination, which lies at the heart of the Kantian notion of autonomy, introduced later in this dissertation.[2]

Although these smart technologies have the potential to connect people and make everyday activities easier and more efficient, important concerns about their widespread and uncritical adoption have been raised, especially in relation to their effects on inequality, power, and individual and collective autonomy (Couldry & Mejías, 2019:33).). A digital divide is ever growing between the marginalised and the elite as a result of the Global South's reliance on continuous data exchange from the Global North, which has access to fast internet and digital infrastructure (Couldry & Mejijas, 2019:103). Thus, in the Global South, where many groups of people lack access to basic digital infrastructure and technology, this divide not only reflects unequal access but also unequal vulnerability to violations on autonomy. Instead of making everyday activities simpler or enhancing the ability of individuals to make meaningful and rational decisions independently, these structures increasingly mediate and pre-structure choices (Zuboff, 2019:13**)**, directly undermining the exercise of autonomous judgment in a Kantian sense**.**

Furthermore, the global technological proliferation of data collection and surveillance is increasingly under the control of multinational corporations, including tech giants from Silicon

[1] Some examples of devices that form part of the Internet of Everything, also known as the Internet of Things (Khaddar & Boulmalf, 2017:138), are smartphones, smartwatches, and smart cities.

[2] Autonomy, as defined by Kant, refers to the rational being's ability to give universal laws to itself in a manner that recognises the equal rationality of all others (Kant, Groundwork G 4:440) This will be unpacked in greater detail in Chapter One.

Valley (e.g., Meta, Google, Microsoft, Apple and Amazon). These corporations have begun to gradually undermine the human condition by surveilling users and collecting the activities of individuals (Zuboff, 2019). It is here that the notion of surveillance capitalism becomes apparent. Surveillance capitalism and digital colonialism together form the contemporary environment in which Kant's ideal of autonomous agency is most at risk**,** especially for countries in the Global South (Kwet, 2019:7-8). Given Kant's emphasis on self-legislation and self-governance, it is through this framework that the dissertation evaluates how these digital structures erode autonomy.

The study identifies several central problems: first, the erosion of individual autonomy by the Culture Industry (to be defined); second, the impact of surveillance capitalism on self-determination and personal freedom; and finally, how these practices collectively perpetuate digital colonialism. It will be argued that these political and economic structures generate conditions that obstruct both individual self-determination and collective self-rule, especially in the Global South.

Building a digital economy[3] and competing in the global market are problems that the Global South faces due to certain countries being unable to control or govern their data. The dominance of Western tech giants in Africa has been a worrying concern, particularly as these platforms are not tailor-made for Africans and their context (Kwet, 2019). For individuals from Africa, this dominance raises concerns regarding autonomy. For Kant ([1785]1997), if individual autonomy is undermined, then human dignity is also at risk. Being used merely as a data source, without meaningful consent or control, violates Kant's imperative to never treat persons merely as a means to an end.

Thus, the dominance of Western internet companies not only poses significant cultural risks to the Global South but also results in hidden forms of modern imperialism, otherwise known as digital colonialism. Western-dominated platforms such as Meta, X (formerly Twitter), Google, and Apple play significant roles in cultural identity, cultural erasure, and individual identity (Kwet, 2019:4). This raises deeper questions about individuals' ability to form independent,

[3] The term "digital economy" was first coined in 1996 by Don Tapscott, who defined it as a framework in which connected individuals and organisations transfer dominant structures to networks (1996). The definition has since been updated, and according to the World Bank (2016), the digital economy is a set of social, cultural, and economic connections centred on communication technologies and digital information.

rational judgments when their cultural environment is shaped by external commercial forces (Coleman, 2019:423).

Kant, in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* ([1785] 1997), strongly believed that individuals should be autonomous, independent, and free. For Kant, the concept of autonomy has a deeper moral meaning, which is that to act autonomously is freedom itself. However, Kant is aware that true autonomy is difficult to achieve. As such, when individuals are subject to algorithmic nudges, platform manipulation, and culturally asymmetrical digital infrastructures, they are less able to act as self-legislating moral agents. Zuboff (2019:17), in her commentary on 'instrumentarian' power, warns that online surveillance might turn people into "objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw-material-extraction operation". This creates a direct tension with Kant's deontological view that persons must never be treated merely as means.

It is important to note that the problem of autonomy in the digital age is not a new idea. If examined closely, autonomy has come under threat since the mid-twentieth century. The Frankfurt School criticised how individuals were becoming less autonomous due to the Culture Industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 12002). They feared that technological rationality would suppress critical thought and reduce individuals to passive consumers. These early critiques form the conceptual bridge from Kant's moral autonomy to contemporary concerns about digital manipulation.

In the twenty-first century, the digital landscape has introduced a new challenge to autonomy, that of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff highlights how personal data has become a valuable commodity, collected by tech companies to inform targeted advertising and behavioural prediction and to influence human behaviour. Such structures directly compromise Kantian rational self-legislation.

Similarly, Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue that contemporary individuals should be concerned about how their personal data is being collected for commercial use, as these practices shape not only consumer behaviour but also democratic participation. Digital colonialism, as described by Couldry, Mejias, Coleman, and Kwet, further indicates that the erosion of autonomy is not merely individual but also geopolitical, affecting collective autonomy and technological sovereignty. Thus, this study argues that tech companies' responses to the inadequacies of their platforms, particularly after crises such as the Cambridge Analytica

scandal (2018), have failed to address the core problems and continue to undermine autonomy and fairness, especially among individuals from the Global South.

These concerns give rise to the central question guiding this dissertation: How has digital colonialism, underpinned by surveillance capitalism, impacted the Kantian Enlightenment concept of autonomy for the individual in the Global South?

This question is guided by several sub-questions:

- How has the Culture Industry undermined the Kantian Enlightenment conception of autonomy through the commodification of individual culture and consciousness, driven by capitalist interests?
- How has the emergence of new forms of capitalism, namely surveillance capitalism, resulted in new forms of colonialism, such as digital colonialism?
- How has digital colonialism impacted the autonomy of individuals in the Global South?

It is also important to note that this study has several limitations. The first limitation is concerned with the reliance on secondary sources rather than empirical data, which makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions. The second limitation of the study is concerned with the lack of knowledge about how these corporations collect personal data, which makes it difficult for people in the Global South to understand the practical implications of corporate data collection (mainly due to the lack of information). Lastly, the study is based on an established theoretical framework. This can limit its applicability as a concept instead of exploring the broader practical ramifications of the power structures of the Culture Industry, surveillance capitalism, and digital colonialism on Kantian autonomy, especially for individuals and communities in the Global South.[4]

Within the above theoretical framework, this dissertation consists of four chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. To lay the foundation for the research question, the first

[4] In the context of this study, the term 'power structure' is employed in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault's concept of power challenges the traditional view of power as purely repressive, and highlights the complex relationship between power and knowledge in forming social reality (Foucault, 1980:119-120). Foucault argues that power and knowledge are connected, influencing human experiences and institutions. In this context, the historical contingency that co-produces control and subjectivity is referred to as a "structure of power" (Foucault, 1980:51-53). Drawing from Foucault, power is seen as a network of relations that produces norms, knowledge, and subjectivities, rather than as something one possesses (Foucault, 1980:239). It shapes what is considered possible and true through institutions and discourse. This conceptual grounding strengthens the later discussion of surveillance capitalism and digital colonialism, which similarly rely on dispersed yet pervasive forms of control.

chapter will provide a basic understanding of the concept of 'autonomy', where it comes from, and why it is important. More specifically, this chapter looks at the idea of 'autonomy' as put forward by Immanuel Kant, and how it fits into Kantian and Enlightenment philosophy as a whole. This lays the philosophical foundation of the study, and to achieve this, the chapter revisits Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785/1997) and the essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment" (1784/1996).

The second chapter of this study unpacks the Frankfurt School's criticism of the Culture Industry, showing how, when culture is turned into a capitalist commodity, it undermines rational autonomy, making individuals less likely to think for themselves. For this chapter, the study draws from Adorno and Horkheimer's *Culture Industry* thesis ([1944] 1997/2002), Marcuse's *One-dimensional Man* ([1964] 1991), and Eric Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* ([1967] 1994), as well as secondary sources consisting of commentaries and academic articles.

This is followed by the third chapter, which provides theoretical concepts pertaining to different forms of modern capitalism, starting with techno-capitalism, information capitalism, and then moving to surveillance capitalism as coined by Shoshana Zuboff, using this as a foundation for the final chapter. The primary text drawn from for this chapter is Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019).

The final chapter will provide a brief overview of earlier forms of modern colonialism before introducing new forms of technological colonialism and its social, cultural, political, and economic effects. Furthermore, because 'digital colonialism' is a relatively new concept that needs to be understood in terms of its consequences, the literature for this chapter draws largely from journal articles and relatively recently published books. An analysis of this phenomenon by Michael Kwet, namely "Digital Colonialism: US Empire and the New Imperialism in the Global South" (2019), is one of the central articles engaged with in this chapter. This chapter focuses on the effects of digital colonialism on the modern individual in a South African context. It connects various developments mentioned in previous chapters to digital colonialism, arguing that digital platforms from the Global North continue a form of digital colonialism that mirrors past patterns of control, actively undermining the autonomy of individuals in the Global South. Following this chapter is a summary of what was discussed in the dissertation.

The importance of this study is that it recognises that digital colonialism, a growing tech ethics dilemma, challenges the notion of autonomy in the digital world, as technologically-based power dynamics continue to shape our society. This concern relates not only to issues of security and privacy, but also to the rights and autonomy of individuals. In particular, it demonstrates how the Kantian conception of autonomy can be used to analyse and critique emerging global technological power structures. By integrating Kantian ethics with critical theory and contemporary analyses of digital power, the study contributes to emerging philosophical debates about autonomy in technologically mediated societies.

Chapter 1: A Philosophical Foundation: Kantian Autonomy

Chapter introduction

The aim of this chapter is to establish the philosophical foundations necessary for understanding autonomy as it functions within contemporary digital culture. By drawing primarily on Kant's account of moral autonomy in order to relate it to Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Culture Industry and its contemporary digital developments, the chapter sets out a conceptual framework for analysing whether digital environments genuinely support self-determination or merely reproduce new forms of constraint, in a form of digital colonisation. In contemporary discourse, autonomy is often reduced to the idea of unrestricted freedom of expression; however, this modern usage frequently departs from Kant's original emphasis on rational self-legislation. For clarity, this chapter uses the notion of "autonomy" primarily in the Kantian sense, while recognising the more colloquial meaning only where relevant to digital culture.

Immanuel Kant remains one of the most influential thinkers of Western philosophy, and his concept of autonomy is an enduring foundation for contemporary moral thought. In *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant states that "autonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition)" (G 4:440.16-440.18). In the digital age,[5] this Enlightenment ideal has gained renewed relevance, particularly in debates about embodiment, society, and the nature of moral obligation. As digital technologies reshape everyday life and accelerate concerns about digital colonialism, it becomes increasingly important to understand how the erosion of autonomy affects individuals and society.

[5] The contemporary digital age is characterised by the vast circulation of information and the persuasive influence of technology on behaviour. This includes social media, virtual and computational processes such as mobile computing, cloud systems, the Internet of Things, big data analytics, and remote information access (Romansky, 2022:89).

Methodologically, this chapter adopts a loosely genealogical approach,[6] tracing how key concepts of autonomy have shifted from their philosophical origins to their contemporary cultural and digital expressions. This allows the chapter to highlight both continuities and distortions in the meaning of autonomy as it moves from Kant's moral philosophy to present-day debates about digital participation.

Accordingly, the first section provides an overview of the origins and historical development of the concept of autonomy. The chapter then turns to Kant's distinctive notion of autonomy, followed by a discussion on the associated ideals of dignity and respect. Major critiques of Kant's conception are then addressed, following which the distinction between Kantian autonomy and the modern idea of freedom of expression is clarified. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of post-Kantian thinkers on autonomy and the implications of their insights for the broader aims of this study.

1) Overview

The Enlightenment era of the 17th and 18th centuries, which emphasised rationality, autonomy, and individuality, shaped the prevailing view of autonomy within democratic societies. In this tradition, autonomy refers to the capacity to self-legislate and self-govern, resting upon the ideals of care, individual dignity, respect, and social responsibility. These ideals laid the groundwork for modern notions of ethical obligations and human rights. However, as Gerald Dworkin argues in his book *The Theory and Practice of Autonom*y (1997), autonomy remains conceptually complex and is open to conflicting interpretations. It's meaning is often unclear and context-dependent (Dworkin 1997, cited in Brassington, 2012:166), particularly when applied to the context of the technologically mediated society of the 21st century.

[6] Michel Foucault's genealogical method examines how concepts such as autonomy are historically produced and continuously reconfigured through shifting structures of power, rather than treating them as timeless or fixed (Foucault, 2024:17-29). Foucault's method, which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has since become highly influential in critical philosophy, providing scholars with a framework for writing critical histories rather than tradtional genealogies (Foucault, 1977:31). Although autonomy is not a concept Foucault theorises about directly, questions of autonomy remain central to the genealogy of ethics, morality, and the constitution of the subject. Genealogy does not undermine autonomy but situates it within its historical conditions of possibility. Foucault's genealogy of *will* demonstrates that while concerns about will, ethics, and autonomy persist across history, the aims, practices, and forms of willing change significantly over time.

Clarifying this concept is crucial for the present study, especially in order to demonstrate how technological advancements, such as the internet, computers, and artificial intelligence, may erode autonomy and its supporting ideals, thus contributing to new forms of oppression, such as that of digital colonialism. Understanding how such technologies interact with global power structures helps show how transformations in autonomy shape emerging ethical challenges and frameworks, and governmental responses to them. Examining autonomy from an Enlightenment perspective, therefore, provides a platform for critically assessing how both the Culture Industry and digital technology can undermine autonomy, while also highlighting the ethical responsibilities of technology producers, users, and legislators, so as to foster digital environments that protect human rights and promote social justice.

To realise these aims, this chapter begins with a critical analysis of Enlightenment autonomy, followed by a discussion of its central characteristics and features, such as embodiment, society, and moral obligation. It is then necessary to address critiques of Kant's conception of autonomy, as this study relies on its conceptual foundation. Many critics claim that the Kantian concept of autonomy is overly egocentric or individualistic; however, the chapter draws on interpretations of Kant that emphasise respect, dignity, social obligation, and care, to show that more relational interpretations of at least the structure, although not ontology, of Kant's conception of autonomy do exist. In particular, insights by Kim Treiger-Bar-Am in "In Defence of Autonomy: An Ethic of Care" (2006) provide important responses to such critiques.

1.1 A critical analysis of Enlightenment autonomy.

The concept of autonomy can be traced back to the Greek word *autonomia,* which loosely translates as "living by one's own laws" (Agich, 2009:268). More specifically, the term is derived from the Greek words *auto* (self) and *nomos* (law), which signify self-rule and self-determination (Agich, 2009:268). This meaning remains evident in the modern concept of personal autonomy, which commonly refers to the ability to make decisions based on one's values and beliefs without undue interference (Agich, 2009:268). Personal autonomy includes not only internal deliberation, but also the individual's actions within the social realm.

It is also important to note that autonomy is sometimes used as a principle or a value, while related concepts, such as respect, consent, and paternalism, may vary in philosophical traditions

and interpretations (Agich, 2009:268). For instance, there is a difference in how both deontological and utilitarian theories interpret autonomy (Agich, 2009:268). John Stuart Mill, in his book *On Liberty* (1859), provides a utilitarian account of the treatment of autonomy, focusing on individual liberty as the centre of moral life (Agich, 2009:268). However, by contrast, this study turns to Kant's deontological account so as to locate the moral value of autonomy in the rational capacity to recognise and act according to universal moral laws (Kant, G 4:421–424**)**.

The Kantian notion of autonomy has had a profound influence on modern conceptions of agency, freedom, and self-governance. Understanding its roots therefore sheds light on how autonomy has been reshaped, and at times undermined, in the digital age.

Moreover, this influence extends to the field of Critical Theory, which is the focus of the next chapter. Two of the key figures in Critical Theory, namely Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno ([1947] 2002), both rely on – and break from – Kant's moral philosophy to critique contemporary capitalist society, while still remaining critical of Enlightenment rationality. They argue that the rise of the Culture Industry and dominance of instrumental rationality undermine autonomy, even while retaining the importance of the categorical imperative and moral practices and responsibility. By grounding this chapter within the framework of Kantian thought, not only do we lay the groundwork for a genealogical analysis of autonomy in the digital age, drawing from the insights of Critical Theory, but also for a deep examination of how it has lost much of its cultural force.

1.1.1 A brief overview of Kant's deontological theory

As noted above, this study draws from and interrogates Kant's notion of autonomy. This section briefly situates the notion of autonomy within Kant's broader deontological framework; it is especially this foundation that informs the Critical Theorists' concerns relating to the Culture Industry (discussed in Chapter Two). For Kant, deontology refers to an ethical approach which in grounded in individual and societal duties and rules. However, before outlining Kant's account, a basic understanding of "deontology" is necessary.

Deontology is an ethical theory based on duty and normative obligation (Kant, 1997, G 4:397). The term itself was coined by Jeremy Bentham in *Deontology; or, The Science of Morality* (1780) from the Greek word *deon,* which refers to that which is binding or a duty, and -*ology*, or *logos*, which means "science" or "theory of". Deontology, therefore, translates to the science or theory of what *should* or *ought* to be done. In deontological ethics, humans are assumed to have the capacity to reason and understand universal moral laws applicable across all circumstances (Kant, 1997 G 4:421). Unlike utilitarian or consequentialist ethical theories, deontological ethics does not evaluate actions based on their *consequences* or *outcomes*, nor does it focus on the emotions motivating the action (Cholbi, 2015:607-610). Rather, it assesses the moral value of the *intention* behind the action, that is, whether the action is performed out of a commitment to moral duty (Kant, [1785] 2012,4:421). This is partly because, as Kant argues, human beings do not always have rational control over their emotions or feelings[7] (Kant, GMS, AA 4:428.14–17), and thus should have a prior ethical framework from which to operate, regardless of the particular situation or one's feelings.

Furthermore, Kant's deontological theory distinguishes between *hypothetical* and *categorical* imperatives (G 4:414-21). A *hypothetical* imperative is contingent (or conditional), based on a person's desires; this can be loosely articulated as "if you want A, then you ought to do B" (Kant, G 4:420-21). Kant's ethics, however, focuses primarily on the categorical imperative, which he defines as an unconditional moral command grounded in reason (G 4:414). This may be more clearly explained using a practical example, such as found in healthcare ethics, where a healthcare worker who withholds information from a patient would need to justify this action according to the principle all healthcare workers could accept as reasonable (Cholbi, 2015:607-610; Noble & Porter, 2015:927). If concealing information, such as a full prognosis, from a client could not be universalised without contradiction, Kant's framework would consider the actions to be morally unacceptable, regardless of the consequences. Kant's categorical imperative thus claims that actions should be judged on whether their underlying maxim could be willed as a universal law, independent of situational consequences, outcome, and context.

[7] Kant does not offer a single, systematic definition of 'emotion', which has led to a range of scholarly interpretations. Maria Borges argues that Kant presents a broad taxonomy of emotions that cannot be captured by one unified model. According to Borges, Kantian emotions involve intentional states, feelings, propositional content, appraisal, cognitive elements, desires, and beliefs (Borges, 2004:143, 152, cited in Cohen, 2017). Similarly, Alix Cohen notes that Kantian "so-called emotions are cognitive, affective, and volitional" (Cohen, 2017:666). Both emphasise the complexity and significance of emotions within Kant's moral psychology.

1.1.2 Deontological theory and the African context

Extending this brief overview of Kant's deontological theory to an African context offers additional clarity on how autonomy may be grounded in the ideals of respect, dignity, social obligation, and care. According to Angelo Nicolaides (2022), in many African philosophical traditions, the destiny of an individual is inseparable from the community in which they live; individuals are thus culturally interconnected and share common values, interests, and objectives (Nicolaides, 2022:29). Although rights are carried by the individual, the community encourages social interactions and supports the notion of communal rights, although these rights are ultimately exercised by individuals (Nicolaides, 2022:29). This could arguably be seen as resonating with certain aspects of Kant's ethical imperative. In other words, the African concept of *Ubuntu* can be linked, at least analogically, to the categorical imperative, which, as discussed below, is one of the central principles of Kant's framework of morality. In both frameworks, moral behaviour is absolute and binding for all agents and is not contingent upon personal inclinations or desire (Nicolaides, 2022:29).

Furthermore, within Kant's moral system, each responsible individual is unique and has inherent moral worth, where morality itself is a definitive rational command (Nicolaides, 2022:30). For Kant, the categorical imperative is defined as the requirement to "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant [1785] 2012, 4:421). He further emphasises the rational dignity of persons when he states: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or another, always as an end and never as only a means" (Kant [1785] 2012, 4:429). As such, in this Kantian framework, individuals can have inherent value and the capacity for autonomy. In the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, individuals similarly possess worth, which is grounded in their relational capacities and contributions to communal life (Nicolaides, 2022:30). While *Ubuntu* is considered relational and communal, and Kant's categorical imperative is often interpreted as formal and individualist, the two share overlapping structures relating to how individuals ought to treat each other. The differences in ontologies between the two frameworks, however, should not be conflated or overlooked.

Furthermore, even though Kant's concept of autonomy provides this study with a normative framework for understanding moral agency and dignity, applying this account in the Global South requires careful clarification. It thus becomes important to recognise that Kant wrote during the age of Enlightenment, a time defined by colonialism and racial hierarchies. Therefore, any philosophical and historical criticism that has come forward must be taken into account in any modern application of the Kantian concept of autonomy.

Kant's conception of rational beings as "ends in themselves" (4:429) demonstrates moral egalitarianism, emphasising individual dignity and influenced contemporary moral philosophy. However, his conflicting racial ideologies have sparked criticism of how someone who supports universal human dignity could hold such views, raising concerns about the consequences for his moral theory and personal integrity. Following an extended phase of near-total complacency regarding Kant's racism, recent post-colonial scholars such as Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze have taken Kant's racism seriously and significantly helped deepen our understanding of both the historical development of Kant's views on race and the nature of his racism. Eze, in his text *On Reason, Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism 2008*, argues that since Enlightenment rationality developed alongside classificatory ambitions that aided in the racialisation of the human subject, it cannot be viewed as historically neutral (Eze, 2008:176). This poses a significant challenge for the current study. Can the Kantian conception of autonomy be used to analyse digital control in the Global South without perpetuating the exclusion inherent in Enlightenment thought?

According to Eze, the universality and objectivity of Enlightenment rationality should be questioned, especially when applied to postcolonial contexts. It should also not be seen as historically neutral, especially with the negative views he held about Africans being lazy, idle, lacking talent, and rational character (Eze, 2008: 120-121). He argues that rationality should not be renounced as a tool for Western imperialism; instead, when it is linked to politics of difference, it should be understood as something that asserts from difference that comes from cultural diversity, political correctness and Identity politics (Eze, 2008:3). He argues that, as much as reason is a human property, it is important to note that it cannot be thought outside cultural diversity (Eze, 2008:21). He thus advocated for rationality in a multicultural world where both identity and differenced is affirmed. According to Eze, the Kantian concept of rationality emerged as part of a larger classificatory work that contributed towards the

racialisation of the human condition (Eze, 2008:13). Eze (1997:131) argues that instead of representing a wholly universal and abstract inclusive ideal, it reflects a fully rational actor which embodies exclusion established in Enlightenment epistemology.

The same concern that Eze had was further developed by other philosophers such as Mogobe Ramose and Mabogo. P. More, although this concern is not limited to these thinkers, the following section will discuss the concerns that these specific thinkers had. Mogobe Ramose's text, '*African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*,' identifies Kant and Hume as key contributors to philosophical racism in the West. In response, he proposes an authentic African Philosophy rooted in the Bantu concept of ubuntu, which emphasises humanness (Ramose 1999, 15). He asserts that Ubuntu reflects African rationality and affirms an authentic African identity that has been historically subordinated due to colonialism and apartheid (Ramose 1999, 15). His philosophical project consists of two primary components: the deconstruction of Western intellectual domination and the reconstruction of an African worldview and way of existence. The reconstruction does not promote a pre-colonial regression; rather aims to create a modern African identity that appeals to people all over the world by incorporating historical traditions while adapting to contemporary needs (Ramose, 1999, 134). Ramose is thus advocating for a dialogue between the opposing epistemological frameworks of the African and Western contexts. Mabogo More, on the other hand, warned that Kantian moral universalism appears to be abstract when compared to the African concept of personhood, which emphasises communal, relationship, historical, and belonging contextual dignity, especially within the Ubuntu tradition (1996:113). Neither of these thinkers implies that Kant's Universal moral philosophy is not important in the African context; they are, however, arguing that it should be handled critically, especially when applied in the African context.

Thus, accepting the concerns that are raised by these African scholars does not mean rejecting the Kantian conception of autonomy. The approach of this study is not dismissive but rather reconstructive. My study argues that Kant's normative insight, especially the importance of treating humanity as an end rather than a means, keeps critical power. Therefore, the Kantian conception of autonomy, if understood and applied as a normative tool, can still be used to analyse contemporary forms of digital control. With the critiques discussed above, it is important to note that, for this study, rather than using Kant as an uncritical historical authority, we primarily use his work as a normative framework for assessing contemporary threats to

autonomy, which allows us to use his moral insight while keeping his historical limitations of Enlightenment thought in mind.

In liberal Western thought, more broadly, autonomy plays an important role in shaping cultures, institutions, and legal frameworks. Kant's work is at the heart of many of these modern theories, emphasising and promoting the necessity for the emancipation of thought from dogma and the pursuit of rational self-legislation. The following section will therefore discuss the tradition of Kant's concept of autonomy.

1.2 Autonomy in Kant's thought

Building upon the Greek definition of autonomy, as mentioned above, Kant understands autonomy as the ideal of the rational will possessed by all adult rational beings. Such beings, for Kant, are seen as capable of legislating universal moral laws, are not only motivated by sensual impulses, and can be free from determinism. For Kant, freedom must therefore be attributed to every rational being (GMM 4:448). As the capacity for reason is what makes us distinctly human, it is a potential that everyone shares. Autonomy, therefore, is not contingent to personal circumstances. As such, although individuals may display autonomy to different degrees empirically, this does not diminish its status as a universal and unconditional concept (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:556).

However, other aspects related to the concept of autonomy are conditional, such as independence, privacy, or the absence of coercion. While these are necessary for decision-making, they are not the core of the concept, at least as Kant conceptualises it. Rather, for Kant, the foundation of autonomy is not in external conditions but in the rational will's unconditional capacity and potential for self-legislation (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:556). This chapter, therefore focuses on the unconditional conception of autonomy, especially its freedom, limitations, and obligations. The conditional conception of autonomy will be explored in Chapter Three, particularly in relation to how surveillance capitalism undermines liberty and privacy.

As already indicated, Kantian autonomy includes the rational being's ability to formulate universal laws that necessarily respect other individuals. Autonomy thus requires more than

acknowledging the mere existence of others (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:550); it further demands that rational beings will only those maxims that could be universalised into laws that are binding for all. Autonomous agents are therefore compelled to define rational action through universal principles and are obliged to consider both how they would reason as rational beings and how their actions affect others (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:550). The categorical imperative thus requires individuals to act in a way that respects other individuals' existence as ends in themselves rather than as a means to an end.

Structurally, this requirement is comparable to the well-known maxim, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you", and similarly resonates with the African ethic of *Ubuntu* (although *Ubuntu* bases its moral framework on a relational ontology). Nnamunga (2013:127) states, as an elaboration on the *Ubuntu* ethic: " [h]uman beings only discover full personality and human wholeness in a group of relationships because in relationships there is both an end and an entity." This form of relationality promotes tolerance and integral human flourishing. The much-quoted South African proverb, *Motho ke motho ka batho ba bang*, which translates to "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am", epitomises a conception of personhood grounded in interdependence rather than individualism. Although *Ubuntu* does not derive personhood from rationality, as Kant does, the two frameworks can be interpreted as structurally similar while remaining ontologically distinct.

From this structural similarity, one could argue, Kant's concept of autonomy is implicitly characterised by taking care of others, a position defended by Treiger-Bar-Am (2011).[8] Care can be understood both as an emotion (such as warmth or love) and as an action or behaviour (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:550). Critics often claim that Kantian ethics prioritises duty over emotion and thereby overlooks the moral significance of feeling. However, the morality of an act also depends on the actor's awareness of the universal law that governs it (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:550). Moreover, several scholars argue that Kant does not exclude feelings entirely; rather, he insists that emotions should not determine the morality of actions (Herman, 1981:359–382). As such, while Kantian autonomy is individual in form, it is not individualistic in moral orientation.

[8] Several contemporary Kantian scholars engage Kant through the lens of the ethics of care. For example, John Paley in *Virtues of Autonomy: The Kantian Ethics of Care (2002)*, as well as Nel Noddings (*Caring*, 1984), Sara Ruddick (*Maternal Thinking*, 1980), and Virginia Held (*The Ethics of Care*, 2006), draw connections between Kantian commitments to dignity, respect, and obligation, and traditions of care ethics.

Kantian ideals of Dignity and Respect

Building upon the discussion above, the Kantian definition of autonomy can be directly linked to dignity and respect. The potential for autonomy, understood as the capacity for self-legislation, is the foundation of the dignity of the rational being, which simultaneously also demands respect for others. Autonomy, therefore, establishes both the dignity of the autonomous agent and the obligation to respect the dignity of others (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:567). These dimensions are discussed in the sections below.

1.2.1 Dignity

Kant conceives of dignity as an "absolute inner worth" (MM 6:435), which is both incomparable and unconditional (GGM 4:440). While autonomy and dignity are often treated as synonymous or interchangeable, Kant distinguishes between them while also linking them closely to each other (GGM 4:436). He argues that humanity's dignity stems from its capacity to legislate universal laws, and this capacity is itself the expression of autonomy. Autonomy, therefore, forms the foundation of dignity (GGM 4:436). Moreover, because rational beings can conceive of universal laws, they can regard themselves as members of a "kingdom of ends",[9] with freedom from the constraints of natural laws, bound only by the maxims that could belong to a universal law (Kant, GGM 4:436). As such, the law that determines all worth must possess unconditional and incomparable dignity. This then establishes autonomy as the foundation of human dignity (Kant, GGM 4:436).

Dignity's connection to autonomy

As noted above, autonomy is unconditional, as is dignity, as it is grounded in autonomy (Kant, GMS, AA 04: 436). However, dignity can also be *conditional*, as it can either be present or absent. When dignity is understood in terms of self-respect, it can be expressed as a virtue or feeling that arises when respect is present (GMS, AA 04:436). Kant also refers to conditional

[9] Kant's concept of the Kingdom of Ends arises from the principle of autonomy and is linked to his broader account of moral freedom (Kant, 1999:83). The Kingdom of Ends presents a two-dimensional view of rational nature: each rational being is simultaneously an *end in itself* and *part of a collective moral community* in which all individuals must always be treated as ends, never merely as means (Kant, 1999:83).

dignity in relation to moral feeling, or sublimity,[10] when an individual fulfils their duties (GMS 4:440). Nevertheless, [a] foundational element of dignity remains rooted in the unconditionality or unconditional nature of autonomy.

Dignity, often equated with respect, is an important concept in human ethics (GMS 4:434). Respect for other individuals can often be conceived of as the acknowledgement of the unconditional dignity that autonomous beings possess. While respect may vary depending on perceived worth, or on feelings, context, behaviour, and attitude, the core of dignity, as with autonomy, is unconditional (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:569). Thus, the duty of respect is universal and a central ethical claim. As Treiger-Bar-Am notes, respect is, for Kant, "one of the most important cornerstones of his ethical ideas, highlighting the importance of treating everyone with respect" (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:569). The next section elaborates further on this.

1.2.2 The Kantian ideal of respect

Kant introduces the notion of respect *(Achtung,* or reverence) as essential to moral law (KpV 5:75). Respect, for Kant, develops when we recognise and submit to the demands of moral law, while still reasoning about what is right. Although this involves a confrontation between duty and inclination, the resulting feeling is practical rather than pathological, because it is actively produced by rational agency rather than passively experienced (KpV 5:75). Respect is therefore a necessary component of autonomy. It provides the philosophical grounding for moral autonomy by reinforcing the requirement that every person be treated as an end in themselves, never merely as a means (GMS, AA 04:428, 461).[11]

Respect is thus integral to autonomy in two ways: first, every rational being is owed respect, and second, every rational being has a duty to respect others. This is not merely a social implication of Kant's ethics; it is central to the structure of autonomy itself (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:569). Kant's moral theory is grounded in duty (O'Neil, 2002:81–165), and autonomy is

[10] Sublimity, in this context, refers to the human capacity to fulfil moral duty out of respect for the moral law. When an individual acts dutifully despite pressure or temptation, they display autonomy and moral greatness; that is, a form of sublimity grounded in unwavering commitment to principle rather than mere freedom of choice.
[11] This contrasts sharply with colonial rationality, which violates the categorical imperative by treating people as means to political, economic, or cultural ends. Such violations persist in contemporary forms, particularly in the Global South, through mechanisms such as standardisation, commodification, manufactured "false needs", algorithmic governance, opaque data practices, and exploitative economic systems (the Culture Industry will be explored in Chapter Two; digital colonialism in Chapter Three).

the exercise of practical reason that generates the categorical imperative. In turn, the categorical imperative requires respect for others as ends in themselves, not merely as means to varying ends.[12]

1.2.3 The integration of autonomy and duty

This link between autonomy and duty provides clarity on the relationship between rights and obligations (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:570). While the concepts of autonomy and rights are not identical, they are sometimes treated as synonymous, particularly in the will theory of rights, where rights are framed as the ability to choose, an idea which is similar to what has been noted above as autonomy (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:570). For Kant, rights are the conditions that allow one person's choice to be combined with that of another under a universal law of freedom (MM 6:230). Kantian autonomy leads to the categorical imperative, and from this imperative, the concept of rights is derived (MM 6:232). Many contemporary critics have argued for a shift away from the individualist interpretations often attributed to Kant, towards an emphasis on the relationship between the bearers of obligations and rights-holders, including those shaped by institutions (O'Neil, 2002:82). While this study does not discuss a legal analysis of Kantian rights, his moral philosophy is drawn on to address these concerns.

1.3 Response to Critiques of Kantian Autonomy

It will be argued that autonomy and dignity contain individual and social dimensions. While many critics portray Kantian autonomy as egotistical and individualistic (Robert, 1986, cited in Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:571), autonomy can also be understood as involving respect for oneself, the autonomous agent, and respect for others. For example, Dworkin aligns with the duty-based aspect of Kant's morality (Dworkin, 2002:172), despite the common concern that Kant prioritises the right over the good. Other theorists remain critical of Kant's account of autonomy, particularly where it appears to neglect relational or social aspects. Such critiques

[12] In the final chapter of this study, it will be argued that under conditions of digital colonialism, this duty is systematically violated. Individuals are treated as tools for surveillance, extraction, and profit, rather than as autonomous agents with the right to self-determination. Their behaviour, attention, and personal data become resources for economic and technological gain, mirroring earlier forms of colonial exploitation (an issue addressed in the final chapter). As such, while autonomy does not derive from duty, the duty to respect others arises naturally from autonomy itself (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:569). Digital colonialism, however, negates this duty by denying individuals' autonomy and moral standing.

are often countered by highlighting the social duties implied by positive freedom, according to which individuals have moral responsibilities towards others. The following sections respond to these criticisms by adopting a more relational reading of Kantian autonomy (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:571).

Kantian autonomy is frequently associated with egocentric individualism, as Jane Kneller (1997:78) argues. The Kantian agent is often depicted as an individualistic, non-social, ahistorical "super-hero", who makes all moral decisions solely through their own rational willpower (Kneller, 1997:78). Iris Murdoch similarly argues that Western moral philosophy continues to be shaped by "the age of the Kantian man-god," who, even when confronted with a transcendent moral ideal, listens only to their own reason (Murdoch, 2001:78). This autonomous being is portrayed as isolated, rational, independent, and powerful, which is an image Murdoch attributes in part to Kant's enduring influence on Western ethics. According to her, the transition from Kant's moral individualism to Nietzsche's radical self-creation, and later to existentialism, reflects a philosophical continuity grounded in the same legacy of isolation through the belief in human autonomy (Murdoch, 2001:78). Kant has therefore, according to Murdoch, undeniably left Western ethics with deep and unresolved alienation (Murdoch, 2001:78).

Murdoch further critiques Kant's moral philosophy on the grounds of rationality. This critique follows interpretations of Kantian ethics as claiming that actions motivated by emotion rather than reason lack moral worth (West, 1997:41-45). To address this argument, one must consider the role of emotions and embodied experience in moral decision-making. The following sections, therefore, respond to Murdoch's criticisms of Kant's supposed reliance on isolated rationality. Alternatively, and as other scholars argue, Kantian rationality can be viewed as universal rather than merely individual. L.W. Beck (1988) suggests that the tension between individuality and universality does not in fact undermine Kant's philosophy; rather, it reflects a central feature of the human condition (Beck, 1988:44–47). That is, we choose freely as individuals, yet our decisions should align with the universal moral law. In this way, we are individuals *and* members of a moral community.

Furthermore, the Kantian concept of autonomy indeed requires individuals to make autonomous and rational decisions. Individuality (or personal autonomy) is linked to

universality (the universal moral law), which means that to act morally, one uses one's own rationality to apply a universal principle. Autonomy is therefore a universal trait, since it derives from human rationality, and Kant treats autonomy as a trait that all humans possess. Not only is autonomy universal, but it is also grounded in, while also grounding, dignity, as noted earlier. As such, universal autonomy and dignity emerge from the fact of rationality.

For this reason, Kantian autonomy has been described, cautiously, as a "special gift of the super 'man-god'" (Kneller & Axinn, 1998, as cited in Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:573). This phrasing should not be understood literally; rather, it signals the aspirational, idealised nature of the Kantian moral agent. Kant's universal theory has profoundly influenced modern ideas of equality and has fuelled the aspiration for freedom by emphasising pure self-activity (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:573). The next section will consider further critiques of Kantian autonomy from communitarian and feminist theorists, and it will draw on the ideal of embodiment to respond to these concerns.

1.3.1 Autonomy is characterised as an embodiment.

Communitarian theorists such as Michael Sandel (1982) and feminist theorists like Carol Gilligan (1982) argue that the Kantian autonomous being is overly free, abstract, and disembodied. Similarly, Bernard Williams contends that Kant's failure to include character as a moral factor stems from his insistence on impartial morality, which renders his (i.e. Kant's) account of the individual inadequate (Williams, 1976:7). According to Williams, Kantian moral philosophy treats people as abstractions, a move he finds problematic, as it overlooks the factors that define, shape, and constrain moral cognition (Williams, 1976:7-8).

However, Kantian individuality can also be interpreted as that of a concrete person with commitments, attachments, needs, connections, and beliefs (Herman, 1993:203-207). Importantly, for Kant, impartiality, rather than impersonal detachment, is the requirement. The impartial agent acts on maxims that are universally applicable, but this does not entail denying or overlooking empirical or phenomenological aspects of human life. This view is supported by Kant's distinction between the negative freedom of *Willkür* and the positive freedom

of *Wille*[13], which suggests that the phenomenal and noumenal can be reconciled (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:574). As such, the impartial yet situated individual, for Kant, can act on universalisable principles.

Furthermore, Kant's theory does not exclude emotions such as compassion. Rather, he encourages benevolent and sympathetic acts, including kindness towards one's family (GGM 4:423). Kantian virtues, which include sympathy and love, are characterised as cultivated habits, with moral actions arising from the exercise of practical reason rather than chance (GGM 4:423). Moreover, benevolence is counted among these virtues, although Kant distinguishes it from strict moral duties (MM 6:448-52).

1.3.2 The autonomous being as social

The autonomous being, in addition to being attached and embodied, is also inherently social. It is therefore inaccurate to view the Kantian rational agent as solitary or detached (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:571). Kantian autonomy is embedded *within* humanity rather than existing in an atomistic vacuum. It is helpful, therefore, to distinguish Kantian autonomy and the duties arising from it from later sociological or conditional conceptions of autonomy.

For instance, Jennifer Nedelsky argues that the self is shaped through social relations, while still holding that a degree of independence is required for self-determination (2011:19). This position indicates that relationality and independence need not be mutually exclusive, a point that resonates with Kant's integration of the free subject into a community of others.

Kant maintains that freedom entails following the moral law and acting only on maxims that one can will universally (Kneller & Axinn, 2008:49). Thus, to understand oneself as free, one must conceive of oneself as an individual among others, bound by universal moral norms (Kneller & Axinn, 2008:42). Kant illustrates this with the example of an isolated tree: a tree growing alone becomes twisted and stunted, whereas one growing among others thrives

[13] *Wille* refers to positive freedom, which embodies the ability to self-legislate and act on moral ideals, which reflects the rational part of free will. In contrast, *Willkür* refers to the negative freedom of the will, which is defined by the absence of external limitations (GMM, 4:412, 4:446).

(Kneller & Axinn, 2008:135). This analogy reinforces the view that Kantian ethics is intrinsically social. Autonomous beings have duties to promote the highest good and to contribute to the realisation of a moral community on earth (Kneller, 2007:9). As Kant states, "Genuine human society is characterised as a community of individuals united to constitute a moral commonwealth" (Kant in Kneller & Axinn, 1998:vii–viii).

1.3.3 Obligation as an essential component of autonomy

Kantian autonomy also necessitates obligations to others, with the categorical imperative requiring the autonomous subject or agent to treat others as an end in themselves. Because one's duties to others shape one's place in the moral community, autonomy, in Kant's sense, is inherently rational and social. Kant emphasises the promotion of others' ends and holds that every rational being has a duty to purposefully avoid withdrawing from others' happiness, and instead act to further their ends (GMM 4:430).

He further argues that it is impossible, or at least not easy, to will a universal principle of deception or non-assistance, as situations inevitably arise in which one would require the help, honesty, love, or sympathy of others, and the universalisation of a principle in which deception or indifference is tolerated would undermine the very conditions under which one could hope for such help (GMM 4:423).

Moreover, according to Rawls, Kant's moral philosophy supports "an ethic of mutual respect and self-esteem" (Rawls, 1971:256). Furthermore, for Rawls, the Kantian-Aristotelian tradition hinges on the moral and legal obligation to respect, care for, and promote the humanity in oneself and others. In this tradition, moral action is not motivated by emotion alone, but rather by *practical reason informed by moral sentiment* (GMM 4:398). Acts done from duty fulfil the obligations associated with positive freedom (GMM 4:401). Kantian autonomy, therefore, prioritises the sentiment "do as we must" over "do as we like".

Some critics claim that such an emphasis on duty limits freedom, suggesting that constraints relating to rationality and practical reason amount to servitude to objective morality. Such critiques contribute to satirical depictions of the Kantian individual (such as the duty/obligation-bound and emotionally detached individual) (Hegel, 1991:163). However,

contrary to the claim that Kant prioritises individual rights above others, Kantian autonomy is duty-based and grounded in *interpersonal ties* within a community (GMM 4:397). Kantian autonomy thus highlights the importance of *care* and *obligation*, offering a principled response to communitarian and feminist critiques by emphasising the nature of positive freedom and its relational demands. Moreover, positive freedom emphasises respect for others' autonomy and dignity, which lies at the heart of the categorical imperative, thus making both attachment and action essential within Kant's moral framework.

The following section will elaborate on autonomy as characterised through care (fellow-feeling).

1.3.4 Autonomy characterised by fellow-feeling

Kant writes:

> To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides, there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any other motive of vanity (*Eitelkeit)* or self-interest (*Eigennutz),* they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no moral worth but is on the same footing with other inclinations, for example the inclination to honour, which if it fortunately lights upon what is in fact the common interest and in conformity with duty and hence honourable, deserves praise and encouragement but not esteem; for the maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but from duty. (Kant, GMS 4:398)

From this passage, it can be understood that Kant maintains that human freedom is required for and must ground sympathy and compassion for others, rather than selfishness. He further argues that humans should cultivate the ability to respond in a non-mechanical way to moral demands, prioritising this over self-interest (Guyer, 2002:207). This aspect of Kant's practical philosophy sheds new light on his doctrines of moral worth and respect, making them more intelligible and engaging (Wilson, 2015:379). It also clarifies the connection between the two doctrines of moral worth and respect, and Kant's broader critical project, in particular his efforts to identify limits on modern philosophy's mechanical worldview (Wilson, 2015:379).

Furthermore, Kant thus shares an ambition with thinkers like Butler, Rousseau, Hume, and Smith (Rawls, 2000:287). Like them, Kant suggests that *mora vindication* (moral vindication) cannot end with or rest on fellow-feeling alone; something more is needed (Rawls, 2000:287-325). Although philosophers such as Hume, Rousseau, Hutcheson, and Smith emphasise fellow feeling (i.e. our ability to sympathise or empathise with others due to our shared experiences) (Wilson, 2015:390), Kant does as well, despite critiques that portray his views as overly individualistic (Wilson, 2015:390). While, to an extent, human behaviour may be explained by self-love, as seen in Hume's "selfish hypothesis",[14], humans are equally capable of sharing genuine sentiments with others. There is no reason to assume such sentiments cannot inspire meaningful behavioural and attitudinal change (Wilson, 2015:390).

Although Kant often emphasises reason, this has at times overshadowed the emotional dimension of his work. *In The Metaphysics of Morals* (1996), he states that sympathetic joy *[Mitfreude]* and sympathetic sadness [*Mitleid*; *sympathia moralis*) are sensible feelings of pleasure or displeasure in response to another's feelings or condition (shared feeling, sympathetic feeling); they are therefore considered "aesthetic" feelings (MS 6:457). Receptivity to such feelings is, for Kant, inherent in human beings (MS 6:457). This suggests that Kant not only acknowledges but openly affirms the human capacity for shared emotion. Like Hume and Smith, he considers fellow-feeling an inherent part of the human condition (Wilson, 2015:390).

Moreover, Kant also follows the views of Hume and Smith in conceiving of sympathy as a function of the human imagination, influenced by Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Anth. 7:238–239). He agrees that fellow-feeling often arises automatically in response to the well-being or suffering of others. As such, he categorises sympathetic joy [*Mitfreude*] and sadness [*Mitleid* or *sympathia moralis*] as *humanitas aesthetica*, describing them as "shareable" feelings (*mitteilend*) that spread and are shared naturally among people living in proximity (MS 6:456–457). Furthermore, our receptiveness to these shared feelings makes us receptive to warmth as well (MS 6:457).

[14] According to David Hume, the *selfish hypothesis* holds that self-love is the driving force behind all human actions and the ultimate explanation of moral judgement (Hume, *EPM*:298). From this view, passions are primarily self-regarding rather than other-regarding (EPM:296), and moral evaluation ultimately expresses what is good or useful to oneself.

Kant further argues that genuine fellow feeling is also important for human moral life. Our natural inclination, according to Kant, to share feelings with others can be elevated through duty (MS 6:457). In order to be and remain open to moral duty, we must possess a genuine and sincere concern for others. “Love for one’s neighbour” *(liebe des Nächsten)* is one of Kant’s four moral endowments *(moralische Beschaffenheiten*), necessary for experiencing the force of obligation. Together, these moral endowments lie "at the basis of morality as a subjective condition of receptiveness to the concept of duty" (MS 6:399). Kant thus emphasises that such features of human nature are intrinsically good and should not be removed; in fact, it would be harmful and futile to attempt to do so (RGV 6:58).

This section therefore, demonstrates that Kant’s moral theory *does* incorporate human emotion in the form of fellow-feeling. The following section shows how the contemporary concept of autonomy or freedom of expression is closely connected to the Kantian conception of autonomy, particularly in a shared emphasis on rights and obligations.

1.4 Kantian autonomy vs the modern conception of freedom of expression

This section aims to show how Kantian autonomy both underlies and extends into the modern concept of freedom of expression. In doing so, responses will be put forward to critiques that depict Kant’s moral theory as excluding emotion. The contemporary idea of autonomy of expression can be traced back to Kantian autonomy. As freedom of expression encompasses more than just free speech, it is important to understand how the concept of autonomy evolved from its Kantian roots to current conceptions of self-expression (Nussbaum, 1986:19-20). The widespread view that modern liberal self-expression has Kantian origins demonstrates this conceptual interconnection.

Central to understanding the link between the two is the recognition that freedom of speech also encompasses duties, as well as rights (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:552). Kantian autonomy similarly entails obligations, rights, and duties, as autonomous beings must respect the dignity of others, and this respect imposes duties on both the autonomous individual and those around them (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:552). As such, just as Kantian autonomy requires consideration

of others, so too should modern conceptions of freedom of expression. Autonomy then, for this reason should not be simplistically interpreted as encouraging egoistic individuality, but instead should be understood as emphasising care for others (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:552).

The contemporary notion of freedom of expression can therefore become more intelligible if understood through the lens of Kant's conception of autonomy. Onora O'Neill, however, argues that Kant would not have connected autonomy with self-expression (O'Neill, 2002:1-3). She in fact critiques contemporary form of autonomy for *mistakenly* tracing their roots back to Kantian autonomy (O'Neill, 2002:1). While there are some historical and theoretical continuities between the two conceptions, of crucial importance is understanding *how* the Kantian roots of modern freedom of expression offers valuable insight into its conceptual development into the doctrinal development of the concept (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:580).

Kantian autonomy entails both rights and obligations grounded in human dignity. These obligations include respecting the dignity of others within the community (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:580). The same duty of respect that grounds Kantian thought should inform the contemporary conception of autonomy as expression (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:580). This conceptual and historical awareness then strengthens legal and philosophical interpretations of freedom of expression, as will be explored below.

Finally, while the concept of autonomy has developed historically and philosophically, modern culture *combines* Kantian ideals with contemporary understandings of autonomy as self-expression. The following sections examine this development in greater depth.

1.4.1 The questions between the two conceptions

Two contemporary concepts of autonomy can be understood as follows. Autonomy, from one perspective, is seen as a deliberate, rational choice (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581), where deliberation and rational reflection determine the choice of action. Kant significantly influences Rawls's account of this position (Rawls, 1980, cited in Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581). From this view, the contemporary conception of freedom of expression as a rational and deliberative

choice is the modern conception closely tied to the Kantian concept, even if the understanding of expression differs from that of Kant (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581).

However, the more familiar and widely-adopted modern notion of freedom of expression emphasises self-expression over reason (O'Neill, 2002 as cited in Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581). Autonomy as choice, from this view, is therefore not only about choosing between alternatives, but also about the ability to express oneself freely (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581). For example, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the phrase "to choose" has become synonymous with "to will", with the element of reasoning having been pushed into the background (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581). Furthermore, a convergence between the two modern views can also be observed, as both reflect certain assumptions about the fundamental characteristics of humanity (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581). To elaborate, autonomy grounded in rational choice views reason as the essence of humanity, whereas autonomy understood as self-expression and self-development conceives of the ability to express oneself free as central to human identity (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581).

Isaiah Berlin (1969:134) similarly observed that freedom is directly linked to the idea of what constitutes the self, and that humanity is defined by how it is expressed. In the same vein, Coleman and Murphy argue that suppressing expression undermines a person's humanity, as discourse, conversation, and argument reveal our capacity for thinking, rationality, and in Kantian terms, autonomy (Coleman & Murphy, 1989:88). Autonomy, in both modern conceptions, is also a moral ideal. Both Dworkin and Kant argue that the ability or capacity to make choices forms the foundation of who we are as individuals and moral agents (Dworkin, 1982:54–55), while Rawls (1980:516-520) suggests that an individual's use of reason leads to rational deliberative choices that shape moral rule-making. In other words, autonomy as expression is itself defined by moral understanding, in that choosing an expression, whether moral, immoral, or amoral, is still an exercise of moral will. Charles Taylor further contends that the contemporary ideal of autonomy as self-expression is in fact a moral ideal that encourages individuals to be true to themselves (Taylor, 1991:28–29).

The aim of this section is not to write off interpretations of the modern conception of autonomy as grounded in reason as problematic, but rather to understand the role of Kant's specific idea of autonomy within modern conceptions of freedom of expression. As such, the liberal

understanding of autonomy still draws from aspects of Kant, as the defining determinant of individual rights remains the person's status as an autonomous being, even if not strictly governed by the laws of reason (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581). There is, therefore, a recognisable connection between Kantian philosophy and contemporary conceptions of autonomy, even without fully accepting the entire Kantian "machinery of causal indeterminism, phenomenal and noumenal worlds" (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:581).

1.5 From the Kantian to the contemporary conception of autonomy

As delineated above, Kant's concept of autonomy refers to self-governance through self-legislation, where the rational being possesses the capacity to legislate moral actions autonomously. This capacity makes self-determination possible, as humans can reflect on their impulses. As such, their self-development is presented by Kant as a teleological projection of self-actualisation; this is a process through which humanity realises its true nature (GMM 4:423). Kant describes these principles with a sense of teleological orientation towards perfection (GMM 4:423).

Furthermore, this movement towards actualisation, for Kant, is particularly evident in his approach to expression. For Kant, an individual's capacity to express thoughts and communicate them to others forms part of the inherent process of self-realisation. Such ability to communicate one's thoughts is therefore an inherent right, since it plays a central role in fulfilling human purpose (MM 6:429–30).

Kant highlights this in his essay "On the Wrongfulness of Unauthorised Publication of Books", where he describes his view of protection afforded to books on the grounds that a book constitutes a public speech (MM 6:289). The book is a discourse addressed to the public, a means of exchanging thought, and thus constitutes a communicative link between author and reader (Walker & Meredith, 2007; Kant, 1996). Moreover, the artistic spirit similarly expresses ideas in forms that are universally communicable (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:584). Artistic creation is thus essential to both *autonomy* and *beauty*, as beauty, for Kant, symbolises morality, purposiveness, and harmony; these functions parallel rational activity through which humans express the moral law (Kant, 1970:178–79). Aesthetic cognition is also an example of

this conceptual connection, in that the imagination is freed so as to give itself rules, and this self-legislation is an exercise of autonomy (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:584).

From the discussion above, it becomes clear that autonomy of expression is central to Kant's moral framework. Moreover, the ability to communicate thoughts is vital to maintaining autonomy, and the obligations the autonomous individual has towards others have been emphasised throughout this chapter. The following section very briefly mentions post-Kantian thought on autonomy, through Hegel and the Romantics, to note how their perspectives further shaped the modern conception of autonomy.

1.6 A (very) brief analysis of post-Kantian thinkers on the conception of autonomy

Hegel

Post-Kantian thinkers, such as Hegel, expanded the concept of autonomy to include autonomy of expression. According to Hegel (1991: xi (PR § 23), "in choice the will is explicitly free". Like Kant, he developed the idea of self-determination as freedom (1991: xi (PR § 23). Hegel, however, goes further than Kant, arguing that individuals realise their conception of freedom through self-development and *"Sittlichkeit"* (which refers to social and communal structures that will be supporting the development) (Knowles, 2002:32–35). This conception gives expression a central role in self-determination.

Therefore, Hegel builds upon Herder's expressivist theory,[15] in that he (i.e. Hegel) synthesises freedom and expression (Knowles, 2002:32–35). His theory reincorporates Aristotelian categories, in which the subject manifests a determinate form (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:586).[16] However, he adds a new dimension, which is that the realised form is itself an expression, and one that cannot be known in advance (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:586). This synthesis of

[15] Herder's expressivist theory of language contrasts with the designative theories held by many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rationalists and empiricists. In the designative model, a word functions as a substitute for the object or concept it represents. In contrast, Herder argues that language emerges from expressive activity rather than abstract designation (Sibley, 2008:207).

[16] Hegel's account of autonomy draws partly from Aristotle's idea that a being realises its *form* (*eidos*) through the actualisation of its capacities (Hegel,1991:22)). However, Hegel modifies this framework by rejecting a fixed, pre-given form. For Hegel, the "form" of the self becomes known only through its own expressive activity, shaped by social and historical life (pR §§ 182-184). This synthesis of Aristotelian teleology with the modern expressive tradition is the foundation of Hegel's view that autonomy is a process of self-realisation achieved in and through expression (Knowles, 2002:32–35; Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:586).

Aristotelian form and the modern expressive paradigm thus enables a conception of self-realisation grounded in both structure and creativity.

Romanticism

The developing conception of autonomy also has strong Romantic roots. The Romantics emphasised the importance of the creative individual and viewed autonomy as the organic unity of fully-developed human powers (Bruford, 1975:75). Kant's notion of spontaneous, breakthrough creativity, or the genius who produces original art, significantly influenced Romantic thought (Beardsley, 1966:245). Although Hegel is not classified as a Romantic philosopher, aspects of his work share common foundations with Romanticism.

For the Romantics, self-development was a form of self-realisation, and artistic creation a mode of self-expression (Beardsley, 1974:19–21). John Stuart Mill further expanded the concept in a liberal direction so as to include his conception of liberty. His account of liberty emphasised the individual's unique self-development, the importance of freedom of speech, and political autonomy, all as necessary conditions for authentic choice (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:586). For Mill, human beings cultivate their individuality through the exercise of choice, and liberty is a prerequisite for such development (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:586). This then aligns with philosophical accounts of autonomy as self-development and self-expression, but stands in contrast to continental traditions that situate freedom primarily within the function of the state (Treiger-Bar-Am, 2011:586).

Feminist and Contemporary Political Theorist

Even though Kant's concept of autonomy provides this study with a normative framework for understanding moral agency and dignity, applying this account in the Global South requires careful clarification. It thus becomes important to recognise that Kant wrote during the age of Enlightenment, a time defined by colonialism and racial hierarchies. Therefore, any philosophical and historical criticism that has come forward must be taken into account in any modern application of the Kantian concept of autonomy.

Kant's conception of rational beings as "ends in themselves" (4:429) demonstrates moral egalitarianism, emphasising individual dignity and influenced contemporary moral philosophy. However, his conflicting racial ideologies have sparked criticism of how someone who

supports universal human dignity could hold such views, raising concerns about the consequences for his moral theory and personal integrity. Following an extended phase of near-total complacency regarding Kant's racism, recent post-colonial scholars such as Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze have taken Kant's racism seriously and significantly helped deepen our understanding of both the historical development of Kant's views on race and the nature of his racism. Eze, in his text *On Reason, Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism 2008*, argues that since Enlightenment rationality developed alongside classificatory ambitions that aided in the racialisation of the human subject, it cannot be viewed as historically neutral (Eze, 2008:176). This poses a significant challenge for the current study. Can the Kantian conception of autonomy be used to analyse digital control in the Global South without perpetuating the exclusion inherent in Enlightenment thought?

According to Eze, the universality and objectivity of Enlightenment rationality should be questioned, especially when applied to postcolonial contexts. It should also not be seen as historically neutral, especially with the negative views he held about Africans being lazy, idle, lacking talent, and rational character (Eze, 2008: 120-121). He argues that rationality should not be renounced as a tool for Western imperialism; instead, when it is linked to politics of difference, it should be understood as something that asserts from difference that comes from cultural diversity, political correctness and Identity politics (Eze, 2008:3). He argues that, as much as reason is a human property, it is important to note that it cannot be thought outside cultural diversity (Eze, 2008:21). He thus advocated for rationality in a multicultural world where both identity and differenced is affirmed. According to Eze, the Kantian concept of rationality emerged as part of a larger classificatory work that contributed towards the racialisation of the human condition (Eze, 2008:13). Eze (1997:131) argues that instead of representing a wholly universal and abstract inclusive ideal, it reflects a fully rational actor which embodies exclusion established in Enlightenment epistemology.

The same concern that Eze had was further developed by other philosophers such as Mogobe Ramose and Mabogo. P. More, although this concern is not limited to these thinkers, the following section will discuss the concerns that these specific thinkers had. Mogobe Ramose's text, '*African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*,' identifies Kant and Hume as key contributors to philosophical racism in the West. In response, he proposes an authentic African Philosophy rooted in the Bantu concept of ubuntu, which emphasises humanness (Ramose 1999, 15). He

asserts that Ubuntu reflects African rationality and affirms an authentic African identity that has been historically subordinated due to colonialism and apartheid (Ramose 1999, 15). His philosophical project consists of two primary components: the deconstruction of Western intellectual domination and the reconstruction of an African worldview and way of existence. The reconstruction does not promote a pre-colonial regression; rather aims to create a modern African identity that appeals to people all over the world by incorporating historical traditions while adapting to contemporary needs (Ramose, 1999, 134). Ramose is thus advocating for a dialogue between the opposing epistemological frameworks of the African and Western contexts. Mabogo More, on the other hand, warned that Kantian moral universalism appears to be abstract when compared to the African concept of personhood, which emphasises communal, relationship, historical, and belonging contextual dignity, especially within the Ubuntu tradition (1996:113). Neither of these thinkers implies that Kant's Universal moral philosophy is not important in the African context; they are, however, arguing that it should be handled critically, especially when applied in the African context.

Thus, accepting the concerns that are raised by these African scholars does not mean rejecting the Kantian conception of autonomy. The approach of this study is not dismissive but rather reconstructive. My study argues that Kant's normative insight, especially the importance of treating humanity as an end rather than a means, keeps critical power. Therefore, the Kantian conception of autonomy, if understood and applied as a normative tool, can still be used to analyse contemporary forms of digital control. With the critiques discussed above, it is important to note that, for this study, rather than using Kant as an uncritical historical authority, we primarily use his work as a normative framework for assessing contemporary threats to autonomy, which allows us to use his moral insight while keeping his historical limitations of Enlightenment thought in mind.

1.7 The importance and relevance of autonomy for this study

Autonomy is an important concept in ethics and philosophy, and it has been studied from various perspectives in political science and psychology. In psychology, it is often defined as a core goal of human development, closely tied to self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1961; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In ethics and political theory, autonomy is understood as a value connected to an individual's right to have their decisions respected, provided these decisions

do not infringe on the rights of others (Dworkin, 1988; Kant, [1785] 1994; Mill, [1859] 1956). For this study, however, the *Kantian* conception of autonomy is especially important. Kant's account is arguably the most influential foundation for contemporary virtue theory and moral philosophy, particularly because of its emphasis on trust, trustworthiness, and the moral standing of rational beings. His perspective is also highly relevant to contemporary challenges associated with technology and its effects on human autonomy.

According to Kant, there are two types of entities in the world: things and persons. Kant (1997: xii-xiv) argues that one may put a price on things and use them merely as means, but this cannot be done to persons, since their autonomy is the ground of human dignity and rational nature (AK 4:397). Kant was also the first major philosopher to explicitly apply the concept of autonomy to individuals, emphasising the moral imperative to respect a person's capacity to choose their own ends. This is reflected in his Enlightenment motto "Sapere Aude!", commonly translated to "have the courage to use your own reason" (Kant, 1996:1). Kant (Kant, 1997:xiv) further argues that because rational beings are capable of giving themselves laws and acting in accordance with them, rational nature exists as an end in itself. This inspired the humanity formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act so that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means" (GMS 4:429–430). This principle asserts that treating others merely as means, or managing them to achieve one's own interests, is morally impermissible because it violates what Kant calls our humanity [*Menschlichkeit*].

Having outlined the Kantian model of autonomy as rational self-governance, it becomes necessary to consider whether the social and technological conditions of the present actually allow such autonomy to flourish. This is where the Frankfurt School, and particularly Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the Culture Industry, becomes crucial. Their critique provides a contrasting lens through which to assess how media systems can shape preferences, limit critical reflection, and undermine the very autonomy that Kant's framework presupposes. Bringing these two perspectives into conversation clarifies the tension between philosophical ideals and contemporary socio-cultural realities.

The analysis developed in this chapter becomes especially relevant when situated within the broader context of the Culture Industry. Through commodification and standardisation, as will

be elaborated on in the next chapter, individuals are increasingly treated as means for organisational and economic ends. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1947] 2002), the Culture Industry is a profit-driven system that produces cultural commodities such as television, music, cinema, and popular entertainment. These products reinforce patterns of manipulation through their standardised, consumable forms, creating what they call "pseudo-individuality" (2002:124-125), that is, the illusion of choice within predetermined options. Such processes reduce individuals to instruments of economic ends and undermine the conditions of genuine autonomy. This stands in direct contradiction to Kant's humanity formulation, since individuals are subtly redirected or manipulated rather than treated as autonomous choice-makers.

The same concerns extend into the sphere of digital technology. Like the Culture Industry, digital technologies have profoundly shaped human behaviour, decision-making, and social relations. Scholars across disciplines have raised concerns about the ways algorithmic systems, surveillance architectures, behavioural engineering, and data-driven platforms undermine human autonomy, particularly when assessed from within Kantian deontological ethics. Understanding these dynamics, and their implications for human agency, is crucial for this study's exploration of power, culture, and technological influence.[17]

To conclude, this chapter has examined autonomy from a traditional Kantian perspective. It has shown how the concept has evolved from self-governance to self-determination, self-actualisation, and self-development, with human flourishing as the ultimate aim. It has also shown that, like the classical Greek conception, contemporary understandings of autonomy emphasise the importance of individuals determining their own goals. Furthermore, it has demonstrated how certain interpretations of Kant's theory can support the modern conception of freedom or autonomy of expression. The Kantian idea of expression has gradually developed from its philosophical roots into the contemporary understanding of expressive autonomy. According to the Kantian conception, autonomy necessarily involves both self-respect and duties to others. This undermines critiques that characterise Kantian autonomy as egoistic or

[17] When autonomy is eroded by the Culture Industry and digital technology, communities become increasingly vulnerable to what has been described as "digital colonialism" – that is, a new form of domination grounded in technological and data-driven exploitation. This study argues that digital colonialism emerges through the same processes of commodification, standardisation, and control that Horkheimer and Adorno identified, intensified by contemporary digital infrastructures (a topic developed in the final chapter).

excessively individualistic. The duties embedded in Kant's account also apply to modern theories of autonomy, which similarly require care, consideration, and respect for others.

Finally, this chapter highlighted the relevance of autonomy for the overarching aim of the thesis: understanding the erosion of autonomy is essential for analysing how the Culture Industry and digital technologies reshape human agency. The next chapter builds on this framework by exploring how these forces undermine autonomy and contribute to the emergence of digital colonialism.

Chapter 2: The Culture Industry's Erosion of Kantian Autonomy

Chapter one established how the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers, drawing specifically from Kant, shaped modern understandings of autonomy, individuality, and self-expression. Their insights revealed that autonomy is not simply a matter of isolated rational choice, but emerges through social relations, recognition, and the capacity to act meaningfully within shared structures. Building on this foundation, Chapter 2 examines how these philosophical concerns develop within the context of modernity, mass society, and the rise of consumer culture, setting the stage for understanding contemporary forms of identity and selfhood.

To do this, the chapter turns to the first generation of Critical Theorists, including Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse, and Fromm (and later Fuchs), whose critiques of modern society as an extension of the Enlightenment reveal how individual autonomy has been reshaped (and undermined) by technological advancement, economic pressures, and cultural expectations. While differing in their approaches, these thinkers share a concern with how subjectivity is formed and limited by broader social forces. Their analyses help illuminate the conditions under which modern individuals struggle to achieve autonomy, authenticity, and meaningful participation in public life.

These philosophical perspectives not only offer historical insight but also prepare the ground for later chapters, which aims to address digital culture and the development of digital colonialism. By clarifying how earlier forms of alienation, conformity, and social pressure operated in the pre-digital era, Chapter 2 traces the conceptual roots of the challenges we now face in digital environments. This chapter therefore serves as a theoretical bridge between the classical debates about autonomy (Chapter 1) and the emerging questions surrounding autonomy in the digital age (Chapter 3), providing the theoretical scaffolding needed to understand the notion of digital colonialism in the twenty-first century (Chapter 4).

Therefore, building on the previous chapter's analysis of the concept and ideals of autonomy, freedom, dignity and rationality this chapter examines how the Culture Industry undermines those ideals. As described by Horkheimer and Adorno, the Culture Industry, together with the later development of digital media, has contributed to new forms of subjugation, domination and colonisation. The foundational texts for this analysis include Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947/2002), especially the chapter "The Culture

Industry as Mass Deception". Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1991), with emphasis on "New Forms of Control", illustrates how consumer culture distorts consciousness, while Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1994) provides an account of those mechanisms underpinning social conformity and the modern individual's fear of freedom.

Together, these works show how genuine individuality has been eroded and replaced by pseudo-individuality,[18] largely through the mechanisms of the Culture Industry (and later digital media). They demonstrate how individual and collective autonomy are weakened through processes of standardisation, mass consumption, false needs,[19] false consciousness,[20] and manufactured individuality (all of which will be defined and elaborated upon in the chapter). The chapter will also revisit the concept of late capitalism through the lens of the Culture Industry in order to clarify its relationship to global transnational capitalism and to highlight how culture and information are commodified to reinforce capitalist domination.

This discussion sets the groundwork for the next chapter, which turns to surveillance capitalism as a mechanism that underpins and conditions digital colonialism through behavioural control and data extraction. Digital colonialism itself will be examined more fully in the final chapter. Although the critical theorists under discussion do not explicitly address information capitalism, surveillance capitalism, or digital colonialism, their frameworks remain relevant because they illuminate the underlying structures and logics that enable these contemporary developments.

2.2. Revisiting Kantian autonomy

As outlined in the previous chapter, autonomy is central to Kant's moral philosophy. For Kant, rationality is essential to autonomy, since autonomous actions embody the proper use of human reason. Examining rationality is therefore important for a study of digital colonialism, as digital colonialism operates precisely by limiting individuals' ability to make informed and autonomous decisions. This chapter, therefore, analyses the role of rationality in relation to

[18] Pseudo-individuality refers to the appearance of personal uniqueness produced by mass culture while real autonomy is undermined; genuine individuality involves self-determination, critical reflection, and non-conformist agency (Horkheimer &Adorno, 2022:125).
[19] False needs are socially manufactured desires that sustain capitalist reproduction, while true needs relate to human flourishing, freedom, and self-realisation (Marcuse, 1991:7-8).
[20] A condition in which individuals accept or internalise dominant ideologies that obscure their real conditions of exploitation or unfreedom, preventing critical awareness (Marx, 1996:205).

autonomy to clarify how external forms of control undermine it, thereby contributing to digital colonialism.

The following section introduces the critical theorists' framework, drawing from Kantian insights, and explores how they analyse autonomy when considering structural limitations, societal forces, and power relations. Although Adorno and Horkheimer do not explicitly frame their critique in Kantian terminology, their analysis of reason, freedom, and the limits of Enlightenment rationality operates within the broader post-Kantian tradition. Their work can therefore be read as an immanent critique[21] of the Enlightenment project that Kant helped inaugurate, rather than a direct engagement with Kant's texts.

2.1 The Culture Industry's erosion of autonomy

This section examines how the Culture Industry, as conceptualised by Horkheimer and Adorno, erodes autonomy by standardising ideas and shaping the needs or desires of the individual. This analysis provides a theoretical basis for understanding the forms of control characteristic of contemporary digital colonialism. The Culture Industry refers to the changing relationship between art and cultural production, shaped by technological advancement and the increasing serialisation of artistic output (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:97). Kellner (1989:8) elaborates on this:

> … [t]he term "culture industry" … contains a dialectical irony typical of the style of critical theory: culture, as traditionally valorised, is supposed to be opposed to industry and expressive of individual creativity while providing a repository of humanising values. In the culture industries, however, culture has come to function as a mode of ideological domination rather than of humanisation or emancipation.

The broader field of Critical Theory thus seeks to analyse how oppression operates not only economically and politically but also through cultural forms (Ponzanesi, 2015:11). Horkheimer and Adorno viewed the rise of the entertainment industry as a threat to intellectual autonomy and critical thinking, arguing that it increasingly functions in hegemonic ways (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:127-128). They also understood the Culture Industry as an institution that

[21] Immanent critique is a form of critique that evaluates a social system according to its own internal norms and stated ideals, revealing contradictions between what is claimed to be upheld and what is actually produced (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:227).

encourages mass consumption of cultural commodities in ways that support dominant economic and political interests (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:111).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the Culture Industry transforms artworks such as paintings, music, and literature into films, records, and posters primarily for entertainment and profit. This process distracts individuals from critical engagement with their circumstances (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:112-113). In their view, aesthetics, art, and critical thought have been reduced to entertainment, and works that once expressed ideas are replaced by products that prioritise immediacy, effect, and technical detail (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:125-126).

As discussed earlier, Kant's (1784) concept of Enlightenment refers to humanity's emergence from self-incurred immaturity, in which individuals rely on external authority rather than using their own understanding (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:63). For Kant, understanding must be autonomous and follow its own internal logic (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:63). Horkheimer and Adorno highlight that this autonomous understanding is grounded in reason, which integrates facts into ideals and enables the organisation of knowledge according to systematic principles (2002:64).

Reason operates through the concept of unity, expressed through Kant's notion of "schematism"[22] (Kant, 1998), i.e. the unconscious mechanism by which perceptions are organised according to the categories of understanding (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:64). Horkheimer and Adorno extend this idea by interrogating whether reason, under modern conditions, still contributes to autonomy or whether it has become entangled in systems of domination. They state that "[a]ccording to Kantian schematism, a secret mechanism within the psyche performed immediate data to fit them into the system of pure reason" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1997:98). However, it is this secret, they assert, which has "been unraveled" by the

[22] Kantian (1998) schematism refers to the mediating process by which the imagination provides time-based rules, or schemata (A141/B180–1), that allow the pure categories of the understanding (such as causality, substance, unity) to be meaningfully applied to sensory intuitions (CPR 137–146). He claims that without this mediating activity "the categories… would be *without sense*" (CPR *145/184*), and that intuitions without concepts would be "blind". Critical theorists draw from this idea, at least metaphorically. Adorno in particular interprets schematism as a precursor to understanding how social and cultural forms shape perception, while in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Enlightenment rationality becomes increasingly formalised and abstract, reducing particulars to rigid conceptual forms (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002: 65-66). Marcuse's notion of technological rationality in *One-Dimensional Man* similarly shows how conceptual mediation becomes functionalised and instrumental, thus shaping thought in accordance with rationalised efficiency (Marcuse, 2002:142–153). In other words, these thinkers of the Frankfurt School interpret Kant's notion of schematism as a warning, which is that when this mediated activity becomes externally predetermined rather than critically reflective, concepts could end up becoming tools of domination.

Culture Industry. They also note that

> [t]he active contribution which Kantian schematism still expected of subjects – that they should, from the first, relate sensuous multiplicity to fundamental concepts – is denied to the subject by industry. It purveys schematism as its first service to the customer (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2022:124-125).

The next section examines this concern by analysing the self-destruction of Enlightenment rationality, which is essential for understanding the fate of autonomy in modern and digital contexts.

2.1.1 The self-destruction of the Enlightenment

This section builds on Kant's ideas of reason and enlightenment to show how the very rationality intended to liberate human beings has, paradoxically, become a tool of control. This becomes especially relevant in the age of digital colonialism. For Horkheimer and Adorno, rationality is closely tied to core Enlightenment ideals such as freedom, solidarity, and justice (2002:2). They argue that the Enlightenment marked a significant shift from myth and myth-making toward rationality, reshaping science, ethics, politics, and aesthetics alike (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:1). Yet, they maintain, the Enlightenment ultimately failed to produce a universal form of reason guiding all human activity. Instead, the uneven development of cultural spheres, such as those of technology, science, politics, and economics, fractured and depleted reason's unifying potential (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:10).

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002:10) emphasise what they refer to as the "crisis of rationality", noting both optimism and profound disappointment in the Enlightenment's legacy. They highlight the complex historical processes that produced modernity, while simultaneously warning that the very tools that enabled these developments, which include modern technologies, now threaten to undermine the Enlightenment project itself. They identify two central mechanisms of this self-destruction. First, instrumental reason has contributed to the erosion of individuality, making it increasingly difficult for people to define themselves beyond the roles imposed on them by society (Horkheimer & Adorno,

2002:10). Secondly, the division between humanity and nature, or culture and nature, has reduced nature to a mere object of knowledge, while transforming knowledge of the world into a collection of measurable facts (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:10). In doing so, individuals have become passive in relation to knowledge, alienated from their own capacity to think critically.

Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that critical thinking – and thus autonomy – requires viewing society dialectically, recognising the relationship between parts and wholes (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:12). They argue that the relationship between subject and object is neither completely separate nor fully unified; rather, it is dynamic and interdependent. Yet the kind of progress championed by the Enlightenment has produced new forms of domination that contradict its imagined and stated ideals (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:12). Instrumental rationality,[23] briefly defined as reason reduced to efficiency, calculation, and control, lies at the heart of this problem. While they (i.e. Horkheimer and Adorno) do not reject Enlightenment rationality itself outright, they insist that it must be critically examined and "enlightened about itself", if its promises are to be realised (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:12).

The challenge, however, is that Enlightenment rationality is already entwined into a process of self-destruction. Without confronting its own dialectic, as mentioned above, the Enlightenment promise cannot sustain itself (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:xiii). Contemporary crises of reason reveal this clearly. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002:xv) point to four prevalent convictions that illustrate these tensions: i) the identification of reason with science; ii) the assumption that Enlightenment rationality is universal; iii) the close alignment of ethics and knowledge; and iv) the belief that ideas by themselves are effective and transformative. The argument at the heart of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that Enlightenment rationality has been reduced to myth, suggesting that humanity is not progressing toward freedom but rather moving toward a new form of "barbarism" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:15). As such, myth becomes enlightenment, and enlightenment collapses back into myth.

Moreover, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, this form of self-destruction has grown out of one of the Enlightenment's aims, which is the domination of nature (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:71). From the outset, Enlightenment rationality developed within contexts characterised

[23] Instrumental rationality or reason refers to a form of reason reduced to efficiency, calculation, and control, rather than oriented towards human emancipation or ethical judgment (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002:29).

by domination, including colonial exploitation, capitalist expansion, the privileging of Western epistemologies, and political forms of oppression (which will be elaborated on in the final chapter). Although the Enlightenment sought to free humanity from its fear of nature, by emphasising the development of scientific and technological mastery, this mastery also produced new forms of control (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002:3). Nature thus became a "substratum of dominance" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:9), and difference was suppressed in favour of uniformity; as such, "what was different is equalised" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:3). This reductionism ultimately led to the de-mythologisation of the world,[24] but also to a collapse of meaning into materialism.[25] Power replaced mimesis[26] as the guiding force of all human relations, while also diminishing art's expressive potential and its necessary role in critical social reflection (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:44). In this way, Enlightenment rationality treats human beings much like objects to be manipulated (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:6).[27]

For Horkheimer and Adorno (2002:23), the self-destruction of the Enlightenment ultimately stems from the urge for self-preservation, which narrows rationality and reduces the subject to an instrument of domination. This insight is crucial to understanding the central role of culture, and particularly the Culture Industry, in shaping the development, or regression, of society. The next section therefore turns to the Culture Industry as a key mechanism through which Enlightenment rationality collapses into domination.

2.1.2 The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception

[24] De-mythologisation of the world: Drawing from Max Weber's notion of disenchantment, this refers to the Enlightenment process through which myth is replaced by scientific explanation, yet which paradoxically enables new forms of domination through rationalisation (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002:42).
[25] A theoretical orientation that explains social structures and consciousness through material (economic, social, technological) conditions rather than ideal or purely mental ones, is referred to as a philosophical tradition of materialism (Marx,1848/1978:473); critical theory emphasis in Adorno, Marcuse).
[26] For Adorno, mimesis is a pre-rational mode of relating to the world based on imitation, affective attunement, and non-instrumental engagement; contrasted with instrumental domination (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:44-45).
[27] As shall be argued in chapter 4, these are connected to contemporary forms of digital colonialism. Here too, expressive representations and critical forms of art and culture are replaced by commercial interests, technological power, and surveillance. This is particularly evident in the Global South, where economic and material resources – including art, narratives, and ideas themselves – are legislated by new forms of power.

This section on the Culture Industry is important for this study because it aims to illustrate how rationality becomes instrumentalised, and how both reason and mass culture are used to encourage conformity and restrict autonomy, rather than fulfilling the Enlightenment's promise of freedom. It also shows how culture and technology can replicate dominance and endanger human freedom. This, in turn, provides a lens for understanding digital colonialism, where online platforms shape users' behaviour while suppressing critical thinking.

As mentioned above, the expression "culture industry" refers to the industrialisation of culture, reframing cultural production as an industry that manages cultural expression in ways fundamentally opposed to authentic culture[28] (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:95). For Horkheimer and Adorno, true or authentic culture is not merely "high culture", which itself can be commodified (2002:95). Rather, authentic culture resists commercialisation, challenges audiences, and demands active engagement rather than mere passive entertainment. By contrast, the Culture Industry promotes commercialisation and passive consumption (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:96). This duality highlights the importance of authentic cultural traditions in supporting individual freedom within an increasingly commercialised environment.

Horkheimer and Adorno's theory focuses on mass deception and social control. The Culture Industry, for them, represents a major source of domination in advanced capitalist societies. It is characterised by three key elements, namely technology, monopoly, and mass production (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:96). It involves the large-scale production of standardised, homogeneous cultural goods for mass consumption. In their time (early twentieth century), this was most visible through emerging mass-media technologies such as television, film, and newspapers (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:96).

In the chapter *"*The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (2002), Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the capitalist ruling class manipulates the masses' receptiveness to their cultural products, and that the masses' apparent preferences, in turn, reinforce capitalist production (2002:115). Competition between companies is replaced by monopolistic control exercised by powerful conglomerates (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:115). Within capitalist

[28] Forms of cultural expression that foster critical consciousness, aesthetic experience, and autonomy, rather than conformity or commodification, is authentic rather than pseudo culture (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:107-108).

societies, culture becomes an industry, producing standardised and repetitive products that subtly reinforce dominant economic interests.

The ultimate aim of this system is to manipulate human consciousness and turn individuals into passive consumers (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:106). Literature, painting, cinema, and other cultural forms rely on pre-packaged and repetitive content, resulting in the commodification of culture (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:106). Moreover, entertainment becomes a distraction from social injustice, offering a false sense of relief or escape that diverts attention from exploitation. This encourages the reproduction of a capitalist mentality that marginalises any alternatives (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:106). Artists, too, are pressured to work within the Culture Industry in order to survive, reinforcing a cycle in which mass culture becomes the dominant means of shaping desires and lifestyles (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). As they note, culture increasingly "infect[s] everything with sameness", despite superficial differences (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:106).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno then, industrially-produced culture undermines the individual's creative capacity and takes over the task of thinking for them (2002:107). Cultural products are delivered as ready-made "merchandise", leaving individuals only the task of consuming them (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:107). Mass production thus leads to homogenisation (sameness), and whatever diversity remains is limited to insignificant details. Although their critique is often described as pessimistic, Horkheimer and Adorno make clear that the Culture Industry does not refer to culture created by the masses for themselves. However, the apparent involvement of the masses is only superficial (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:108). They argue that this is a form of "swindling of the majority".

In relation to their claim that Kantian schematism has been 'hijacked' by the Culture Industry, they maintain that cultural products have become openly shaped to align with prevailing ideologies (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:98). The fact that mechanically-produced cultural goods appear different, yet ultimately function in the same way, reveals the schematic nature of the Culture Industry. It produces sameness under the guise of novelty, essentially training audiences to demand more of what they have already been given (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:98). This normalises consumerist ideology and reinforces capitalist dominance.

Those who engage with the concept of the Culture Industry often describe it in terms of technological rationality[29] (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:113), where the masses come to expect reproducible and standardised products that appear to meet universal needs (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:114). Moreover, the technological distinctions between production companies require central planning and organisation by those in power (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:114). In contemporary contexts, technological rationality is closely tied to domination, contributing to the alienation experienced by individuals within modern society (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:115). For example, films, automobiles, and even military technologies hold society together in ways that ultimately reinforce the same system they serve (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:114).

Technology in the Culture Industry thus reduces artistic expression to standardisation and mass production, further distancing art from the social world (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:124). The negative effects of technology stem from its role within the modern economy, where individual consciousness suppresses desires that fall outside institutions of centralised control (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:124).[30] Kellner (2012:n.p.) similarly argues that cultural industries continue to reproduce hegemonic beliefs and commodify culture, aligning with Horkheimer and Adorno's critique.

Finally, Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that commodification fosters both standardisation and pseudo-individuality, processes that will be examined in detail in the following section.

2.1.3 Standardisation of products and pseudo-individuality

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, in today's neo-capitalist culture, television advertising significantly shapes an individual's social identity through spending habits. With their strong visual component, commercials offer a sense of self-identity and perceived control over consumption. They refer to this as "pseudo-individualisation"; that is, the illusion of personal

[29] Technological rationality is where rationality is absorbed into the logic of technological efficiency, leading individuals to adapt themselves to technical systems rather than shaping them (Marcuse, 1991:147).
[30] Within the latter sections of this study, it will be argued that the rise of digital technologies, the Culture Industry has expanded even further due to the fact that Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002:125) concerns about standardisation and commercialisation are clearly apparent in a digital environment shaped by algorithms, recommendation systems, and targeted advertising; streaming platforms and social media intensify these dynamics.

choice within a system of standardised, mass-produced goods. In this way, advertisements influence an individual's personality, sustaining capitalist interests, while preserving a veneer of individuality (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:125. Horkheimer and Adorno similarly define pseudo-individualisation as a mechanism of capitalist production (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:125). Critics argue that as society shifts from an industrial to a post-industrial context, traditional social identities decline, making it increasingly difficult to represent collective diversity in any single image (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:125).

Moreover, for the Critical Theorists, modern advertising, particularly on television, constructs and circulates false versions of reality (Lane, 2009:72). Marketers mass-produce images that mirror consumers' aspirations, creating branded simulations of reality intended to resonate with their desires (Nayar, 2010:405). This manufactured world, which is a pure simulacrum,[31] challenges consumers' sense of autonomy and freedom of choice. As decisions become shaped by pervasive marketing discourses, individuals lose their sense of agency without necessarily recognising what is happening (Nayar, 2010:405). Consumers are thus deceived into believing they have meaningful options, whereas most differences are merely superficial. This fosters the perception of an endless array of new and improved products, and further contributes to a social order in which conformist goods are presented as pathways to happiness and success.

Advertisements frequently promote inclusivity, yet often fail to engage with broader socio-political and economic realities (Roy & Putatunda, 2022:553). They promote products as carriers of specific ideological meanings, drawing consumers into that ideological space (Roy & Putatunda, 2022:553). As brand images become symbols of particular worldviews, they raise important questions about consumer autonomy and agency. Despite appearing to celebrate individuality, advertisements may instead reinforce conformist and exclusionary practices, sustaining the conditions for pseudo-individualisation (Roy & Putatunda, 2022:553).

Pseudo-individuality, for Horkheimer and Adorno (2002:126), refers to cultural products that appear original yet differ only in superficial ways. Their example of a lock and key, as mass-

[31] A "pure simulacrum" refers to a representation that no longer has any correspondence to an original reality, but instead generates its own autonomous, self-referential world of meaning. In Baudrillard's account of simulation, signs do not mask or distort reality but replace it entirely, producing effects of authenticity and desire that operate independently of any underlying referent (Baudrillard, 1983:6–7). In this sense, advertising constructs a hyperreal environment in which what is consumed are not products but signs and images that simulate lifestyles, identities, and aspirations.

produced yet differentiated only by small modifications, illustrates this point (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:126). A contemporary parallel is the yearly release of new iPhone models, which often include only minor adjustments to previous versions (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:94). The resulting drive to consume such products reflects false needs[32] (Marcuse, 1991:7), manufactured by the culture industry. These false needs align with capitalism's broader logic of commodification, where the value of objects becomes tied to their exchangeability rather than their intrinsic worth (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:126). Consequently, consumers misinterpret social prestige for artistic or functional excellence, turning utility into a form of fetishism.[33]

Furthermore, Adorno (1947:147) also observed that commercially successful songs become "standards", fitting predictable genre patterns, such as Pop, Soft Rock, or R&B. Their repetitive structures make them memorable and easily consumable (Adorno, 1947:147), coercing listeners to purchase them, for instance, through platforms such as iTunes. In such a system, commercial aims dominate, and critical thinking is diminished. For Horkheimer and Adorno then, meaningful art fosters reflection, whereas mass-produced cultural goods merely reinforce conformity (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:126). They further argue that cultural products are generated using the same formulas and vocabulary, thus reducing costs and ensuring predictable profit (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:126).[34]

2.1.4 Instrumental rationality

Instrumental rationality seeks only the most efficient means to achieve a given end, without questioning the value or morality of the end itself (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:95). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the argument is made that the Enlightenment is closely linked

[32] Marcuse (1991:8) argues that true needs are those that enable individuals to realise their full potential, such as the need for meaningful connections, mental and physical health, as well as creative expression, which brings freedom. On the other hand, false needs are repressive needs, as they are superimposed by external forces on the individual; these needs perpetuate injustice, turmoil and aggression (Marcuse, 1991:7).
[33] This is the process through which social relations appear as relations between things. Commodities take on an independent power, obscuring the labour and relations that produced them (Marx, 1992:176).
[34] In the final stages of this study, it will be argued that these theories of standardisation and pseudo-individuality are especially relevant to contemporary forms of digital colonialism. Algorithmic curation[34] mirrors the culture industry's mechanisms by shaping not only cultural consumption but also patterns of reasoning. In doing so, it reinforces instrumental rationality and reproduces power imbalances central to digital capitalism.

to the rise of instrumental reasoning, and it is through this very development that Enlightenment ultimately betrays its own emancipatory promise (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:95).

Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that Enlightenment thought has always aimed at freeing humans from fear and establishing them as masters of nature (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002:95). Yet, they contend that formalism's attempt to make nature calculable reduces it to what is merely useful, thus turning reason itself into a form of instrumental rationality (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:95). As a result, anything that cannot be quantified or formalised is excluded from Enlightenment's rational picture of the world (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:96). This picture is then reinforced through practices that seek to dominate nature, so that instrumental action[35] ultimately forces reality to conform to this distorted model (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:96). Over time, this narrow and mechanised view of the world comes to be seen as the only legitimate one.[36]

The Culture Industry further highlights the tension between genuine cultural expression and the mechanical processes of industrial production (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:96). It spans a broad range of fields, including craft, architecture, film and television, music, and publishing (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002:96). Within this framework, individuals are encouraged to forget their lived reality and thereby become more easily manipulated. Mass media within the Culture Industry uses producers and advertisements to transmit emotions designed to encourage consumption (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:96). Audiences may feel or not feel these emotions, but in either case, the emotional content belongs not to their own reality but to one constructed for them (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:96).

In other words, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the dominance of technology over human behaviour ultimately undermines the Enlightenment's ideals. Technology and specialised

[35] This refers to taking necessary and effective actions to achieve specific ends, no matter the means of achieving them.

[36] In Chapter 3 of this study it will be argued that Surveillance capitalism functions as a key condition for digital colonialism and is deeply rooted in instrumental rationality, which prioritises efficiency and profit over ethical responsibility and local empowerment. As technology companies expand globally, understanding how instrumental reasoning shapes their practices becomes essential in addressing the dynamics of digital colonialism. Furthermore, Horkheimer and Adorno argument that instrumental rationality assimilates culture into the logic of mechanical production, resulting in its homogenisation will be extended into the digital realm, in which it will be argued that digital rationality follows a similar logic, where users become data points to be predicted, managed, and controlled, undermining the Kantian ideal of autonomy.

knowledge become instruments of labour exploitation, while the dialectic of reason reveals that attempts at human self-liberation can also lead to new forms of domination. Furthermore, the Culture Industry is characterised by monopoly, mass production, and technology, all of which turn cultural products into commodities. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, capitalist societies pursue a single overarching goal, which is that of increasing profit. Mass media also functions as a mechanism of repression and social control, while radios and cinemas operate as propaganda tools for elites. The Culture Industry thus renders individuals passive and compliant, reducing them to mere recipients of information.

These themes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are crucial for analysing digital colonialism, especially as it manifests in the Global South, as they illuminate how power operates, how domination is reproduced, and how human beings' relationship to nature becomes increasingly instrumentalised. This study draws from the foundations of Horkheimer and Adorno precisely because their critique of Enlightenment rationality has profoundly influenced later twentieth-century thinkers, and continues to remain highly relevant for understanding how rationality shapes contemporary technological systems, including those that contribute to digital colonialism.

Taken together, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of Enlightenment rationality, the Culture Industry, and the reduction of human beings to calculable units, helps explain how technological infrastructures replicate earlier patterns of domination. Yet their analysis is only one part of the broader Frankfurt School engagement with technology and power. The next section therefore turns to Marcuse, whose concepts of one-dimensionality, false needs, and false consciousness offer a crucial extension of this critique, illustrating how individuals are encouraged, often unconsciously, to support technological systems that sustain economic, cultural, and social exploitation.

2.2 Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man

As discussed above, Horkheimer and Adorno, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, argue that "the power of the culture industry lies in the unity with fabricated needs" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944:52). Marcuse later develops this insight in *One-Dimensional Man* (1991). While Horkheimer and Adorno describe the Culture Industry's commitment to sustaining capitalist structures through the manipulation of "sameness" and "needs" (Horkheimer & Adorno,

2002:94), Marcuse extends their critique by showing how technological rationality contributes to societies becoming increasingly one-dimensional.

Marcuse's critique of late-capitalist society provides one of the most influential accounts of how individuality in the 20th century (and beyond) has been shaped, and limited, by broader social forces. Drawing on Marx and Freud, Marcuse argues that modern consumer societies cultivate "false needs" that encourage individuals to identify with goods, lifestyles, and values that ultimately reinforce existing structures of power. This process gives the appearance of choice while subtly directing individuals towards conformity.

For Marcuse, technological progress and mass culture play a central role in this dynamic. Rather than expanding human freedom, they risk producing a form of one-dimensionality, in which alternative ways of thinking and living are suppressed. This analysis develops themes introduced in Chapter 1, particularly the idea that autonomy is not simply a process of internal rational control but rather, is actively shaped by the social environment in which the individual is required to operate. Thus, where Kant emphasised the individual will, Marcuse highlights how that will can be structured from the outside in.

Marcuse's reflections on the culture of consumption also help clarify how contemporary identities can be "manufactured" through patterns of desire, aspiration, and self-presentation. This insight provides a foundation for later arguments about digital identity formation, where similar pressures operate through ever-pervasive media and algorithmic curation. In this way, Marcuse offers a vital stepping-stone between classical theories of autonomy and the challenges of selfhood in the digital age.

Marcuse refers to the corrosive effects of instrumental rationality in advanced industrial societies, particularly its capacity to shape cognition, foster conformity, and deepen alienation (Marcuse, 1991:xvi). He argues that, somewhat paradoxically, technological rationality enhances social cohesion and control, embedding domination within the very processes of technological development (Marcuse, 1991:xvi). Moreover, he claims that technological rationality forms a productive apparatus that permeates all aspects of life, whose efficiency and productivity stabilise society, while simultaneously driving technology towards domination (Marcuse, 1991:17). Although advanced industrial societies claim to refine rationality in order to improve technology, technology becomes irrational when subordinated to the interests of the existing system (Marcuse, 1991:17).

Furthermore, according to Marcuse, the rights and freedoms that were central to the early phases of industrial society, that is, during the emergence of modernity and the Enlightenment (as discussed in Chapter 1), have since lost much of their traditional meaning (Marcuse, 1991:3). In *One-Dimensional Man*, he argues that modern industrial civilisation has produced new and subtle forms of social control. Through expansive systems of mass production and distribution, the rise of a "totalitarian"[37] economic–technical coordination, and the exploitation of fundamental human needs, capitalist societies manipulate individuals into conformity (Marcuse, 1991:5). As capitalism advances, citizens come to internalise dominant economic and social norms, resulting in widespread conformity in consumer societies (Marcuse, 1991: xii). Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse maintains that capitalism restricts individuals' capacity for critical reflection, creating a "one-dimensional society" and, correspondingly, a "one-dimensional man".

Additionally, technological rationality, he argues, eliminates the possibility of radical critique while manufacturing a regime of controlled and inauthentic "needs" (Marcuse, 1991:xxiv). It is rooted in production systems marked by centralisation, coordination, and harmonisation across manufacturing, distribution, and services (Marcuse, 1991:xxiv). For Marcuse then, modern industrial civilisation and technical rationality represent the latest form of a historical project grounded in the domination of nature and human beings (Marcuse, 1991:xix).

This analysis sets the stage for understanding how new forms of control persist in contemporary society. Under these emergent systems, technology continually reinforces domination through surveillance, commodification, and the production of false needs. This continuity supports the broader argument of the study: that technological systems sustain unfreedom and instrumental rationality, undermining autonomy in the name of progress.

2.2.1 New Forms of Control and the Creation of False Needs

In the chapter titled "New Forms of Control", Marcuse asserts that "the dominating forms of social control are now technology" (Marcuse, 1991:9). Increased productivity, technological

[37] For Marcuse, this is the total mobilisation of all media for the defence of the established reality (Marcuse, 1991:21)

efficiency, and the mass distribution of goods to previously marginalised groups have enabled industrial society to cultivate powerful internalised forms of social control. These controls rest on the creation of new, commodity-driven false needs (Marcuse,1991:9). Marcuse analyses the rise of commodity fetishism,[38] echoing Marx's account of capitalism, where individuals increasingly identify themselves through the commodities they possess. He claims: "[T]hey discover their soul in their car, hi-fi system, split-level home, and kitchen equipment" (Marcuse, 1991:9-11), adding that "People who discover themselves in the things that shape their lives do so by absorbing rather than providing" (Marcuse, 1991:11).

Marcuse therefore argues that capitalism and technology manufacture a one-dimensional society by producing false needs. Under technological domination, these false needs replace true needs, diverting individuals from genuine social and personal flourishing (Marcuse, 1991:5). The rise of false needs leads individuals to internalise capitalist priorities, mistaking dependence for freedom. Consumer satisfaction replaces intellectual autonomy, aligning individual desires with the requirements of production. In Kantian terms, autonomy gives way to heteronomy, as the will becomes shaped by external forces rather than reason.

Marcuse further argues that people come to identify with and find satisfaction in these false needs, which originate in a society structured around repression (Marcuse, 1991:8). Such gratification produces what he terms "unhappy happiness"[39] (Marcuse, 1991:7). Examples include the need to relax, to act impulsively, or to love or hate what is presented through advertising – i.e. needs shaped by external pressures rather than genuine desires (Marcuse, 1991:7). False needs, in this sense, impair autonomy. As Doyle and Gough note, impaired autonomy arises when individuals cannot act freely due to externally imposed constraints or manipulation[40] (1991:53–54).

Horkheimer and Adorno similarly argue that, in the context of false needs, "the spectator must need no thought of his own: the product prescribes every reaction" (2002:69-70). This leads to

[38] Commodity fetishism refers to the use of object-like media to create an impersonal "system of objective compulsion", reducing human existence to personifications (Marx, [1867] 1977:165)
[39] This Marcusian concept points to individuals being manipulated into believing that they are happy as a result of false needs (Marcuse, 1991:7).
[40] In the final chapter of this study, it will be argued that when false needs undermine autonomy (as Marcuse elucidates), individuals become increasingly vulnerable to mechanisms of digital colonialism, such as data extraction, cultural dominance, and infrastructural dependence, because their desires and behaviours are shaped by forces outside their own rational agency.

Marcuse's concept of false consciousness, which explains how capitalist ideology penetrates the psyche, shaping emotional and intellectual reactions (Marcuse, 1991:13). Although Marx never used the term directly, Engels (1893:23) coined it to describe the ways ideological manipulation distorts perception. For Marcuse, false consciousness encourages "one-dimensional" thinking by nudging individuals to see themselves through the conditions imposed upon them and to find satisfaction within those limits[41] (Marcuse, 1991:13).

Marcuse's synthesis of false needs and false consciousness thus provides a critical foundation for understanding how individuals become integrated into systems of domination, where autonomy is gradually replaced by conformity and dependence. These insights help clarify the broader function of the culture industry as outlined by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002). However, while Marcuse and the Frankfurt School emphasise how domination is internalised through false needs and one-dimensional thinking, Fromm offers an important complementary perspective. His work highlights how these same mechanisms also generate deep psychological alienation and social disconnection.

The following section, therefore draws on Fromm's analysis to show how the Culture Industry not only shapes desires and consciousness but also undermines individuals' capacity for meaningful relatedness and authentic autonomy.

2.3 Fromm's insights – Escape From Freedom

As noted above, the following section connects Fromm's insights with those of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, showing how the culture industry contributes to feelings of anxiety and isolation, driving individuals to seek refuge in consumerism rather than embracing genuine freedom (Chang & Hongxia, 2021:40). Alongside Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, Fromm launched a powerful critique of developed capitalism (Chang & Hongxia, 2021:40). He observed that alienation in consumer societies had intensified in wealthy capitalist nations (Fromm, 1941:70). Although societies produced more goods to create the possibility of a dignified life, increased consumption and production became ends in themselves rather than a means to human flourishing (Fromm, 1994:66). While consumption and commodification intensify this alienation, Fromm emphasises that its roots are also deeply existential and

[41] As shall be elucidated in the final chapter of this study, jn contemporary contexts, false needs manifest as forms of digital dependence: constant connectivity, compulsive updates, and self-branding practices that support capitalist infrastructures while undermining reflective self-governance.

psychological. In other words, individuals lose their autonomy, spontaneity, capacity for genuine relatedness, and what he calls “productive orientation”, the mode of being that enables love, creativity, and meaningful agency (Fromm, 1994:90–94).

This shift resulted in people becoming preoccupied with production and consumption, forming what Fromm identifies as a “false pleasure”[42] consumer society (Fromm, 1994:17). For Fromm, individuals should value the worth of things through meaningful production and purposeful use rather than through possession and consumption alone, as this is essential for a healthy society (Fromm, 1941, cited in Chang & Hongxia, 2021:40).

According to Fromm, individuals in industrialised capitalist societies experience alienation not only from their surroundings but also from themselves. Fromm (1941 [1969]:87) describes this situation as follows:

> … we do not find dependence on overt authority, but rather on anonymous authority as it is represented by public opinion, culture patterns, common sense, or "science." The person feels or does what he is supposed to feel or do; his activity lacks spontaneity in the sense that it does not originate from his own mental or emotional experience but from an outside source.

Moreover, as manual workers sell their physical strength, while doctors, clerks and merchants sell aspects of their personalities, Fromm notes: “Man sells both commodities and himself, seeing himself as a commodity of some sort” (Fromm, 1994:70). In such a society, individuals are evaluated based on success, wealth, type of work, and market value rather than their free and full development. Humans are thus transformed into commodities, with their status and relationships objectified in ways that disregard happiness, freedom, dignity, and creativity.

Since the modern individual experiences themselves as both commodity and seller, their self-esteem becomes tied to external forces, with “success” functioning as the key measure of personal worth (Yiliang, 2013:145). Fromm argues that a “transactional personality” dominates consumer society, where self-identification is shaped by external conditions and easily replicated forms of success (Fromm, 1994:70). This alienated personality becomes deeply ingrained in consumer culture. Goods, once produced to meet genuine needs, are increasingly

[42] That is, pleasure derived from passive consumption and conformity rather than from genuine satisfaction, autonomy, or self-actualisation (Fromm, 1994:149).

purchased for their symbolic value (Chang & Hongxia, 2021:41). Moreover, individuals can appear as experts in fields simply through financial investment, reducing personal identity to an economic category. They derive satisfaction from possession rather than use, driven by the fetishism of ownership[43] and its associated social status (Yongsen, 2003:77). Yet, for Fromm, true happiness cannot be found through possession, which yields only temporary pleasure (Chang & Hongxia, 2021:41). When existence is experienced externally rather than internally, the result is pseudo-happiness or pseudo-pleasure – that is, a cognitive feeling disconnected from genuine emotional experience (Zhonghui & Xionglin, 2015:122).

In addition to the aforementioned, it can be argued that the Frankfurt School's critique of instrumental rationality, which we explored in earlier paragraphs, is complemented by Eric Fromm's socio-psychological theory, which examines how domination emerges as the creation of the subject rather than as overt force. His "automaton conformity' idea highlights how individuals in modern mass cultures adapt to social norms despite believing their choices are made freely. As individuals internalise social constraints, their behaviour increasingly aligns with dominant social expectations. This alignment represents a form of domination that does not rely on overt force. Instead, individuals start to become what Fromm refers to as a socially patterned automaton whose behaviour is shaped by external norms despite a subjective experience of freedom.

Fromm's book *Escape from Freedom* (1941) explores the implications of modernity and highlights the dual nature of freedom and isolation experienced by individuals who have separated themselves from medieval societal structures (Fromm, 1941:16). According to his theory, modernity exposes individuals to emotions of loneliness and anxiety even though it liberates them from traditional authorities. Fromm (1941:57) argues that individuals, in the search for freedom, may feel forced to give up their autonomy to different types of dictatorial authority or conform to social norms, eventually becoming automatons.

He identifies three adaptive reactions to this anxiety: authoritarianism, which involves subordination to power; destructiveness, which is defined by efforts to eliminate danger; and automaton conformity, in which individuals integrate into groups (Fromm, 1941:115). His notion of automaton conformity, which is central to his work, explains how individuals in

[43] This refers to the belief that identity, status, and meaning are achieved through the acquisition of commodities, obscuring the social structures of consumer capitalism (Marx, 1992:176).

contemporary mass culture adhere to societal norms despite having freedom. He compares them to 'socially patterned automatons' who are guided by external norms and expectations, while they are unconscious of their lack of genuine freedom (Fromm, 1991 [1970]: 149). This concept is relevant, especially in a digitally mediated society, as we see algorithmic systems influence our choices through filtered visibility and predicted preferences. This framework provides an analysis of the psychological underpinnings of authoritarianism and destructiveness. Fromm's analysis of authoritarianism reveals that in the midst of social anxiety and uncertainties, individuals may pursue external guidance using platforms for information and communication (Fromm, 1941:89-91). Thus, instead of being overtly directed by the government, power in the digital age takes the form of infrastructural reliance that pervades everyday digital interaction. Furthermore, Fromm offers us a paradigm for understanding digital alienation and reactive alienation in a highly mediated world by discussing destructiveness as a result of frustrated self-realisation (Fromm, 1941:112-115). He argues that a lack of positive self-realisation can lead to these "mechanisms of escape" (1941:26), reflecting on society's difficult balance between freedom and the possibility of authoritarian tendencies in society. Thus, as individuals navigate their limited relationship with the social world that restricts their autonomy, they may start to show withdrawal or frustration.

From the aforementioned, we can say that Fromm's socio-psychological analysis strengthens the broader argument of this study, as it highlights the relevance of algorithmic systems in a digitally mediated context, pointing out how they shape decision structures and user preferences without displaying. Thus, the erosion of autonomy takes place through not only a subtle process but though over domination. Fromm's theories on autonomy and freedom are technically intensified by surveillance capitalism, in which individuals believe they have the freedom to choose while opaque mechanisms increasingly influence their choices. According to Fromm's theory of authoritarianism, individuals who experience social anxiety may turn to external situations for security, which in the digital sphere presents itself as reliance on platforms that control access to communication and knowledge. As a result, authority becomes ingrained in digital life rather than being represented directly through governmental instructions.

Therefore, Fromm's analysis asserts that the erosion of autonomy is often sustained by subtle influences that provide a sense of independence. This aligns with the idea that surveillance

capitalism is a persistent trend of controlled conformity made possible by data-driven behavioural reconfiguration rather than a break from historical norms. This foundation sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the concept as described by Shoshana Zuboff.

2.4 Contextualisation of modern society's consumer culture

In today's consumer society, money has become a tool for measuring human connection and individuality (Chang & Hongxia, 2021:42). Life is increasingly approached as a profit-making venture, extending beyond traditional commerce. Individuals position themselves through consumption, constructing self-identity, values, cultural tendencies and lifestyles through branding practices (Chang & Hongxia, 2021:42). Consequently, meaningful human contact has diminished, replaced by interactions shaped through market metrics. The tendency to quantify everything in monetary terms also affects leisure time,[44] which becomes dominated by consumption-driven imperatives rather than genuine personal choice (Chang & Hongxia, 2021:42). Such leisure often provides only momentary delight, leaving individuals alienated from life.

Although material living standards are high (for some), contemporary society places little emphasis on spiritual or psychological development (Chang & Hongxia, 2021:42). In fast-paced consumer cultures, individuals frequently attempt to fill existential voids through excess spending. Fromm was concerned by this dynamic and advocated for holistic personality development grounded in humanistic values (Chang & Hongxia, 2021:42). The following subsection briefly considers how this broader context of consumerism contributes to Fromm's notion of pseudo-individuality.

2.4.1 Loss of individuality due to consumer culture

Individuality has eroded under consumer culture, which expects people to be autonomous and self-actualised while simultaneously undermining those capacities through capitalist and materialist pressures (Fromm, 1994:50). Society becomes increasingly one-dimensional,

[44] One of the definitions of "leisure time" is of time that appears free but is structured to reproduce work-discipline, passivity, and consumption within advanced capitalist societies (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002: Marcuse, 1991:52)

prioritising material concerns and economic performance over spiritual or intellectual growth. As a result, individuals become more conformist and less capable of independent thought, leading to a loss of identity and autonomy.

Consumerism contributes further to the loss of uniqueness by encouraging conformity to systemic expectations. Even socially conscious consumers struggle to fully understand the production processes underlying their purchases, making critical awareness difficult in a controlled society (Kaza, 2000:29). Fromm (1994:131) notes that individuals become content with meaningless possessions, rendering consumption itself alienating. Media representations shape false desires and standards, intensifying detachment from authentic needs.

The Culture Industry reinforces this dynamic by producing standardised commodities, such as films, radio, television, and magazines, that reproduce capitalist ideology through images and spectacles (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1982). Mass production and distribution overwhelm individuals and reduce space for reflection (Marcuse, 1964:10).

In *Escape from Freedom* (1994), Fromm highlights the influence of economic progress on social character and the new anxieties that accompany modern freedoms. Human life, he argues, requires the avoidance of isolation and the maintenance of meaningful connections (Fromm, 1941:34). Individuals often seek someone or something to submit their freedom to, even if the authority is irrational, in an effort to escape isolation (Fromm, 1994:173). This dynamic often leads people to nationalism, religion or other powerful social identities as substitutes for genuine connection (Fromm, 1994:34). What appears to be individuality, in such contexts, is often pseudo-individuality: conformity masked as personal choice (Fromm, 1994:23).[45]

This dynamic aligns with Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002:107) claim that the Culture Industry creates illusions of choice while enforcing uniformity. For Fromm, pseudo-individuality arises within modern capitalist societies where mass production and consumption dominate. His conception is therefore used here to respond to the conditions identified by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse (Fromm, 1994:14). Although people believe they express individuality

[45] In the final chapter, this critical insight of Fromm's will be extended into the digital age of the 21st century in which individuals similarly believe they are expressing independent choices and unique identities, yet these expressions are shaped by algorithmic systems and homogenised digital cultures. This mirrors Marcuse's false needs, which render individuals vulnerable to digital colonialism by obscuring the external forces shaping their desires and behaviours.

through consumption, these expressions remain superficial and constrained by economic and social pressures (Fromm, 1994:15).

Additionally, for Fromm, "automaton conformity"[46] occurs when individuals lose sight of their real selves and adopt a socially acceptable pseudo-self. For Fromm, our desire to escape feelings of loneliness and social isolation has led to what he refers to as automaton conformity. When one is confronted with extreme loneliness or alienation, as faced in the world today, Fromm (1941 [1969]:209) argues that the individual "ceases to be himself", and instead assumes a mask of personality which he finds in acceptable or rewarded 'cultural patterns' (Cawood, 2020:104). Fromm (1941 [1969]:209-210) contends that

> … [t]he discrepancy between "I" and the world disappears and with it the conscious fear of aloneness and powerlessness … The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons around him, need not feel alone and anxious anymore. But the price he pays, however, is high; it is the loss of his self.

Although conformity can provide security, it undermines genuine individuality and deepens helplessness and insecurity (Fromm, 1994:15). The pseudo-self becomes normalised, replacing authentic selfhood. As humans repeatedly forget the value of uniqueness, diversity, and individualism, societies increasingly promote standardisation (Fromm, 1994:15).

The final section of Chapter 2 develops and expands upon the preceding insights by examining how the Culture Industry functions as an instrument of ideological control. It traces its development from late industrial capitalism to its contemporary form under informational capitalism, where standardisation is not only cultural but embedded in digital infrastructures. This discussion prepares the ground for the next chapter on surveillance capitalism, which extends these processes through behavioural prediction, digital control, and data extraction.

[46] According to Cawood (2020:104), it is important to note that Fromm's concern regarding 'automaton conformity' is that "the sacrifice of individuality for the assimilation into a predetermined culture results in the inhibition – and destruction – of critical thinking, self-determination, autonomous choice, and even moral principle."

2.5 The Culture industry and the continuity of capitalism

Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002:106) ideas about how the Culture Industry operates, such as its role in the structures of late capitalism, its interaction with the subject, and the limits it places on individual and collective agency, provide valuable insights into the functioning of the contemporary capitalist information system and the problem of information overload. Adorno (1968/2003) asked "whether the capitalist system continues to rule, even if it has changed, or whether industrial development has made the concept of capitalism itself, and the distinction between capitalist and non-capitalist states, [is] outdated" (Adorno 1968/2003:1). In other words: Do we now live in late capitalism or in an industrial society?

Christian Fuchs (2014a) reformulates this as: "What is the fundamental structure of contemporary society? Do we live in a capitalist society or an information society?" (Fuchs, 2014a:137).

Fuchs argues that discontinuous information-society[47] theories assume that society has undergone a radical transformation in recent decades, giving rise to concepts such as the "knowledge economy,"[48] "post-industrial society,"[49] "internet society,"[50] "virtual society,"[51] and "network society"[52] (Fuchs 2014a:138). Continuous information-society theories,[53] by contrast, recognise the significance of information technologies while still emphasising the persistence of capitalist structures. For these theorists, information and ICTs drive contemporary society, but the notion of the "information society"[54] itself becomes an ideology (Fuchs 2014:140).

[47] These are theories that view the digital age as a radical break from industrial society, emphasising its novelty (criticised by Fuchs, 2012:415).
[48] Knowledge economy - a model in which knowledge production, information, and intellectual labour become central forms of economic value (Bell 1979; used critically by Fuchs, 2009).
[49] Post-industrial society - The claim that advanced societies are no longer defined by industrial labour but by services, information, and symbolic production (Bell, 1974:37-43); discussed critically by Fuchs, 2009).
[50] Internet society - A society structured around digital communication networks, online sociality, and internet-mediated interactions (Castells 2000; Fuchs, 2009).
[51] Virtual society - A social configuration where digital environments mediate interactions, identities, and practices (Castells, 2000:386; Fuchs, 2009).
[52] Network society - A society organised around global, decentralised information networks that structure economic, political, and cultural life (Castells, 2000:367).
[53] This refers to approaches that view digital capitalism as a continuation, not a rupture, of earlier capitalist dynamics, emphasising continuity in exploitation and labour relations (Garnham [1998] 2004:165).
[54]Information society - A society where information processing, data flows, and communication infrastructures become primary forces shaping social organisation (Castells 2010:21).

Scholars such as Fuchs (2014a), Garnham (2004), Webster (2014), and Golding (2000) argue that information society discourse ultimately benefits dominant economic and political elites (Garnham 2004:165). This critique underscores the persistence of capitalism while highlighting the importance of knowledge, information technology, and digital infrastructure in shaping present-day society (Fuchs 2014a:140).

Fuchs further emphasises the importance of information, ICTs, and media in global capitalism, referring to this formation as Transnational Information Capitalism (Fuchs 2014a:142). In this model, the knowledge and information sectors become tools of capital accumulation and sites where intellectual labour is commodified (Fuchs 2014a:144). The relationship between these forms of capitalism is complex: information and ICTs serve as key productive forces, while information artefacts themselves are consumed not as information but as commodities (Fuchs 2014a:144).

In this context, information consumption involves acquisition, collection, exchange, accumulation, possession, and display, rather than critical processes of selection, interpretation, and understanding. What individuals believe they "need" is shaped by false consumer needs produced by their social environment (Marcuse, 1991:xxx), resulting in a society driven by profit and oriented around consumption.

Given this understanding of the information society and information overload, Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the Culture Industry provides a useful lens through which to analyse the mechanisms of advanced capitalism. Drawing on Marx's distinction between use value and exchange value,[55] they argue that cultural products under late capitalism lose autonomy as they become market commodities whose value is determined by price and trade (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:127). Art, instead of challenging society, becomes an instrument for generating profit. The Culture Industry has established a global network that simplifies the production and distribution of goods and connects consumers with products, yet this network is based entirely on capitalist relations and logic.

[55] Use-value refers to a commodity's practical utility, while exchange-value refers to its market value, determined by social relations and labour. According to Marx ([1847]1888:85), capitalism prioritises exchange-value, obscuring real needs.

This analysis parallels the shifting role of information under Transnational Information Capitalism. The exchange value of information increasingly outweighs its use value, and information is valued less for meeting social needs and more for its capacity to function as a commodity (Spier 2016:392). This applies not only to cultural products but also to personal data harvested by social media platforms, advertisers, and search engines. Such information is rarely used to promote equality or justice (as explored in Chapter 3) but instead serves dominant economic interests (Spier 2016:392).

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Culture Industry and the subject exist in a reciprocal relationship. The Culture Industry relies on consumers, while simultaneously shaping and standardising cultural products to minimise risk (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:21). As a result, culture loses its critical dimension, and only what aligns with statistical predictability is produced. The industry encourages consumer passivity, reduces critical thinking, and cultivates false needs (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:87). By transforming culture into a tool of manipulation and control, it supports capitalist interests and maintains existing power structures.

Although Horkheimer and Adorno do not explicitly theorise information overload, it can be argued that the Culture Industry contributes to it through its constant circulation of homogenous cultural messages, which weaken reflective and critical capacities (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:95).

The reciprocal dynamic they describe is mirrored in today's information industry. Search engines and social media platforms reduce individuals to information consumers and flood them with content, reinforcing false consumer needs, and commodifying users in the process (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002:21). Stakeholders in the capitalist information society personalise information streams, through tailored news feeds, filtered search results, and algorithmic curation, for example, creating "filter bubbles" that further entrench capitalist interests (Spier 2016:393). These practices form part of a broader system of data-driven governance.

In light of the above, it can be concluded that this chapter lays the critical foundation for the conceptual framework of the next chapter, which turns to surveillance capitalism as a method of capturing human behaviour, both online and offline, to enable behavioural prediction, modification and exploitation for profit. Surveillance capitalism also plays a central role in shaping the dynamics of emerging forms of digital colonialism.

The following chapter explores how, like the Culture Industry, surveillance capitalism undermines Kantian autonomy and the Enlightenment ideals examined in Chapter One. Drawing on Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Fromm, it uses their insights into earlier forms of capitalism and cultural domination to illuminate the contemporary digital sphere, where domination and exploitation persist through data extraction and behavioural governance.

Thus, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Fromm offer a sustained critique of the Culture Industry and the rise of mass culture. They argue that mass culture becomes a commodity rather than an art form, produced on demand yet stripped of critical or spiritual depth. Instead of challenging social reality, it conforms to it, generating entertainment rather than reflection and producing a one-directional process of indoctrination. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno describe how mass culture exploits the human mind by removing autonomous thought beneath the façade of entertainment. Marcuse extends this by showing how technological rationality creates a form of totalitarian economic-technical coordination, generating controlled and false needs that suppress radical critique.

Taken together, their critiques articulate a broader crisis of modernity – one in which the Enlightenment promises of freedom, equality, emancipation, autonomy, and subjectivity remain unfulfilled. Fromm's notion of pseudo-individuality further shows how apparent self-expression can mask deeper systems of control. In the digital age, the insights of the Critical Theorists become all the more pertinent due to the fact personal freedom and self-expression increasingly operate as mechanisms of behavioural governance and data extraction (Zuboff, 2019). Autonomy becomes entangled with new technological forms of control, where freedom is reshaped through prediction, surveillance and algorithmic management.

Based on what has been delineated above, the following chapter therefore examines surveillance capitalism as a contemporary expression of this duality, where ideals of self-determination and rational agency are quietly transformed into tools of data-driven control, conditioning the emergence of digital colonialism.

Chapter 3: Surveillance as Imperialism

In this chapter it will be argued that the most recent development of the power dynamics anticipated by the likes of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm (as delineated in Chapter 2) is that of surveillance capitalism, which will be defined and elaborated on over the course of this chapter. According to Zuboff (2019), Surveillance Capitalism emerges from the promises (and ideological claims) of instant connection and digital freedom by commodifying emotion, attention, and desire transforming these into conditions that shape modern autonomy. Since the 1973 Oil Crisis,[56] information has emerged as the most valuable commodity in markets. This period, known as the "New Economy", was marked by the decline of industrial production and the rise of service sectors driven by new computer technologies (Tickell & Peck, 1992). As information technology expanded, it created new opportunities for profit-making. IT companies invested in behavioural forecasting models capable of predicting individuals' future actions through machine intelligence (Kahraman, 2022:778). In response to these developments, Zuboff (2014) identifies a new stage of capital accumulation grounded in individual surveillance, which she terms "surveillance capitalism".

This shift can be contextualised within the longer history of managerial control, in which organisational processes transitioned from rational bureaucracy to modern Taylorist[57] forms of scientific management based on continuous surveillance and optimisation (Schram & Pavlovskaya, 2017). Thus, surveillance capitalism may be understood as a new "technology for the self", one that employs psychological manipulation to subordinate individuals within neoliberal governmentality[58] (Rose-Redwood, 2006).

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[56] The 1973 Oil Crisis marked a turning point in global capitalism, accelerating the decline of Fordist industrial production and prompting a shift toward flexible, information-driven economic models. As manufacturing profits fell and stagflation set in, advanced economies increasingly turned to digital technologies, finance, and services as new sites of accumulation (Harvey, 1990; Castells, 1996). This transition helped inaugurate the "New Economy," where information became a key commodity, paving the way for informational capitalism and, ultimately, the data-extraction logics that underpin surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).

[57] Taylorism is genealogically relevant to surveillance capitalism because it represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to translate human behaviour into measurable, optimisable data. Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) sought to decompose labour into discrete, observable motions that could be recorded, analysed, and re-engineered for efficiency, which was an early form of behavioural quantification. As scholars such as Zuboff (2015; 2019) note, digital surveillance practices extend this logic from the factory floor to everyday life, transforming not only labour but all forms of human activity into data points for prediction and control. In this sense, Taylorism prefigures the extractionist and optimisation-oriented ethos that underpins contemporary surveillance capitalism, where behavioural monitoring is no longer confined to the workplace but becomes ubiquitous, continuous, and automated.

[58] Rose-Redwood (2006), drawing on Foucault, uses the concept of "neoliberal governmentality" to describe how neoliberalism governs through the production of self-managing subjects who internalise market rationality and regulate their own behaviour accordingly. Rather than relying on overt coercion, neoliberal governance operates

While a full examination of the literature on capitalism is beyond the scope of this dissertation, this chapter focuses on specific classical components of capitalism to clarify how the economic system shapes the ways surveillance is marketed and normalised in news media and advertising. The chapter is organised around central surveillance-capitalist ideologies, terminologies, and their implications for human autonomy; that is, its ideals of dignity, respect, obligation, operational autonomy, and power.

In light of the above, the first section provides an historical overview of the emergence of surveillance capitalism. The second section examines how the economic landscape has transformed with the rise of digital technologies. Subsequent sections analyse the far-reaching implications of surveillance capitalism for autonomy, politics, and power. The insights of the Critical Theorists, particularly Andrew Feenberg (2002), will be incorporated. As such, the primary focus will be on Feenberg's concept of the "technical code" (2002:15), which illustrates how capitalist values become embedded in technology, and on Marx's (cited in Marcuse, 1991:75-76) notion of "operational autonomy", which offers a complementary critique of technological domination. Finally, the chapter shows how surveillance capitalism establishes the conditions for the emergence of new forms of colonial domination, namely "digital colonialism", which will be examined in detail in the final chapter of this study.

3.1 Historical overview of surveillance capitalism

3.1.1 Kellner's techno-capitalism

This section explores an earlier form of what is now termed surveillance capitalism, tracing how transformations in capitalism and technology created the conditions from which contemporary data-driven surveillance emerged. Although the term "surveillance capitalism" has gained significant scholarly attention only in recent years, the underlying dynamics have long been discussed (Zuboff 2019, 2022; Foster & McChesney 2014; Mosco 2014; Lauer & Lipartito 2021:1–26). The historical roots of surveillance itself reach much further back.

through dispersed techniques, specifically quantification, responsibilisation, and continuous self-monitoring, that shape action by structuring the conditions under which individuals "freely" choose. This has a direct philosophical resonance with debates on autonomy, which is that while subjects appear self-directed, their agency is guided by external, systemic norms that pre-configure decision-making. In this sense, neoliberal governmentality exemplifies a contemporary form of heteronomy that complicates the Kantian model of self-legislation.

The concept of surveillance was already taking shape during the French Revolution, when it was coined to describe new practices of watching and managing populations during a period of rapid social transformation. In pre-revolutionary hierarchical societies, people's identities were largely fixed by tradition, status, and inherited obligations; in such contexts, extensive cataloguing or identification was unnecessary. However, with the emergence of legally "free" citizens, individuals no longer possessed stable or predetermined identities. As Simmel ([1903] 1950:195) argues, modern life gives rise to a "society of strangers" in which capitalism dissolves traditional social bonds and geographic, economic, and cultural boundaries.

In a world where people are formally free yet socially unanchored, new mechanisms of trust, recognition, and social coordination become necessary. Surveillance thus emerges as a means of collecting information, verifying identities, and managing interactions among individuals who no longer share pre-modern ties (Lipartito, 2025:3). While surveillance has always taken diverse forms, the rapid acceleration of digital technology, combined with the imperatives of capital accumulation, has dramatically expanded its scope, speed, and pervasiveness. This has made it increasingly difficult to track, regulate, or comprehend its societal impact.

Before examining surveillance capitalism directly, it is necessary to understand how capitalism itself was transformed by modern technological revolutions. To do so, we turn to Douglas Kellner's account of techno-capitalism, which provides a theoretical bridge between earlier forms of capitalist rationalisation and contemporary systems of digital surveillance.

Kellner, a prominent figure in the German Critical Theory tradition, was initially recognised as a theorist of techno-capitalism before turning to critical studies of media culture (Kellner 1984, 1995). His recent work, *Technology and Democracy: Towards a Critical Theory of Digital Technologies, Technopolitics, and Techno-capitalism* (2021), offers the most comprehensive articulation of his critical theory of technology.

Kellner (1989:177, as cited in Amiradakis 2020:54) argues that capitalism has been fundamentally reshaped by new information and communication technologies, producing what he refers to as "techno-capitalism". This form of capitalism reorganises society around computers, automation, scientific-technical knowledge, and advanced technological infrastructures. Where the first Industrial Revolution replaced manual labour with machines, the so-called "second Industrial Revolution" (spanning roughly the period from the 1960s to the 1970s) introduced technological systems that substituted not only physical labour but also

cognitive and organisational tasks, thereby restructuring both production and social life (Kellner 1989:177, in Amiradakis 2020:55).

According to Amiradakis (2020), Kellner's work demonstrates how corporate capital introduced new technologies to rationalise production, intensifying the restructuring processes of the late twentieth century. As a consequence, late-capitalist societies witnessed computerisation, electronics, and information systems replacing earlier forms of mechanisation, while knowledge and information became central to everyday life and economic production. Kellner argues that these technological revolutions laid the foundation for the subsequent development of twenty-first-century capitalism, in which information and data become the primary sources of value (Kellner 1989, in Amiradakis 2020:55).

Understanding this transformation is essential, as the logic of techno-capitalism directly anticipates the mechanisms of surveillance capitalism. The integration of information technologies into capitalist accumulation not only reorganised labour and production but also prepared the ground for the extraction, prediction, and monetisation of human behaviour, developments which are examined in the next section.

3.1.2 Fuchs's information/network capitalism

The expansive and adaptive character of capitalism has historically permeated all spheres of social life, continually reshaping itself through emerging forms of communication and media. As African societies – and the global context more broadly – undergo rapid transformation, new variants such as communication capitalism, digital capitalism, information capitalism and network capitalism have gained prominence in political economy and communication studies (Fuchs, 2009; Dean, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2002; Schiller, 2000).

Christian Fuchs, a leading figure in contemporary critical theory, updates Kellner's conception of techno-capitalism for the 21st-century digital environment in *Foundations of Critical Theory: Media, Communication and Society* (2008). Fuchs introduces the notion of transnational information/network capitalism to explain how digital and networked technologies, particularly the Internet and social media platforms, reconfigure labour processes into informational forms characteristic of contemporary capitalism. As he argues, "the rise of communicative, cognitive, and cooperative labour that is connected to the emergence of technologies of goods that objectify human cognition, communication and cooperation is the

basis of modern capitalism" (Fuchs, 2008:109). Information capitalism thus rests upon the continual use of ICTs, computational infrastructures, and networked communication systems.

For Fuchs (2008:112), these interconnected technologies introduce new mechanisms of categorisation, analysis and commodification, allowing virtually all digital interactions to be transformed into marketable informational commodities. Such commodification necessitates data monitoring, a process highlighted by Amiradakis (2020:55), to extract value from the traces of digital behaviour.

These informational productive forces drive capitalist restructuring and strategic adaptation, shaping technologies in ways that increasingly influence individuals' social and economic lives (Fuchs, 2010:180). Fuchs (2008) further contends that transnational networks – as mediated through knowledge production and digital communication – function as channels through which power, exploitation, hegemony and resistance are organised. While communication networks are not historically new, their *scale*, *structure*, and *speed* in contemporary capitalism represent qualitatively intensified developments.

Information capitalism operates through transnational organisational models, meaning that institutions transcend territorial boundaries. Novel features include globally distributed networks, fluid social structures, rapidly shifting nodes of activity, and high-speed flows of capital, commodities, people, and information (Fuchs, 2010:180). As a result, global information network capitalism is "nomadic"[59] and dynamic: that is, its components reorganise continually, forming new alliances and abandoning actors unable to contribute to capital accumulation (Fuchs, 2010:180).

In sum, information capitalism refers to socio-economic formations grounded in information processes such as communication, cooperation, cognition, and the technologies that support them (Fuchs, 2007; 2008b; 2009a). Its nomadic, fluid and rapidly adaptive character creates

[59] In this context, *"*nomadic*"* refers to the capacity of global informational capitalism to operate without fixed territorial, organisational, or labour commitments. Building on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of nomadism as a fluid, deterritorialised mode of organisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), Fuchs uses the term to describe how networked capital continuously reconfigures itself through shifting infrastructures, partnerships, and labour sites across borders, in pursuit of profit. This nomadic movement contrasts with earlier, territorially anchored forms of industrial capitalism and reflects the flexibility, mobility, and rapid reorganisation enabled by digital networks (Fuchs, 2010).

fertile conditions for the rise of surveillance capitalism. The structures and dynamics of informational capitalism, its technological infrastructures and data-extractive capacities in particular, serve as the foundation upon which surveillance capitalism emerges. The following section will examine the latest trajectory of technological development, focusing on how digital technologies such as the Internet expanded informational capitalism and facilitated the evolution of surveillance capitalism.

3.2 The Role of Technology in Enabling Surveillance Capitalism

The internet in the 1990s underwent a significant conceptual shift, moving from primarily being a marketplace for the sale of goods to a technological infrastructure designed for the production, extraction, and analysis of user data (West, 2017:2). Fuchs argues that this shift laid the structural foundation for digital surveillance. According to Fuchs (2011:304), as the internet evolved into Web 2.0 (i.e. a multidirectional communication system mediated by corporate-owned platforms), communicating subjects increasingly became objects of datafication[60], subject to surveillance by corporations and the state.

According to Andrejevic (2014:1674), a "data gap" exists between the people who generate data and those who possess the technological capabilities to collect, store, process, and analyse it. This gap produces asymmetrical power relations, in which users possess almost no control over their own data, while corporations have unprecedented analytic power. This can be linked to the emergence of data analytics, which includes Big Data and data mining, through which actors with access to large datasets and computational processing power gain strategic advantage over those without such access (Andrejevic, 2014:1676).

Furthermore, in the 21st century, modern capitalism has transformed into digital capitalism, shaped by the mutual development of the information revolution, digitisation, and globalisation, as well as the search for technological solutions to economic stagnation and social crisis. Over the last decade, digital technologies such as the internet, mobile devices, and cloud computing have converged to create the conditions for the growth of digital capitalism, which in turn has given rise to surveillance capitalism (Lipartito, 2025:2). In contrast to earlier

[60] Datafication and big data are often used interchangeably and have, over the years, gained popularity. According to Ylijoki and Porras (2016, cited in Cieslik and Margócsy 2022:355), datafication refers to the rapid processing of vast volumes of information using deep learning algorithms. According to analysts, big data enables precise predictions without the need for scientific modelling.

digital technologies, newer systems, particularly big data infrastructures and algorithmic processing, have reorganised space-time relations, enabling capital to monitor, measure, and shape human life in increasingly granular and automated ways.

This transformation has facilitated the rise of digital monopolies (including Microsoft, Apple, Google, Meta, and Amazon) which dominate the global economy through their control of platforms, data, and algorithmic systems (Lipartito, 2025:9). Digital capitalism thereby creates a new economic structure in which user data is converted into "data capital", a central resource for capital accumulation. Zuboff (2019:9) conceptualises this as surveillance capitalism, a new economic paradigm premised on data extraction and behavioural prediction. Subsequently, the following section elaborates on Zuboff's groundbreaking work on surveillance capitalism.

3.3 Understanding surveillance capitalism

Over the past two decades, the internet has emerged as a dominant economic model built on the monetisation of personal data. Zuboff (2019:2) describes this new paradigm as one in which digital services are offered in exchange for the right to impose continuous surveillance on users. Importantly, Zuboff (2019) also highlights that individuals on social media platforms are not customers, nor even products (as argued by Smythe [1977] and Fuchs [2017]); instead, their behaviour functions as the raw material that is extracted, analysed, and ultimately transformed into predictive services sold to third parties.

Zuboff (2015, 2019) refers to this emerging form of informational capitalism as "surveillance capitalism." She argues that the digitalisation and instrumentalisation of social life create prediction systems that threaten both individual autonomy and the broader social order (2019a). Her analysis makes a significant contribution to the growing critical literature on the digital economy (Crary, 2013; Pasquale, 2015; Couldry & Mejias, 2019) by exposing how contemporary digital business models distort, commodify, and ultimately reshape social relations.

Zuboff (2019) and these complementary analyses depict a future in which big-data-driven corporations impose a rationalised, algorithmic order on private and social life. Restated in Habermasian terms, the current internet business model enables the colonisation of the

lifeworld by system imperatives[61] (Habermas, 1984, 1987), producing an unprecedented form of instrumental rationalisation. This form of "colonisation" generates the potential for systemic crises that threaten both material and social life (Zuboff, 2019). The following section outlines Zuboff's theoretical account of surveillance capitalism.

3.4 Zuboff's theory of Surveillance capitalism

Zuboff (2015; 2019) identifies a new stage in information capitalism, namely surveillance capitalism, in which user data collected by oligopolistic[62] digital companies becomes the "raw material" for services designed to predict individuals' future behaviour (Zuboff 2019:129). The dominant online business model has shifted toward the maximisation of behavioural surplus, which is the excess data extracted from users beyond what is required for service provision (Zuboff 2019:129-131).

Zuboff (2019:74-77) describes Google's 2000 pivot as the earliest expression of this logic, when the company began monetising the data collected by its search engine and then offering targeted advertising based on user data. Google, Meta (formerly Facebook), and Microsoft have since become paradigmatic examples of surveillance capitalist firms. These companies no longer sell software or hardware as primary products; rather, they provide services in exchange for the right to extract, process, and monetise user data (Zuboff 2019:74, 162-163). Zuboff (2019:138-139, 233-234) uses metaphors of "dispossession" and "rendition"[63] to characterise the involuntary extraction of data from users. Beyond violating privacy, these digital environments are designed to maximise data capture, producing conditions in which behaviour can be predicted, nudged, and shaped.[64]

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[61] Habermas's notion of the "colonisation of the lifeworld" describes how economic and bureaucratic system logics displace the communicative norms that enable autonomous self-understanding and mutual justification (Habermas, 1984; 1987). In the Kantian sense, surveillance-capitalist infrastructures undermine the very conditions of practical autonomy by substituting algorithmic imperatives for self-legislation, which points to an encroachment of heteronomy into the lifeworld.

[62] This refers to a market structure with a small number of companies that exert significant control over given markets. Together, these companies may control prices by colluding with each other, ultimately providing uncompetitive prices in the market.

[63] Zuboff uses **"**dispossession**"** to describe the unilateral capture of behavioural data without meaningful consent, echoing colonial and Marxian forms of appropriation (Zuboff, 2019:138-139). **"**Rendition**"** refers to the subsequent technical processing and transfer of this data into predictive systems (Zuboff, 2019:233-234). Together these terms highlight how users are transformed into data resources within asymmetrical power structures central to digital colonialism.

[64] As shall be argued in the next chapter, this dynamic aligns with theories of digital colonialism, where technological systems reproduce and intensify older imperial logics of domination by rendering human subjects into data objects for manipulation and profit.

The increasing inevitability of reliance on surveillance-capitalist services for participation in social and material life results in what Zuboff (2019:434) calls the dominance of instrumental power – a form of power rooted in the algorithmic rationalisation of social life for the purposes of data extraction. These dynamics challenge the foundations of private life, social relations, and political agency. For Zuboff, surveillance capitalism develops its own logic of capital accumulation by transforming human experience into commodities that can be sold in behavioural futures markets.

According to Zuboff (2015:14), surveillance capitalism follows a dialectic of production, extraction, and commercialisation. To generate behavioural surplus, digital platforms use algorithms to create predictive products, which are then sold to advertisers, insurers, political actors, and other institutional clients. In exchange for free services, users consent, often unknowingly, to continuous monitoring and data extraction (Zuboff, 2015:115). Their entire digital footprint becomes subject to algorithmic surveillance (Zuboff, 2015:125). The key elements of surveillance capitalism, which are data collection, analysis, and personalised recommendations, constitute its core economic engine (Zuboff, 2015:23).

Zuboff extends Andrejevic's (2007:2) concept of the digital enclosure, defined as "the creation of an interactive realm wherein every action and transaction generates information about itself." While Andrejevic emphasised the commercial imperatives driving these asymmetries (2007:133), Zuboff argues that the rise of big data and ubiquitous sensor technologies intensifies and systematises this enclosure. Surveillance capitalism thus emerges as a new logic of accumulation grounded in the belief that big data is the foundational resource of the contemporary economy (Zuboff, 2015:75). Markets for the prediction of future behaviour represent its primary source of profit (Zuboff, 2016:26). In the current economy, crucially, data has become a highly valuable asset – the central commodity driving surveillance capitalism.

Here, Zuboff's theory intersects deeply with Frankfurt School concerns, at least on three accounts: i) with Marx's account of alienation through the transformation of life-activity into capital; ii) with Horkheimer and Adorno's warning that instrumental rationality culminates in systems that shape subjects from the outside; and iii) with Feenberg's argument that technology embodies the values of dominant social groups.

In this sense, surveillance capitalism can be read as the latest, and most far-reaching, manifestation of the instrumentalisation of reason under capitalist modernity.

3.4.1 How Surveillance capitalism came to exist

Surveillance capitalism is built on the foundation of user data. Google was one of the first companies to recognise the value of the behavioural data generated through its search engine. Originally, user inputs, such as search queries, were considered a mere by-product, often referred to as *data exhaust*.[65] Google initially used this data to refine its search algorithm in order to deliver more accurate results to users. Zuboff terms this feedback loop a "behavioural value reinvestment cycle" (Zuboff, 2019b:12), a process in which user behaviour is reinvested to enhance service quality. Yet this closed loop produced no profit, because value was circulating only between user input and user benefit.

Zuboff (2019b:12–13) argues that the incorporation of behavioural data into advertising systems marked the decisive rupture and the birth of surveillance capitalism. Instead of merely matching ads to content, Google began analysing behavioural traces to predict which advertisements would be most relevant to specific users**,** thereby enabling a new form of targeted marketing based on behavioural prediction. Historically, marketers selected audiences through informed speculation. Google transformed this logic by using behavioural data to algorithmically identify potential consumers**,** selling both the advertising space *and* the enhanced probability of user engagement (Zuboff, 2019:13).

How is the data collected? Big data is collected through smart devices, digital platforms, and ubiquitous networked infrastructures. Zuboff (2015:75) insists that big data is not simply a technological artifact; rather, it is fundamentally social, with technology serving as the mechanism that translates lived reality into data images. In this sense, big data becomes the raw material upon which surveillance capitalism depends, enabling unprecedented insight into human activities at multiple levels of detail (Zuboff, 2015:76–77).

Where does the data come from? Behavioural data is sourced from computer-mediated transactions; corporate and state databases; digital sensors associated with the Internet of

[65] "Data exhaust", in this context, refers to the unintended digital traces generated as a by-product of users' online activities, such as search queries, clicks, timestamps, and navigation paths, which were originally considered operational garbage rather than economic assets (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2014). In the context of surveillance capitalism, this exhaust becomes a key raw material for behavioural prediction and targeted monetisation.

Everything; public and private surveillance cameras; and a vast array of what Zuboff calls “non-market activities” – that is, the everyday digital expressions of individuals such as Google searches, social media interactions, text messages, photos, emails, purchases, biometric information, and geospatial movement (Zuboff, 2015:78–79). The infrastructure linking physical life to digital capture constitutes what Zuboff (2019b:16) calls the “extraction architecture.”

What is meant by extraction? Extraction is defined by asymmetrical reciprocities. Unlike traditional capitalism, where production and consumption were interlinked through employment and wages, data extraction operates without reciprocal benefit for the population supplying the raw material. Because automated systems have reduced the need for human labour, and because the “product” is sold to advertisers rather than users, the benefits accrue almost entirely to corporations (Zuboff, 2015:80).

Zuboff further argues that this structural asymmetry poses a democratic risk (2019b:23–24). Drawing on the example of 19th-century Britain, she shows how industrial capitalism was historically intertwined with democratic development, as inclusive economic structures supported non-violent reforms. Surveillance capitalism breaks this reciprocity: the extraction of behavioural surplus does not improve user experience, but instead services the interests of paying corporate clients. Just as industrial capitalism appropriated natural resources, surveillance capitalism appropriates behavioural resources as a new type of raw material. Once extracted, behavioural data is analysed and transformed into objective, decontextualised information**.** Zuboff (2015:80–81) argues that this analysis yields predictive products, or mechanisms designed to anticipate and shape user behaviour, generating a continuous cycle of extraction and intervention.

In summary then, surveillance capitalism evolves from a logic of extraction-for-knowledge into extraction-for-action. The extraction architecture is complemented by an execution architecture, both of which together constitute the “means of behavioural modification”. Whereas industrial capitalism sought to optimise the means of production, surveillance capitalism seeks to optimise the means of behaviour control, enhancing the efficiency of prediction and intervention.

Importantly, while these architectures rely on the ubiquitous network of digital devices, Zuboff (2019b:18) notes that it is possible to imagine such infrastructures without surveillance capitalism. Thus, *the problem lies not in the technology itself but in the political-economic logic that governs it.*

The next section turns to Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism. This is essential for the present study, as it reveals how personal data is extracted without informed consent and how such extractive processes mirror historical patterns of colonial domination, particularly in the appropriation, control, and exploitation of resources. These parallels will be explored further in the discussion of digital colonialism in the following chapter.

3.4.2. Zuboff's criticisms of surveillance capitalism

Zuboff highlights the problems of surveillance capitalism, which seeks to replace self-determined action with a range of hidden operations designed to influence behaviour at its source (Zuboff, 2019b:18). Zuboff uses a well-known internal Facebook (now Meta) study to illustrate how emotional states can be transferred to others through "emotional contagion", leading users to experience emotions that were algorithmically induced without their awareness (Zuboff, 2019b:18-19). Because online interactions shape affect, they also produce downstream effects on offline behaviour, meaning that the boundaries between digital influence and embodied action are increasingly blurred. This then underscores the need for a comprehensive and critical concept of autonomy, as surveillance capitalism systematically replaces self-determined judgement with opaque, data-driven operations that steer behaviour (Zuboff, 2019b:18).

Zuboff argues that such manipulation extends beyond mood to physical space itself. Her example focuses on the augmented-reality game Pokémon Go, where players were directed towards particular commercial locations, illustrating how digital incentives can herd populations in real space. She calls this process "social herding",[66] emphasising that

[66] "Social herding", in this context, can be read as a digital intensification of Nietzsche's notion of "herd behaviour", in which individuals uncritically follow collectively structured norms and impulses, thereby losing the capacity for self-overcoming and independent valuation (Nietzsche, 2002–203). Surveillance capitalist "herding" thus represents a technologically mediated form of heteronomy that both echoes Nietzsche's critique of the herd and violates the Kantian requirement that action stem from a will free from external manipulation.

behavioural manipulations emerge through continuous innovation, are largely boundaryless, and typically occur without users' knowledge (Zuboff, 2019b:19). Zuboff also stresses that the capacity to influence behaviour at scale is a precondition of behaviour modification, and although some scholars have framed this in terms of digital totalitarianism, she rejects this comparison. Instead, she argues that surveillance capitalism represents a new and unprecedented form of power (Zuboff, 2019b:19).

For this reason, Zuboff introduces the term "instrumentarian power", defined as "the instrumentalisation of human behaviour for prediction, control, modification, and monetisation" (Zuboff, 2019b:20). Instrumentarian power does not seek ideological conversion or domination of the inner self; rather, it targets behaviour alone, reducing individuals to sources of behavioural surplus. This dynamic mirrors the extractive logics of colonialism, in which experiences, relations, and activities become raw materials for external appropriation. This study therefore, treats instrumentarianism as a key mechanism of digital colonialism, where behavioural data becomes a resource exploited for commercial accumulation. The following section further examines instrumental power to demonstrate that surveillance technologies are not neutral tools but structures of influence that shape behaviour, decision-making, and social relations.

3.4.2 Instrumental rationality

In the final section of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Zuboff analyses the forms of power and governance that accompany this economic order. Although surveillance capitalism exhibits totalising tendencies, Zuboff argues it cannot be equated with twentieth-century totalitarianism. Totalitarian regimes relied on immediate physical coercion, constant fear, and the reshaping of the inner self; by contrast, surveillance capitalism is indifferent to belief, requiring only predictable behaviour (Zuboff, 2019:359). *It seeks not the soul but the pattern*. Lacking a historical analogue, Zuboff proposes the concept of instrumentarianism, defined as a mode of power that "instrumentalises behaviour to manipulate, predict, monetise, and control others" (Zuboff, 2019:352).

Instrumentarianism is rooted in behaviourist psychology (as found in the work of Planck, Meyer, and especially B. F. Skinner), where human beings are understood as predictable organisms responding to environmental stimuli. Surveillance capitalism deploys this logic through continuous digital experimentation, rather than through overt political violence. Its

"governmentality"[67] is disinterested in beliefs, values, or interiority, caring only about whether actions align with predicted outcomes. While digital totalitarianism has emerged in some regions (for example, certain uses of state surveillance in China),[68] instrumentarianism is subtler yet still profoundly corrosive, because it undermines democratic life from within by eroding the capacities of agency, reflexivity, and autonomy that democracies presuppose (Zuboff, 2019:381). Zuboff argues that the behavioural ontology embedded in surveillance capitalism quietly redefines freedom and autonomy, turning them into measurable, optimisable outputs (Zuboff, 2019:364).

Under instrumentarian power, behaviour becomes the primary target of governance. Human flourishing – traditionally linked to autonomy, deliberation, and self-determination – is replaced by behavioural optimisation, and freedom is recast as alignment with the expectations of algorithmic systems. Privacy is thus eroded because the epistemic needs of behavioural science converge with the commercial imperatives of surveillance capitalism, creating a regime in which autonomy is structurally undermined. The cumulative result is the gradual loss of the human capacity to act freely, think critically, and sustain the democratic public sphere.

This dynamic intensifies the concerns raised by the Frankfurt School. Marcuse's critique of "technological rationality" anticipates Zuboff's argument, in that technological systems embed norms that present domination as rational and inevitable (Marcuse,1991:149). Marcuse argues that modern domination is justified and concealed through rationalised technological systems, producing a "false consciousness" that naturalises unfreedom (Marcuse, 2002:162). Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno's (1944/2002) analysis of the "Culture Industry" demonstrates how standardised technological forms cultivate conformity by embedding power into everyday life. For them, instrumental rationality is always the rationality of power – a logic that organises society in ways that appear neutral but are structured by domination (1944/2002:95).

[67] According to Foucault, governmentality is the conduct of conduct, which seeks to influence human behaviour through deliberate means. The focus of the government is on the welfare of all people, aiming to improve their conditions, well-being, health, wealth, and lifespan (Foucault 1991:100).

[68] For example, aspects of China's contemporary digital governance, such as the integration of biometric monitoring, extensive CCTV networks, and algorithmic scoring systems, are examples of a form of technologically enabled state oversight that goes beyond traditional disciplinary models. These systems demonstrate how datafication can be used to shape, categorise, and direct populations at scale through predictive and corrective feedback loops. Although conceptually distinct from surveillance capitalism, such practices reveal how digital infrastructures can be mobilised to condition behaviour, reduce uncertainty, and enhance administrative power. See, for instance, H. F. Hsu's discussion of digital social management in *The Datafication of Governance in China* (2020).

Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism radicalises these earlier critiques, extending the reach of instrumental rationality into intimate domains of life. As Zuboff explains, surveillance technologies deprive individuals of the "right to a future tense", which is the capacity to project oneself into the future through intention, will, and promise (Zuboff, 2019:331). Behavioural prediction thus forecloses the space of possibility that autonomy requires. In this sense, surveillance capitalism represents a new economic rationality, one that exceeds its technological function and becomes a pervasive architecture of power.

The relevance of Feenberg's work also emerges here. Drawing on the foundational framework of the Frankfurt School, Feenberg (1991, 2002, 2005, 2015, 2017) argues that technologies encode social values and reproduce existing power structures. His concept of the "technical code", which is the rule under which technologies are designed in ways that reflect the unequal distribution of social power (Feenberg, 2005:47), extends Frankfurt School Critical Theory by highlighting how capitalist imperatives become materially embedded in technological systems. This framework helps illuminate how surveillance capitalism operationalises instrumental rationality through design choices that prioritise prediction, control, and profit over autonomy, as will be further elaborated on in the next section.

Digital technologies, as Feenberg (1991; 1999; 2010) argues, are not neutral tools but forms of "instrumental power" that stabilise existing social hierarchies and reproduce dominant interests. Technologies are therefore socially constructed sites of struggle; their design, implementation, and normative functions reflect the priorities of those with economic and political power. In the context of informational capitalism, this means that platforms, algorithms, and infrastructures increasingly channel communication toward commodifiable behaviours and predictable patterns of engagement. Marcuse (1964) similarly warned that advanced industrial societies produce "one-dimensional" subjects, whose desires and modes of expression are subtly directed by technological environments that appear liberatory while deepening domination. In contemporary digital environments, dominated by data extraction, surveillance, and algorithmic modulation, Marcuse's analysis becomes newly relevant. The individual's capacity for critical reflection is constrained by systems that pre-structure choice, visibility, and expression.

Feenberg's and Marcuse's critiques together illuminate a deeper tension, which is if autonomy requires the ability to reflectively determine one's actions, then technologically mediated

environments that shape cognition, communication, and cooperation (Fuchs, 2008; 2010) exert a profound influence on the very conditions that make autonomy possible. The digital sphere does not merely mediate action, it also shapes the formation of preferences, the structure of attention, and the boundaries of communicative agency. As such, the contemporary technological order both enables participation and constrains subjectivity, producing a paradox central to digital-era autonomy: the more one depends on digital technologies for self-expression and political engagement, the more one becomes vulnerable to the techno-capitalist logics embedded within them.

Thus, the critical-theoretical tradition, from Marx's analysis of alienation, to Marcuse's critique of technological rationality, to Feenberg's theory of democratic rationalisation, provides a comprehensive foundation for analysing how informational capitalism reconfigures the conditions of autonomy. These perspectives highlight how power operates through technological infrastructures, design, and mediated communication, and why autonomy in the digital era cannot be understood as merely self-directed choice but as something shaped, conditioned, and sometimes curtailed by technological forms of instrumental power.[69]

3.5 Critical Theory in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism

This section examines Andrew Feenberg's Critical Theory of Technology as a framework for critiquing the technologies of surveillance capitalism. Feenberg's Critical Theory of Technology "combines insights from the philosophy of technology and constructivist technology studies" (2005:47), arguing that technologies are never neutral instruments but forms that carry "biases derived from their place in society" (Feenberg, 2005:47). Although Feenberg developed his framework during an earlier stage of neoliberalism, his model remains powerful precisely because it exposes how technological design embodies social values,

[69] The concept of 'instrumental power' in Feenberg and Marcuse is rooted in a broader critique of Enlightenment rationality. Marcuse (1964), drawing from Weber, argues that modern technological rationality becomes a form of domination when efficiency and control override substantive human ends. Feenberg (1991; 1999) expands this by showing how technological design embodies social values, thus shaping the horizon of possible actions available to individuals. This intersects with Kantian autonomy: for Kant, autonomy requires the capacity to act according to self-given rational principles rather than external determinants (Groundwork *of the Metaphysical of Morals*, 1997; *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1996). When technological systems condition cognition, preference-formation, and communicative possibilities, they function as heteronomous structures that compromise the individual's capacity for self-legislation. In this sense, instrumental power represents a structural threat to Kantian autonomy, as it embeds external interests into the very processes by which individuals form judgments and pursue ends.

making it well-suited for analysing the structures of surveillance capitalism. What now requires updating, as this section argues, is not Feenberg's core thesis but its application to a digitally intensified "datafied" environment.

Within the Critical Theory of Technology, technological designs and applications reflect a stabilised balance between competing social and technical values. Historically, public could intervene in the design and governance of technologies. The French Minitel system is Feenbergs best-known example of a publicly shaped socio-technical arrangement. Surveillance capitalism, however, alters this balance, constituting both a techno-system and a technical code that systematically limits social intervention. Its extraction-driven architectures displace democratic negotiation in favour of asymmetrical value-embedding by corporate actors.

Feenberg's framework maintains Marcuse's argument that "technology has rendered possible the translation of values into technical tasks, the materialisation of values" (Marcuse, [1964]1991:236). In capitalist systems, the ruling class benefits from the values sedimented into technological design. Marcuse insisted that such technologies require demystifying critique, in a similar manner to Marx, who demystified the supposedly "neutral" laws of the market (Feenberg, 1991:68-69). Extending this, Feenberg aims to preserve Marcuse's insight while proposing a civilizational alternative grounded in democratic and participatory design. To do so, he engages critically with three major theories of technology, namely instrumentalism, substantivism, and technological determinism.

3.5.1 Instrumental Theory, Substantive Theory, and Technological Determinism

The instrumental theory of technology holds that "the subject of action… can be defined independently of its means"(Feenberg, 1991:65). In this view, technology is a neutral tool that serves whatever ends humans impose upon it. Marcuse's critique of instrumental reason, which is the foundation of the Frankfurt School's broader critique of technical rationality, exposes how instrumentalism masks the value-laden, interest-driven nature of technological systems. Feenberg (1991:5) argues that although both instrumental theory and Critical Theory acknowledge human control over technology, instrumentalism falsely restricts the space for democratic or value-laden intervention, presenting efficiency as a universal norm and thereby naturalising the interests of dominant groups.

In contrast, the substantive theory of technology claims that once adopted, technology reorganises the social world according to its own logic. As Feenberg (1991:7) explains through Jacques Ellul and Martin Heidegger, technology becomes a "new cultural system" that structures every domain of life as an object of control. Ellul (1964:14) describes the "technical phenomenon" as the defining condition of modern societies. Heidegger (1977a:17) deepens this critique, arguing that modern humanity is transformed into "standing-reserve", raw material optimised for technical processes. Seen through substantivism, surveillance capitalism's infrastructures of extraction and algorithmic prediction represent an intensified form of this logic, creating a social order built on predictive certainty and behavioural steering.

Feenberg defines technological determinism as the view that technology follows "its autonomous logic of development" and, once introduced, reshapes the social system according to its imperatives (1991:122). This movement can appear "unilinear", progressing from less to more advanced configurations (Feenberg, 1999:177). Although determinists acknowledge some degree of human agency, they claim that societies ultimately conform to the logic of their dominant technologies. Marx is often associated with determinism, especially through claims such as "machines make history" (Mackenzie, 1984:476). Yet, as Feenberg notes, Marx's writings are more ambiguous; that is, only if the forces of production are equated with autonomous technology would Marx become a determinist. Feenberg insists that Marx includes labour relations and tools in the forces of production, thereby rejecting a simple determinist reading.

Taken together, these traditions reveal that the Critical Theory of Technology occupies a hybrid position. Feenberg draws from instrumentalism, substantivism, and determinism, while rejecting their most problematic assumptions. He argues that although technologies embody elite interests and rationalise domination, they remain sites of struggle, or what he calls "a social battlefield" (1991:14). Technologies contain multiple unrealised possibilities; their trajectories are not predetermined but politically contestable. Therefore, new analytical tools are needed to explain how values become stabilised in specific technological configurations. This is the basis for Feenberg's concept of the technical code.

3.5.2 Technical Code

Feenberg (1991) describes technical codes as the processes through which competing social interests become sedimented into technological design. Technical codes define whose interests technologies serve, organising the "invisible" value-structures embedded in rules, procedures, artefacts and systems. According to Feenberg (2005:47), the technical code is "the rule under which technologies are realised in a social context with biases reflecting the unequal distribution of social power". In surveillance capitalism, this code is shaped by two dominant imperatives, namely the extraction imperative and the prediction imperative. These govern data capture, behavioural monitoring, and algorithmic optimisation.

The asymmetry of these imperatives creates a technological order that systematically excludes democratic participation, thereby echoing earlier Frankfurt School critiques of domination. Marcuse's insight that technology can materialise values (1991:236) becomes vividly clear: surveillance architectures materialise values of control, certainty, and monetisation. The dispossession cycle, where personal experiences are captured, commodified and returned as behavioural nudges, represents a paradigmatic example of technical coding in action.

Technical codes also illuminate broader political economic concerns. Capitalist rationality translates its values into technical specifications; from engine emissions to workplace automation, technologies routinely embody priorities such as cost-reduction, control, or deskilling (Feenberg, 1999:87-89). Deskilling becomes an ideological and technical process, operationalised through design choices that remove workers' agency.

Returning to Marx, Feenberg argues that socialist and capitalist technological codes would differ radically. Marx's vision of "assembled producers" (Marx 1973:612) implies alternative technological pathways grounded in cooperative, democratic production. The failure of twentieth-century socialist states to democratise technical relations, referring to their reliance on Western industrial designs and technocratic bureaucracy, stemmed from neglecting issues of operational autonomy (Feenberg, 2009:176-208). This oversight enabled new forms of domination that persist in contemporary digital infrastructures, from state databases to platform capitalism.

Operational autonomy thus allows managers and owners to make unilateral decisions insulated from public influence (Feenberg, 2002:16-22). As technology permeates institutions, this autonomy expands into technocracy, generating self-perpetuating systems. In digital contexts, operational autonomy manifests as algorithmic opacity, proprietary data practices, and corporate control over platforms – a new architecture of domination that threatens democratic autonomy**.**

3.5.3 Feenberg, Berry, and the Digital Condition

To adequately critique surveillance capitalism, Feenberg's theory must be integrated with David M. Berry's (2014) *Critical Theory and the Digital*, which addresses the foundational digital technologies, such as algorithms, software, protocols, that now mediate experience. Feenberg's concept of the technosystem (2017:159), borrowed from Ihde (1990), defines a "field of technical practices aimed at control". Surveillance capitalism embodies this definition perfectly, functioning as a technosystem structured by extraction and prediction.

Feenberg draws on Adorno's claim that under advanced capitalism experience is too corrupted by commodification to provide alternative values (2017:132). Berry modernises this by arguing that software and computer code are the new media through which commodification occurs. Unlike earlier media forms, code is processual, agentic, and performative (Berry 2014:123). Algorithms, particularly those employed by Google, Meta, and other platforms, are not just tools but active mediators that prescribe, classify, and shape behaviour. They thus express a distinct technical code, one optimised for surveillance capitalism's imperatives.

Under Berry's extension of Feenberg's insights, the locus of domination shifts – not from mass media, but from datafied infrastructures, where human experience becomes raw material for extraction. This reveals why surveillance capitalism appears "invulnerable" to traditional forms of intervention; the technical code is embedded at the infrastructural level of software, algorithms, and computational architectures, making resistance more difficult and autonomy more fragile.

3.6 Surveillance capitalism's erosion of autonomy

As explicated above, surveillance capitalism gradually conditions users, increasing their vulnerability to digital manipulation. Everyday actions, such as liking posts, watching videos, sharing content, or clicking on advertisements, are continuously tracked, analysed, and fed into algorithmic systems that refine behavioural predictions. As the previous sections have shown, these predictive operations do not merely observe behaviour but shape it, deepening the asymmetry between platform power and user autonomy.

The usage of digital technologies, particularly ICT platforms and infrastructural systems, tends to diminish rather than enhance autonomy, even though individuals often believe that they are making free, convenience-based choices. This loss of autonomy is one that individuals willingly "agree" to, seduced by the convenience of everyday digital services (Harcourt, 2015). Yet this agreement occurs under conditions of structural opacity, resulting in a subtle loss of control over the architectonic frameworks that govern digital life.

Zuboff argues that the governance structures underpinning contemporary digital systems operate "beyond democratic entitlement or inspection" because they are depersonalised, privately owned, and largely unaccountable (Zuboff, 2019:181-182). Questions fundamental to democratic autonomy – who knows what, who decides, and who governs – are displaced from public deliberation into proprietary corporate architectures. These technologies undermine autonomy not only by violating privacy but by constraining individuals' psychological, social, and political self-direction, including their capacity for autonomous thought and critical reflection. Thus, even within formal democratic institutions, citizens risk losing the reflective capacities required for public self-governance.

3.7 The myriad issues posed by surveillance capitalism

In relation to the concerns outlined above, the following section elaborates on the myriad issues posed by surveillance capitalism. Before doing so, however, a short overview of data extraction is required, since it constitutes the foundational resource that drives surveillance capitalism. As will become clear, surveillance capitalism emerges directly from processes of data surveillance, extraction, and control, and these processes simultaneously underpin the contemporary phenomenon of digital colonialism.

Coleman (2019:424) notes that in the contemporary era, data is regarded as the "new currency", in some cases valued more highly than traditional natural resources. This shift has enabled large Western technology companies to expand aggressively into African markets (Coleman, 2019:424). As outlined earlier, transnational corporations acquire this data through web tracking, behavioural monitoring, mobile app usage, and platform-based interaction.

Functioning as a vast extractive mechanism, digital technology collects an array of data – facial scans, navigation routes, location patterns, phone numbers, clicks, search queries, purchasing behaviour, likes, dislikes, and more (Van Rijmenam, 2018). This data is continuously monitored through cookies, device tracking, profile scraping, facial recognition, and related techniques (Coleman, 2019:424). The aggregated data forms anonymous but highly detailed digital profiles, which are synchronised and classified in order to produce personalised content for advertisements, notifications, and location-based services (Coleman, 2019:425). These profiles are then sold to data brokers for predictive analytics and targeted advertising.

Consumerism[70] has thus shifted from mass, undifferentiated marketing toward hyper-personalised behavioural targeting, enabled by pervasive tracking technologies (Evans, 2018, cited in Coleman, 2019:425). This shift is economically advantageous due to the ubiquity of portable digital devices and the cross-generational expansion of social media use. Advertisers can now target consumers with extraordinary accuracy, drastically reducing uncertainty about future behaviour (Coleman, 2019:425).

Moreover, Coleman (2019:426) argues that within this system, a company's most significant asset is its knowledge infrastructure. Companies such as Meta (Facebook) and Alphabet possess considerable competitive advantages due to their vast pools of user data, global scale, and computational resources. Furthermore, the introduction artificial intelligence, particularly machine learning and natural language processing, has enabled the synthesis of billions of data points to generate behavioural predictions (Coleman, 2019:426).

With such sophisticated systems, companies acquire highly sensitive and personal information, including political views, religion, ethnicity, health information, and financial status, often without meaningful user consent (Coleman, 2019:426). These collected traces produce a digital

[70] The meaning and stories that consumers share and create about their consumption experience are often a reflection of their social interaction, identity and value. For instance, updating your iPhone to the lates model every year to stay up to date.

footprint that grants corporations deep insight into an individual's life. The purpose, as Coleman (2019:427) notes, is not merely to analyse present actions but to anticipate and shape future behaviour.

Predictive analytics thus blur the boundaries of privacy, especially when only a handful of corporations have access to such extensive behavioural repositories. For these corporations, user privacy is not a priority; rather, data constitutes a global economic asset essential to investment, advertising, workforce management, and the wider mechanisms of global capitalism[71].

3.8 Synthesis: situating surveillance capitalism within techno-capitalist and autonomy frameworks

In this chapter, we situated surveillance capitalism within the historical frameworks of Kellner's techno-capitalism and Fuchs's informational capitalism, showing how the commodification of technological systems and informational processes laid the groundwork for today's behavioural predictions and extraction regimes. Surveillance capitalism emerged at the intersection of surveillance and capitalist expansion, as illustrated by Zuboff's notion of the "Big Other", a distributed apparatus that records, analyses, and commodifies human behaviour.

We then used Feenberg's concept of the techno-code to illuminate how technology embeds prevailing power relations and values, and, implicitly, Marx's critique of operational autonomy to uncover the internal contradictions of capitalist technological systems. Together, these concepts reveal that surveillance capitalism is not merely a market phenomenon but an ideological, infrastructural, and profoundly political project, one that reconfigures autonomy and rearticulates colonial relations.

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[71] In light of what has been delineated, the introductory stages of chapter 4 will use these insights in an attempt to explicate how surveillance capitalism underpins digital colonialism. As such, chapter 4 will discuss how – via the recently acquired understanding of what surveillance capitalism entails – digital colonialism arises, what it entails, and why it should be understood, particularly through the analyses of Kellner, Christian Fuchs, and Zuboff, as a contemporary extension of Western techno-capitalist dominance.

From a Kantian perspective, as was discussed in Chapter One, autonomy requires that individuals act according to self-given rational laws rather than external determinants. What surveillance capitalism disrupts, therefore, is not merely privacy but the very *conditions for moral self-legislation*. Marcuse's critique of one-dimensionality (Chapter Two) and Feenberg's account of instrumentalisation (Chapter Three) both illuminate how technological systems reshape the field of choices available to subjects.

In Kantian terms, these systems shift agents from being authors of their own maxims to becoming objects within the maxim-setting of algorithmic infrastructures. When predictive analytics, behavioural nudging, and data-driven optimisation pre-structure the range of possible actions, they undermine the independence of practical reason by substituting heteronomy (i.e. rule by external forces) for autonomy. Thus, the philosophical stakes extend beyond economic exploitation; surveillance capitalism transforms what Kant (1996) understands as the prerequisites for practical freedom, which is the ability to reflect, deliberate, and act without coercive or manipulative influences determining one's will.

From this foundation, the following chapter turns explicitly to digital colonialism, analysing how the global logistics of surveillance capitalism reshape digital sovereignty and subjectivity – particularly in the Global South – under emerging forms of infrastructural and epistemic control.

Chapter 4: Digital Colonialism and the crisis of digital sovereignty in the Global South

Introduction

The preceding chapters examined Kant's concept of autonomy, followed by Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the Culture Industry and its role in reproducing cultural commodities for uncritical consumption. This analysis established a crucial link between the Culture Industry and contemporary capitalist dynamics. In particular, it demonstrated how the logic of cultural commodification has been intensified within surveillance capitalism, where algorithmic systems replace traditional broadcasting while pursuing similar aims: the commodification of behaviour and attention, the normalisation of manipulation, the erosion of privacy, and – as central to this thesis – the weakening of individual autonomy. These threats to autonomy undermine not only individual judgment and integrity but also the social conditions necessary for collective agency and democratic participation. Importantly, these forces do not operate in isolation; they are embedded within a global economic order that reproduces long-standing patterns of domination and dispossession.

Building on this foundation, the present chapter examines the notion of digital colonialism, particularly as developed by Michael Kwet. It argues that contemporary forms of digital dependence, large-scale surveillance, widening inequality, and the erosion of diverse knowledge systems are not merely the products of late capitalism but manifestations of the enduring structures of coloniality that have shaped global power relations since the age of Empire.[72]

Digital colonialism refers to a twenty-first-century "Scramble for Africa" (Harlow & Carter, 2003:6), where Big Tech corporations, such as Apple, Microsoft, Google, Meta, Tesla, SpaceX, and OpenAI, consolidate power by extracting, analysing, and owning user data, disproportionately drawn from the Global South (Coleman, 2019:417). Under the guise of philanthropy and development, these corporations secure unprecedented access to new data

[72] For this study, "empire" is a system of interaction between two political entities in which the dominating metropole exercises political control over the subordinate periphery's internal and external policies, or effective control through technologies and its advancements (Kwet, 2019). It is a structure that continues to shape contemporary global power connections even after modern colonialism has ended.

frontiers, deploying technologies in contexts with minimal oversight, regulation, or public accountability, often to the detriment of affected communities.

This chapter, therefore, examines how Western technological monopolies employ an instrumentalised deployment of digital infrastructures that produce new forms of domination,[73] and how these systems shape political, social, and cultural discourses in the Global South. It further analyses the persistence of colonial logics within digital infrastructures, the extraction of data as a resource within global capitalism, and the ways digital knowledge systems reproduce hierarchies grounded in colonial rationality.

In particular, the chapter proceeds by addressing the following questions: i) What does digital colonialism entail, and how does it resemble and differ from earlier forms of colonial domination? ii) What socio-political effects arise from digital colonialism? iii) Through what technological infrastructures, specifically in relation to surveillance systems, platform architectures, and data extraction practices, does digital colonialism operate in the Global South?

The first section returns to the Culture Industry framework from Chapter Two to show how cultural production and mass media have historically served colonial projects by imposing dominant values onto marginalised societies under the veneer of progress and entertainment.[74] This theoretical grounding is essential for understanding how the Culture Industry evolves in the digital sphere to undermine emancipatory thinking, discernment, imagination, and ultimately, autonomy while also facilitating the process of digital colonialism.

According to theorists such as Fuchs, Turkle, Stiegler, Vaidyanathan, and Zuboff, the digital age amplifies many of the Culture Industry's core concerns. Stiegler, for example, illustrates how the Culture Industry becomes the "attention economy", in which digital systems exploit the attentional capacities of the modern indiviudal as a scarce resource (Stiegler, 2010:8). According to Stiegler, this continuity reveals that the processes of standardisation,

[73] Instrumentalism is defined by Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) as "using people as means to achieve an end" which is the current tendency of Big Tech companies, users are treated as mere tools to achieve a goal.
[74] While Horkheimer and Adorno themselves did not directly address the colonial condition in *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* it provided a critical framework for other thinkers who took their analysis of cultural industrialisation and showed how it was used as a tool for cultural hegemony and homogenisation for Western (and in particular, American) cultural norms and values. Theorist such as Amy Allen, Edward Said, Frederic Jameson, etc have expanded this critique to by demonstrating how mass media and cultural production are tools for cultural hegemony.

commodification, and the erosion of critical capacities identified by Horkheimer and Adorno not only persist but have been intensified through algorithmic design and platform economies. As a result, mass culture in the digital age becomes increasingly homogenised and commodified, largely according to American corporate interests, leading to diminished individual autonomy, the production of pseudo-individuality, and new forms of alienation (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:125). Moreover, according to? (reference), digital cultural flows reshape, marginalise, or erase indigenous cultures, traditions, and epistemologies. In this respect, Edward Said's Orientalism (1978:12) remains illuminating: just as colonial discourse represented non-Western societies through Western categories and stereotypes, the global digital culture industry privileges Western norms while sidelining alternative cultural expressions.

4.1 A critical link between the culture industry and modern colonialism

Chapter Two reconstructed Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the Culture Industry (*Kulturindustrie*) and its implications for autonomy. Their argument shows how the industrialisation of culture reduces symbolic forms to standardised commodities designed for mass consumption, producing deception, conformity, and alienation. Through this process, individuals are relieved of the difficult task of exercising critical judgement; this echoes Kant's concern about "immaturity," where it becomes convenient to allow others to think on one's behalf (Kant, 1996:1). As Horkheimer and Adorno observe, the consumer's active discernment is displaced by pre-fabricated perception, since "the classification has already been pre-empted by the schematism of production" (2002:98). The Culture Industry's "first service to the customer" is precisely the unravelling of the Kantian demand for autonomous schematism, replacing it with ready-made interpretive frameworks (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:98). Its "after-sales service" is the ongoing removal of the responsibility for critical judgement, and thus the burden of maturity that Kant (1996:1) insists is essential to autonomy.

The following discussion introduces Jean Godefroy Bidima's critique of African modernity in order to clarify the relationship between the Culture Industry and modern colonialism. In *Théorie critique et modernité négro-africaine (Critical Theory and Negro-African Modernity)* (1993), Bidima argues that African expressions of *Aufklärung*, initially intended to cultivate openness and intellectual freedom, have ossified into a "positive" and unreflective discourse shaped by colonial histories and postcolonial political structures (1993:136). The

lingering effects of colonialism, he argues, suppress the "non-identical" in African thought and inhibit philosophical diversity. This produces conditions in which African philosophical traditions risk marginalisation unless a more inclusive, pluralistic, and decolonial approach is adopted (Wiredu, 1980:12; Ramose, 2002a:2; 2002b:120). Concepts such as *Ubuntu*, which emphasise relationality, interdependence, and communal flourishing, offer an alternative model of autonomy, one grounded not in individual self-sufficiency but in reciprocal recognition and shared humanity (Anyanwu, 1989:127).

These dynamics reveal how the discourses that underpinned colonialism continue to shape the political and cultural life of African societies. For Bidima (1993:173), the Enlightenment has increasingly functioned as a "discourse of mastery", mirroring Horkheimer and Adorno's claim that the dialectic of Enlightenment exposes the gap between the promise of emancipation and the reality of domination. Bidima extends this insight to African modernity, arguing that Enlightenment discourses, intended to promote reason and freedom, have been appropriated to justify repression, false identity,[75] and the continuation of colonial logics.

Achille Mbembe further refines this argument. He suggests that Africa's "dark night" is colonisation itself, while decolonisation represents a deferred "promise of happiness" continually undermined by the persistence of colonial structures (Mbembe, 2021:217). What survives is what Mbembe (2001:24) calls a "commandement"; this refers to forms of power that have shifted from disciplinary techniques to more violent, tactile, and necropolitical modalities, in which the management of life and death becomes the central technique of domination. For Mbembe, this exposes how Enlightenment narratives of progress and rational order can mutate into mechanisms that normalise violence, exclusion, and instability.

Reinterpreting Horkheimer and Adorno's claim that technological rationality becomes a rationality of domination (2002:95), Mbembe argues that contemporary African domination is sustained by *technical* rationality. The enduring relevance of the critical theorists such as Marcuse, Benjamin, Fromm, and others discussed in Chapter Two, thus lies in their insight that instrumental rationality, often masked as efficiency and progress, functions as a mechanism of control. According to Kwet (2019:65), this analysis then parallels the dynamics of digital

[75] Bidima's false identity refers to a sense of self that is developed as a result of what seems real or rational, while it actually serves as a facilitator of confusion and oppression – this then resonates with Fromm's notion of the pseudo-individual (Bidima, 1993).

colonialism, in which Western technological monopolies control digital infrastructures, data, and economic systems across the Global South. These systems enable new forms of extraction, surveillance, and socio-political influence, extending colonial power into the digital sphere. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Global South becomes a site of resource extraction – not of minerals, but of data, targeted, mined, and monetised by powerful corporate actors.

Thus, the digital era can be understood as a continuation of earlier colonial projects, rebranded through the rhetoric of innovation, connectivity, and development. The following section examines how these historical continuities manifest in the global digital system and how they reproduce persistent colonial structures under new technological conditions.

4.2 The historical continuation of colonial power through the global system

This section examines how colonial infrastructures persist into the contemporary era, thus establishing the conceptual link between modern colonialism and digital colonialism. Mbembe argues that we inhabit a postcolonial world in which present struggles must be understood as the ongoing legacies of a colonial past (Mbembe, 2001:7). For anti-colonial theorists such as Fanon, Foucault, and Said, this means that the structures, effects, and power relations inaugurated during the colonial period endure long after the formal end of empire.[76] Stuart Hall similarly contends that colonial histories continue to shape contemporary economic, political, and cultural realities (Hall, 1998:189).

Moreover, Faleiro defines modern colonialism (occurring from roughly the 15th to mid-20th centuries) as a project of territorial, economic, and political expansion through which Western powers inserted themselves into foreign societies and controlled their governance and livelihoods (Faleiro, 2012:13). In this sense, colonial powers sought economic growth through the exploitation of colonies as markets (and to digital marketplaces,[77] in the contemporary digital context) and through the extraction of their resources. Reconstructing this historical background is therefore essential, since the logic underpinning colonial domination, such as

[76]Due to space and time constraints, very briefly, the notion of colonialism here is also referred to as neocolonialism, defined as an indirect control that developed countries have over un- (or under-) developed countries (Halperin, 2025 in *Encyclopaedia Britannica)*

[77] A marketplace is a platform that offers services and products from many vendors which customers can buy from (Tian et al. 2018, Li et al. 2019). Most of the products on these platforms are from external companies, but some platforms also sell their own products, such as Amazon and Allegro. A South-African example of a marketplace would be Takealot.

resource extraction, cultural hierarchy, and political control, reappear in altered form in digital colonialism.

4.2.1 *Brief historical context of colonial economic domination*

In South Africa, during the modern colonial era (1652-1961), indigenous groups were exploited and displaced by European corporate and political interests (Bakan, 2004). Corporate families such as the Oppenheimer dynasty illustrate how economic domination persisted well into the twentieth century. More broadly, the "Scramble for Africa" was fuelled by European demand for resources, industrialisation, and expanding global markets, resulting in extensive economic exploitation and territorial division.

Industrial capitalism intensified this dynamic. Industrialised nations became increasingly dependent on controlling markets and resources within their colonies (Dahiya, 2023:4). Companies such as the Dutch East India Company played a central role in advancing imperial economic agendas across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Yet colonialism was not only economic; it also operated through ideologies of cultural superiority. Nineteenth-century narratives of European moral and cultural pre-eminence framed colonisation as a "civilising mission", positioning Western Europe as the benchmark of civilisation (Heraclides & Dialla, 2015:31). The supposed moral duty to "civilise" non-European peoples drew on Enlightenment ideals, liberalism, Christian evangelism, and racialised notions of white superiority (Pekanan, 2016:1).

4.2.2 Colonialism as a civilising mission

Boatcă (2015, cited in Hussein, 2024:17) argues that the "civilising mission" functioned as an ideological facade that legitimised Western political and economic dominance. Said's foundational work on Orientalism shows that the concepts of "Orient," "Occident," and "Other" are not neutral descriptors but mechanisms through which the West asserted intellectual and cultural authority (Said, 1978:1, 12). The Orient was constructed as static, irrational, and backwards, while the West was framed as progressive and rational. This binary justified the expansion of colonial rule and reinforced Western dominance (Iqbal, 2021:12; Hussein, 2024:17). Fanon (1967:27) further argues that biological and racial hierarchies underpinned this ideological division. Said therefore attempts to show that Orientalism produced a durable epistemic structure that continues to shape contemporary global

hierarchies, particularly in the representation and treatment of Eastern cultures (Said, 1978:33, 45). This worldview legitimised colonial power by controlling knowledge, discourse, and, ultimately, political authority.

According to Parkash (2025:22-35), colonial expansion from the fifteenth century onward relied on this ideological framework. European powers justified land occupation, religious conversion, governance imposition, and resource exploitation by portraying indigenous populations as "savages" requiring civilisation. As such, colonisation produced not only territorial conquest but also deep cultural disruption. Indigenous languages, identities, and belief systems were suppressed or eradicated (Thiong'o, 1986:15, 37). Christianisation, residential schools, the destruction of sacred sites, and the imposition of European legal and educational systems further entrenched cultural dislocation and loss of identity.

Modern colonialism also generated widespread poverty and the destruction of traditional lifeways (Faleiro, 2012:13). Although its explicit political forms have ended, Faleiro argues that many former colonies now face new iterations of colonial domination – that is, neo-colonialism – through which powerful nations and corporations continue to control markets and natural resources (Faleiro, 2012:14). Kwame Nkrumah (1965:4-5) similarly identifies neo-colonialism[78] as the contemporary extension of these older logics, exercised through economic dependence, multinational corporate power, and resource extraction.

In contrast to earlier forms, Dahiya (2023:4) contends that a new mode of colonialism is emerging through digital infrastructures and communication networks. These systems gather extensive personal data, which becomes the raw material for profit generation and behavioural governance. Faleiro (2012:12) identifies this as "digital colonialism,[79] a form of domination exercised through technological control, data extraction, and the concentration of digital power in a small number of global corporations. The next section examines this contemporary "civilising mission."

[78] Neo-colonialism refers to a system where a state is supposedly autonomous and possesses international sovereignty, but its political policies and economic system are influenced by external forces (such as foreign countries or global corporations) to benefit the interests of these external forces first, ahead of local economies or people. (Nkrumah, 1965:4).

[79] While digital colonialism can indeed be regarded as a global issue, the focus of this study will be on exactly how it is that such a form of colonialism is unfolding in the Global South and what impact it is having on the populations residing within such regions.

4.3 Big Tech as a new form of civilising mission

Alongside its technological and financial ambitions, Big Tech advances a contemporary civilising mission. Western scientific disciplines, including network science, computer science, and data science, continue to shape this vision (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:16). Unlike earlier missions grounded in Christian evangelism, today's version is framed through ideals such as convenience, connectivity, and technologically enhanced problem-solving – promises that suggest machines and AI can improve life and address contemporary challenges more efficiently than human intellect (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:16). While these benefits may be realised for a privileged minority, they risk becoming "nightmares" for others through the loss of control over personal data, new forms of labour exploitation, and the erosion of livelihoods (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:17). Historically, civilising missions have always been entwined with economic motives, technological expansion, and unequal outcomes, a pattern that persists in the digital era (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:17).

In the contemporary era, data processing tools are thus celebrated as scientific breakthroughs that promise ease, connection, and new kinds of intelligence (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:17). Yet beneath this "gift" lies an expanding regime of surveillance (for example, workplace monitoring and facial recognition), exploitation (as seen in the wage suppression of gig workers), and discrimination (for instance, when algorithmic profiling restricts access to services) (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:17). To understand this dynamic, digital practices in the Global South must be analysed alongside both colonial history and contemporary capitalism. Capitalism, now the dominant global system governing resource allocation, remains deeply interwoven with colonial legacies (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:30). Thus, identifying emerging forms of colonialism makes visible how capitalism and colonialism remain mutually reinforcing.

Artificial intelligence further entrenches these inequalities, particularly through Natural Language Processing (NLP), a central component of contemporary data technologies. While AI excels at translation and language recognition, its development often prioritises dominant global languages, marginalising smaller linguistic communities (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:113). Meta's failure to regulate hate speech in Myanmar exemplifies how insufficient support for minority languages produces harmful real-world consequences, raising concerns about Big Tech's commitment to linguistic diversity (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:113).

This contemporary civilising mission therefore functions as a form of digital colonialism: the manipulation and extraction of data to legitimise hierarchies of knowledge and power that again subordinate the Global South. This mirrors earlier colonial narratives in which Western science and epistemology were positioned as inherently superior (Mejias & Couldry, 2024:116). Big Data's civilising discourse encourages continual data extraction by presenting it as necessary for convenience, connection, and a more efficient life. Such narratives shape collective imagination, narrowing alternative technological futures and reinforcing the dominance of platforms like Meta, Google, and smart-device manufacturers, who frame their systems through the language of community and connectivity. In doing so, the civilising narrative normalises ongoing extractive practices by presenting them as simply part of the natural order.

The next section turns to the theoretical framework of digital colonialism, its development, mechanisms, and implications, drawing on the work of Michael Kwet, as well as global theorists of technology such as Siva Vaidhyanathan and Shoshana Zuboff.

4.4. How Surveillance Capitalism Perpetuates Digital Colonialism

To understand how older colonial logics are reconfigured in the digital age, or what this thesis refers to as 'digital colonialism', it is necessary to situate these processes within the structural transformations of contemporary capitalism. Fuchs (2008:98) initially notes the emergence of numerous contemporary buzzwords in economic and sociological discourse, such as *knowledge economy*, *information society*, *network society*, and *informational capitalism*. These terms describe the transformed nature of modern society and its economic base. Importantly, while each concept emphasises different theoretical dimensions, Fuchs (2008:119) maintains that they all highlight the centrality of information and data – circulating across dense digital networks – as the key driver of restructuring the economic, political, and cultural configurations in contemporary society.

Van Dijk (2006:20) supports this view by arguing that although these buzzwords differ in scope and theoretical lineage, they ultimately depict a "networked" mode of existence.[80] As Van Dijk (2006: 20) states, such concepts point toward a:

> social formation with an infrastructure of social and media networks enabling its prime mode of organisation at all levels… Increasingly, these networks link all units or parts of this formation (individuals, groups and organisations).

In line with the above, Fuchs (2008:101) argues that these networked conditions reflect significant transformations within contemporary capitalism, transformations that directly shape the emergence of digital colonialism. The capitalist enterprise of the 21st century is increasingly dependent on a technological infrastructure comprised of highly sophisticated, interoperable communication networks capable of accumulating, storing, and processing vast amounts of information.[81] Within this global enterprise, strategies of capital accumulation, together with the technologies that facilitate them, operate on a planetary scale and have evolved into a flexible, transnational regime of accumulation.

It is for this reason that Fuchs (2008:103-104) considers concepts such as knowledge capitalism, informational capitalism, or network capitalism (as defined in the previous chapter) analytically helpful. These notions emphasise how labour itself has been transformed into an informational format,[82] wherein cognitive, communicative, and cooperative labour now constitute a substantial portion of work time. Crucially, this labour is mediated – often intensively – by information technologies. As Fuchs (2008:104) explains:

> The notion of informational capitalism… conceptualises contemporary capitalism based on the rise of cognitive, communicative, and cooperative labour that is

[80] Castells was probably the first theorist, in 1996, to make use of this term in his text (aptly) titled *The Rise of the Network Society*.

[81] Corroborating such a claim, Zuboff (2019:159) indicates how the search engineering team of 'Bing', which is a search engine that is owned by Microsoft and is by no means anywhere near the level of sophistication and scale of Google's search capacity, has developed a self-learning system, based on information collected from the Internet and its associated applications that is *"adding 28,000 DVDs of content every day"*. To put such a quantification of data-accumulation into perspective, Zuboff (2019:159) refers to the project's senior director who is quoted as saying that: "It's mind-blowing how much data we have captured over the last couple of years. *The line would extend to Venus, and you would still have 7 trillion pixels left over*" [emphasis added].

[82] See Fuchs (2008:98-120) in order to acquire a more detailed description of what informational labour entails along with how such a novel form of labour now underpins the strategies of production and accumulation in the contemporary epoch.

interconnected with the rise of technologies and goods that objectify human cognition, communication, and cooperation.

On this basis, Fuchs (2008:104) argues that informational labour, together with the technologies that enable and exploit it, now shape the dominant strategies of capital production and accumulation in the 21st century. Furthermore, the rise of informational capitalism is structurally tied to the increasing importance of computer networks and global organisational systems. Such networks form the technological foundation of "global network capitalism", dissolving those temporal and spatial barriers that historically constrained earlier forms of capitalism and colonial expansion.[83]

Fuchs (2008:110) further warns that this globalised network economy has produced concealed regimes of accumulation, regulation, and discipline, all of which rely on transnational organisations utilising cyberspace and digital technologies for global coordination and control. Contemporary ICTs dissolve previous constraints, enabling corporations to flexibly manage production and exploit "global interconnected flows of capital, technology, labour, and information" (Fuchs, 2008:112).

4.4.1. Surveillance capitalism as the new frontier of digital colonialism

We have already analysed Zuboff's framework of surveillance capitalism. Building on this, we can argue that surveillance capitalism relies on colonial discourses, translating older logics of resource extraction into the digital domain. Viewed through a colonial lens, surveillance capitalism enables new forms of dispossession, where human experience becomes the resource

[83] This point is both reinforced and corroborated by Bozkurt (2017) who, in an article aptly titled "The world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data," notes how, when evaluating the economy of the 21st century, Internet-based companies such as Alphabet (Google's parent company), Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Microsoft should be regarded as the "titans" of the new digital economy - i.e. the five most valuable listed firms in the world. According to The Economist (2017), these "titans" profited massively, racking up over US$25 bn in net profit in the first quarter of 2017 alone. Furthermore, The Economist reports that Amazon captures half of all dollars spent online in America, while in 2016, Google and Facebook accounted for almost all revenue growth in digital advertising in America. Such figures highlight how information-based companies have come to play a central role in the global economy. In line with Fuchs's (2008) notion of "informational capitalism," which depends on data generated by interconnected communicational technologies, Bozkurt (2017) argues that smartphones, social media, and wider Internet applications have made data abundant, ubiquitous, and far more valuable than traditional commodities. As The Economist (2017) asserts: "Whether you are going for a run, watching TV or even just sitting in traffic, virtually every activity creates a digital trace — more raw material for the data distilleries." More detail will be provided below when discussing surveillance capitalism as expanded on by Zuboff (2015). For now, suffice it to say there is strong literature - both older and contemporary - supporting the insight that data has replaced oil as the foundational resource of capital accumulation in the digital age (see also Paskaleva, 2024).

frontier of capitalist expansion. As Zuboff (2015:75) notes, profit-driven digital firms increasingly colonise private spaces and temporal rhythms, enclosing ever more dimensions of everyday life.

This shift requires a profound social transformation towards a "datafied society" (Zuboff, 2015:153), wherein social relations become economic inputs, and human life becomes raw material for data extraction. Social bonds and personal experiences are reduced to production inputs feeding large-scale extraction, abstraction, and aggregation processes. Although data collection is typically invisible, the automated and mass-scale commodification of data has significant implications for the reproduction of oppression, particularly because data is framed as "objective," masking the structural biases embedded within extraction systems**.**

4.4.2. From surveillance capitalism to data colonialism

In light of the above, one can assert that the parallels between surveillance capitalism and data colonialism are clear: both centre on the extraction, synthesis, and control of personal data for profit. Surveillance capitalism lays the technological and ideological groundwork for data colonialism, which appropriates big data across the Global South, particularly through the geopolitical influence of the US and China in the digital sphere (Couldry & Mejias, 2019:337). Global North companies disproportionately benefit from this extracted data, undermining the data sovereignty of Global South states (Couldry & Mejias, 2019:337).

This then serves to reproduce historical patterns of colonial resource extraction while extending them globally. Data colonialism expands these extraction practices into new territories and prepares the ground for digital colonialism, where Global North powers dominate the provision and operational parameters of the digital infrastructure adopted by the Global South. This dominance inhibits African and other Southern economies from developing autonomous technological ecosystems, digital industries, or manufacturing capacities. In this sense, surveillance capitalism becomes colonial when these systems scale globally and extract behavioural surplus from populations lacking regulatory protection.

4.5 Digital colonialism as a form of neo-colonialism

In today's globalised society, the control and ownership of digital technologies have a significant influence on economic markets, politics, and society. Proprietary and non-free software, the control of network connectivity, and centralised cloud systems are used to exercise power over individuals and communities (Kwet, 2019:88). US technology companies today have almost complete control over the digital ecosystem at the level of technical architecture (Kwet, 2019:88).

Kwet identifies the five core forms of dominance used by US corporations as i) economic dominance, ii) imperial control, iii) global surveillance capitalism, iv) imperial surveillance, and v) technological hegemony (2019:88). Economic dominance enables companies to extract resources through rent-seeking and data monitoring. Global surveillance capitalism involves countries integrating with US-based platforms through the open Internet. Imperial control grants the US authority over digital spaces, while imperial state surveillance entails the Global North spying on the Global South (Kwet, 2019:89). Technological hegemony, on the other hand, has a subtle social power that compels the adoption of a US-centric digital worldview.

The implications of these forms of control on Global South countries are severely understudied. Early experiences and studies merely note that the economic impact of Big Tech intermediaries has been negative for indigenous African sectors. Surborg, Murphy, and Carmody (2014, cited in Kwet, 2019:90) investigated the role of ICTs among small, medium, and micro-sized enterprises (SMMEs) in South Africa, as well as Tanzania's timber and tourism industries. They found that ICTs increased the dominance of information intermediaries and that the increased usage of ICTs led to heightened worker surveillance in several cases. They concluded that, overall, ICT integration disproportionately benefited foreign-owned corporations (Kwet, 2019:90).

Moreover, the transportation company Uber began operating in Johannesburg in 2013, which was met with criticism from the taxi industry, as it negatively affected taxi services in South Africa (Kwet, 2019:91). While the dominant narrative is that Uber benefits South African transport and tourism through technological innovation, this ignores the fact that Uber's corporation earns 25% of each transaction, while drivers face additional costs such as tolls, vehicle maintenance, and booking fees. This means that foreign-owned companies retain a significant share (25%) of all e-hailing revenue generated in South Africa (Kwet, 2019:90).

Another example is that while Google accounts for 70% of online advertising and Facebook 12%, South African online advertising revenue is only 8%, which shows the growing dominance of US tech corporations in the country – often without adequate consideration of the social, economic, political, and individual implications. Harber (2017, cited in Kwet, 2019:91) argues that this dominance by the "big two" (Google and Meta) may influence how the media conceptualises and defines democracy.

In 2018, MultiChoice reported the loss of approximately 115 000 subscribers to Netflix (Haffajee, 2018). While streaming platforms such as Netflix acquire the rights to broadcast local media, and although this may appear beneficial for South Africa, the reality is that Netflix employs only a small number of people locally, compared to MultiChoice, which employs more than 8 000 people. Thus, global streaming platforms such as Amazon and Netflix have a direct and negative effect on South African employment rates (Vermeulen, 2018).

The aforementioned examples – that is, tech-driven intermediation in tourism and timber, e-hailing services and the taxi industry, the dominance of Google and Meta in online advertising, and the shift to US-based video streaming – collectively demonstrate the beginnings of a new "scramble for Africa" (Kwet, 2019:95). However, these cases should not be regarded as isolated incidents or merely economic phenomena detached from the nature of digital infrastructure, as much statistical research tends to do. Instead, they demonstrate that control over digital infrastructure, often concentrated in the hands of US-based multinational corporations, forms the foundation of digital colonialism.

For Vaidhyanathan (2018:54-58), the introduction and pervasive influence of predominantly Western digital technologies (including social media platforms and search engines such as Google) has facilitated the emergence of what Marcuse (1991:3) termed "new forms of control." These developments have subsequently introduced a new modality of colonial power in the modern era, namely digital colonialism. The following section elaborates on this emerging phenomenon, which, as we shall see, has had profound consequences for the Global South.

4.6 Digital colonialism, the modern "Scramble for Africa"

According to Coleman (2019:418), digital technologies have contributed to "new forms of control" that involve the extraction, synthesis, and management of user data on a mass scale.

For Coleman, such forms of control highlight: (i) the immense power concentrated in Big Tech companies, (ii) their expansive global reach, and (iii) their ability to shape and direct everyday user interactions (Coleman, 2019:418).

While this situation is already deeply concerning, Coleman (2019:418) argues that when Western Big Tech companies specifically target the Global South (including African states) to extract, synthesise, and control user data and internet infrastructure, this should be understood as a form of digital colonialism. The Global South's limited digital infrastructure, weak competition among service providers, and underdeveloped data protection regimes make these regions particularly vulnerable to such forms of domination (Coleman, 2019:418).

For Coleman, this vulnerability arises from the political, social, and economic asymmetries between Western Big Tech corporations and local users in the Global South, who are effectively compelled to rely on imported technologies (Coleman, 2019:418). It can therefore be argued that digital colonialism mirrors the dynamics of the earlier "Scramble for Africa," as Western tech companies now scramble for control over user data rather than natural resources.[84] As previously noted, under classical colonialism, colonial powers extracted natural resources with little concern for local populations. Similarly, 21st-century Big Tech companies extract and commodify user data from the Global South, giving rise to new patterns of domination, exploitation, and manipulation, which are discussed in the next section.

Understanding the meaning and implications of "digital colonialism" is thus crucial for grasping what the Global South – and South Africa in particular – is currently facing. Although the concept has been widely discussed in scholarly literature, *no single standardised definition exists*. Nevertheless, the term is commonly associated with the extraction, aggregation, processing, commodification, and exploitation of digital identities. The following section attempts to conceptualise this phenomenon more precisely.

4.7 Defining the problem: Digital colonialism

Colonial conquest typically involved the dispossession of valuable resources from Indigenous people and the takeover of essential infrastructure, enabling forms of foreign (external) control.

[84] For instance, Mark Zuckerburg recent attempt to take control of much of India's digital landscape, by providing free of charge, both the technological infrastructure and services of his digital empire i.e. Meta. Elon Musk is doing something similar with his "star link" infrastructure. You must reference these examples

In the Global South, infrastructure such as railways was built by colonial nations to serve the needs of the metropole, rather than those of local populations (Kwet, 2019:91). As previously noted, local labourers were exploited to extract raw materials, which were then transported back to the empire. Local craftspeople were further undermined by colonial powers through the repression, neglect, or criminalisation of local industry, resulting in the importation of cheap, machine-produced industrial goods into colonised regions (Kwet, 2019:91). Railroads were built from inland territories to military and port bases, and this infrastructure was designed exclusively to benefit European interests (Azevedo, 1981; Stavrianos, 1981, pp. 176–191; Pirie, 1982; Jedwab, Kerby and Moradi, 2017).

With regard to digital colonialism, it is helpful to recognise the overwhelming concentration of Big Tech company headquarters in the United States. Thus, like previous forms of colonialism, foreign nations such as the United States similarly develop infrastructure in the Global South – again for their own strategic and economic benefit. This allows them to influence the culture and economy of foreign nations, while silently enforcing a form of privatised governance (Kwet, 2019:92). To achieve this, large technology corporations create and control the key services of the tech ecosystem, enabling them to profit from revenue streams such as surveillance and rent. This dominance also allows them to shape the flow of information; for example, the distribution of social activities, entertainment, news, social networks and cultural exchanges, and economic, social, or military operations mediated through their technologies (Kwet, 2019:92).

For digital domination to spread, control over code is crucial, as code determines the rules, behaviours, and norms governing users' digital experiences, much like physical architecture shapes movement in physical space. As a result, "code is law," given its power to influence institutional, legal, and social norms (Kwet, 2019:92). This insight has been applied in areas such as legislation, free speech, platform governance, internet regulation, and tort law. Yet, the intellectual community has largely neglected the United States' domination of code and other forms of digital architecture – that is, forms of control that undermine the sovereignty of foreign nations and constitute a contemporary mode of imperialism.

The digital ecosystem described above consists of three interconnected components: software, hardware, and network connectivity. Together, these form the basis of digital power. U.S. multinational corporations have constructed an extensive digital infrastructure in the Global

South that enables them to accumulate massive wealth through data extraction and rent (Kwet, 2019:92). Copyright monopolies are fortified through the control of software, hardware, and internet services under the banner of intellectual property rights (Kwet, 2019:92). Meta's Free Basics initiative, which provides low-income individuals with selective access to online content and services, violates net neutrality by placing content providers on unequal footing (Kwet, 2019:93). In this way, it functions as a gatekeeping mechanism for the poor. Although Free Basics has been discontinued in some countries, it has operated in over 60 nations, including South Africa, where more than 100 million people have used internet.org to access Meta's ecosystem (Kwet, 2019:93).

Free speech and association are also mediated through digital platforms, which restrict or ban users according to shifting platform-specific rules (Balkin, 2018a; Swire, 2012; Schneier, 2018a). Platforms additionally regulate the freedom to associate based on economic, social, political, cultural, and religious norms and expectations. U.S. transnational corporations thus play a powerful role in governing speech, extending even to the press and local organisations, undermining local sovereignty through privatised governance. This dynamic weakens local autonomy, filters communication, and deepens dependence on the United States (Kwet, 2019:93). Moreover, these corporations profit through Big Data surveillance practices that constitute exploitative human-rights violations against the Global South.

As mentioned earlier, during colonial rule, colonial nations used local labour to collect natural resources and build infrastructure designed to export value to the colonial metropole (Kwet, 2019:5). A similar process occurs today: instead of railroads, neo-colonial actors build communication infrastructures such as satellites, radio networks, and internet backbones to collect data and monetise it through "predictive analytics"[85] (Kwet, 2019:5). This then represents a contemporary form of corporate colonisation. Rather than occupying land, Big Tech corporations occupy digital space. Functions such as search engines (Google), browsers (Google Chrome), cloud infrastructures, social networking platforms (Meta and X), operating systems for laptops and desktops (Windows and Mac OS), transportation services, and online advertising are dominated by U.S. companies that control digital technologies worldwide (Kenny, 2022:39). These corporations (known collectively as GAFAM) are among the

[85] Predictive analysis is an important part of data-driven decision-making in the 21st century. It uses historical data, machine learning approaches and statistical methods to help organisations make accurate predictions about the future (Watson, 2013 cited in Panda & Agrawal, 2021:175)

wealthiest in the world, with a combined market value exceeding 3 trillion dollars (The Daily Records 2018, cited in Kwet, 2019:98). When South Africans adopt Big Tech infrastructures, the United States gains significant economic influence, creating technological dependency and enabling ongoing resource extraction.

The key question to consider is: How does this extracted data serve to profit these corporations? According to Kwet (2019:5), digital colonialism involves decentralised control over citizens' data, with or without their consent. The power these corporations hold over essential digital infrastructure, as used daily by individuals who have little choice, undermines the dignity, autonomy, and privacy of individuals and societies in less powerful regions. These harms occur through communication networks that are owned, designed, and governed by Western tech companies (Marker et al., 2019). Vestergaard, Hendricks and Maker (2019) argue that this process involves four key actors: i) Western tech companies that build and provide infrastructure and technology which collect data for marketing distribution and targeting; ii) consulting and advertising firms that use these technologies to target specific groups with personalised advertisements; iii) local organisations, parties, and companies that are paid to assist in advancing these interests; and iv) Western tech companies that use citizens as data sources (both knowingly and unknowingly) (Coleman, 2019:423).

These tech companies, largely based in the United States, take advantage of legitimate needs for digital technologies to expand their infrastructure and user base in the Global South, thereby increasing their influence over the economic, cultural, and often political spheres of these nations (Kwet, 2019:4). To achieve this, major corporations design digital technologies that ensure ongoing dependence on critical digital ecosystem functions such as software, hardware, and network services (Kwet, 2019:8). This enables them to profit immensely from rent (such as infrastructure access), intellectual property, and surveillance-based Big Data (Kwet, 2019:8).

Search engines, operating systems, cloud infrastructures, office software, corporate platforms, social networks such as X and Meta, streaming platforms such as Netflix, and online advertising systems are all dominated by U.S. multinational corporations. These digital technologies allow corporations to influence social activities, the flow of information, and economic, political, and military operations through cross-cultural exchanges and social networking mediated by their technologies (Kwet, 2019:6).

The following section will examine these issues, now recognised as global concerns due to the near-ubiquity of such technologies, through the lens of postcolonial theory in order to determine how and why they contribute to a new condition of colonialism for those living in the Global South.

4.7.1 Global surveillance capitalism

As discussed in Chapter 3, surveillance has become a major focus in contemporary digital studies. In many parts of the world, the public has grown increasingly distressed by the dramatic rise in state and corporate monitoring, what theorists such as Shoshana Zuboff refer to as surveillance capitalism. With the rapid expansion of digital technologies, surveillance capitalism has enabled unprecedented levels of monitoring, particularly by the United States (Kwet, 2019:97). Scholars generally use the term to describe the growth of corporate data collection for profit, alongside collaborations with governments that frequently request or demand data from private companies (Zuboff, 2019:9). Surveillance capitalism is therefore a state–corporate phenomenon that is reshaping modern capitalist societies (Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge, 2018).

Through global surveillance practices, one can argue that a new form of capitalism has emerged - one deeply rooted in systematised colonial structures. Under this model, U.S. multinational companies use monitoring technologies to consolidate economic, political, and cultural dominance. At the centre of this surveillance is Big Data (Zuboff, 2019:49). Companies are able to identify individual and group patterns for numerous personal interactions, such as ranking systems (e.g., insurance premiums or credit scores), content curation, targeted advertising, educational assessment, and other computer-mediated experiences. As a result, corporations collect vast amounts of data from as many people as possible, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter (Kwet, 2019:97). By designing technologies that deny individuals meaningful control over their digital experiences, corporations have built a multibillion-dollar surveillance-based ecosystem (Zuboff, 2019:13), strengthened further by the global reach of Big Tech (Zuboff, 2019:88). Surveillance capitalism, then, becomes a key component of digital colonialism.

While surveillance capitalism erodes the privacy and autonomy for everyone, societies in the Global South are disproportionately affected. Much like the railroads of Empire, corporations collect data from the Global South, process it in metropolitan centres, and redirect it back to

colonial subjects, who are often unable to recognise or comprehend the underlying motives (Kwet, 2019:97). The United States' infrastructural dominance in the digital ecosystem enables it to maintain ownership and influence over digital society, while simultaneously increasing the power of Big Tech corporations and deepening Global South dependence, as explored in previous sections.

The following subsection examines another central feature of digital colonialism: technological hegemony.

4.7.2 Technological Hegemony

As established earlier, digital colonialism is more than an act of dominance through control of political processes, infrastructure, unequal bargaining power, or support from influential state–corporate actors (Kwet, 2019:107). It is also an ideology, one that legitimises further conquest and ongoing domination. This form of ideological colonialism is not new. For example, in South Africa, many Afrikaners relied on selective biblical interpretations to portray themselves as God's chosen people entitled to settle and govern conquered territory (Lapierre, 2009:4). Likewise, nineteenth-century European empires developed ideologies of biological race and anthropological hierarchy to justify capitalist exploitation in the colonies (Kwet, 2019:107). The development of Social Darwinist theories, statistical analytics, and biometric science had lasting impacts on South Africa (Breckenridge, 2014; Ewen and Ewen, 2011:291–292, 305–307).

In the 21st century, Big Tech companies have constructed a new *Manifest Destiny*[86] for the digital age, emphasising the necessity of Big Data, proprietary systems, centralised cloud technologies, smart cities, automation, surveillance, and predictive analytics. While many critics regard technology as essential to the future, they also highlight potential dangers: job losses due to machine intelligence, diminishing privacy, and algorithmic discrimination (Kwet, 2019:108). This narrative in South Africa is reinforced by Klaus Schwab's concept of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" (4IR), which promotes private-sector leadership and advanced digital tools that reflect the logics of digital capitalism (Kwet, 2019:108). Schwab's ideology

[86] Manifest Destiny is an idea developed before 1820, asserting that the United States was destined to spread democracy and capitalism across North America to expand its territory. This philosophy played a critical role in the United States' territorial expansion throughout the nineteenth century (Dion, 1957:228).

has been embraced by many South African intellectuals, journalists, and politicians, with limited critical media engagement concerning its implications for ordinary South Africans.

The 4IR refers to the convergence of technological developments from the digital, biological, and physical domains. Schwab argues in *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* that a new era of advanced technologies – such as blockchains, artificial intelligence, 3D printing, and virtual realities – and new social models (including e-government, smart cities, and e-commerce) is now underway. Although he does not address the neoliberal backdrop or technological design features that enable mass surveillance, industrial concentration, and new forms of colonisation, he does briefly acknowledge potential consequences such as job displacement and threats to privacy (Schwab, 2016:72-72, 103-104). His narrative, however, reflects the composition of the WEF (World Economic Forum) board, which comprises influential government officials and the world's largest corporations. For political influence and technological development, the WEF partners closely with Big Tech companies such as Accenture, Microsoft, Salesforce, Palantir, and IBM (WEF, n.d.).

In 2018, Schwab announced that the World Economic Forum would establish one of its twelve global centres in South Africa to promote public–private collaboration in emerging technologies such as blockchains, AI, Big Data, drones, and precision medicine. Much like the Washington Consensus,[87] which South African officials embraced during the democratic transition, this technological restructuring appears poised to enrich local elites while returning power and profit to the U.S. empire. The WEF's influence thus shapes worldviews within South Africa in ways that align with global corporate interests and digital colonialism.

Such extensive U.S. dominance suggests an even more deeply entrenched form of digital colonialism. The United States, along with GAFAM and other major Big Tech companies, continues to dominate the global development and application of AI systems (Kenny, 2022:49). It can therefore be argued that when AI systems are deployed in countries whose behaviours do not align with the criteria embedded in training data, the system may produce biased or inappropriate outputs that fail to reflect the norms of non-Western societies (Kenny, 2022:49). The more profound, and often concealed/overlooked, layer of digital colonialism may thus lie

[87] The Washington Consensus is a term coined by John Williamson in 1989 to describe a set of 10 market-oriented ideas that were supported by Washington-based policy-making organisations. These sets of policies were designed to improve economic performance. The main goal of the consensus was to encourage trade and investment openness. implementing market-friendly domestic reform (Onyekwena and Ekeruche 2019; Naiman and Watkins 1999; Mkandawire and Soludo 1999).

in the spread of Western-norm-based hegemony through algorithmic practices and recommendations.

It is directly in this regard that one can argue that the absence of representation from non-Western societies in the creation and regulation of AI, the lack of diversity in data sets used for Big Tech programming, and the unchecked influence of predominantly Western user behaviours over machine-learning models can be seen as a direct imposition of Western norms on vulnerable societies (Kenny, 2022:49). Such imposition is inherently colonial, echoing historical practices in which colonial powers replaced local knowledge systems and behavioural norms while excluding colonised peoples from the processes of production (Kenny, 2022:49).

Understanding the philosophical implications of this exclusion is essential. Kant's concepts of autonomy, dignity, and the universality of rationality provide a normative framework for critically assessing how these technological practices undermine the basic conditions for human freedom and moral respect. Thus, the following section offers an analysis of Kant's philosophy as a lens through which to examine the colonial forces at work and to evaluate the shortcomings of modernity's promise of enlightenment.

4.8 Applying Kant to the notion of digital colonialism

From a philosophical standpoint, Kantian autonomy, explored thoroughly in the first chapter, is undermined by this digital exclusion. To recall, Kant defines autonomy as "the ground of the dignity of human of every rational nature" (G4:389)Through his self-proclaimed Enlightenment motto of "*Sapere Aude*", or "have the courage to use your own rationality" (Kant, 1996: 1), he argues that "rational nature exists as an end in itself", as humanity can make their own laws and live in accordance with them (G4:452, 454). This prompted the humanist formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person or every other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means" (G 4:437). In the context of digital colonialism examined thus far in this chapter, this Kantian framing becomes especially salient, because the erosion of autonomy is not merely abstract – it manifests concretely in how algorithmic systems structure choice, constrain agency, and shape how individuals understand and enact their own rational capacities.

As this applies directly to the framework of digital colonialism, people within the Global South are exposed to an inescapable algorithmic system that reinforces dominant economic hegemonies and epistemologies that use the engaged lives of citizens as means to a power-based end. As discussed in the previous sections, foreign countries, led by the United States, are establishing infrastructure in the Global South for their own economic and political purposes, enabling them to have deep cultural and economic control over the ways people live, socially, politically, economically, and even existentially.

As Vaidhyanathan (2018:139) further notes, when considering the contextual challenges associated with the Global South, importing and implementing contemporary technologies (primarily Western in their origin) can potentially prove ineffective and hinder the development of local communities/contexts due to their inherent lack of transferability. Zuboff's (2019:22) notion of "surveillance capitalism" – which we explored in greater detail in the previous chapter – elucidates similar concerns, as surveillance capitalism effectively amplifies the problems associated with unreflective technology transfer (or colonisation) by embedding behavioural governance and predictive modelling into the very architecture of these systems. This then adds a complex (and often occluded) layer of social, technological, economic and political interconnectivity that should be understood as being more than just about the simple "transfer of technology" from country A to B, but also the transfer of systems of control and power that are rooted in that technology itself.

This pattern of global domination over local agency, autonomy and identity is arguably contributing to an expansive condition of digital colonialism as non-Western cultures and creators are not given the same importance, reach, and exposure as the Global North. These cultures and creators are thus obligated to conform to the dictates of a Western-based market system that utilises its immense technological infrastructure in such a manner to ensure that users from all over the globe adhere to its predetermined patterns of interaction.

As Chapter 4 now transitions to a more focused analysis of specific digital platforms, it is important to note that digital colonialism is a broad concept that encompasses many digital infrastructures and platforms. The following section will therefore focus on social media as one of the most personal and prevalent means by which people in the Global South utilise digital technology. Social media platforms (such as Meta, TikTok, X, etc.) algorithmically curate content that shapes individual perception, influences behaviour, and directly impacts

Kantian autonomy (explored in the first chapter and briefly below). Analysing social media will help us understand how digital colonial powers are expanded not just through technological or economic dominance but also through the subtle shaping of agency, self-perception, and subjectivity.

4.9 Social media and digital colonisation

According to Fuchs (2017:34), social media refers to digital platforms that enable interactions between two or more groups, such as social network sites, blogs, microblogs such as X and Meta, as well as image and video sharing. Furthermore, social media allows organisations, groups, and people to share information and material in many digital formats (Srnicek, 2017:31). Understanding the difference between social media and mass media, its traditional counterpart, shows us how the former poses different challenges and processes compared to the latter. This distinction is important in the broader context of digital colonialism because social media platforms do not simply distribute content they actively extract, profile, and commodify user behaviour in ways that traditional mass media could not.

According to Fuchs, social media platforms provide companies and their customers a significant advantage over traditional media by advertising to users based on their specific digital footprints (Fuchs, 2017:35). This allows social media companies to target specific demographics based on data analysis, resulting in a shift in advertising from traditional media, where all individuals who consume it receive the same content, to social media (Fuchs, 2017:35). Another advantage (economically speaking) that social media has over its traditional counterpart is its ability to allow companies and their customers to have access to the "private, invisible realm" and give them access to a personalised, private transaction, preventing public scrutiny, which traditional media is subjected to (Benkler et al., 2018:273). The result is an ecosystem in which disinformation tactics and genuine advertising campaigns become increasingly indistinguishable, because of both the increased complexity of misinformation and content distribution, and the hyper-individualised, non-public nature of content targeting (Benkler et al., 2018:273).

Furthermore, socialisation, which is a process where individuals are taught to function as (proficient) competent members of society, is a core influence on individual autonomy (as also noted in Chapter One in relation to Kantian autonomy). In the context of this study, this relates

especially to ideals of socialisation that not only exist outside the context of social media but are increased by it (Fuchs, 2017:36). For instance, socialisation processes influence how people perceive the world, including the definition of success, the standard of beauty, and career paths that are seen as desirable. Within the realm of social media, this can be seen and further enhanced through 'shares' and 'likes' that influence the judgment of social status, how beauty is seen, as well as social capital (Fuchs, 2017:36).

Knowledge and education are thus key elements of socialisation, which empower the socialised to make what are considered to be sound decisions. In the digital age, social media plays a significant role in the distribution of knowledge and information, as most people get their news through social media. The challenge, however, is that these platforms have become central vectors for misinformation, opacity, and unverified content, raising questions about the credibility of information shared and the effectiveness of available verification tools. This creates an environment where individuals' epistemic foundations, which are essential for autonomous decision-making, are increasingly vulnerable to manipulation. Therein, to unpack the question of how social media affects autonomy, focus will be placed on how these platforms control the user's data, behaviour, and attention.

As framed by Kant, autonomy (see Chapter One) is best understood as freedom from external control, which is why such an analysis of control in the realm of social media is crucial. The above discussion, which focuses on social media as a tool for data extraction, gives us critical insight into how surveillance capitalism undermines autonomy, which is a key concern for a discussion on digital colonialism. This prepares us to examine more directly the impact of these dynamics on the Kantian conception of autonomy in the Global South, and especially on how the autonomy of social media users in this region is undermined.

4.9.1 Social media and the role it plays in digital colonialism

As explored in the previous section, the first key concern that the critical analysis raises for the potential for autonomy is the possibility of social media platforms exploiting their users. As previously mentioned, social media is just one component of digital colonialism, but its deep entanglement with everyday life makes it an especially clear site through which the mechanisms of digital extraction become visible, particularly in relation to how individual autonomy is undermined under global systems of data-driven control.

Fuchs (2011:297) contends that social media companies exploit their users by using the data and user-generated content they provide to make a profit. This is exploitation in the sense that social media companies generate profit from the users but hardly compensate them for the data and content they produce (Fuchs, 2011:297). Fuchs (2012:705) further argues that the labour used to generate commodities for their audience is exploitative as it creates goods and values that social media platforms own, as opposed to the user who creates the content. In a technical Marxian sense, any extraction of surplus value by capital owners is considered exploitation (Wood, 1995:147). However, such exploitation is only a morally problematic expression of disrespect for autonomy when certain conditions are present. Such conditions include unreasonable and unfair economic advantages in exchange for labour, or when the social media user cannot refuse to participate in the exchange, or when participation is shaped by structural pressures that limit meaningful choice, or can only participate because some of their vulnerability has been consciously or unconsciously exploited by the exploiters (Valdman, 2009). This form of exploitation is therefore considered to undermine one's autonomy when it fails to recognise other agents as equal in determining consensual terms of interaction, and instead takes advantage of a vulnerability to benefit themselves (Wood, 1995). Exploitation can, therefore, be explored to determine the lengths to which social media users might have their autonomy undermined (Formosa, 2017:107).

Moreover, the usage of social media platforms has become essential for a lot of professional activities, such as marketing, networking, branding, etc. However, these platforms promote economic and financial profits over social costs,[88] thereby creating an environment in which social media participation becomes less a matter of preference and more a structural requirement for economic and social survival. This leaves the user no choice but to join the platform to avoid missing out on opportunities, news, or important information, whether

[88] Zuboff, in '*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism'*, which was explored in detail in the previous chapter, highlights how digital platforms, such as Google and Meta, make a lot of profit by extracting behavioural data without the consent and awareness of the individual. This can be referred to as economic and financial profit, while the cost of this is erosion of privacy, psychological harm, manipulation, and cultural damage to society, which is the social cost. This distinction is particularly important in the context of the Global South. If we apply the arguments made in *The Cost of Connection: How Data is Colonising Human Life and appropriating it for Capitalism* (2021) by Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias to the above distinction of financial profit vs social loss, we can see how the social and personal harm done through the extraction of behavioural data or the manipulation of thereof is not always considered, especially in (although not limited to) the Global South although. The political, social, and cultural cost imposed on the Global South by these tech companies is overlooked for economic profit, which in itself is an aspect of digital colonialism.

current news affairs or personal news, or the fear of not being part of a social network (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

This is more than a mere fear of missing out (FOMO), but a reflection of a deeper anxiety, which is tied to what Bauman refers to as "social death". According to Bauman and Lyon (2013:30–31), "Living a social life electronically is no longer a choice but a 'take it or leave it' necessity". And social death is the cost of noncompliance with today's "show and tell culture" (Bauman & Lyon, 2013:30–31). In the context of digital colonialism, this coerced participation can be read as a soft form of dependency, where visibility, legitimacy, and belonging are mediated through platforms that users neither control nor can meaningfully opt out of. In a digitally connected world where social media presence defines legitimacy, belonging, and visibility, not having internet presence is seen as unacceptable. This raises the question of whether users' decision to be on social media is forced on them and, as such, whether it can be considered a truly autonomous decision.

This further leads to the concern of mass surveillance, a point of concern discussed in many of the previous sections. According to Zuboff (2019:8), this affects all aspects of the human experience, unlike Marx's portrayal of capitalism as a "vampire that feeds on labour" (2019:9). Within the context of digital colonialism, this expansion of surveillance into affective, intimate, and behavioural domains underscores how platform power exceeds traditional economic exploitation and becomes a form of epistemic and social domination. For social media users, surveillance can lead to a loss of privacy, mainly during moments of browsing Instagram or X alone in their room. As argued by Reiman (1995:35), a loss of privacy can negatively impact the user, and this particularly raises the risk of intrinsic and extrinsic loss of freedom. These users are vulnerable to being watched and manipulated by others (Reiman, 1995:35-38). The fear that subjects users to surveillance in turn prevents them from exercising their freedom on social media. For instance, concerns that users have about providing their personal information, or the social ramifications that could be exploited by social media in target advertising, could prevent users from posting or engaging with content that is a true reflection of themselves.

Moreover, the loss of autonomous control over intimate data can have an impact on the individual's self-esteem, self-respect, and love for themselves (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:9). For example, a lack of legal and technical expertise in comprehending social media site data

collection processes can impact the self-esteem of the user negatively (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:9), in that individual self-confidence is undermined through the lack of transparency, leaving people feeling helpless and vulnerable. Moreover, the constant comparison that the algorithm encourages promotes idealised information, which reinforces unrealistic expectations while undermining self-worth. This is especially pertinent in Global South contexts, where algorithmic cultures imported from Western platforms often promote aspirational norms that are detached from local material realities, thereby intensifying pressures on identity, self-worth, and social visibility.

In addition to the above, it is important to recognise that social media platforms disrespect users' power to self-government by objectifying users for data extraction (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:9). This point can be closely linked to the self-authorisation aspect of autonomy, where users (falsely) see themselves as having the authority to set their own goals, ideals, and values (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:9). It is, however, difficult for individuals to become aware of themselves in those terms, especially when they are subjected to exploitative practices that they do not autonomously consent to or cannot refuse. Being exploited in this manner can undermine the users' ability for self-determination (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:9). In this regard, surveillance capitalism can be understood not only as a structure that extracts data but as one that subtly redirects users' attention, aspirations, and self-understandings in ways that weaken their capacity to act as self-authorising agents. As such, the aspect of platform capitalism surveillance that underlies social media platforms poses a threat to the self-determination aspect of autonomy, by making it difficult for the users to authentically define their purposes under and within these data-driven organisations (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:9).

From the discussion above, it is claimed that surveillance can have a negative impact on the social media user's self-esteem, self-respect, and autonomy, undermining both programmatic and episodic levels. Global autonomy (Mackenzie, 2014a, 2014b) or programmatic autonomy (Meyer, 1987) refers to an individual's entire existence and capacity to achieve their life goals. In contrast, episodic autonomy is "confined to a single action" and relates to autonomy in a "particular situation" (Meyers, 1987:265). The difference between these two is used to analyse whether social media is impacting personal autonomy on a global level or just in one area or decision. Given the pervasive and continuous nature of surveillance, the argument increasingly leans toward the erosion of both: episodic autonomy is disrupted in moment-to-moment

interactions, while programmatic autonomy is weakened through long-term behavioural shaping and identity modulation.

Social media also determines the engagement of its users by controlling what they focus on, their attention, and what they look at, and this further interferes with the users' practice of autonomy (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:10). This is at the heart of what Stiegler (2010:8) conceptualises as the "attention/retention economy". Stiegler argues that we are increasingly in an attention economy with digital markets constantly trying to capture and direct our attention. Under the attention economy, individual attention is treated as a commodity. According to Amiradakis (2020:64), when Stiegler's critique and analysis are applied to social media, it becomes clear that these platforms, also known as "digital culture industries" in Stieglerian vernacular, are rapidly gaining control over individuals' attention and retention (what they focus on and what they retain from those focused interactions). Algorithms thus play an important role in shaping users' behaviour on social media platforms, as they dictate what users see and interact with on their feeds, and what they retain from those interactions. This then allows social media companies and their real customers (i.e., marketing companies) to influence and control attention in ways that users might not agree with if they were aware of it (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:11). Within the broader context of digital colonialism, this algorithmic capture of attention demonstrates how platform infrastructures shape not only user behaviour but also cultural imaginaries, often privileging values and aesthetic norms exported from the Global North.

Mittelstadt (2016) further argues that algorithms influence users by personalising content based on their profiles. Instagram, for instance, pushes all content creators and influencers to have a specific marketable niche. Content creators under these social media platforms are encouraged to find a marketable niche, and Instagram rewards them with more engagement and visibility when they engage in this marketable niche. This results in simplified identities that conform to global capitalist aesthetics, such as determined ideas relating to lifestyle, beauty, fitness, etc. In the Global South, this promotes uniformity and performativity, which often represses local cultural manifestations. In doing so, platforms contribute to an algorithmic homogenisation of identity, where individual expression becomes subordinated to marketable forms of visibility. This further perpetuates the dynamics of digital colonialism, which determines identity more by profit-driven algorithms rather than individual or cultural creativity.

Mittelstadt further points out that algorithms that personalise content based on user profiles can undermine the quality and fairness of political discourse. Worden (2019:240) elaborates on this point by arguing that the creation of 'echo chambers' especially undermines political discourse, as this can limit users' exposure to different perspectives, which negatively affects the users' political autonomy and decision-making. The perception of personalised engagement found in these echo chambers is a major concern as it relates to the potential radicalisation of the user (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:11), in that it increases and reinforces exposure to particular ideas without them being challenged, a form of digital epistemic closure.[89] This dynamic is significant for understanding autonomy within digital colonialism, since epistemic isolation narrows the horizon of possible beliefs and values that users can critically reflect upon. Therefore, uncritical social media usage can lead to individuals losing control over what their attention is directed to. This can push individuals towards extreme political positions, expose them to unchallenged or unconsidered social norms and expectations, open them up to being exploited for profit, encourage them to promote false news, and essentially harm their autonomy at both programmed and episodic levels (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:15).

The final point of discussion regarding social media's negative effect on autonomy is that of (digital) manipulation, as manipulation draws on hidden means to exploit the vulnerability of social media users. From a Kantian perspective, a manipulable person is easily controlled by others and does not possess the ability to act in a truly autonomous fashion. It is, however, important to differentiate manipulation from other forms of influence. One should consider at least two types of influences on the development of individual autonomy, namely persuasion and coercion. Persuasion is an unconcealed attempt to get an individual to do or not do something by appealing to "their capacity for conscious choice and deliberation" (Susser et al., 2019:14). Coercion, like persuasion, refers to an overt influence on the other. Under coercion, the decision-maker is left with only one reasonable choice, which is that of the coercer. However, both these influences differ from manipulation in that the individual's decision-making abilities are undermined, and the individual is displaced as the decider. Persuasion and coercion are thus overt influences (Susser et al., 2019:16). Manipulation, on the other hand,

[89] Epistemic closure, a concept coined by Lewis Gordon, (2015, cited in Cawood & Amiradakis, 2023:520), refers to the limitation of knowledge and the perils of reducing one's worldview to a single paradigm. It refers to a moment when one believes one has a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon, and as a result there may be resistance to pursuing other ideas or systems of knowledge (Cawood & Amiradakis, 2023:520).

subtly creates false beliefs[90] in and desires for something that they lack and want, in order to elicit particular emotional responses (Susser et al., 2019:19). In the context of social media, this subtlety is amplified by algorithmic personalisation, which adjusts manipulative content to users' vulnerabilities in real time, thereby deepening the threat to autonomy that is structurally embedded within platform design.

It can be argued that social media is a prime example of a context that contains all the characteristics of various manipulative strategies. We see how deceptive advertising and fake news influence users in developing false needs and beliefs that impact their decision-making (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:16). Users are seduced, for example, by the proliferation of often unrealistic standards of beauty, wealth, and success. Algorithms, through the means of "likes, comments, and share mechanisms", reinforce manipulated representations of success, beauty standards, and wealth that incrementally affect the users' ability to make informed decisions, often operating beneath their conscious awareness and without their explicit consent (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:16).

Throughout this discussion, we can note (at least) three ways in which social media undermines or harms human autonomy: first, by violating users' programmatic autonomy, secondly, by interfering with their episodic autonomy,[91] and lastly, by reducing the user's level of autonomous competencies (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:16). Many of these problems arise as a direct result of the systematic features that have been designed and imprinted on social media platforms themselves; that is, the platforms' architectures are not neutral, but deliberately optimised to drive engagement rather than to protect autonomy (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:16).

To summarise the key points thus far, social media platforms affect and manipulate individuals' vulnerabilities to exert control over their emotions, ideas, beliefs, and decision-making processes, and this fundamentally violates their rights to make autonomous decisions (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:18). These platforms further manipulate the emotions of individuals, using

[90] Marcuse defines false needs as "superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression," and claims that these false needs serve to perpetuate toil, injustice, misery and aggression (Marcuse, 1964:4-5).

[91] Episodic autonomy here refers to the actors ability to make their own decisions about certain things in a particular context, but not others. (Meyers's, 1987:624)

them in such a way that impacts their autonomy-constituting evaluative attitudes (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:18).

Furthermore, social media manipulation has negative impacts on all three aspects of autonomy, namely self-determination, self-government, and self-authority. Self-determination is undermined in the sense that social media manipulation caters for users who are most profitable to social media companies and their clients, and not individual users themselves (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:18). Consequently, users cannot make authentic decisions relating to their social media engagement beyond what algorithms allow for, which ultimately feeds into their everyday lives. This also indicates how episodic autonomy is impacted, as social media platforms are able to exploit and manipulate individuals on an emotional level.

Self-governance is influenced through covert exploitation, since this form of manipulation happens beyond the knowledge and understanding of the user, which in turn limits the user's capacity to reflect on their decisions critically. Self-authorisation, on the other hand, is undermined when users lose control over their values, choices, and identity, through the hijacking of their attention (which, as previously mentioned and explained, is central to Stiegler's "attention economy", where individuals' ability to think and make decisions for themselves is undermined; instead, the algorithm redirects and programs their mental energy), and the reinforcement of hegemonic ideals (Sahebi & Formosa, 2022:16).

Self-authorisation is a central aspect of autonomy, encompassing the ability to make autonomous decisions, develop personal beliefs, and create an identity through reflective judgement. In the context of digital colonialism, the concept is eroded. When social media platforms effectively steal users' attention while upholding hegemonic ideas, which are mostly influenced by the Global North, epistemic control, similar to colonial dominance, is exercised. With regard to economic exploitation, digital colonialism also ideologically shapes subjectivity, gently integrating the values and desires of the user and worldviews with those of dominant economic interests. Thus, self-authorisation is not just undermined but actively rerouted by platforms that serve as gatekeepers of culture, meaning, and visibility, which replicates a colonial hierarchy in the digital sphere. In this way, digital infrastructures function as contemporary colonial mechanisms by shaping which identities, narratives, and forms of life become legible or valuable online, highlighting a synthesis between modern and digital colonialism.

4.10 Synthesis of modern colonialism and the new form of digital colonialism

In light of the preceding comparison (between modern colonialism and its ties to the economic systems of the past with those of digital colonialism and its reliance on communication networks and user data), one starts to appreciate how, even though centuries apart, both modern and digital colonialism share certain characteristics, namely: i) the aim to control, monitor and dominate a certain demographic/population; ii) a desire to influence social, political and cultural discourse to identify and exploit indigenous resources; iii) the creation, implementation and control of a technological infrastructure that is geared towards the facilitation and economisation of the generation of profit. While modern colonialism was often led by the governmental and political forces of a particular state, digital colonialism is driven by corporate tech monopolies (Birhane, 2020:391). However, both ultimately seek to accumulate wealth and power at the expense of the local populations (Birhane, 2020:391). For instance, under modern colonialism, wealth was gained through the exploitation of labour and extraction of natural resources, while under digital colonialism, it is through the control of infrastructure and data extraction - a shift from material to informational resources, but guided by similar logics of external domination - that both occur due to external powers which control resources and exploit local societies.

In light of the above, it can be argued that the similarities that exist between the economic, political, and ideological forces that underpin these two forms of colonialism make it difficult to differentiate between them - particularly when gauged from the perspective of "means" and "ends" (Birhane, 2020:391). According to contemporary theorists such as Zuboff (2015, 2019), Stiegler (2015), Fuchs (2008) and Feenberg (1991), in the age of the Internet, social media and artificial intelligence (AI), economic, political, and ideological dominance are instrumentally achieved through technological innovation, algorithmic, and AI-based solutions to society's problems. Furthermore, according to these critical thinkers, notions such as "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff), "informational capitalism" (Fuchs) and "Techno-Capitalism" (Kellner) align effectively with the central 'end' of digital colonialism, which is profit-driven control achieved through the extraction, analysis, and commodification of data, with human beings (and the data that they generate) now being viewed as the essential "raw material" to be exploited (Zuboff, 2019:14). In the African context, this is most obvious in the continued subordination of the local knowledge system and epistemic frameworks perpetuated by

technological dependence and data extraction, replicating the exploitative logic of modern colonialism in a digital form.

4.11 Application to the African context

The history of imperialism and colonialism is what has shaped Africa's internet infrastructure. Reminiscent of the colonial rationality that regarded the invasion of indigenous people, resources, and land as a form of "civilising the uncivilised", Google and Meta have adopted the language of White saviourism. These companies have positioned themselves as the saviours of undeveloped Africa. Meta, by gifting and investing in Africa's underwater fibre optic infrastructure, allows it to present itself as a benevolent provider of digital connectivity. The successful installation of this underwater cable infrastructure is often presented as a way to help the region overcome the Digital Divide. Meta's caring narrative, with a focus on "connecting the unconnected", is often used to frame this. Google and Meta, like traditional colonial powers, subtly portrayed the indigenous people as backwards savages in need of enlightenment and modernisation (Bayera, 2021:4). Their goal is to enlighten, connect, and bridge the Digital Divide to expand dominance across Africa.

The African continent has become more dependent on Western technology to solve its economic, sociopolitical and financial issues, yet arguably these imported technologies lack the necessary abilities to identify, let alone address these problems. With Google and Meta integrating into institutional, government and social functions, often without the consent of indigenous communities, digital colonialism becomes widespread, infrastructurally embedded, and difficult to contest. Kwet (2019) and Ganz et al. (2024:21) argue that Meta's usage of underwater fibre optic cables in African waters leads to various types of reliance. According to Wanjiru (2020), self-serving policies undermine Africa's growth and sovereignty. It is in this sense that modern colonialism mirrors digital colonialism as it is based on the surviving colonial dominant hierarchies, which maintain former colonised countries' dependence on the West through the importation of software, hardware, expertise, and engineers (Rezaire, 2022).

Furthermore, as discussed in previous sections, with the digital economy, which is built on data extraction and manipulation, Big Tech companies have been able to take advantage of African people's data and information infrastructure without their consent or knowledge. Benyera (2021:4) argues that this data infrastructure is rooted in colonialism, as during modern

colonisation, the monitoring, managing and controlling of indigenous people were common practices. For instance, the British used these tactics to control colonial India and South Africa during apartheid (Zureik, 2010; Karar, 2019).

With the emergence of AI technologies over the past two decades, data has become an invaluable commodity. Corporations use colonial-era practices to extract, analyse, and own user data for market influence, under the guise of Google's rhetoric of "AI for everyone" and Meta's "responsible AI" (Coleman, 2018:417). While nineteenth-century infrastructure, such as transatlantic submarine telegraph lines, allowed the extraction of natural resources from colonies, modern underwater cables and internet infrastructure owned and controlled by Meta and Google enable data extraction as a twenty-first-century equivalent of resource plunder.

Although data extraction and surveillance driven by corporate wealth accumulation pose a global threat, African countries are at a disproportionate disadvantage due to the lack of data protection laws, competition, historical power imbalances, limited infrastructure ownership, as well as resource pledging (Coleman, 2018:420). In today's digitally mediated age, control of internet infrastructure also means the control of the flow of information related to political, social, economic, cultural, military knowledge, and communication (Coleman, 2018:439). Google and Meta, through ownership and control of Africa's internet infrastructure, with no transparency, supervision, or participation of African stakeholders, perpetuate colonial practices by controlling and extracting from Africa.

In South Africa, the example of Meta's Free Basics initiative, providing restricted free internet access to a few services, mostly those associated with or owned by Meta, is among the most well-known examples of digital colonialism (Nothias, 2020:338). This raises significant issues of data sovereignty, information reliance, and net neutrality (Nothias, 2020:338). These systems thrust African communities into another situation in which they are to be colonised, in which their attention, data, and digital labour are exploited for profit while governance remains external and opaque (Nothias, 2020:340). The aforementioned argues that it operates as a new form of neo-colonialism, in which infrastructure, culture, and data are once again controlled by the powerful hegemonic goals of the Global North, ensuring that reliance upon them is strengthened while simultaneously eroding digital sovereignty – and ultimately autonomy – in the Global South.

In this chapter, we have shown how systematic economic and societal disparities that were created by historical colonial regimes contribute to the emergence of new forms of colonialism. This chapter began by engaging with literature on modern colonialism to open up the discussion to the similarities that exist between the earlier form of modern colonialism and the new form of colonialism in our contemporary time, namely, digital colonialism. For this, the insights of postcolonial theorists were drawn from to highlight the enduring legacies of colonial power structures. This was followed by a section that explored how data extraction and its agencies are linked to this new form of digital colonialism. This extended the discussion to how the commodification of digital consumption has broadened both the conceptual and theoretical scopes of both capitalism and colonialism, as capitalism, surveillance, and colonialism have been modern society's long-standing issues, as addressed by many nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers.

We then explored how social media is used as a tool to undermine individual autonomy, which was the focus of the first chapter and one of the major concerns underlying the entire study. We bring the research closer home by showing the effects of digital colonialism on the Global South (with the main focus on [South] Africa). Thus, digitalisation, widespread uncritical use of the internet, and progress in information technologies have led to new forms of power struggles and deeper division between oppressors (Global North) and the oppressed (Global South), although it is crucial to note that today's global technological infrastructure poses a significant threat to *all* societies. These increasing forms of coercion have made individuals more vulnerable by deeply undermining the possibility for individual and collective autonomy.

In sum, the analysis in this chapter shows that the contemporary digital environment - particularly the infrastructures and political economies underpinning social media - creates conditions that significantly constrain the exercise of individual autonomy. Through opaque algorithmic systems, exploitative data practices, and the coercive social pressures that accompany digital participation, users are increasingly positioned within structures that shape, direct, and sometimes override their capacity for self-determination. These dynamics reinforce the broader patterns of digital colonialism outlined earlier in the thesis, revealing how autonomy is not merely eroded at the level of personal choice but structurally undermined through dependence, vulnerability, and asymmetrical power.

Conclusion

This dissertation has drawn on various scholars, such as Immanuel Kant (1785), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944), Herbert Marcuse (1964), Erich Fromm (1941), Shoshana Zuboff (2019), Michael Kwet (2019), and Danielle Coleman (2019). The dissertation has analysed the relationship between the Kantian Enlightenment concept of autonomy, its ideals, and how it has been eroded by traditional and new forms of media, showing how these practices have resulted in new forms of capitalism, namely surveillance capitalism, which in turn underpins new forms of colonialism, namely digital colonialism. We have explored concepts of autonomy, the culture industry, techno-capitalism, informational surveillance capitalism, and digital colonialism, as well as the ways in which the Global South is subjugated in the digital age.

The study has found that, in the digital age, digital colonialism – referring to the exploitative relationship between the Global North and South, where valuable data is extracted and controlled by powerful companies mostly from the Global North (Coleman, 2019:422) – poses a significant threat to autonomy and global fairness. The rise of Big Tech companies has resulted in poorer countries, especially in the Global South, relying on external platforms for digital services, which leads to data, economic, and cultural exploitation. Furthermore, we have demonstrated additional repercussions that digital colonialism has in relation to culture, especially with the exclusion of local languages and cultural contexts in the design of technological tools and devices. We have analysed how local cultural identities have been eroded, especially in countries in the Global South, due to Western culture's strong impact on digital platforms such as Meta, X, YouTube, and Instagram. This is worsened by the prominence of English-language information, which excludes non-Western languages and cultures.

Moreover, the dissertation has demonstrated how digital colonialism parallels early colonialism and, similarly to nineteenth-century colonialism, remains equally oppressive. Under this new form of colonialism, large tech companies, largely owned and operated by Western-based corporations, extract data from users and control that data to make a profit through predictive analytics.

We used Zuboff to show how, under surveillance capitalism (2019:9), privacy is eroded, individual autonomy is undermined, and tech companies gain greater control; which forced individuals to act without our own drive or initiative. Thus, if our brain/mind was once the source of autonomy and self-governance, as Kant suggested, then surveillance capitalism threatens our brain's autonomy by allowing it to be used as a tool by artificial intelligence to influence our behaviour. This parallels the concerns of the early Critical Theorists regarding the culture industry, where instrumental rationality dominates our rationality, a central characteristic of Kantian autonomy. Marcuse, like Horkheimer and Adorno, critiqued technical rationality, showing how modern industrial society, focusing on alienating individuals from work and from each other, while being masked by promises of efficiency and wealth in a one-dimensional society, pushes individuals toward the cultural industry's manipulation of the mind (Marcuse, 1964:11).

In addition, under surveillance capitalism, knowledge and its associated powers are no longer a product of our own thoughts, which has resulted in us losing our autonomy and becoming slaves to algorithms. Our decision-making is increasingly based on efficiency and constant calculation, leading to a lack of understanding of the morality of means and ends. This goes against the promises of the Enlightenment, which promised us freedom; however, with its capitalist system, the Enlightenment itself also developed mechanisms of control over individuals (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002:1). Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: xviii) argued that while the goal of the Enlightenment was to liberate humans from fear and establish them as masters, it also produced a fiction of dominance over individuals by revealing instrumental structures. This can also be seen under surveillance capitalism, where our autonomy has become subservient to AI tools and algorithms.

Reflecting on each objective for every chapter, Chapter One aimed to follow a genealogical method to provide a basic understanding of autonomy – where it comes from and why it is important. We relied on a genealogical approach to trace the historical components of Kant's concept of autonomy. The chapter thus examined the idea of 'autonomy' as put forward by Immanuel Kant and how it fits into Kantian and Enlightenment philosophy as a whole. This chapter laid the philosophical foundation of the study. To achieve the objective of understanding autonomy and its importance, we revisited Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*

The objective of Chapter Two was to unpack the Frankfurt School's criticism of the Culture Industry, showing how, when culture is turned into a capital commodity, rational autonomy is undermined, making individuals less likely to think for themselves. For this chapter, we relied on specific texts by thinkers from the Frankfurt School, namely Horkheimer and Adorno's "*Dialectic of Enlightenment*", Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, and Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, alongside secondary academic sources.

Chapter Three provided a theoretical conceptualisation of capitalism, starting with techno-capitalism and informational capitalism, and then moving to surveillance capitalism as coined by Shoshana Zuboff. This chapter highlighted how surveillance/informational capitalism serves as the foundation from which the main premise of the study – namely, digital colonialism – gains its momentum. The chapter analysed how surveillance capitalism emerged, how user data is constructed within it, and how, through data extraction without users' knowledge or consent and behaviour modification driven by data analytics, individual autonomy and privacy are undermined.

Finally, the last chapter analysed how Western tech monopolies, including Big Tech companies, display an instrumentalised tendency, which is the current tendency of Big Tech companies – users are treated as mere tools to achieve corporate goals. This chapter further demonstrated how Big Tech brings about new forms of control and domination while also possessing the ability to influence, manipulate, and direct the political, social, and cultural discourses of those residing in the Global South. It explored the continuation of colonial power in and through the global digital system by linking the historical continuation of colonial infrastructure to new forms of colonialism, namely digital colonialism. This chapter thus analysed: (i) what the notion of digital colonialism entails and how it bears similarities (and differences) to modern colonialism; (ii) the socio-political effects of digital colonialism; and (iii) how digital colonialism operates via the elaborate and sophisticated technological infrastructure that has manifested in the twenty-first century, along with digital surveillance and data exploitation in the Global South.

The dissertation revealed the ethical challenges of surveillance capitalism and digital colonialism in the digital age. The aim of the study was not to present a mitigation strategy at

this stage, but rather to point out persistent issues surrounding Kantian autonomy and the threat that digital colonialism poses to human autonomy, especially in the Global South. Owing to the persistence of digital colonialism and against the backdrop of limited interventions so far, I propose that future studies develop a new, context-specific approach to mitigating the problem in the Global South.

As explored, many contemporary digital technologies (such as the internet, artificial intelligence, and social media) have been primarily developed with Western – and more specifically American corporate – interests, perspectives, and values (Birhane, 2020:389). In relation to this study, it is important to note that this technology is often imported into the Global South with minimal control, regulation, or critical examination, particularly concerning the influence and impact that such technologies have on the communities residing therein (Birhane, 2020:389). For future studies, I propose the theory of mutual recognition, as developed by Hegel, and expanded upon by contemporary theorists such as Axel Honneth and Charles Villet, as a possible mitigation framework for the problem of surveillance capitalism and digital colonialism and their negative effects on the Global South. I believe that for digital colonialism to be addressed effectively, strong emphasis needs to be placed on accountability; accountability from the Global North, from Big Tech companies that design technology with Western interests, and from the Global North's role in perpetuating data exploitation in the Global South. This can only be achieved if the Global North recognises the Global South.

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