

Public relations and popular culture as mechanisms of system reproducers: An evaluation of John Fiske

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ABSTRACT

Capitalism shapes economic production and cultural production, restructuring popular culture to fit market conditions. Cultural products become objects of mass consumption through public relations and advertising strategies. According to John Fiske, this commercialization extends beyond economics into ideology, as public relations playing a crucial role in shaping values and consumption habits. This study critically examines how the capitalist system directs and reproduces popular culture, drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry approach and Gramsci's theory of hegemony. It argues that public relations, beyond being marketing tools, serve as mechanisms for disseminating ideological messages and maintaining the capitalist system. Using John Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture* as a foundation, this study explores how popular culture is commercialized and the role of public relations in this process. This study investigates the interaction between popular culture and public relations within the capitalist system, analyzing how public relations facilitate commercialization. Employing a qualitative methodology, it utilized content analysis to examine academic studies on the subject from a historical and comparative perspective. The findings revealed that public relations were not just marketing strategies but tools that shape social norms and influence consumption habits, functioning as part of broader social engineering processes. This study offers a theoretical and critical framework for understanding the deep connection between public relations and popular culture.

KEYWORDS

Culture, popular culture, public relations, social engineering, communication.

Sistemin yeniden üreticileri olarak halkla ilişkiler ve popüler kültür: John Fiske üzerine bir değerlendirme

ÖZET

Kapitalizm yalnızca ekonomik üretimi değil, aynı zamanda kültürel üretimi de şekillendirerek popüler kültürü piyasa koşullarına uygun hale getirmektedir. Kültürel ürünlerin kitlesel tüketim nesnelerine dönüşmesi, halkla ilişkiler ve reklam stratejileri aracılığıyla sağlanmaktadır. John Fiske'ye göre bu ticarileştirme yalnızca ekonomik değil, aynı zamanda ideolojik bir süreçtir ve halkla ilişkiler, değerlerin ve tüketim alışkanlıklarının şekillendirilmesinde kilit bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu çalışma, kapitalist sistemin popüler kültürü nasıl yönlendirdiğini ve yeniden ürettiğini eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Adorno ve Horkheimer'in kültür endüstrisi yaklaşımı ile Gramsci'nin hegemonya kuramına dayanarak, halkla ilişkilerin ideolojik mesajları yayarak kapitalist sistemin devamlılığını sağlayan bir mekanizma olduğunu öne sürmektedir. John Fiske'nin *Popüler Kültür* adlı eserinden hareketle, popüler kültürün nasıl ticarileştirildiği ve halkla ilişkilerin bu süreçteki rolü ele alınmaktadır. Araştırma, popüler kültür ve halkla ilişkiler arasındaki etkileşimi incelerken, halkla ilişkilerin kapitalist sistem içindeki ticarileştirme sürecini nasıl yönlendirdiğini analiz etmektedir. Nitel bir yöntem benimseyen çalışma, akademik literatürdeki içerik analizini kullanarak konuyu tarihsel ve karşılaştırmalı bir perspektifle ele almıştır. Bulgular, halkla ilişkilerin yalnızca bir pazarlama stratejisi olmanın ötesinde, toplumsal normları şekillendiren ve tüketim alışkanlıklarını belirleyen bir araç olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda, halkla ilişkiler, geniş çaplı bir toplumsal mühendislik sürecinin parçası olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Çalışma, halkla ilişkiler ile popüler kültür arasındaki derin bağı anlamak için teorik ve eleştirel bir çerçeve sunmaktadır.

ANAHTAR KELİMELE

Introduction

Culture and public relations share a profound and dynamic relationship. Public relations is a strategic discipline that facilitates effective institutional communication, informs the public, and cultivates a favorable image (Aymaz, 1993). Culture, on the other hand, consists of fundamental elements that encompass consumption values, beliefs, aesthetic perceptions, and forms of expression. Public relations help institutions in the field of culture and arts share these values with society while ensuring that cultural expressions reach wider audiences (Batmaz, 1981). Therefore, understanding this interaction between public relations and culture allows public relations professionals to communicate effectively with their target audiences, support organizations, and contribute to the widespread dissemination of cultural awareness. Furthermore, public relations serve as an essential tool in increasing public support for cultural initiatives (Erdoğan, 2004).

Similarly, the relationship between popular culture and public relations is robust. Popular culture includes elements widely adopted by large audiences, such as ideas, trends, entertainment, media content, and everyday life practices. Meanwhile, public relations is a discipline that enables institutions, individuals, or brands to communicate with their target audiences, manage their images, and engage with the public (Hatipler, 2017). Public relations facilitate the dissemination of popular cultural trends and movements, ensuring that specific products, services, and values are embraced by large audiences (Fiske, 2010). Today, digital media and social platforms clearly demonstrate how public relations strategies are intertwined with popular culture. Tools, such as social media, influencer marketing, and digital content creation, help public relations professionals leverage the opportunities provided by popular culture to reach their target audiences directly and effectively (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

In this context, popular culture and public relations have become increasingly intertwined. While public relations practices contribute to shaping popular culture, popular culture, in turn, influences the direction of public relations strategies (Bourdieu, 1984). Popular culture exerts a broad societal influence through media and communication tools, an impact reinforced by public relations activities (Ewen, 1996). Public relations professionals can leverage the opportunities presented by popular culture to develop strategies that enhance brand awareness and establish stronger engagement with target audiences. Public relations functions as a promotional tool and a mechanism that directs societal values, demands, and consumption habits (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944).

This study aims to analyze the interaction between popular culture and public relations through John Fiske's theoretical perspective. Fiske's approach to popular culture suggests that cultural consumption is not merely an economic activity but is shaped by individuals' active meaning-making processes (Fiske, 2010). The research examines how popular culture is commercialized within the capitalist system and how public relations influence this process. It provides a framework to understand how popular culture is commodified within capitalism, the role of public relations in this transformation, and its broader societal implications. By exploring the relationship between public relations and popular culture through Fiske's theoretical lens, this study contributes a new perspective to the academic literature. It discusses how public relations shape cultural production within the capitalist system, arguing that public relations are not merely an economic activity but also an ideological mechanism (Gramsci, 1971). Additionally, it analyzes the commercialization of popular culture and the role of public relations in this process, further detailing the functions of public relations in cultural and social engineering (Ewen, 1996).

Fiske's understanding of popular culture emphasizes that cultural consumption and meaning-making constitute a site of social struggle (Fiske, 2010). According to Fiske, popular culture is not solely a system controlled by capital but a dynamic process in which consumers actively

participate in meaning-making. This perspective offers a significant theoretical framework for analyzing the influence of public relations on popular culture. Fiske argues that cultural production is not unidirectional and that audiences do not engage with popular culture products merely as passive consumers (Fiske, 2010). Academic studies examining the relationship between public relations and popular culture explore how these two fields mutually influence each other. Frankfurt School theorists Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) argue that the culture industry is controlled by the capitalist system and that public relations serve as a tool for manipulating the masses. In contrast, Gramsci's concept of hegemony suggests that the public does not merely consume cultural products passively but assigns meaning to them, creating forms of cultural resistance (Gramsci, 1971). Recent studies on the interaction between public relations and popular culture indicate that this process has become more complex with digitalization (Ewen, 1996). Today, public relations have become an influential tool in shaping popular culture, increasingly affecting individuals' cultural consumption habits through media and digital platforms (Bourdieu, 1984). In conclusion, this study examines how popular culture is commercialized within the capitalist system and the role of public relations in directing this process. Public relations function as an economic tool and as a mechanism for disseminating ideological messages to the masses (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In this regard, public relations are a critical component in understanding the role and operation of popular culture within the capitalist system.

Methodology

Social reproduction encompasses the activities and institutions essential to ensure the maintenance of life and its transmission to future generations. Within the framework of the social system, popular culture is not a system of "creating life" under capitalism but a system of "making things." In this study, the document analysis method, one of the qualitative research techniques, was employed to examine the relationship between public relations and popular culture. Document analysis is a method that aims to derive theoretical insights by systematically examining written materials on a specific subject (Bowen, 2009). This research evaluates how popular culture intertwines with public relations, its role within the capitalist system, and its contribution to the process of social reproduction. Within this framework, academic sources from various disciplines were analyzed in accordance with the theoretical framework established in the study.

The sources utilized in this research consist of academic studies on public relations, popular culture, the capitalist system, and social reproduction theories. In selecting the sources, specific criteria were applied to establish a strong theoretical foundation within the literature. First, only academic sources were included, with peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and scholarly works forming the basis of the analysis. The selected sources were required to align with theoretical approaches explaining the relationship between popular culture and public relations. Therefore, analyses from both classical theorists and contemporary academic research were incorporated to balance historical and modern perspectives. The study evaluates theoretical frameworks such as the Frankfurt School's culture industry approach (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944), Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) while drawing upon John Fiske's conceptual framework for analyzing popular culture (Fiske, 2010).

The research methodology was implemented in three stages. In the first stage, the data collection process was conducted by reviewing academic studies that examine the interaction between public relations and popular culture. For this purpose, searches were carried out in academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Web of Science to select comprehensive and up-to-date sources that evaluate popular culture from a public relations perspective. In the second stage, data analysis and synthesis were performed. The selected academic works were analyzed using content analysis to identify fundamental connections

between popular culture and public relations, comparing different theoretical approaches. This stage explored how public relations shape popular culture, its role within the capitalist system, and its relationship with social reproduction. In the final stage, theoretical insights and conclusions were evaluated, providing a conceptual explanation of how popular culture functions as a system producer within the context of public relations.

Social reproduction refers to the activities and institutions necessary for maintaining societal sustainability and transmitting cultural values to future generations (Bourdieu, 1984). In the capitalist system, popular culture is not only a process of creating a lifestyle but also operates as a "product creation" mechanism (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). In this regard, popular culture is viewed as both a tool for reinforcing social structures and a mechanism for reproducing the capitalist system (Fiske, 2010). Public relations, on the other hand, develop strategies that guide, shape, and present popular culture to the public, while popular culture itself reaches broad audiences through public relations techniques (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

This study theoretically explains how public relations methods and systems contribute to societal construction through popular cultural elements. As a result, the role of public relations in executing social engineering functions via popular culture becomes clearer (Ewen, 1996). Public relations are not merely a communication tool but also a crucial component in disseminating and commodifying popular culture. When analyzing the role of popular culture within the capitalist system, it becomes evident that public relations play a strategic function in shaping public perception and influencing consumption habits (Bourdieu, 1984).

In conclusion, this study employs the document analysis method to evaluate the interaction between popular culture and public relations. The selected academic sources were analyzed in accordance with the established theoretical framework, demonstrating how public relations act as a system producer through popular culture. The findings indicate that public relations are not solely an economic tool but also a mechanism for disseminating ideological messages to the masses (Gramsci, 1971). In this context, popular culture has become a system that directs society through public relations strategies, positioning public relations as a key player in social engineering processes. The study provides a theoretical framework for researchers in this field by mapping the conceptual relationship between public relations and popular culture.

John Fiske's approach to popular culture and its comparison with alternative theories

John Fiske's approach to popular culture considers cultural consumption as an active process rather than a unidirectional model of power. According to Fiske, popular culture is a phenomenon produced by people within their daily life practices in interaction with industrial products (Fiske, 1999). Fiske's perspective underscores that popular culture is not merely a commodity for passive consumption but a dynamic structure continually reshaped and redefined by individuals.

According to Fiske's theory, although popular culture is created by hegemonic systems, it is also transformed by individuals, acquiring new meanings in the process. For instance, he examines the use of ripped jeans as an example of how consumers reshape this popular culture product according to their identities. In this case, individual consumption practices simultaneously reproduce the dominant ideology while also generating resistance against it (Fiske, 1990). However, this resistance is ultimately absorbed by the system and re-commodified. This process reveals that popular culture functions as both an instrument of domination and a means of resistance.

Fiske's approach, which views popular culture as a product of the people, directly opposes the culture industry model proposed by Frankfurt School thinkers Adorno and Horkheimer. According to the Frankfurt School, popular culture is a tool used by the ruling classes to manipulate the masses, independent of individual creative contributions (Adorno & Horkheimer,

1944). In this model, popular culture is commodified and reduced to a passive consumption process. In contrast, Fiske's model argues that the public actively participates in cultural production, asserting that culture is not merely shaped by dominant classes but is instead a dynamic and interactive field.

Another significant approach to analyzing popular culture is Gramsci's theory of hegemony. According to Gramsci, ruling classes secure public consent through ideological hegemony, which becomes evident in cultural production (Gramsci, 1971). Popular culture reflects these hegemonic struggles and is not merely passively consumed by the public but is also transformed into a part of ideological contestation. Fiske's understanding of popular culture aligns with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, emphasizing that cultural production is not strictly a top-down process but is also shaped by the people themselves. However, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social fields presents a different critique of Fiske's model. Bourdieu argues that cultural consumption is closely linked to class distinctions and that popular culture is evaluated within a hierarchy of tastes determined by specific social groups (Bourdieu, 1984). According to him, individuals' participation in popular culture and the meanings they assign to it are directly connected to their social positions. While Fiske highlights the transformative power of the people over popular culture, Bourdieu's approach suggests that the unequal distribution of cultural capital limits the extent to which individuals can shape popular culture.

The interaction between public relations and popular culture

Public relations play a crucial role in the formation of popular culture. While Fiske conceptualizes popular culture as a product of the people, he does not sufficiently elaborate on how public relations serve as a tool in shaping it. Public relations practices are utilized by specific brands, companies, and organizations to steer popular cultural elements. For example, brands reinforce particular consumption patterns within popular culture through influencer marketing and media strategies (Ewen, 1996). Public relations function not only as a promotional tool but also as an ideological mechanism. Grunig and Hunt (1984) argue that public relations are a strategic tool for managing societal perceptions and that, in this context, popular culture is shaped through public relations campaigns. For instance, major global brands design their marketing campaigns by leveraging popular cultural trends to influence consumer habits.

Kellner (1987) emphasizes that popular culture is largely created by media industries, with the public participating in this process primarily as consumers. According to this perspective, popular culture is not freely shaped by individuals but is instead controlled through media corporations and public relations strategies. Fiske's model, which conceptualizes popular culture as a product of the people, faces criticism for insufficiently addressing the extent to which today's media environment is driven by corporate influence. Particularly, social media and digital public relations have become increasingly influential in shaping popular culture. Public relations professionals utilize social media trends to disseminate specific messages and direct how consumers perceive popular cultural products (Hatipler, 2017). This raises the question of how much actual agency the public has over popular culture. Fiske's understanding of popular culture distinguishes itself by asserting that people actively participate in cultural production and assign new meanings to cultural products. His key argument, which sets him apart from other theorists, is that he does not view popular culture solely as a domain controlled by capital. Instead, he contends that individuals reconstruct popular culture products according to their own interpretive frameworks (Fiske, 1999). However, this approach has been criticized for not adequately addressing how popular culture is manipulated by capital. Kellner (1987) considers the notion that popular culture serves as a tool of resistance in the hands of the people to be overly optimistic, while Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) argue that popular culture functions less as a space of conscious participation and more as a mechanism of capitalist domination.

Bourdieu's (1984) perspective further critiques Fiske's model for overlooking class-based differences in cultural participation. The unequal distribution of cultural capital suggests that

individuals do not engage with popular culture on equal footing, revealing that popular culture is not always a democratic space. In conclusion, while Fiske's model offers an important perspective by emphasizing active participation, it does not fully address the extent to which popular culture is controlled by capital and media structures. When the influence of public relations on popular culture is examined more comprehensively, it becomes evident that popular culture is shaped not only by the public but also by dominant media structures and corporate actors.

Public relations, popular culture, and social hegemony

Capitalism is a cultural and economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and driven by the pursuit of profit. According to Fiske, we live through commodities in capitalism, and in doing so, we reinforce its structures. In addition to Fiske, Karl Marx presents a sharp critique of this phenomenon. Marx argues that the capitalist mode of production alienates individuals, stripping them of their humanity. Thus, the concept of alienation is a fundamental pillar of Marx's intellectual framework (Jenkins & Green, 2013). Popular culture represents the people and carries traces of the struggle between dominance and resistance. From Fiske's perspective, popular culture should not be confused with the concept of the culture industry. While he acknowledges that popular culture is a product of an industrialized society, his argument contains inherent contradictions. In a capitalist society, individuals commonly experience a sense of powerlessness in the face of dominant forces, advertising, cultural commodities, and financial systems. Consequently, advertising has become an integral part of daily life, increasing its influence over time. As one of the most effective methods of marketing products, advertising has become a core element sustaining capitalism (Hall, 1999).

Another key feature of popular culture is its fluidity. An individual can participate in and advocate for multiple popular cultural movements simultaneously. Through this process, individuals satisfy their need for belonging and reconstruct their identities. When examined through the lens of capitalism and the culture industry, popular culture brings us to the perspectives of Adorno and Horkheimer (Adorno, 2007). These thinkers conceptualized the culture industry as the commodification of cultural forms that emerged in late 19th and early 20th century America and Europe. The professionalization of the entertainment industry led to the standardization of cultural forms and the expansion of mass culture. The cultural products generated by these industries are created and distributed primarily for profit.

According to Ünsal Oskay, popular culture is a phenomenon that must be examined critically (Oskay, 1980). However, returning to an immaterial folk culture is no longer possible, nor is embracing elitist culture a viable solution. Therefore, popular culture must be redirected within a transformative and restorative process. Ahmet Oktay, on the other hand, argues that popular culture produces artificial happiness by helping individuals escape the negative aspects of reality (Oktay, 1997). With its misleading nature, popular culture obscures reality and primarily serves as an ideological construct, making it an area of growing academic interest in recent years.

Public relations function as more than just a tool for managing communication between institutions and individuals; they also serve as a strategic mechanism that shapes cultural norms and societal structures (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Popular culture, meanwhile, should be understood as a phenomenon that reaches broad societal segments through mass communication channels and consumption practices, shaping individuals' identities, values, and perceptions (McRobbie, 2004). The interaction between public relations and popular culture must be analyzed not only within the framework of advertising and marketing but also through ideological, economic, and sociological dynamics (Ewen, 1996).

Gramsci's theory of hegemony provides a crucial theoretical framework for analyzing the relationship between public relations and popular culture. According to Gramsci, social hegemony is constructed not only through economic and political means but also through

cultural mechanisms (Gramsci, 1971). Popular culture can serve to sustain dominant ideologies through media campaigns and marketing strategies orchestrated by public relations (Kellner, 1987). As a mechanism that controls and directs popular cultural production, public relations play a critical role in disseminating specific societal values and consumer practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Media institutions, in particular, function as central actors in the normalization of certain messages and values within society through public relations strategies (McChesney, 2004). For instance, Hollywood films and television series integrate narratives reinforcing specific lifestyles and consumption habits through public relations strategies (Kioussis & McCombs, 2010). By circulating popular cultural content through public relations-driven campaigns, the media shape individuals' socio-cultural identities and contribute to the reproduction of hegemonic structures (Storey, 2021).

Frankfurt School theorists Adorno and Horkheimer examined popular culture within the framework of the culture industry, highlighting the manipulative influence of public relations within this process. Within their framework, the culture industry is designed to pacify individuals, dull their critical thinking abilities, and direct them toward consumption (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). Adorno argues that public relations and advertising divert mass attention away from social inequalities, creating false needs and transforming individuals into functional consumers who sustain the capitalist system (Adorno, 1991). The process of cultural production is structured to suppress the development of critical consciousness, with public relations serving as a central instrument in maintaining this mechanism (Storey, 2021).

Conversely, John Fiske's approach to popular culture offers an alternative perspective to the critical stance of the Frankfurt School. According to Fiske, popular culture is not solely a system controlled by hegemonic forces; it is also a dynamic space where individuals and communities actively participate in meaning-making (Fiske, 2010). Fiske argues that the public has the potential to reinterpret popular culture products, transforming hegemonic structures. However, this process is significantly constrained and directed by media and public relations strategies (Shuker, 2013). Therefore, while Fiske's perspective frames popular culture as an active production of the people, it must be considered alongside critical discussions on how public relations reproduce societal structures.

Conclusions and discussion

The interaction between public relations and popular culture is a multilayered process that extends beyond the production and distribution of media content. It encompasses shaping social norms, consumption practices, and hegemonic ideologies. This study examines how public relations influence popular culture, how this influence has evolved with digitalization, and how the process can be analyzed within the critical theory framework. The study's key findings demonstrate that public relations' impact on popular culture extends beyond promotional strategies, embedding itself within ideological hegemony. In this context, Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry, and John Fiske's theory of cultural resistance provide a critical framework for understanding how public relations shape popular culture.

A key finding of the study highlights public relations serve as a tool to reinforce hegemonic structures within popular culture. Hegemony is maintained not only through coercive state apparatuses but also through voluntary consent, which is cultivated through cultural production mechanisms. Public relations sustain the hegemonic system by imposing specific norms on consumers through media campaigns, advertising, and strategic communication tools. For example, Hollywood films, television series, and digital media platforms integrate public relations strategies to popularize specific lifestyles, consumption habits, and identity perceptions. This demonstrates that public relations are directly linked to the production of media content and the reproduction of social values and norms. Media content is meticulously designed by public relations professionals to ensure that consumer audiences adopt certain

behavioral patterns. In this regard, public relations and popular culture have become intertwined within the dynamics of consumer society, forming a structure that normalizes specific ideologies. Global brands, in particular, do not merely market products but also promote specific lifestyles and ideological narratives through their marketing strategies.

The Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry provides an essential conceptual framework for understanding the manipulative aspects of public relations within popular culture. The culture industry functions as a mechanism that pacifies individuals and transforms them into consumption-driven entities within the capitalist system. This study highlights how public relations divert consumer attention away from social inequalities, manufacture artificial needs, and render individuals functional for the continuity of capitalism.

In particular, advertising campaigns, brand positioning strategies, and digital marketing techniques illustrate how public relations turn popular culture into a consumable object. The culture industry does not merely provide individuals with media content; it also dictates how they should consume it. The role of public relations in this process extends beyond merely providing entertainment; it ensures that specific ideologies and consumption habits are widely adopted at a mass level. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that how public relations influence popular culture have undergone significant transformation with digitalization. Beyond traditional media tools, social media, big data analytics, and AI-driven content management have enabled public relations to develop more sophisticated and measurable methods for shaping mass perceptions. Thus, this study underscores the evolving role of public relations in constructing and reinforcing dominant cultural narratives within the popular culture framework while also highlighting how digital technologies have made these processes more intricate and pervasive. These findings highlight the need to critically evaluate the influence of public relations on popular culture and to question how public relations reinforce hegemonic structures.

Popular culture emerges as a fundamental element shaping the socio-cultural identities, consumption habits, and perceptions of individuals in contemporary society. As a product of the modern market economy, popular culture should be understood as an outcome of a system in which consumption becomes an essential component of the production process. Within this framework, public relations have evolved beyond merely serving as a promotional and communication tool; they have become a central force in creating, shaping, and disseminating popular culture.

Author contributions

1st Author: Contributed 100% to this study.

Conflict of interest statement

The author of this study has no financial conflict of interest with any institution, organization or person.

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