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DIGITAL PYRAMID BUILT BY DATAFICATION: TAKE BYTEDANCE'S CORPORATE CULTURE TEXT FOR EXAMPLE

Zhao Ziran (a), Juliana Abdul Wahab (b)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Universiti Sains Malaysia, Level 1, Building E42, Chancellory II, Penang, Malaysia, zhaoziran258@gmail.com
(b) Universiti Sains Malaysia, Level 1, Building E42, Chancellory II, Penang, Malaysia, julia@usm.my

Abstract

ByteDance is a giant Internet company that abruptly expands to the world with TikTok as its mainstream media product. TikTok was even metaphorically called Pandemic Objects as a consequence of its rapidly increased usage during COVID-19. But behind the prosperity is capital's reinterpretation and shaping of social life and the extra bonus extracted from repression upon digital labor. In the process of transforming abnormal domination into "taken for granted" daily life, corporate culture text plays a core role. Based on the concept "datafication" and "data relations" put forward by Nick Couldry, the authors conducted textual analysis and participatory observation on ByteDance's propaganda video, slogans of corporate culture, and the sensory lived experience to explore the cultural and ideological paths for ByteDance to establish the myth of a digital pyramid in the digital age. The main results were: 1) The form of extraction of surplus value is changed from the employment relationship to the capitalization of social life. 2) The reality of social life is constructed by informing and hiding. 3) The redundancy of pan-entertainment information forms a verisimilitude sphere, dominating social lives by data streams. By summarizing the results, the authors concluded: ByteDance as a Giant Internet company is using "datafication" and "data relations" to construct a pyramidal structure, and the material to fill up this structure is the pan-entertainment data redundancy obtained by squeezing digital labor and compressing social lives.

Keywords: Datafication, ByteDance, data relations, corporate culture, Nick Couldry

1. Introduction

ByteDance is a giant Internet company that sharply expands to the world with TikTok as its mainstream media product within 10 years (Lim et al., 2019). TikTok was downloaded more than 738 million times in 2019 and the total number of downloads surpassed 1.9 billion in Google Play and the Apple Store (Moshin, 2020). It was even metaphorically viewed as "pandemic objects" as a consequence of its rapidly increased usage during COVID-19 (Kunjumon, 2020). As a unicorn startup company, ByteDance's "Algorithm+product" model as the unique development advantage made itself another emerging tech giant that is juxtaposed with BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent), shaping a rising sage of enterprise in the digital age (Wang & Dong, 2021).

But behind the myth of the prosper sage constructed by the giant enterprise, some social problems such as "996 work regime" (working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and six days a week without extra pay for those extra hours) as well as the phenomenon of extraction towards digital labour were put forward by past researchers. Critics exist holding that the long working hours in China's tech industry risked sending employees straight to the hospital intensive care unit (ICU) and has aroused growing resentment (Xiaotian, 2019). Overtime work culture, stagnant salary, and health damage caused by demanding management were seen as signals of a historic turn in employees' subjective perception of the hustle culture, and they lead up to feelings of "sickness" and "anger", these employees who embraced the "big firm dream" are now frustrated by the collapse of the trust towards the employment relationship in China's internet industry.

2. Problem Statement

With the rapid development of ByteDance as an emerging unicorn company, the problems behind have become increasingly prominent. The working hours of employees are getting extremely long, and their physical conditions are experiencing problems; but meanwhile, ByteDance is still one of the companies that graduates wish to join in, internet hot words such as "involution", "corporate slave" reflect a fierce competition for graduates to enter these internet companies.What's more, TikTok as a UGC platform produced by ByteDance, its content is criticized as vulgar and pan-entertainment. These ironies have gradually formed social trends and have become part of the discourse system of contemporary Chinese online communities.

In this process, the function of data and datafication was seen as the main drive of the transformation of social lives. Zuboff (2019) argues that what humans are living through is a new stage of "surveillance capitalism" that characterized as human experience becoming the raw material that produces the data used to influence and even predict their actions. "Data is the new oil" is gradually becoming common sense rather than merely a prophecy (Javornik et al., 2019).

Among the scholars who debate about the link between data and social life, Nick Couldry applied political economics as well as decolonial theory to the analysis of the digital age. Couldry (2018) viewed the transformation of social life as a "Capitalism's turn to data", taking the metaphor of "data colonialism" to describe the relationship between individual users and vast data corporations, revealing the underlying rogue form of contemporary capitalism. Data colonialism as "an emerging order for appropriating and

extracting social resources for profit through data" is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a).

Revolving around the dominance upon humans' social life, Couldry formulated the concepts of "datafication" and "data relations". "Datafication" implies that something is made into data, in a more intimate sense, a contemporary phenomenon which refers to the quantification of human life through digital information, very often for economic value (Couldry & Mejias, 2019b). In this framework, human life is processing a transformation with its elements becoming "a continual source of data", datafication as a new form of extractivism is unfolding in our times, operating the appropriation of data about our lives, and this large-scale transformation is reinterpreting media and culture imperceptibly (Couldry, 2018).

"Data relations" refers to a new type of human relations that enables the extraction of data for commodification, is an abstract form of new capitalist organizations born of data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019c). Data relations includes the "capture and processing of social data" which ensures the "natural" conversion of daily life into a data stream, is the new form of data colonialism that normalizes the exploitation of human beings through data.

Past researchers have interpreted the link between data and humans' social life, constructed the concept of datafication and data relations in a creative way, critically proposing the powerful dominant force of data colonialism as the latest form of capitalism. But gaps do exist that research taking a certain internet company as an example was found scanty. Besides, the mechanism of corporate culture's function was somehow overlooked. Without the gaps being probed, the researches upon the relations between data and social lives will remain blurred, leaving latent troubles to the society.

This research is based on the contentions of Nick Couldry's theoretical framework of data colonialism, datafication, and data relations, the authors aim to introduce those key concepts to the analysis of ByteDance's corporate cultural text, interpreting the way of constructing a unique ideology for a giant internet company to control the employees and users, deconstructing the structure and pointing out the risk of the society facing a structural crisis.

3. Research Questions

This research probes into 3 main research questions:
- How is social life datafied and capitalized?
- How is the reality of social life constructed?
- How does datafication and data relations compress and transform social life?

4. Purpose of the Study

- To find out the way that the reality of social life is constructed.
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- To probe into the way that datafication and data relations compress and transform social life.

5.   Research Methods

In this research, purposive sampling method was used to analyze and deconstruct the corporate culture text such as advertising videos and sensory live experience of ByteDance by textual analysis and participatory observation. The authors focused on one exemplar of internet giant company that developed quickly through entertainment-oriented product, which correspond to the requirement of text choosing. Through analyzing the corporate cultural text's representation of daily lives, the process of datafication can be revealed through deep interpretation. On the one hand, based on the theoretical framework of Couldry, the authors made a participatory observation on the life state of the employees, aiming to explore the transformation to their social life made by datafication and data relations. On the other hand, the video text of corporate culture will be analyzed. In this process, the meaning structure of the corporate culture text will be deconstructed to explore how do datafication and data relations carry and convey ideologies, extracting the surplus value of digital labor. Through the analysis, the game between authority and public opinion was revealed. On the surface, it reflects the pervasive ambivalence of social individuals, but the deep structure is predetermined and shaped by capital, which can be demonstrated as a pattern diagram of the digital pyramid.

6.   Findings

6.1.   The Form of Extraction of Surplus Value Is Morphed from the Traditional Employment Relationship to the Datafication of Social Life

TikTok is one of the most popular products of ByteDance that is categorized as a live-streaming social networking platform where users can share and watch short videos of dances, lip-sync, comedy, talent videos, and so on (Ma & Hu, 2021; Schwedel, 2018). It has been introduced in 155 countries and regions in 75 languages and the number of monthly active users is more than 800 million (Moshin, 2020). Facing the massive content production all over the globe, ByteDance is under huge pressure of human resources. Accompanying the enormous business volume is the rapid expansion of the company's employees and the extension of their working hours. With the large-scale resistance of the notorious "996 regime", ByteDance applied the "big/small week" policy, where most of its employees work a six-day week every second week (Huang, 2019). But "big/small week" is just a transfiguration of "996 regime", it is the surface regulation compared to the corporate culture, but its deep structure is reinterpreted by corporate culture texts and regarded as a creed, which is gradually accepted as normalized "social life" by people in a subtle process.

In *The 9th Anniversary Employee Documentary* video issued on the intranet of ByteDance (e.g., lark as the communication tool), the slogan is poetic and persuasive: "with an ordinary mind, let's keep our feet on the ground while aiming for the stars". This series of videos for the purpose of commenting employees applied a narrative strategy of a structure of the hero's journey: 1) faced with an urgent mission, employees were challenged by a voluminous amount of difficulties. 2) they decided to cross the thresholds. 3) when they were about to succeed, there was a huge crisis. 4) They cooperated together and finally completed the mission. When describing the difficulty of the mission, several interviews of the employees were cited:

> "The whole project was much more difficult than the previous ones…We will not
> have break time with so many bugs."
> "We have made dozens of plans alone for the moment when we draw the winning
> numbers of the latter lottery at 11:00 pm."

Those selected utterances reflect how challenging the mission was, but meanwhile, the internal video of ByteDance utilizes the presence of "break time" as well as "11:00 pm" to form a notion that: working overtime is normal. The emphasis is put on the subject (the employee) and the object (the mission), but the context (irrational situations) of working itself is somehow disguised. This presencing (Anwesen) bypasses a non-totemic semiosis, directing the intentionality to a pseudo-justified reality, breaking down the traditional employment relationship. The standard working hours system is ideologically morphed into an objective-oriented non-written rule, showing the employees an ideal, commendable attitude that: I am on an important mission, and I volunteer to finish the task overtime with no extra pay.

The "overtime culture" is not rare in China's big techs, but the capitalization of social life is far deeper than this. Work is one of the biggest sections of social life, therefore, the tempo of lives is largely influenced by enterprises. Within the fast-paced lifestyle, the pieces of leisure time of employees are also treated as raw materials to produce profits. With TikTok blending with people's lives, employees themselves become users of TikTok and other products. They act as "the second level digital labour", processing and dealing with data in the daytime, seeking high-intensity entertainment when out of duty. The fragmented leisure time and the remaining energy are also totally squeezed out by the media.

Corresponding to the temporal presence is the absence of space. Within the video, a host of montage shots were presented: when preparing the *TikTok Spring Festival Special Project*, a lobby was transformed into a work area full of rows of workstations, the aisle is crowded with employees, the environment is noisy with the employees' whispered discussions, hubbubs, and loud voices of instruction from the leader's microphone, the employees are holding laptops in their hands, their speed of walking and speaking are very fast, but in the scenes, full of fervor. Then there comes the voice-over of the employee interviewed:

> "I already could tell how my colleagues sound like when they just wake up. You will
> have to call them even it's two or three in the morning. You will hear their sleepy
> voice when the call gets through…At moments like this, you will feel this team is
> really trustworthy, you can trust them to have your back."

Those visual-auditory materials constructed a flattened spacial structure, in which the leader and the employees are working in the same space with a close distance. The high level of power/distance in traditional Chinese culture renders breaking through bureaucracy interpreted as highly unethical behavior (Wang, 2020). But the sense of power and authority was diluted with the distance shortened, the only symbol of power is the microphone in the leader's hand, metaphorically, making the imagery of the leader traffic police directing the rush-hour traffic, rather than a senior executive. The shrinkage of distance can also be seen in the recruitment advertising video: followed by a set of scenes of daily work, with the door of the elevator opening, Zhang YiMing, the CEO of ByteDance appears on the screen playing smartphone

and smiling. All of the symbols demonstrate a notion that: we are breaking through the bureaucracy, there is not deviance behavior in ByteDance.

Furthermore, the trajectory of employees' behavior is also confined. The company provides housing subsidies to employees who rent an apartment within a certain distance. The surrounding landscapes that people perceive are similar, both physical and mental distance to the mansion of the company are shortened. Besides, the company's data protection also functions as another path of compressing the spatial distance. Not only confidential documents and information, but also employees' title, salary, department, and even locale of the company cannot be discussed to prevent data leakage.

But ironically, a large number of positive gossips about ByteDance are spread into all kinds of channels that people can get in touch with, especially in TikTok and other media produced by ByteDance without screening. In so doing, the gossips of ByteDance are processing datafication, becoming the data that can be controlled and transformed, and the human relations are also evolved into the new stage of data relations. This is not a natural process but redefined by giant data producers, or in Mejias and Couldry (2019)'s theory, the "social quantification sectors". Users are seeking information positively but receiving information negatively: when they wish to seek for the headlines to know one most important event in the society, they get three pieces of irrelevant content, that host of information become redundant pan-entertainment information, but they are not appearing with no reason, they carry certain value and interest, and are controlled by the algorithm as well as the capital behind it. The myriad employees and users become the custodians of ByteDance's myth construction.

This form of primitive accumulation of capital has been discussed for a long time, of utmost debatable question in this proposition is: is social life a renewable resource? For individuals, the answer should be no, however, for big techs such as BAT and ByteDance, they may follow a totally different train of thought. Those tech giants have the most powerful resource of media and the capability of directing, emphasizing, and even molding public opinion. Those contents on the theme of sudden death from working overtime and harming health by staying up late to play games have gradually lost their critical dimension. They have merely become products that take social events as raw materials and process them into data that cater to the demands of users to obtain data traffic. Users finish their heavy-loaded work and strike chords with these contents, but they are unable to resist this constructed "social reality". Both employees and ordinary users can only accept the "reality" of "the era has changed, and I have to change", continuing to work overtime in silence, spending time on these redundant pan-entertainment data.

The cunning point is that it is not a revolutionary form, and there is no clear trace within the transformation process. Rather, the process of datafication is based on the original pyramidal structure, attribute the changes to the natural social transformation, silently "modifying" the original structure. ByteDance and other big techs aim at the users' temporal and spatial "gaps", accurately producing pan-entertainment data to fill in those gaps of social lives, extracting surplus value from the double-sense digital labor, creating a naturalization trap.

6.2. The Reality of Social Life Is Constructed by Informing and Hiding

Social lives as the raw material were extracted to produce surplus value, but in between the fundamental form and the outcome is a funnel-shaped "gatekeeper". Corporate culture is the invisible

strategic asset that functions as a critical factor in organizational success and failure, and among its various dimensions the customer orientation dimension is the most important one. To cater to the main body users, who are primarily teenagers and young adults, ByteDance constructed a market-oriented ideology through its various types of corporate culture text (Ma & Hu, 2021). The funnel, as the authors point out, is a mechanism of informing and hiding: to inform users of the rejuvenated and the marked "the other", to hide the old fashioned and the native.

In the 2021 recruitment advertising video, a classic 60s TikTok short video, the rejuvenation orientation can be reflected much. The video uses *Galway Girl* by Ed Sheeran, which is popular among youngsters, as the background music. Also, the scene adopts a first-person perspective, and follows a young, good-looking, student-like girl to observe the employees' daily work in ByteDance. The colleagues met along the way are commuting using a skateboard, wearing headphones, T-shirts, and jeans in the office, dancing hip-hop in front of the mass, and discussing equally at the round table. All of the imagery inform the audiences of an emphasis on rejuvenation, personality, and informality, attracting thousands of excellent students from the best universities to join in.

Correspondingly, the other side of those items is somehow hidden. Representation of aged, conservative, and decent employees is hidden due to the ideology of ByteDance. The prototypes in the real life have been through the process of datafication, and filtered by the mechanism of informing and hiding. The chosen prototypes become imagery in cultural texts, but the left part is muted. This process is not a reflection of social life but is shaping social life and social culture through dataficaiton. This naturalized transformation is not only aimed at the organization itself but also formed domination based on dimensions such as age and personalities within the macro social scope, constructing a "reality" to force social members to embrace the changes made by those cultural products.

Another aspect of the mechanism is to emphasize "the other". In the advertising video for the 2021 campus job fair *ByteDance Story*, among some of the representative employees, there is a woman whose skin is black, she has a red haircut of dreadlocks, wearing colorful, collage clothing, swinging to music in front of a bookshelf filled with books arranged in a disorderly manner, saying that "I graduated from the University of Cape Town, off work I am a DJ!" It is hard not to believe that the video is putting efforts to demonstrate ByteDance's culture of "Champion diversity & inclusion", but in an almost crude way. Dreadlocks can be associated with the Rastafarian movement, has become "a symbolic accompaniment to oppositional collective identities associated with the African liberation/Black Power social movements" (Kuumba & Ajanaku, 1998). It is also viewed as resistance against hegemonic politics and spread extensively among African liberationists, womanists, radical artists of African descent. With these meanings that the haircut carries, the woman in dreadlocks herself is a strong symbol with a high intention of informing.

The imagery of the woman bears two levels of semiosis. The first level is the symbolization of herself. With the cultural capital expanding to all over the globe, ByteDance admits talents as well as users from diverse backgrounds, it is important to construct cultural imagery of a "the other" to show a stance on its inclusiveness. The tricky one is the second level, which refers to the linkage between the character imagery and her social life as her label. Compared to other representative employees interviewed who wear suits or glasses, behaving like the stereotypical wage earners, she is the "other" to this environment not just

due to her high self-expressive appearance and unconstrained personality, but the demonstration of her social life beyond the working hours. She as a symbolized imagery is a piling of the marked terms, when attached to the social expectations within the text, the prototype has lost its initial meanings, being constructed into a part of the representation semiosis.

Overall, the mechanism of informing and hiding works as a filter that construct the reality of social life, through the screening of the binary opposition, the core as well as the shape of the corporate cultural text is formed. Then with the text spreading into TikTok and other influential media, people's perception of social lives can be morphed into those advocated, ideal representation. In so doing, domination based on the cultural divide of age and personality will be formed, aggravating societal injustice and disorders.

6.3. The Redundancy of Pan-entertainment Information Forms a Verisimilitude Sphere, Dominating Social Lives by Data Streams

The social lives as raw materials are capitalized and extracted as surplus value, becoming cultural products under the filtering and processing of the mechanism of informing and hiding. The essence of these cultural products is pan-entertainment data that is blended into the daily life of users, and they become the core part of the macro social culture. There is a stratification among them, forming a supporting structure from the bottom to the top, but the increasing data redundancy has accumulated to an overloaded volume and becoming dominant oppression upon social lives. The authors name this structure digital pyramid built by datafication. The specific mechanism can be demonstrated in the following pattern in Figure 1:
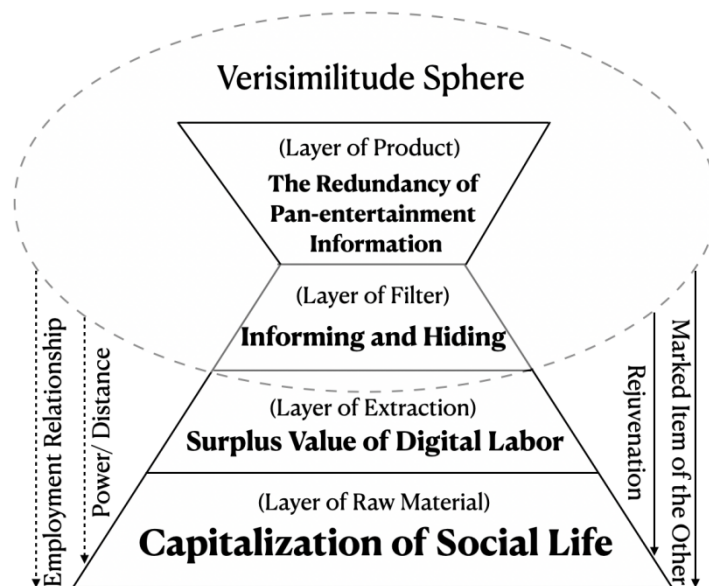

Figure 1. The Multilayered Structure of Digital Pyramid Built by Datafication

In the pyramidal structure, the capitalization of social life is the foundation. Social lives are compressed both temporally and spatially, being processed as the raw material to produce cultural text. Social lives are spun into data for the social quantification sectors, who are the giant techs to arbitrarily

select the materials they want to use. Social lives are datafied, and in a more intimate sense, are experience a process of capitalization, becoming the open resources available for extraction.

In the second layer, data made from social lives is processed by digital labor, who are not only the employees but the users of the cultural products. With the social lives being compressed, surplus value is extracted in a steady flow to generate profits. In this process, digital labor is not even the creators of cultural products, but just weavers who are mending bugs or errors in the crowded "factory", or staying in front of the little screen in their sofas, laughing and crying under the control of the real producers of the cultural text that they are immersed in. Besides, people's relationships were transformed into data relationship, where once living, then a person is generating surplus value, he becomes a knot of the textile he weaves by himself.

The third layer is a filter, which is called a mechanism of informing and hiding. This layer works as a gatekeeper, through this filter, those cultural products that are considered to have the potential to carry the mainstream culture of the society are displayed on the media. Different from the gatekeepers of traditional media, this filter weakens the dimension of authority but caters to the dimension of public opinion. The filtered cultural products form a social fashion of rejuvenation through prominent, contagious representations of "the other". Social news, films, pop music, and advertisements are derived from one certain side of social life, those sides chosen by the mechanism of informing and hiding are molding the social life increasingly faster and normalizing the fierce competition as well as the transformation against the traditional social structure. Through this layer, a new order of positive cultural term is established by screening data.

Eventually, the chosen data extracted from social lives as the raw material becomes cultural products that touch the users after being filtered by public opinion. They are produced not to gratify users, but to attract users' attention. The essence is that the crude deposition of redundant pan-entertainment data replacing the traditional cultural structure, becoming the core part of social culture, but the new structure built by redundancy is not systematic. The digital pyramid demonstrates an inverted pyramidal structure, and with the volume of the redundancy enlarging, there is a risk of social structural crisis. Furthermore, revolving around redundant pan-entertainment data as the core of social culture, a verisimilitude sphere with cultural division as the basic unit is formed, which develops into a dominant power upon social lives and digital labor. The restraint of the employment relationship and the pressure of power/distance are weakened, but the verisimilitude sphere oppresses the society in new manners, which are data streams such as emphasizing rejuvenation and the marked item of the other. The sphere of today's social culture has achieved colonial domination over social life through datafication and data relations, which is likewise to say, data colonialism put forward by Nick Couldry.

7. Conclusion

Based on the concept of datafication and data relations, ByteDance's corporate cultural text was analyzed to interpret the way of constructing a normalized transformation of social life, and to deconstruct the pyramidal structure of meaning. In the guise of datafication, people can hardly understand the complete picture of a single thing, redundant data become a vein to hide the senders' intentions, through the intensive

and intentional representation flowing rapidly in the form of short videos and news, social lives and culture are morphed into the scene that those cultural products depicted.

Internet companies are producing data, and their process of producing data has become the main force to transform social life. For individuals, social lives are datafied, capitalized, screened, and eventually filled with fragmented pan-entertainment redundant information, and once the cultural products are suddenly taken away, they fall into a "void" state, thus forming a dependence on these dominant media and cultures. In the past, people's fetishes consisted of system of physical objects such as collecting stamps and paper money to label themselves, trying to use a systematic way to fight against nothingness. But the fetishism of the digital age embodies sewing up one's own "essence" with fragmented messages which are seemingly spatio-temporal coincidences (actually produced by big data and algorithmic techniques), behind these messages are capital operations in a concealing manner.

Social individuals become wanders in the digital age, but just as Coleridge wrote in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: Water, water, every where, Nor any drop to drink. The accumulation of pan-entertainment data can only reach a state of "zero degree of information", and the meanings are vanishing. Individuals have gone through the process of datafication themselves, connected with each other through data relations, becoming part of the big data. While they cherish the memory of the past social life, they still have to accept the massive amount of pan-entertainment information to construct the surrounding "reality", falling into a so-called cultural nostalgia: it is hard to imagine social life without data filling up it.

Acknowledgments

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