



## The loss and return of education from the perspective of "Human alienation by things"

**Shan Wang<sup>a</sup>**, Southwest University, No. 2 Tiansheng Road, Beibei District, Chongqing, 400715, P.R. China,  
[475953067@qq.com](mailto:475953067@qq.com), <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7700-8645>

**Jiali Yao<sup>b 1</sup>**, Southwest University, No. 2 Tiansheng Road, Beibei District, Chongqing, 400715, P.R. China,  
[419623499@qq.com](mailto:419623499@qq.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3903-0763>

**Qingwen Cai<sup>c</sup>**, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia,  
[vickycaiwen@163.com](mailto:vickycaiwen@163.com)

### Suggested Citation:

Wang, S., Yao, J. & Cai, Q. (2025). The loss and return of education from the perspective of "Human alienation by things". *International Journal of Innovative Research in Education*, 12(2), 106-116.  
<https://doi.org/10.18844/ijire.v12i2.9880>

Received from April 4, 2025; revised from August 5, 2025; accepted from December 2, 2025.

Selection and peer review under the responsibility of Prof. Dr. Zehra Ozcinar, Ataturk Teacher Training Academy, Cyprus ©2025 by the authors. Licensee, North Nicosia, Cyprus. United World Innovation Research and Publishing Centre. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

©iThenticate Similarity Rate: 6%

---

### Abstract

This study examines the growing phenomenon of human alienation in education, where educational practices increasingly prioritize objects, symbols, and systems over human development. Contemporary educational environments often emphasize formal compliance, instrumental utility, and technological mediation, resulting in the reification of learners and educators. Despite extensive philosophical discourse on alienation, there remains a research gap in critically synthesizing these perspectives to explain how modern educational ideologies and practices diminish human subjectivity. The study aims to analyze the mechanisms through which education contributes to human alienation and to articulate value-oriented directions for restoring a people-centered educational purpose. Employing a theoretical and critical research design, the study uses conceptual and interpretive analysis grounded in Marxist critical theory and contemporary social philosophy. Key concepts such as alienation, reification, symbolic coding, and human subjectivity are examined through systematic analysis of classical and contemporary philosophical and educational texts. The findings reveal that educational formalism, symbolic reproduction, and dependence on media-mediated learning environments reinforce the treatment of humans as tools and objects within educational systems. The study highlights the need to reassert practical reason and humanistic values in education. Its implications emphasize reorienting educational theory and practice toward the holistic and free development of human beings.

**Keywords:** Alienation; educational philosophy; human development; reification; subjectivity.

---

\* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Jiali Yao, Southwest University, No. 2 Tiansheng Road, Beibei District, Chongqing, 400715, P.R. China. E-mail address: [419623499@qq.com](mailto:419623499@qq.com)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of "human alienation by things," alternatively referred to as "reification," was originally a critical theory developed by Georg Lukács based on Marx's analysis of the form of alienation wherein humans are alienated by the commodities they themselves create. To place this concept within the discussion of educational issues is to recognize that the phenomenon of reification has permeated educational activities. As money, power, and even media have begun to dictate the development path of education, we are compelled to reflect on three core questions: Whether "humans" in educational practices are being reduced to mere functional objects to fuel the superficial false prosperity of education; whether the tendency of "valuing things over humans" has emerged in the educational process; and how to address the crisis of human reification induced by education (Shim, 2025).

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

#### 1.1.1. *The reduction of humans to things and the dissolution of critical consciousness*

Karl Marx early observed the phenomenon of "things dominating humans" in consumer society. It is precisely the labor of workers that endows the products of labor with the "thing-like form of objective value" equivalent to labor itself, thereby reflecting the social relations between producers and total labor as social relations between things existing outside producers"(Marx & Engels, 1995). A society with "consumption" as its ideology alienates social relations between things into social relations between humans, "concealing the social character of private labor and the social relations of private laborers under the form of things"(Marx, 2004). In this process, labor products, in the form of commodity consumption, deviate from the labor invested by workers; instead, they paralyze and control workers 'consumption, leading workers to lose their subjective value as humans in the cycle of "labor products, commodity consumption, reproduction. "Marx termed this phenomenon "commodity fetishism."

Drawing on the idea of "commodity fetishism" from Marx's *Capital*, the Hungarian philosopher Lukács (1972) proposed the theory of "reification" and established it as a methodology for understanding and criticizing the reified reality of capitalism. He argued that the most terrifying aspect of capitalist society lies not in the establishment of alienated labor through social production relations, but in the fact that "reification" has become a specific social ideology dominating people's thoughts and behaviors, creating a class of unconscious masses who lack discernment and merely cater to consumption (Etzrodt, 2024). Marcuse (2013) further expanded Lukács' idea that capitalist society "turns the functions of humans into commodities" into a characteristic of the entire industrial civilization. Means characterized by technical rationality, such as established division of labor, repressive social management, and mechanized domination, are all imperceptibly eroding the freedom, criticality, and autonomy of subjective consciousness.

While large-scale machine production has liberated labor and improved people's living standards, the development of science and technology has also brought about greater consumption stimulation and material needs (Steinmann, 2022). In satisfying consumer desires, humans have gradually grown accustomed to obedience, dependence, and adaptation, willingly indulging in sensory pleasure and false prosperity. From Marcuse's perspective, this is a consumer desire imposed by external forces that exceeds individual nature; through irrational consumption, human needs tend to become homogenized and simplified, leading people to be captured and controlled by things. Human needs become reified, and the "false consumption consciousness" manufactured by science and technology becomes people's "true needs." As a result, people indulge in hedonism where technology satisfies material desires, losing their critique of real life and only submitting to the so-called "happiness consciousness" constructed by science and technology.

#### 1.1.2. *Humans encoded by the symbols of things: the loss of subjectivity*

Baudrillard (1975) also recognized that science and technology have been alienated into tools of enslavement, and that false consumption consciousness has led to the degradation of the subject. He argued

that "social development is no longer mainly determined by the 'economy'; instead, social culture, which permeates the entire structure of the economy and society, plays a decisive role in the development of contemporary society"(Zhang, 2008). In his insight and critique of postmodern society, Baudrillard (1975) realized that what people consume is no longer confined to the "use value of things"; the meanings that things embody as symbols have also become objects of consumption. Thus, he turned to a semiotic approach to interpret the significance of symbolic exchange in consumer society.

Baudrillard (1975) maintained that things can only be consumed when they are transformed into symbols. What we consume is not the materiality of things, but their class connotations. Social classes are thereby established through symbolic consumption: the higher the value of an object, the greater the superiority of the consumer group; the lower the value, the more disadvantaged the group. Ultimately, commodity exchange essentially becomes the symbolic exchange between "humans" and "things." Individuals in consumer society are categorized into different "things" based on differences in consumption capacity and family background. To attach higher-value symbolic labels to themselves, some individuals begin to alienate themselves through consumption, reducing humans to "things of desire." By packaging symbolic content, people construct a "cage of codes" for themselves and step into the historical presupposition of the symbolic era, a presupposition that "everything can only exist when it is transformed into a symbol" (Zhang, 2008). The more obsessed people are with consumption, the further they drift from their true selves; eventually, humans become increasingly similar to the properties of things and even become objects of consumption themselves. This leads to a situation where "human status depends on things, and humans are 'alienated' by things"(Zhang, 2008).

In consumer society, the human spirit is controlled by codes, and humans are symbolized as "things" with low autonomy, often existing as encoded entities. The more individuals indulge in consumption, the more disconnected they become from their essence. Prevalent media networks and information technology have brought an abundance of things, yet these things, through various meaning-laden interpretations, have formed a consumption ideology that seizes social control, with the consequent dissolution of human subjectivity. Baudrillard (1975) attributed human alienation and the loss of subjectivity to social symbolization: everything in daily life is monopolized by the additional meanings of symbols. It can be said that the symbolic value of modern humans is shrouded in the "imaginary consumption" of commodities, and the fate of humanity moving toward total symbolization is inevitable.

## **1.2. Purpose of study**

Despite extensive philosophical discourse on alienation, there remains a research gap in critically synthesizing these perspectives to explain how modern educational ideologies and practices diminish human subjectivity. The study aims to analyze the mechanisms through which education contributes to human alienation and to articulate value-oriented directions for restoring a people-centered educational purpose.

## **2. METHODS AND MATERIALS**

This study employs a theoretical and critical analysis method grounded in Marxist critical theory and contemporary social philosophy. The primary research method is conceptual and interpretive analysis, focusing on key concepts such as *alienation*, *reification*, *symbolic coding*, and *human subjectivity*. The research materials consist of classical and contemporary theoretical texts in philosophy, sociology, and education, including works by Marx, Lukács, Marcuse, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, and related scholars. These texts are systematically reviewed, compared, and synthesized to construct a coherent analytical framework for examining the phenomenon of human reification within educational contexts.

Building on this framework, the study adopts a critical–normative approach to interpret educational ideology, institutional practices, and media-mediated learning environments. Educational phenomena are treated as historically and socially constructed processes shaped by power relations, capital logic, and technological mediation. From the normative standpoint of humanistic education and the ideal of the all-round and free development of human beings, the analysis critically evaluates educational formalism, symbolic

reproduction, and media dependence. Through this method, the study aims to reveal the mechanisms of human alienation in education and to articulate value-oriented directions for restoring human subjectivity and spiritual development.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Manifestations of educational loss under "Human Alienation by Things."

##### 3.1.1. *The reification of educational ideology in practice: the force of humanistic ideas is overshadowed by reifying forces*

Humans are the purpose of education and the foundation of its existence. Education originates from humans and ultimately aims at humans; enabling humans to become complete beings is the significance of education. Human development is not only a prerequisite for advancing the strategy of reinvigorating the country through talent but also the main driving force for economic and social development. Therefore, education must be people-oriented: respecting the development of human personality, focusing on the development of individual uniqueness, and affirming human value. Only then can we realize that "humans grow through education, and education develops through humans" (Li et al., 2020). The purpose of proposing the "people-oriented education" ideology is to enable education to return to its true essence and to humans themselves (Zhai, 2012). However, in the process of integrating this ideology into educational practice, its original meaning has been distorted. As a result, human subjectivity and free will have been suppressed, discarded, and dissolved under educational discipline, and even individual personalities have lost vitality under the management of institutionalized education.

Specifically, this is mainly reflected in the fact that the "people-oriented education" ideology remains superficial in educational practice. Education has been reduced to the manipulation of formalization, and a standardized, normative management approach is still adopted toward the development of individual personality and autonomy. Common practices include applying external forms that supposedly embody educational concepts to daily teaching and learning: believing that strict military-style management systems can make students self-disciplined; that uniform clothing can avoid the psychology of comparison; that washing parents' feet can cultivate a sense of gratitude; and that establishing WeChat groups for parents reflects the concept of coordinated home-school cooperation. Notably, once these activities formally embodying educational significance become repetitive, mandatory, and perfunctory tasks, the "people-oriented education" ideology is distorted by formalism into formalized educational activities aimed at padding data, seeking superficial prestige, and meeting inspection requirements. Such practices appear superficial, false, and contrived in execution.

The power of this formalism lies in obscuring the intrinsic meaning of educational activities, allowing people to perceive only the external forms of education rather than its essence. It pursues formal conformity to the "prescripts" of educational concepts rather than the substantive all-around development of humans. For the educational subjects involved, the formalization of education erodes the diversity and richness inherent in human beings. "I cannot, as a complete person, appropriate my comprehensive essence" (Marx & Engels, 2009), because formalistic education has already appropriated "my" senses, "my" thoughts, "my" spirit, and everything that makes "me" human. As Rousseau (1959) puts it: "There prevails in our manners a vicious and deceitful uniformity, and everyone's mind is cast in the same mold." "I" become a tool for meeting inspections, a "thing" produced from the same mold. "Things" have no autonomy; their value, meaning, and image can only be endowed by others.

Under the coercion of formalism, education equates humans to "things" to meet the needs of educational formalization. These needs are artificially constructed "false consciousness" that deviates from human nature, resulting in "the alienation between education and life, rendering genuine education impossible" (Zhang & Hu, 2015). In the process of implementation, the "people-oriented education" ideology is hijacked by formalism. Educational formalization alienates the relationship of "humans growing through education, and education

developing through humans" (Li et al., 2020) into humans serving education, with education dominating humans. Humans become "things" that satisfy the external forms of education. Once the "false consciousness" generated by education becomes a rational norm restricting individual behavior, the modified and manipulated forms of educational activities will be rationalized. Human utility will usurp human subjectivity, discarding subjective generative elements such as personality, autonomy, creativity, and uniqueness. Humans allow themselves to be worn down into human-like "things" by various formalized educational activities, tasks, and practices.

### ***3.1.2. The usurpation of education's coding function: the pursuit of educational symbolic value obscures education's true essence***

The coding function of education exists in the instrumental form, where education is alienated into a tool for controlling humans and appropriating their entire essence. Such education no longer aims to cultivate humans' free individuality and subjective consciousness, but rather to produce objective beings humans encoded by hierarchical difference symbols. This instrumentalized form of education originates from the refinement of social division of labor amid the gradual development of social productive forces, which has differentiated the strata of social labor, led to class solidification, and alienated education into a possession of the social elite to monopolize superior social resources and economic status.

In this sense, education first becomes a "thing" that humans can fully grasp and possess, then, in turn, applies its own symbolic coding function as a "thing" to social groups. Consequently, the aura of possessing high-quality educational capital for individuals has become "an increasingly necessary prerequisite for gaining a hegemonic position in the economic field," and "holding diplomas, even those obtained through deliberate planning" (Bourdieu, 2004) has come to represent an individual's "potential."

Education was originally a key channel for ensuring the sound mobility of social strata; however, competition for educational resources has always been biased. This competition has shifted from a contest of abilities and talents to a contest of financial and material resources, and human demand for education has long transformed into a pursuit of the superior symbolic value that education can bestow. The reification of human demand for educational resources has turned education into a system of exercising symbolic violence, introducing the symbolic system of social space into humans' spiritual world. It hierarchically encodes each individual based on family background, social status, financial capacity, and other factors, determining from the outset the possibility of individuals achieving class mobility through education.

The educational field itself is a site of class reproduction, as Bourdieu (2004) noted: "Fields such as elite universities, when operating as structures, promote the reproduction of the structure of social space and the structure of the field of power. Fundamentally, people's demand for education stems from greed for education as a system for crossing or maintaining class hierarchies, a system permeated with symbols representing difference, individuality, and hierarchy. Class reproduction is precisely the educational coding that humans, as "things," undergo. The significance of education seems to lie merely in endowing each individual with symbols of social status, while education's role in human spiritual development, self-transcendence, and cultivation of moral character necessary for survival in a civilized world has been overshadowed by educational symbolic coding."

In this regard, education is deficient in enriching humans' inner worlds; instead, it "produces humans as dehumanized beings both spiritually and physically" (Marx, 2000) in accordance with social demands. Humans produced in this way abandon the possibility of self-transcendence or spiritual creation through education and instead seek educational symbolic coding. This means that the relationship between humans and education has become one symbolic exchange. While humans control education, they are in turn reified by it. Thus, the reification of humans caused by education is essentially a state of alienation into things after losing one's self.

### **3.1.3. The infringement of educational media iteration: the more dependent on media for learning, the more reified by media**

Media, as organizational forms for disseminating information, refer to all things in human society that can transmit information and messages. While the integration of science and technology into educational development has accelerated the transformation and upgrading of educational methods through the combination of education and digitalization, it has also brought about a crisis of "dehumanization" due to technological progress. The most obvious manifestation is "the loss of human subjectivity, which is replaced by digitalization, turning humans into calculable and manipulable things"(Sun, 2012).

Although the digital age has largely satisfied humans' pursuit of an illusory world, this world is likely to develop into "a self-sufficient world of images, where the deceivers are also deceived and blinded"(Debord, 2012). The excessive liberation of subjective will also means the unrestraint of irrationality, which instead makes humans indulge in false fantasies and lose their ability to distinguish. Therefore, some scholars point out that if humans become completely addicted to the visual stimulation brought by media, it may cause irreversible damage to the development of human logical abilities (Hu et al., 2022). Today, digital media have become an indispensable tool in human society; learning, living, entertainment, and other activities all rely on digital media. However, the more we depend on digital media, the faster media information erodes our learning skills, thinking patterns, and learning abilities.

Contemporary information society is transforming into an intelligent society, which also means the deepening of educational digitalization. Firstly, teaching has become multimodal: vivid and intuitive knowledge pervades educational activities, clearly and directly revealing the imaginative images hidden in logical thinking to stimulate the use of individuals' figurative thinking. However, this has also solidified the cognitive form of knowledge. Secondly, the ubiquitous online information is interspersed with the personalized coding of intelligent algorithms. The coding of intelligent algorithms constructs an information domain around individuals' thoughts, desires, and experiences, essentially confining the scope of information individuals receive within the algorithm. While learners engage in fragmented learning in the information space, they also accept the symbolic coding customized by intelligent algorithms for themselves. Whether receiving or send information, our thoughts and consciousness are imperceptibly influenced and guided in the process of browsing information. If we become excessively dependent on media for learning and act as one-way information recipients of intelligent algorithms, our subjective consciousness may be dominated by information, leading to the loss of judgment and independent thinking abilities.

Finally, the media ecology, which is about to develop into a digital mimicry domain, has almost unprecedentedly enhanced the simulation capabilities of existing technologies, indicating that humans are about to enter a digital virtual era, pursuing sensory immersion. If education uses digital technology to conduct teaching in the form of digital, visual, and interesting simulations, it may make education highly appealing. However, if repeatedly pursuing the authenticity of sensory experience as an educational training method, it will instead make humans take sensory reality as the reference and become "slaves" held hostage by their senses. Beyond sensory feedback, other rational rules and ethical constraints will suddenly vanish in the ultimate enjoyment of sensory immersion.

Humans have used media to create a modern society and civilization, but the use of media has gradually changed their thinking patterns, modes of existence, and lifestyles. If media are not used in educational activities, others will question the advancement and scientificity of education. Today's digital media have become something humans depend on for survival, and even one of the most critical props in education's promotion of human socialization. Ironically, however, individuals in society barely realize that they are becoming "information production libraries" for the media; their various types of information, even choices made according to their own will, are under the control of the media. It can be said that modern "humans"

have almost been reified into media from which various "information" can be retrieved at any time, becoming numb and empty.

### **3.2. Return: reclaiming education's attention to the spiritual world**

#### **3.2.1. *Highlighting humanistic care and breaking through the barriers of formalism***

One of the reasons why the "people-oriented" educational ideology cannot break through the shell of educational formalization lies in the fact that pragmatism-oriented education adheres to the principle of efficiency first, emphasizing the output benefits of educational achievements. As long as the educational process and outcomes formally meet the requirements of educational policies, it matters little whether educated individuals have developed comprehensive qualities. Consequently, some scholars argue that the improvement of educational efficiency is inevitably accompanied by the sacrifice of educational equity, and pursuing educational equity as an educational goal makes it difficult to maximize educational efficiency (Dong & Liu, 2022).

Educational equity is the deepest manifestation of the "people-oriented" ideology. It reflects education's attention to the development of every individual from the starting point and highlights the humanistic care spirit of education. The most criticized flaw of formalized education is the loss of humanistic care: both educators and educated individuals have become mechanized, simplistic, and homogenized under bureaucratized educational management methods. The result of educational formalization is to treat humans merely as "living and conscious things" that maintain management authority. In top-down educational activities, "the exertion of human characteristics and abilities is increasingly subservient to relations of possession and exchange" (Sun & Sun, 2001). From this perspective, to break through the barriers of formalism, the primary goal is to correct the relationship between educational efficiency and quality: the output of educational achievements should be dominated by educational quality rather than efficiency. The "all-round development of humans" itself requires a great deal of free time and sufficient educational resources to enable individuals to "acquire the necessary knowledge in various fields or meet the diverse requirements of their activities" (Hu, 2005). It is impossible to cultivate individuals with comprehensive literacy overnight.

Furthermore, since formalized education, characterized by bureaucracy, focuses only on superficial work while ignoring actual conditions and substantive content, to return education to the path of "taking the comprehensive and free development of humans as the foundation," it is necessary to appropriately restrict or weaken the excessive intervention of administrative management in teachers' daily teaching. This will allow teachers to free themselves from heavy formal tasks unrelated to education, eliminate a large number of perfunctory and form-focused training burdens, and instead devote their time to humanistic care for students and teaching work.

In addition to teachers being freed from formalistic educational tasks, students also need to obtain free and disposable time. For "every individual's existence is a journey" (Jin, 1997), always moving from the past self to a future self, and deriving meaning from dynamically changing time to perfect their lives. The human-centered educational ideology that "education makes humans human" focuses on human free development: "it opposes the logic of humans being 'a one-time existence'" (Sun & Sun, 2001) and instead "views humans in terms of their most noble potentials and immortal creativity" (Jin, 1997), refusing to treat humans as possessions that satisfy formalized education.

Therefore, to cultivate individuals with free and independent personalities and creative spirits, it is necessary to awaken students' vitality, not constrain or rigidify their thinking with external standards and forms. Instead, education should enable individuals to create infinite value within a limited time and achieve self-transcendence and self-improvement.

#### **3.2.2. *Defending educational justice and restricting the abuse of power***

Educational justice focuses on the rationality and fairness of just distribution, with particular emphasis on

the allocation of educational capital, the right to education, and educational opportunities. High-quality educational resources are scarce and cannot be equitably distributed to everyone; they can only be obtained through competition. Driven by utilitarianism, the competition for high-quality educational resources has been alienated to a contest of family background and social connections. It can be said that the essence of educational involution lies in the extreme outbreak of the Matthew effect in class reproduction.

People compete for scarce educational resources to obtain educational symbolic coding, as the educational system "itself is an important production site of codes and ideology" (Wu & Shen, 2022). Bourdieu (2004) argued that "educational work always functions to maintain order, that is, to reproduce the structural power relations between various groups or classes. The operation of power in educational relations relies on symbols: "symbols endow objects with a certain legitimacy and authority," and "all dominance relations in society depend on the invisible manipulation of symbolic power" (Zhang, 2005). The stability of education's reproductive function lies in the fact that power endows education with the ability to educate people, guide their thoughts, and symbolize them. Resource holders collude with organizations that possess subordinate attributes, such as schools, enterprises, and factories, through power, forming a natural hierarchical social segmentation and an access system for reproducing classes. Thus, the essence of educational reproduction is the symbolic reproduction of humans.

Coerced by power, education has become a tool for the dominant class to safeguard their vested interests and class status, and even "dominates the distribution of power in a social system" (Mumby, 1988) on this basis. While power is an authoritative force that maintains the stability of educational order, its excessive operation in education can also turn humans into obedient dependents of power holders. To liberate humans from the state of being operational and dominated by "functional things," it is necessary to dismantle the collusion between education and power. A prerequisite for achieving this goal is to make people realize that power is a product of social contracts that individuals have signed. If power does not adhere to the principle of upholding justice, everyone in society has the right to refuse to fulfill the contract. This reflects human subjective will: humans have the right to determine their own fate; if they cannot do so, they are no different from things.

Education's role in "making humans human" embodies human will. The reason why individuals form social contracts and establish social order is that the pursuit of fairness and justice serves their own development. Humans produce power and are also the cause and measure of justice. "Modern educational justice is based on human freedom and rights, rather than such conceptions of justice as excellence, appropriateness, or virtue" (Wu, 2015). Pursuing educational justice means pursuing the legitimacy of humans maintaining their subjective status under the operation of power. Such humans possess the ability to develop themselves independently and exist as creative beings.

### ***3.2.3. Taking the all-round development of humans as the foundation and rationalizing the use of educational media***

Marx argued that the future society is "a social form based on the fundamental principle of the comprehensive and free development of every individual" (Zhai, 2012). Regardless of how the intelligent society evolves, it should take "the comprehensive and free development of humans" as its primary principle. Only by possessing the freedom inherent to human existence can individuals fully assert their subjective will and become all-around developed beings.

The iteration and innovation of media have enabled education to transform from traditional classroom teaching to online and distance education, thereby breaking the spatial pattern that requires human presence in education and granting individuals freedom in time and space. However, this does not mean that our consciousness and thinking possess equal freedom. If our information, faces, senses, and images are all recorded in digital media, resulting in the mastery of our unique traits, such as personality and preferences, by intelligent algorithms, then big data, instead of liberating us, becomes a digital cage that deprives humans of

privacy and renders information transparent. If we are long constrained by media as intermediaries for communication and interaction, media will instead become objects of human dependence, and we may face enslavement by such technologies. When educational media are used unrestrainedly, educators, as media operators, may unconsciously manage, number, and grade humans as "things."

#### 4. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of critical theory, this study reveals that contemporary education is increasingly permeated by the logic of reification, whereby humans are reduced to functional, symbolic, and calculable "things." Educational formalism empties humanistic ideals of their substantive meaning, symbolic coding transforms education into a mechanism of class reproduction, and the unrestrained integration of digital media further erodes human subjectivity. Under the combined influence of efficiency-oriented governance, power intervention, and technological mediation, education is alienated from its original purpose of cultivating free and complete human beings, instead becoming an instrument for producing compliant individuals adapted to external standards, symbols, and algorithms.

In response to this crisis of human alienation, the study argues for a return to an educational orientation centered on human subjectivity, justice, and spiritual development. Reclaiming education's humanistic essence requires breaking through formalism, restraining the excessive operation of power, and rationalizing the use of educational media under value-guided principles. Only by reaffirming the ideal of the all-round and free development of human beings can education resist reification and restore its role in enabling individuals to achieve self-transcendence, autonomy, and meaningful participation in social life.

To avoid the risk of being reified by various media, two key measures are required:

First, educators must uphold the "people-oriented" educational ideology and strive to promote the all-round development of humans and the exertion of their learning potential. The "all-round development of humans" is a continuously generative process in interaction with society. For education to conform to human nature, it must respect "humans' pursuit of freedom, independence, and subjectivity." Most crucially, it is necessary to enable humans to both flourish in creative activities of self-transcendence, enrich their inner worlds, and always maintain a pure and kind original nature.

Second, every individual in society must use media rationally, becoming masters of media rather than being constrained by it. This requires individuals to always uphold a sense of responsibility and normative awareness, take value rationality as the guide to correctly use media to empower themselves, and apply media in life and production from a rational perspective prescribed by practice.

Only by moving from heteronomy to autonomy can humans avoid being influenced by the information disseminated by the media.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Approval:** The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

#### REFERENCES

Baudrillard, J. (1975). *The mirror of production* (Vol. 17). St. Louis: Telos Press.  
<https://libraryofagartha.com/Philosophy/Post%20Modernism/Jean%20Baudrillard/92575432-Jean-Baudrillard-the-Mirror-of-Production-1975.pdf>

Wang, S., Yao, J. & Cai, Q. (2025). The loss and return of education from the perspective of "Human alienation by things". *International Journal of Innovative Research in Education*, 12(2), 106-116. <https://doi.org/10.18844/ijire.v12i2.9880>

Bourdieu, P. (2004). State Nobility: Elite Universities and the Spirit of the Corporation (Trans. by Yang Yaping). Beijing: The Commercial Press, 50.

Debord, G. (2012). *Society of the Spectacle*. Bread and Circuses Publishing.

Dong, H. J., & Liu, H. Y. (2022). Equity and Efficiency: The Phased Evolution of China's Educational Development (1949—2022). *Social Sciences Journal*, (04), 48–58.

Etzrodt, C. (2024). Max Weber's rationalization processes disenchantment, alienation, or anomie?. *Theory and Society*, 53(3), 653-671. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11186-024-09554-7>

Hu, Y. M., & Yao, Q. (2022). Metaverse: Meta-Media, Non-Autonomous Interaction and the Singularity of Subjectivity Evolution. *Studies in Culture & Art*, 15(01), 56–64.

Hu, Z. P. (2005). A New Analysis of the Connotation of "All-Round Development of Humans". *Educational Research*, (05), 3–8.

Jin, S. H. (1997). Understanding and Education: An Introduction to Educational Philosophy Toward Philosophical Hermeneutics. Beijing: Educational Science Press, 41, 56.

Li, X. Y., Ruan, H. M., & Tang, D. H. (2020). Why Should Education Be People-Oriented: Not a Self-Evident Question. *Heilongjiang Research on Higher Education*, 38(11), 11–15.

Lukács, G. (1972). *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. MIT Press. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Sfcylislu4gC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Georg+Luk%C3%A1cs++History+and+Class+Consciousness&ots=OqKEvE9aVz&sig=tKL89tTOd62L0\\_dA\\_mASfAzM\\_ss](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Sfcylislu4gC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Georg+Luk%C3%A1cs++History+and+Class+Consciousness&ots=OqKEvE9aVz&sig=tKL89tTOd62L0_dA_mASfAzM_ss)

Marcuse, H. (2013). *Towards a Critical Theory of Society: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 2* (Vol. 2). Routledge. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=4cPKBgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Herbert+Marcuse,++capitalist+society+&ots=RRImDvOzaa&sig=h8LOnSQfFW7\\_kToaDFKnC2NhmRw](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=4cPKBgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Herbert+Marcuse,++capitalist+society+&ots=RRImDvOzaa&sig=h8LOnSQfFW7_kToaDFKnC2NhmRw)

Marx, K. (2000). Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 58.

Marx, K. (2004). Capital (Vol. 1). Beijing: People's Publishing House, 93.

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1995). Collected Works of Marx and Engels (Vol. 2) (Compiled and Translated by the Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China for Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin Works). Beijing: People's Publishing House, 138–139.

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2009). Collected Works of Marx and Engels (Vol. 1). Beijing: People's Publishing House, 189.

Mumby, D. K. (1988). Communication and power in organizations: Discourse, ideology, and domination. <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130282269724486912>

Rousseau, J. J. (1959). Discourse on the Sciences and Arts (Trans. by He Zhaowu). Beijing: The Commercial Press, 9.

Shim, S. H. (2025). Resonance as an educational response to alienation and acceleration in contemporary society. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 26(3), 567-579. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12564-022-09814-0>

Steinmann, M. (2022). Alienation in a world of data. Toward a materialist interpretation of digital information technologies. *Philosophy & Technology*, 35(4), 99. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13347-022-00595-3>

Sun, Y. G. (2012). Lukács' Theory of Reification Critique and Reflections on Contemporary Educational Philosophy. *Journal of Nanjing Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, (04), 69–76.

Sun, Y. G., & Sun, A. Z. (2001). Subjective Education: Reification and Humanization. *Education Exploration*, (11), 26–27.

Wang, S., Yao, J. & Cai, Q. (2025). The loss and return of education from the perspective of "Human alienation by things". *International Journal of Innovative Research in Education*, 12(2), 106-116. <https://doi.org/10.18844/ijire.v12i2.9880>

Wu, Y. F. (2015). Educational Justice: A "Noble" Lie in Modern Society: The "Ancient-Modern Transformation" and "Ancient-Modern Controversy" of Educational Justice. *Fudan Education Forum*, 13(02), 5–10.

Wu, Y. Y., & Shen, H. (2022). Differences in Class Codes, Academic Performance, and Educational Reproduction. *Fudan Education Forum*, 20(04), 48–58.

Zhai, B. (2012). People-Oriented Education Is a Profound Reform and Ideological Innovation in Educational Thought. *China Education News*.

Zhang, T. Y. (2008). Social Symbolization: A Study of Baudrillard's Later Thought from a Marxist Perspective (Vol. 3). Beijing: People's Publishing House.

Zhang, Y. (2005). Culture and Symbolic Power.

Zhang, Z. Y., & Hu, Z. P. (2015). The Triple Obscuration and Clarification of Educational Humanization. *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences Edition)*, 33(02), 1–9.