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Interpreting Digital Capitalism as a Modern Myth through Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

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ABSTRACT

This study interprets digital capitalism as a modern myth by employing Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, thereby offering a philosophical reflection on the role of digitality within contemporary cultural contexts. Cassirer emphasizes that human beings are essentially symbolic animals who apprehend the world through symbolic forms, which structure how reality is constructed, mediated, and interpreted. In the digital age, capitalism operates as an economic and dominant symbolic form that organizes human perception and meaning-making processes. Within Cassirer's framework, digital capitalism can be read as a modern myth because it performs a symbolic conversion mechanism: transforming experiences, relationships, and cultural values into commodities for capital accumulation. Although it emerges from a rational and scientific discourse, this myth continues to assert itself by establishing cultural hegemony in digital life. The study argues for the urgency of developing symbolic literacy to unveil the mythic structures of digital capitalism critically and for creating alternative cultural spaces rooted in dialogue and intersubjective relations. Such efforts are necessary to foster critical awareness and resist the totalizing influence of capitalist myth in shaping digital reality.

Keywords: digital capitalism, modern myth, Ernst Cassirer, philosophy of symbolic forms, symbolic literacy

INTRODUCTION

Digitalization is one of the defining events of contemporary history, not simply as a technological advance but as a cultural transformation that reconfigures human existence. By turning activities, bodies, spaces, and temporalities into data that can be processed, measured, and monetized (Franklin, 2015: p. 8), digitalization has become the infrastructure of a new form of capitalism (Blankendaal-Tran et al., 2023; Schiller, 1999: p. xiv; Fuchs, 2022: pp. 25–26). This digital capitalism manifests in diverse configurations – network capitalism (Fisher, 2010), platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), data capitalism (Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge, 2018), and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).

Beyond technological and economic drivers, digital capitalism also operates through ideological forces embedded in everyday life (Fisher, 2010: p. 22). These forces integrate individuals into the digital ecosystem while concealing underlying economic interests, most visibly through the attention economy that commodifies human attention and diminishes critical distance (Citton, 2017: pp. 176–177; Davenport and Beck, 2001: pp. 5, 20).

Existing scholarship has illuminated the structural, economic, and political aspects of digital capitalism, but less attention has been given to its symbolic dimension – how it produces meaning, directs collective attention, and

conceals power through mythic narratives. Following Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms (1955a: pp. 69, 80), we argue that digital capitalism should be understood not merely as an economic configuration but as a modern myth: a symbolic mode of thought that integrates science, technology, and ideology into a shared cultural horizon (Cassirer, 1946: p. 286, 1955b: pp. 79–80).

This article thus positions digital capitalism as a mode of thought operating in mythic form, extending existing critiques by situating it within the broader trajectory of human meaning-making.

SYMBOLIC FUNCTIONS IN PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS

Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), a neo-Kantian philosopher, examined the construction of meaning through symbolic systems (Cassirer, 1955a: pp. 60, 80; Matherne, 2021: pp. 28–29; Verene, 1966: p. 555). No raw material apprehended by the human senses possesses immediate meaning in this context. Such materials only acquire meaning within a particular conceptual mode of the world – an ordered network of relations, structures, and laws. Consciousness creates unique symbols for each sensory impression, which are then organized and processed through specific conceptual modes to become meaningful (Cassirer, 1910: pp. 367, 382, 1957: p. 45). Meaning emerges through the spontaneous expression of universal ideas in distinct and concrete forms, mediated by particular conceptual modes (Cassirer, 1955a: p. 78, 1955b: p. 29; Coskun, 2007: p. 157).

Cassirer (1955a: p. 78) described conceptual modes as the autonomous and distinctive paths of the spirit (In German: *Geist*) that actively and creatively shape and generate meaning. He developed this notion (1955a: p. 69) upon recognizing that classical theories of knowledge were insufficient to account for the complexity of the human world. Building on Kant, his method involves analyzing the spiritual structures that shape the various human modes of understanding reality.

Symbolic forms include myth, religion, science, and other autonomous domains that transcend these categories, such as language, history, art, and politics. Human beings, defined as *animal symbolicum*, construct and comprehend the world through symbolic forms (Cassirer, 1944: p. 44), which possess both an irreducible and a teleological character (Matherne, 2021: p. 152). The irreducible nature affirms that each symbolic form manifests its own autonomy, resisting reduction to any other form, as humans use it to construct and interpret reality. The teleological nature indicates a directed progression among symbolic forms towards realizing freedom.

Cassirer (1957) proposes the outlined symbolic function in human consciousness. These consist of three levels: the expressive, the representational, and the pure signification functions. The framework of symbolic functions, summarized in **Table 1**, is irreducible and teleological. Its teleological character refers to the directed maturation of structures of consciousness, rather than a fixed historical sequence of societal development. Within this framework, cultural development creates symbolic forms oriented towards freedom. **Table 1** illustrates the construction of this framework within Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms.

Cassirer conceives myth as serving two primary functions: first, as the earliest symbolic form that arises spontaneously to transform fear and anxiety into collectively meaningful modes, and second, as a vehicle for the return of scientific thought (Savodnik, 2003: pp. 447–448; Verene, 1966: p. 554). Thus, myth is not only a spontaneous expression but can also appear as an artificial symbolic form deliberately designed for specific social or political purposes (Cassirer, 1946: pp. 48, 282). Early myths operate at the expressive and representational levels, where symbols are identical with their meaning and humans are not yet fully conscious of their role as creators of meaning. By contrast, artificial myths – namely modern myths – are consciously developed at the level of pure signification, shaping shared meaning, directing attention, and performing manipulative or organizational functions. Their impact is significant: modern myths are capable of mentally preparing society prior to the occurrence of concrete actions.

In its symbolic function as a meaning-maker, myth encompasses three main aspects: thought, intuition, and life. In thought, reality is presented directly without distinguishing between illusion and truth (Cassirer, 1955b: p. 36). As intuition, it organizes experience through the basic categories of space, time, and number, characterized by the separation between the sacred and the profane (Cassirer, 1955b: p. 81; Moss, 2023: pp. 226–226). Meanwhile, as a form of life, myth emphasizes the magical connection of the individual to the group and the environment (Cassirer, 1955b: p. 157). Mythical consciousness binds individuals into sacred collectivities and is a prerequisite for forming society (Cassirer, 1946: p. 38).

The form of myth continues to evolve through internal contradictions, maintaining its relevance in the modern era (Cassirer, 1955b: p. 235). Myth restores modern scientific consciousness to a mythical mindset when rationality falls short of fulfilling human needs for emotion and meaning, particularly during times of crisis (Cassirer, 1946: p. 278). Cassirer reported the development of modern political myth under the Nazi regime, which manipulatively combined mythical and scientific consciousness in response to the crisis in Germany (Baumgardt, 1947; Peukert, 1989; Strenski, 1984). This myth relies on emotion and imagination through the repetition of promises, the

Table 1. Symbolic functions according to Cassirer

Aspect	Symbolic function		
	Expression	**Representation**	**Pure signification**
Symbolic representation	Mimetic: direct, affective imitation.	Analogic: presentation through similarity; beginning to be reflective, but not entirely so.	Pure symbolism: entirely arbitrary, systemic, and conceptual.
Symbol-meaning relationship	Identical, direct: the symbol is not perceived as distinct from its meaning; there is no reflective distance.	Present as a concrete form: symbols convey meaning through a sensory form; there is a separation between symbol and meaning, yet the relationship remains intuitive mainly.	Arbitrary, conceptually signifying symbols function as signifiers of meaning within an accepted abstract system, with no inherent or natural connection to objects.
Sources of meaning	Emotion and affection: People develop meaning as a spontaneous outpouring of inner states or instinctive reactions.	Intuition and aesthetic perception: People formed meaning from sensory experience processed by the imagination.	Social reflection and Agreement: meaning is formed collectively and rationally, through a system of signs that can be transmitted and analyzed.
Meaning as	Affective presence: meaning is experienced rather than intellectually grasped; the concept is emotional and directly compelling.	Intuitive presentation: People convey meaning through form, which remains within direct experience, and is not entirely conceptual.	Conceptual signification: meaning is logically represented, enabling abstraction, categorization, and systematization.
Human position	Not realizing their role as creators of meaning, they passively accept the world in its given state. The world expects humans to adapt.	Beginning to recognize the relationship between form and reality, although not yet fully aware that these forms are constructed or created.	Humans fully realize that they can shape reality through symbolic activity. The world "adapts" to human creative abilities.

manipulation of language, and the ritualization of actions, with leaders transformed into figures akin to magicians who determine destiny. The three main elements of political myth include the ideological narrative, mythical actors, and mythical stages realized through linguistic symbolism, the substitution of ideal values, and the reinforcement of the concept of destiny. Modern myths, with their elements and techniques, may arise at specific times and places, shaped by the interests of those who employ them (Cassirer, 1946: pp. 281–284; Krois, 1987: pp. 193–195).

Modern technologies such as radio and film enabled Nazi political myths to succeed by disseminating mythical narratives on a massive scale as collective psychological weapons before the outbreak of physical warfare (Cassirer, 1946: p. 282; Krois, 1987: p. 191). Paradoxically, Ernst Cassirer himself was once involved in the production of political myths during World War I through his work at the *Kriegspresseamt* – the German War Press Office – where he was tasked with selecting and editing news stories from French newspapers to mislead public opinion in Germany (Cassirer, 2016: pp. 119–120). This biographical episode reveals a striking tension: the philosopher who would later become one of the most rigorous critics of political myth had himself participated in its machinery. Such activity illustrates how myth-making operates by steering attention and restricting the scope of human meaning, since actors have pre-selected the experiences to be conveyed. Modern technology, developed within the framework of scientific and technological thought, was thus deployed for power through the symbolic form of myth.

Cassirer (1946: p. 168) argues that modern myth functions by harnessing ideology as a driving force that shapes collective consciousness and cultivates loyalty to leaders and political systems. Ideology, in its operation, imparts a technical dimension to modern myth by structuring the mobilization of emotions and the coordination of social actions. Cassirer (1946: p. 277) describes this as the catalytic effect, in which modern techniques infuse older ideas with renewed and explosive power. In this sense, ideology operates as the catalyst that grants artificial myths in the modern era their effectiveness. The significance of modern myth, therefore, lies not only in its symbolic content but also in the ideological power that strengthens it through what Cassirer terms the techniques of modern myth. Within this Cassirerian framework, digital capitalism may be interpreted as a modern myth.

DIGITAL CAPITALISM AS A MODERN MYTH

Within Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, digital capitalism functions as a mode of thought operating as a modern myth. This mode of thought organizes human experiences of digitality by integrating technology into

every aspect of existence, shaping thought patterns, behavior, and social structures (Lengsfeld, 2019: p. 159) with economic objectives. This section outlines digital capitalism as a modern myth, beginning with crisis as a catalyst, followed by its mythic elements, and concluding with the techniques through which modern myths operate.

Crises and the Emergence of the Myth of Digital Capitalism

From the perspective of the symbolic form of myth, crises function as catalysts for the operation of mythical consciousness. This operation is exemplified in the myth of digital capitalism, which frames crises through the narrative of digital technology as the savior of collective life, particularly within the economic sphere (Chu, 2013; Rochadi, 2021). The three key moments of crisis that triggered the development of this myth include:

- The 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis encouraged reliance on network technology and ICT-based economic recovery (Harvie and Lee, 2003; Sharma, 2003).
- The 2008 financial crisis, which accelerated the shift towards a platform economy by giving rise to digital business innovation and a surge in technology-based freelance labor (Fields, 2022; Rani and Gobel, 2023).
- COVID-19, which reinforced digital dominance through a sharp increase in the use of online services in health, education, and employment, particularly in countries with established digital infrastructures such as China and the US (Ganichev and Koshovets, 2021; Schwarz et al., 2020).

Social and economic crises generate profound stress and fear concerning societal stability. These emotionally charged anxieties open the way for technological solutions, constructed as savior due to their perceived rationality and efficiency. Technology as the answer to global challenges has thus become an ideological narrative, forming the foundation of the myth of digital capitalism. This narrative is produced and disseminated on stages employing modern techniques.

Elements of the Myth of Digital Capitalism

Digital capitalism, understood as myth, comprises three interrelated elements: ideological narrative, mythic actors, and mythic stages. Ideological narrative constructs a worldview by simplifying reality in an emotionally persuasive way. Individuals and institutions generate and disseminate this narrative as mythic actors, while symbolic spaces communicate the narrative to audiences. Together, these elements actively shape, sustain, and transmit the power of digital capitalism.

Techno-solutionism as the spirit of the narrative ideology

Ideological narrative operates through four mechanisms, namely rationalization, legitimation, universalization, and naturalization. Rationalization provides logical and ethical grounds; legitimation builds support; universalization renders an idea a common belief; while naturalization presents an idea as natural and undeniable (Eagleton, 1991: pp. 51–58). This framework explains how ideological narratives articulate and sustain the operation of ideology across different contexts.

Within the myth of digital capitalism, an ideological narrative constructs realities that shape collective perspectives on technological progress, integrating social experiences, values, and beliefs. This narrative expresses the spirit of digital capitalism as a transformation of the classical spirit, emphasizing the peaceful and limitless accumulation of capital (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: p. 4) – ideologization functions to legitimize this context as a valid social order. Normative beliefs in technological solutions drive capital accumulation (Nachtwey and Seidl, 2024: p. 3), which operate through ideological mechanisms.

Techno-solutionism is rooted in Alvin Weinberg's concept of technological fixes, which initially emphasized adapting technology to the practical needs of society through technocratic rhetoric and imaginaries of technology's capacity to address social problems without altering existing structures (Johnston, 2018). Over time, however, this logic has shifted: humans and society must now adjust to the technological solutions that innovators have already devised, rather than expecting technology to adapt to human needs (Sætra, 2023: p. 3).

As the spirit of digital capitalism, techno-solutionism advances technological innovation in the service of capital accumulation (Chua, 2018) and structures forms of public participation (Morozov, 2013). Such participation increases the likelihood of generating solutions. It integrates the public into digital capitalists' interests, as digital capitalists conceal motives of accumulation beneath a narrative of innovation and social engagement (Yeritsian, 2018).

Techno-solutionism thus functions as the ideological narrative of digital capitalism, internalized within the collective consciousness as a form of belief. This spirit is deliberately designed, produced, and disseminated by interested actors to shape understandings of the digital age and to secure the continuation of capital accumulation. These actors constitute the creators and disseminators of digital capitalism.

The mythmakers

Mythmakers articulate human emotions through collective narrative and encapsulate ideological interests (Rhein, 1977: p. 4). Digital capitalism's mythmakers, including individuals and corporations, construct and disseminate techno-solutionism as an ideological narrative. Figures such as Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg are frequently portrayed as patriarchs of digital capitalism (Little and Winch, 2021) and architects of the information age (Curley, 2012). These figures frame the digital realm as a natural and inevitable domain, employing metaphors of the household to legitimize private control over public services – for example, in narratives such as "Facebook as a family business" and the Amazon Household system. Another notable figure is Peter Diamandis, who asserts that technology and entrepreneurship are the world's saviors (Huberman, 2022: pp. 23, 27), even though the underlying logic of capital accumulation remains concealed.

The influence of these individuals operates through large corporate structures, transforming digital capitalism into an institutionalized myth. Major technology companies such as Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Amazon are surveillance capitalists (Huberman, 2021; Zuboff, 2015) and platform capitalists (Srnicek, 2017). This myth is shaped by the symbolic relationship between individual figures and institutions, disseminating an ideological narrative to advance technology and global capital accumulation. The role of digital capitalists in shaping the myth of digital capitalism is as follows:

1) Narrative management and myth communication

Digital capitalists construct myths through narrative management, generating symbolic meanings that frame digital reality in the language of technology, freedom, and innovation. The slogans and mission statements of companies such as Google ("Maximize access to information," "Sell ads, nothing more"), Meta ("Give People a Voice," "Promote Economic Opportunity"), and YouTube ("Everyone deserves to have a voice") project a neutral, inclusive, and progressive image. These statements rationalize data collection and targeted advertising practices as both usual and beneficial. In doing so, they actively provide a symbolic foundation that collaborates constructively with other elements, including the propagators and the platform disseminating the myth.

2) Digital platform design

Digital platform design encompasses both technical and ideological dimensions, shaping system functionality, user experience, and perceptions of the digital and social spheres (Design, 2024; Huang and Krafft, 2024). Researchers identify two principal forms of design: visible design, manifested in interfaces such as buttons, notifications, and social metrics (Ali, 2024; Ruiz et al., 2024); and hidden design, embedded in algorithms, recommendation systems, and data tracking mechanisms that implicitly regulate attention and behavior (Bekos et al., 2023: p. 2132; Chan et al., 2025; Rieder et al., 2018: p. 51). These design strategies operate through affordances, understood as structures that simultaneously enable, constrain, and guide action (Davis and Chouinard, 2016: p. 242).

Artificial Intelligence has become a pivotal element, integrated across design processes to capture attention and construct ideological images of itself as intelligent, approachable, and creative (de la Torre et al., 2024; Hsu and Lee, 2023; Hsieh and Lee, 2024; Yu, 2025). Furthermore, design facilitates networks of domination through interoperability between platforms – for instance, cross-application login – which exemplifies digital capitalist collaboration in pursuing system stability and capital accumulation.

3) Market expansion and dominance

Market expansion and dominance extend the reach of digital capitalism into all aspects of life, establishing its logic as a universal principle of economics, meaning, social relations, and consciousness. Models of the expansion include the following frameworks: a) Monopolies and acquisitions through buy-or-bury strategies that reinforce dominance and create closed ecosystems (Glick and Ruetschlin, 2019; Rahn et al., 2025; Snyder et al., 2024); b) Internal interoperability in form of inter-services within a single corporation, such as Google/Meta, and external interoperability, such as cross-platform access through shared login systems, to reinforce user dependency (Chen and Cui, 2022; Hodapp and Hanelt, 2022; Rehm et al., 2020); c) Expansion of global digital infrastructure in form of satellites, submarine cables, hardware, and software, which increases connectivity and spreads market ideology throughout the social fabric (Bojczuk et al., 2024; Graydon and Parks, 2020; Winseck, 2017); d) Collaboration with the state through subsidies, incentives, or public-private partnerships. Large technology companies employ negotiation strategies in developed countries and dominate regions with lower technological capacity (Bannerman, 2024; Venkatesh, 2021; Young, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

Digital capitalism embeds market logic on a global scale, establishing a power structure that proves difficult to contest. Its myth-making is an ideological mechanism that shapes dominant meanings and values through strategic narrative, technical design, and infrastructure expansion. Internal and external actors contribute to disseminating this narrative until it becomes deeply embedded within public consciousness.

Myth propagators

The myth propagators construct and disseminate an ideological narrative of techno-solutionism to reinforce the myth of digital capitalism. This narrative shapes perceptions of the world, the self, and social relationships as

normal and natural. Analysts categorize such propagators into internal and external groups that interact dynamically.

Internal myth propagators deliberately design and disseminate an ideological narrative through corporate communication strategies. Executives and creative teams articulate progressive visions through algorithms, gamification, and interfaces that embed values of efficiency and connectivity. This narrative is further reinforced through advertising, collaborations, corporate social responsibility, and philanthropy, portraying the company as a positive social force and normalizing digital dominance (Deterding, 2019; Haupt, 2021; Manning et al., 2020; Richey and Fejerskov, 2024; Zheng, 2024).

External myth propagators are actors operating outside official corporate structures who reinforce the myth of digital capitalism. First, they reproduce symbolic representations through content portraying the digital world as a realm of freedom and success, devoid of structural inequalities. Second, such individuals legitimize digital capitalism through scientific, professional, and policy discourses, for instance, in narratives of smart cities or the digital economy. Third, the myth is normalized through everyday practices to reflect the values of digital capitalism, such as hustle culture and the glorification of entrepreneurs (Anglada-Pujol María et al., 2023; Burns and Welker, 2022; Carter, 2016). The extent of their success depends on the symbolic space that enables both internal and external propagators to articulate meaning, shape collective imaginations, and embed ideological values within public consciousness.

The mythical stages

Within mythical stages, communities' express mythical narratives and perform ritualized actions to shape and influence collective perspectives, beliefs, and behavior. In the context of the myth of digital capitalism, these stages comprise both online and offline arenas.

The online stage is the digital symbolic space provided by social media, marketplaces, and work applications, where meaning is constructed and disseminated through user interactions. Algorithms control this space by prioritizing visibility, engagement, and monetization, while mediating visual, affective, and ephemeral narratives. Various platforms construct the myth of digital capitalism per the ideology of techno-solutionism, using algorithms that amplify content consistent with the ideological orientation. Instagram and TikTok emphasize personal success, LinkedIn demonstrates meritocracy, YouTube fosters creativity, and Amazon foregrounds the efficiency of consumerism (Anglada-Pujol María et al., 2023; Christin and Lewis, 2021; Davis, 2017; Duffy et al., 2019; Hoose and Rosenbohm, 2024; Törnberg and Uitermark, 2022).

The offline stage comprises social and institutional spaces beyond the direct control of digital platforms. These spaces shape and reinforce the myth of digital capitalism through normative and ideological means. For example, schools, media outlets, and industry conferences promote a narrative of techno-solutionism regarding digital skills and prominent technology figures (Creech and Maddox, 2024; Droog et al., 2020; Kayyali, 2024; Rikap, 2024; Teräs et al., 2020). These spaces establish the value framework, perpetuating digital dominance while interacting reciprocally with online platforms to reinforce the narrative and performative expectations.

The spread of digital capitalism occurs through mythic techniques that shape and guide ideological narrative to appear natural and undeniable. These techniques embed symbolic domination into collective consciousness and everyday practices through rhetorical, visual, technological, and affective devices.

The Modern Myth Techniques of Digital Capitalism

The modern myth techniques are adaptations of older methods designed to increase the acceptance of digital capitalism as the dominant system of meaning, reinforce narrative, and restrict critical thought. These include the manipulation of language, the ritualization of actions, the substitution of ideal values with concrete images, and the use of the concept of destiny.

The language manipulation

According to Cassirer (1946: p. 282, 1955b: pp. 147–148), language has two principal functions: semantic and magical. The semantic is rational and communicative, whereas the magical is affective and directly influential. In mythic techniques, the latter is concealed behind the former, producing an impression of rationality while remaining manipulative. Language plays a negative role when the concept obscures reality and forecloses the space for criticism. This view aligns with Huberman's (2022: p. 62) analysis of semantic maneuvers and Zuboff's (2019) study of language in disguising capitalist motives.

Digital capitalism exploits the magical function in constructing a narrative of inevitability and progress through the creation or redefinition of terms (Simon, 1971: p. 39). Examples such as the *digital era, digital transformation,* and *digital culture* denote the state of technological innovation, while simultaneously social perceptions that obscure social and economic problems with techno-solutionism.

The term' digital era' refers to the period since the 1970s, characterized by the transition from an industrial to an information society reliant on technology such as computers and the internet (IGI Global, n.d.; Shepherd, 2004). This narrative reinforces the perception that the digital era is a natural and positive stage. Yet, it historically emerged from the crisis of capitalist democracy in the late 1960s and labor's ideological interests (Stocchetti, 2020: pp. 4–5). This narrative expresses the term' digital transformation', a fundamental change driven by technology across various dimensions of society (Gong and Ribiere, 2021). While this term evokes a sense of optimism and technological solutions, it conceals challenges such as digital inequality and technological dependency (Lin et al., 2024; Pratap Singh and Kumar, 2023).

This narrative extends to the 'digital culture' concept, encompassing the values, practices, and behaviors associated with technology (Kerner, 2023). People regard digital culture as usual and progressive, despite the persistence of inequality, superficial interactions, and psychosocial disorders (Moyo, 2009; Pérez-Juárez et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2022).

Accordingly, these terms reinforce the myth of digital capitalism by concealing power relations and social crises beneath a narrative of progress. A wide range of terms associated with digital capitalism contribute to shaping collective consciousness while obscuring the realities of domination. From a mythical perspective, the significance of these terms lies in the emotional atmosphere they foster. The formation of the myth occurs through the manipulation of language and the introduction of new rituals in the form of repeated actions. The ritualization of such actions further consolidates the formation of the myth.

The ritualization of actions

Rituals are central to culture as an institutionalized form of action (McLaren, 1984: p. 272). Furthermore, ritualization techniques intensify the manipulation of language by introducing systematic and widespread patterns of collective action to ensure the internalization of mythical values. Rituals serve integrative and distortive ideological functions through uniform behavior that maintains stability and perceived bodily habits. Cassirer emphasizes that ritualized actions suppress individuality and personal responsibility in favor of togetherness (Cassirer, 1946: p. 285; Krois, 1987: p. 193). This technique establishes repetitive patterns of behavior that serve the interests of digital capitalists.

Digital rituals render individuals socially connected yet leave them solitary (Sen, 2017). These practices constitute technical procedures and social actions that evoke emotions, establish a sense of stability, and foster everyday engagement (Bengtsson and Johansson, 2022; Simpson et al., 2018). As media for constructing meaning, identity, and digital community (Kennedy and Funk, 2023), rituals appear socially meaningful. However, the concept encourages individuals to persist in engaging with the platform, thus serving the interests of mythmakers.

Dimensions of digital ritual encompass salience, repetitiveness, homologousness, and resources (Bartholomew and Mason, 2020: p. 3). Salience refers to the significance of ritual actions in everyday life, particularly in time structure. Digital platforms generate new rhythms – such as morning and evening status updates or the routine monitoring of behavioral metrics (Aledavood et al., 2015; Bengtsson and Johansson, 2022; Breitenstein et al., 2024) – to the extent that rituals become markers of social time (Schnauber-Stockmann and Mangold, 2020). Moreover, repetitiveness automates actions, embedding meaning into bodily habits. Repeated practices establish a stable, traceable, and controlled digital identity (Shaw et al., 2022). Platform design circumscribes these habits by filtering choices to ensure that narratives remain uniform and behaviors stay contained within the ritualistic structure of digital capitalism. Homologousness enables rituals to transform into new forms while retaining relevance in the digital medium, accompanying users throughout the entire life cycle (Samuel, 2016).

Table 2 illustrates the stages of the digital life cycle on a social media platform within the homologous function of ritualization.

The resource dimension refers to the material and technical conditions that enable digital rituals, including infrastructure and user competences (Lybeck et al., 2024; Ragnedda and Ruiu, 2020). Within digital capitalism, ritual participation requires resource access, generating costs and dependencies. This dimension is ideological in framing digital access and concealing the interests of capital accumulation. Furthermore, the dimensions of digital ritual obscure individual responsibility, normalize capitalist values, and ensure that users remain caught in a cycle of material, data, and content consumption.

The substitution of ideal values with concrete images

Values constitute the goals that motivate human life (Lee et al., 2019: p. 19). According to Cassirer (1955a: pp. 75, 147, 301), symbolic relations form values by conferring affective and evaluative meaning. Spurious values, constructed to serve particular interests and subsequently accepted as collective beliefs, have also been noted (Cassirer, 1955a: p. 188).

Values are abstract and are apprehended intuitively (Caminada, 2022), which renders such qualities inconspicuous. This variable is embodied in concrete images to function within the myth of digital capitalism. This

Table 2. Stages of the digital life cycle on social media platforms within the homologous function of ritualization

Stages of digital life	Explanation	Example of digital rituals	Homologous function
1. Initiation	The first stage of entering the digital world is living a digital life.	The initiation stage involve creating a first account, constructing a digital profile (choosing a username, uploading a profile picture, writing a brief self-description, selecting a visual theme, synchronizing with other platform, and setting privacy and notifications), and engaging in initial interaction (making a first post, following other accounts for the first time, joining a group to connect within the digital community, as well as leaving first comment, like, or share).	Such actions shift the meaning of cultural initiation into the form of digital profiling. One may interpret them as the beginning of one's 'presence' and recognition in the digital world.
2. Active life	A productive and consistent phase, characterized by the regular production and consumption of content.	Temporal rituals that reinforce digital identity include posting content at specific times, checking notifications continuously, reviewing metrics via the dashboard repeatedly, celebrating digital achievements (1k followers, 100k views, blue ticks, FYP, golden buttons), consistently curating one's feed, and interacting symbolically through the features provided on the platform.	This stage represents transforming everyday work and social rituals into digital forms that can be shared and monetized.
3. Crisis/ fatigue	A stage of crisis arising from experiences of digital burnout, loss of relevance, shadow banning, or decline in followers.	Rituals include crisis acknowledgement (posting on the feed about one's digital crisis, changing the profile picture to black); digital detox (announcing a break, deactivating the account, deleting apps, ceasing to post); performance evaluation (checking dashboard metrics, analyzing the possibility of shadow banning, deleting content that no longer aligns with the initial identity construction, accessing recovery tutorials); and resurrection (reactivating the account, producing content about the revival, altering content style and feed aesthetics, rewriting self-description, re-engaging with the audience).	This stage represents the transformation of self-purification into a digital ritual of rest, as a form of resistance institutionalized by the system.
4. Farewell	Decision to leave the platform, voluntarily or by compulsion (permanent ban), or upon the account holder's death.	Public farewell rituals (final posts, directing audiences to another platform, archiving content, closing accounts personally or through a designated family member); digital mourning rituals in the event of an account holder's death (audience mourning posts, transforming the account into a digital memorial).	Recasting traditional death rituals or cultural farewells into the narrative of "the death of digital identity".
5. Inheritance/ reincarnation	Post-death stages of digital identity.	Account inheritance rituals following the owner's death (The owner appoints a legacy contact who inherits the account and transforms it into a memorial account); digital reincarnation rituals (opening a new account with a new form, style, and orientation).	Adapting rituals of value inheritance or spiritual transmission into forms of algorithmic transmission designed to sustain engagement within the digital ecosystem.

process transforms values into consumable experiences. While both values and images contribute to the formation of meaning, they possess distinct characteristics that underpin the myth of digital capitalism.

The myth of digital capitalism constructs techno-solutionism as a central value that absorbs and reduces freedom, justice, solidarity, and success into a controlled form. As abstract concepts, such values require transformation into concrete images that the senses can perceive to direct attention. For instance, the image of the digital nomad, the *'internet for all'* logo, emoji hashtags, and the figure of content creators serve to replace the values of freedom (Reichenberger, 2018), justice, solidarity (Santhanam et al., 2019), and success, respectively (Annabell, 2025). Figures such as Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, and Jeff Bezos function as concrete images embodying digital values in human form (Creech and Maddox, 2024; Little and Winch, 2021; Zelinsky, 2024).

Lifestyles, visual symbols, and personal narratives reinforce the illusion that technology solves all human problems. Such techniques enable digital capitalism to reduce moral complexity to the belief that every problem has a technical solution furnished by the authorities.

The use of the concept of destiny

Cassirer (1946: p. 290) characterized the technique of modern myth through the notions of fate and destiny (In German: *Schicksal*). Such narratives quell dissent and consolidate control by projecting promises and a brighter

future within a given political framework. Within the myth of digital capitalism, digital fate and destiny operate as symbolic poles underpinning the master narrative of techno-solutionism (Egan, 2025). Digital fate legitimizes control over individuals through predictive technologies, algorithms, and artificial intelligence, which function without the inclusion of will, and promise transcendence of death through immortal digital identities (Peeters and Schuilenburg, 2021; Savin-Baden et al., 2017). Digital destiny, by contrast, projects a collective future deemed inevitably digitized, wherein technology shapes the course of human life (Dubravac, 2015; Mitra et al., 2024). This technique reinforces the myth of digital capitalism as a dominant system of meaning that presents itself as objective and inevitable, excluding alternatives.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

A critical engagement with digital capitalism, through the lens of Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, requires an inquiry into how meaning is constructed and controlled. Digital capitalism operates through a mythical symbolic mode that blurs the line between representation and reality, so symbols are experienced as lived realities rather than mediated signs. Meaning arises less from rational reflection than from emotional and sensory responses. Attention becomes the primary symbolic resource, with digital platforms intentionally designed to capture and direct it through emotional cues such as likes, notifications, brand imagery, and other visual prompts that provoke instant reactions. This sustained engagement produces a subtle yet persistent form of domination maintained through affective mechanisms. This article responds to these dynamics by advancing three core critiques of digital capitalism: (1) the transformation of symbols into instruments of control and accumulation, (2) the mythical nature of digital capitalism that obscures power relations under the guise of technical neutrality, and (3) the erosion of human autonomy through symbolic automation that undermines reflective freedom.

First, from Cassirer's perspective, symbols that once served as a medium of human liberation have been transformed into instruments of control and accumulation within digital capitalism, as articulated by the concepts of surveillance capitalism and the attention economy. Human experience is datafied and manipulated for behavioral prediction, while attention is commodified through large-scale algorithms and analytics, eroding cognitive freedom and existential reflection (Chisita et al., 2025; de la Torre et al., 2024). The proposal of a Pigouvian tax on attention capture in 2025 underscores the urgency of protecting attention as a collective resource (Belgroun et al., 2025; Cuiñas and Augusto, 2022). Consequently, digital symbols no longer foster critical consciousness but govern it through the logic of efficiency and capitalization, signaling a regression from a humanizing culture toward a regressive symbolic form (Altuna et al., 2013).

The second critique addresses the mythical nature of digital capitalism. Cassirer maintained that myths could assume new forms through techniques and pseudo-rationalities. In digital capitalism, the mythical mindset manifests in algorithms, data, and artificial intelligence as representations of objectivity and truth (Berry, 2025; De Ruvo, 2025; Longo, 2021; Rakowski et al., 2025). Myths direct attention and shape consciousness without critical reflection, concealing power relations beneath the guise of technical neutrality (Pathni, 2023; Phillips-Brown, 2025). Such mythic operations lead digital culture to diverge from Cassirer's ideals of open rationality and emancipation, reinforcing structures of domination rather than fostering liberation.

The final critique highlights the erosion of human autonomy in the digital world. Cassirer's critique of the erosion of human autonomy under digital capitalism – where algorithmic and corporate logics shape preferences, attention, and choices – has gained renewed relevance. Recent studies show that consumer agency must be actively cultivated rather than assumed, that smart wearables turn bodily freedom into productivity infrastructure, and that AI functions as an ideological and commercial artifact that weakens human dignity (Nokhiz and Ruwanpathirana, 2025; Rodríguez Reyes, 2024; Wang, 2025). Research on algorithmic management further reveals how automated control erodes free choice, replacing it with efficient yet authoritarian compliance (Donoghue, 2025). Together, these findings confirm Cassirer's claim that symbolic automation produces a new alienation, where meaning and value are no longer reflectively created by humans but centrally generated by external systems.

Transformative strategies are more viable when pursued from the bottom up, acknowledging the difficulty of redirecting digital culture. Symbolic literacy and critical reflection, cultivated through education, form the foundation for critical-thinking communities and content creators. Their purpose is to equip society with the capacity to read and critique symbolic structures in the digital sphere, thereby fostering a collective awareness capable of guiding digital culture in more ethical and humane directions. Establishing an intersubjective cultural space grounded in art, dialogue, and cultural practice is essential for strengthening shared relations and offering symbolic resistance to the dominance of algorithms and the attention economy. Such a space is a platform for developing counter-myths, where humans remain active creators of meaning. Within the myth of digital capitalism, digital platforms actively shape symbolic relations by demanding sustained attention – precisely as capitalists intend – transforming fleeting focus into a structured form of control.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, digital capitalism is the foundation of a mechanism that absorbs all human cultural achievements. Conceptual modes are reprocessed and redefined as commodities, content, or services marketed through digital platforms. Within the framework of modern myth, digital capitalism operates as a "symbolic conversion machine" that extracts the energy of meaning from all other symbolic forms and reconfigures it through the logic of capital accumulation. Myth becomes a modus operandi that shapes collective experience through specific techniques, achieving the aim of limitless, non-violent capital accumulation. These techniques are primarily symbolic forms designed to reinforce the infrastructure of capital accumulation.

In Cassirer's perspective on the critique of political myths, education, critical literacy, creative communities, and content creators actively shape alternative symbolic spaces, strengthen intersubjective relations, and generate a liberating consciousness. Within the digital ecosystem, individuals ground cultural engagement in mindfulness and reflective awareness rather than surrender it to fleeting attention vulnerable to manipulation. This way, society orients the trajectory of digital culture toward humanizing symbolic representation

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