

SOCIAL-MEDIA (UN)SUPPORTING E-LEARNING AND EDUCATION: REPRODUCING DIGITAL INEQUALITIES AND CULTURAL CAPITAL BEYOND VIRTUAL IDENTITIES

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Abstract. The main aim of this article is to highlight the role of digital tools and social-media in reproducing two phenomena closely criticized by Bourdieu, the rise of *cultural capital* – partially shaped by knowledge and educational contents – and the reproduction of *social inequalities*. As Bourdieu is canonical for the sociology and philosophy of education, rarely his name is linked with *digital sociology*. Therefore, one of the main outcomes of this research is to emphasize how Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital might be rightfully engaged in tailoring the meanings of digital inequalities, emerging from social inequalities, especially within virtual educational ecosystems.

Keywords: social inequalities; digital inequalities; cultural capital; digital capital; virtual identity; social-media; education

From cultural capital to digital capital, a necessary shift

The dynamics of modern societies has at its heart at least three human attitudes: *homo ludens* (Huizinga 2016), which is the most playful instinct towards culture, *homo faber* (Frisch 2006), a concept coined by Bergson as pillar of mankind's creative evolution and engaged by Arendt and Scheler to depict the control of tools in securing welfare, and *homo digitalis*, the subject of the Big Data and social-network era. It seems that the latter combines playfulness and technicality in raising a particular form of culture, embedding ideals of progress, fast knowledge and comfort, achieved through technical instrumentality. The fact that we find new media art (Șerban 2022), e-learning techniques and artificial intelligence as key-elements that quantify progress within digital societies is an optimistic narrative that competes with the pessimistic perspective on compromised authenticity, spread of superficial mass-culture and anti-social attitudes of individuals who spend their time unequally, rather preferring virtual realities instead of *in situ* cohesions.

The main aim of this article is to evaluate the forms of cultural capital raised by homo digitalis and to critically undertake the role of digital capital in constituting a new form of *skholè*.

First, let's take a look at the possibilities of understanding digital capital as a form of cultural capital. Bourdieu's article from 1986 evaluates forms of capital that have been (re)produced along a social, accumulated history. Generally, we define capital as "accumulated labour" (Bourdieu 1986, p. 248), achieved through both subjective forces (*vis insita*) and responses to normative patterns of our world (*lex insita*). Bourdieu observes that any form of capital has genealogically the capacity to produce profit and to reproduce itself in various structures, as long as we perform *interested* actions (and by this, economic capital appears) or *disinterested* actions (from which cultural capital emerges).

Capital has a taxonomy that considers and embeds forms of capital convertible to money and occasionally institutionalized as property rights – meaning *economic capital*; forms of capital potentially, but not necessarily convertible to money and in certain conditions to educational calcifications – understood as *cultural capital*, and forms of capital that are rarely convertible to economic capital and might be institutionalized as titles of nobility, namely *social capital* or a set of connections. As we see, digital capital lacks from this taxonomy, mainly due to the historical time when Bourdieu wrote his article and the internet was far from being what it is today, the purest form of globalism and the most accessible resource for sharing knowledge. Nevertheless, digital capital appears to be anticipated by the interference of cultural and social capital. Somehow, the layers of cultural capital can also be applied to digital capital: there is *the embodied state*, meaning "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu 1986, p. 249) – equivalent to our digital abilities, *the objectified state*, reducible to cultural goods – equivalent to digital knowledge, and *the institutionalized state*, understood as structures, credentials or qualifications – equivalent to digital certifications. In what concerns the social capital, we must recall that for Bourdieu, it has the function "to form and inform those who undergo a common name (a family, a class, a tribe, a school, a party)" (Bourdieu 1986, p. 249). Social capital emerges from the size of a network of connections and is maintained, respectively reproduced, through a continuous exchange of symbolic goods. Therefore, social capital secures not only material profits, but also symbolic profits, "such as those derived from association with a rare, prestigious group" (p. 249). As we see, nowadays, enhancing social capital through social-media becomes a matter of privilege – whenever someone includes you in a certain community, whenever you receive the badge of active member within a social-media group or that of a fan for an official page, it seems that the virtual selection of human resources requires meritocratic standards, but also "durable obligations subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship)" or institutionally guaranteed (rights)". (p. 249) One of the visionary perspectives of Bourdieu was that of considering cultural goods under the Arrow effect, meaning that

any cultural good and “any objects shaped by man, particularly all those which belong to the childhood environment – exert an educative effect by their mere existence, is no doubt one of the structural factors behind the schooling explosion in the sense that a growth in the quantity of cultural capital accumulated in the objectified state increases the educative effect automatically exerted by the environment” (Bourdieu 1986, pp. 255 – 256). If we would apply these considerations on digital capital we will immediately observe that as the embodied digital capital might increase (slightly overcoming social inequalities that keep such evolution apart), educational systems might upgrade their list of competencies and implicitly might offer new qualifications required for a digital society. As Bourdieu observes,

“If one adds to this the fact that embodied cultural capital is constantly increasing, it can be seen that in each generation, the educational system can take more for granted. The fact that the same educational investment is increasingly productive is one of the structural factors of the inflation of qualifications (together with cyclical factors linked to effects of capital conversion)” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 256).

It might seem that virtualizing educational ecosystems was the cleverest decision in times of pandemics: it became a necessary, long-lasting investment, that connected people, provided fast access to resources and enhanced academic networking, although these achievements came with the costs of higher risks for property rights and for privacy. In fact, the most vulnerable trajectory embraced by the forced digitalization of educational ecosystems is represented by the accelerated reproducing of social inequalities by digital capital and e-learning. In what follows, I will try to draw some perspectives on this phenomenon that lead to a critical understanding of digital capital as core of a new *skholè*.

The era of a new *skholè*: digital capital in post-pandemic times. Reproducing social inequalities

Ignatow and Robinson (2017) consider that Bourdieu’s critical insights on the role of our natural aptitudes and abilities to (re)produce knowledge and expand our cultural capital are highly valuable when it comes to understanding our capacities of being digital and, therefore, accumulating information or digital capital. Moreover, they plea for a new and legitimate form of capital, namely *digital capital*, coined by Hamelink (2000) and further explored by Van Dijk (2005), synthesized as “technical skills”, “evaluation abilities”, “information-seeking motivation” and “the capacity for implementation” (Van Dijk 2005, pp. 72 – 73). Dealing with our virtual identities also includes tailoring and fashioning a digital self that transgresses our values, beliefs and, most importantly, our online behaviours. In the end, “the constitution of digital subjects, as well as their interactions, should be defined in terms of processes” (Şerban 2016, p. 165). However, even though, at a first glimpse, digital capital is merely related to social capital, given the high potential of networks to reproduce and expand social circles and acquaintances, in fact, cultural implications are higher than the social ones.

Surfing the internet is part of the epistemic development that we are exposed to in the era of instant information – but our transgressive attitudes depend on the level of online-skills. Habermas (1968) would say that the greatest challenge nowadays is to convert *information* to *knowledge* – a seizure reflecting one of the deepest crisis of modernity, whose echo becomes the era of fake-news and post-truth. Moreover, different levels of techno-capital reveal that the digital divides: this pandemic reflected how financial and social inequalities – conceived through the lack of digital resources – have been doubled by epistemic inequalities – once education adopted paradigms of remote work and e-learning. As virtual environments became competitive fields for students, professors have not been excused by digital gaps and vulnerabilities. Seniors are rarely technical and eager to overcome minimal levels of online communication, whereas millennials innovate as much as possible to develop new platforms and safe digital ecosystems for students. Somehow, the pandemic revealed that all the efforts of academic institutions to continue lifelong learning for professors through digital classes were desperate means to peach the extension of digital capital not only as possibility to improve communication skills for human capital and to plea for accepting virtual environments are incentives for social inclusion and gratification, but also sustainable processes to educate new behaviours for progressist societies: virtual dialogues and reactions, means for dissemination, access to epistemic resources that digitally are easily affordable but materially confront scarcity. Going digital during this pandemic also meant a boom of educational groups hosted by different platforms of social-media. Such trends imposed performing new forms of *habitus* that led to expressing judgements of taste and critical reactions (*like, dislike*), creating content that has to be slightly modified from its core-academic shape to be catchy for virtual audiences, searching for new paths to raise interest for different resources or information. Socializing for the sake of education became a new trend seeking to coherently correlate information, human resources and discretionary interests.

A new *skholè* emerged (Ingatow, Robinson 2017, p. 955), based on these new virtual behaviours, types of *habitus* and values blending an online social cohesion. However, the greatest challenge in this context is not to explore types of *habitus*, nor to understand new fields of virtual interaction, but to target the real effects of digital inequality, emerging from what we might call “classes” of users (see Selwyn, Hefernann 2022).

According to Gómez (2020), there is no doubt that economic capital upholds the greatest role in accelerating digital inequality, and their complementarity can be easily understood given the following interdependencies:

“Cultural capital is transformed into DC through people’s techno-socialization, while social capital is converted into DC by means of social practices and social support. DC can be retransformed into each of the three main forms of capital: to economic capital by means of professional networking and access to goods; to cultural capital through access to knowledge; and into social capital by the differential management of social ties.” (Gómez 2020)

But let's take each form of capital at one time. On the one hand, cultural capital is linked with behaviour, habits, values and principles – consequently, it tends to ground morally different types of knowledge and to expand them considering opportunities raised by gender, religion, intangible heritage (see Șerban 2023). Interacting with people online means defying regional boundaries and accelerating cultural exchanges through social-media platforms. One might say that the Internet is already a multicultural society that pretends to be a sort of cosmopolitanism and a virtual federalism, stating that as long as we do not hurt ourselves and others, this can be a safe, eternal peaceful environment – calling for a Kantian utopia – to perform different social roles. Nonetheless, not all our contacts really expand our cultural capital – sometimes we are connected with people that we do not know and with whom we do not interact – Facebook or LinkedIn are examples of platforms that do not necessarily instantly increase our social capital. The fact that virtual friends cannot be capitalized as real friends is still a vulnerability that reflects mechanisms of social reproduction being illusive.

On the other hand, digital capital pretends virtual interaction starting from real social connections that prolong online; we begin to exchange content, information, impressions, and sooner or later we pretend to be part of virtual “communities”, coagulating individuals with similar interests, values and convictions. Social-media becomes in all its forms a *commonwealth* that mirrors offline economic status and social relationships. People start connecting online by reproducing real contacts through virtual interactions. From one point, they start to follow influencers, models, unknown, but sympathized individuals or profiles suggested by algorithms that tend to increase our community – it happened to us, not once, to receive recommendations from Facebook such as “it might happen to know X” or updates such as “Your contact from Facebook is now on Instagram”. One way or another, we tend to reproduce social relationships as virtual contacts and then we tend to add social capital, as much as possible, without necessarily performing a real meeting. Regardless of the sustainability of these relationships, digital capital seems to affect our interaction: a more challenging and aestheticized profile might attract more followers.

However, we see that educational influencers nowadays tend to increase their reputation and popularity by extending their online social capital, but as much as they continue to extend their cultural capital, they proportionately increase the related digital capital. According to Ragneta et al (2022), digital capital is made of competences and accesses: their correspondence procures “individual life chances” (see Weber 1949), to improve knowledge and academic rank.

As we know from Bourdieu, cumulability and transformability are core-pillars of any form of cultural capital (Ignatow & Robinson 2017, p. 952). Consequently, digital capital remains dependent on time, in what concerns its accumulation, and it will always be quantifiable either directly, through aptitudes, skills and digital knowledge, or indirectly, by tracking its reproduction to social and economic capital and the emergent digital inequalities.

In what concerns the role of digital capital and reproducing social inequalities within the realm of education, there are five core-theses that I have identified as consistent and relevant in explaining such phenomena.

(Thesis 1). Regardless of the level of digital capital achieved, it is never an inner guarantee to complete inclusion in academic life.

Seale (2013) rightfully observes that nowadays we live in the era of digital natives. This *Net generation* might be very skilful, but digital abilities are irrelevant as long as there is no sustainable access provided to exercise *digital habitus*. As universities educate wisdom, the internet educates confidence. First, it strengthens the attitude of not fearing technology, as it might harm privacy and expose you to blame, exclusion or hate speech. Secondly, using technology to express personal evaluations contributes to self-esteem. However, academic groups seek to promote their research through different networks: as long as digital capital provides contacts, individuals will have to engage beliefs, values, attitudes and knowledge that go way beyond digital spheres. Therefore, digital capital can hardly provide exclusion but has the capacity to barely support inclusion.

(Thesis 2) Digital capital is a subversive form of knowledge that educates individual judgments of taste and exercises of autonomy and liberty.

Ignatow and Robinson (2017) argue that “the enactment of a ‘taste for the necessary’ is ultimately counterproductive and reinforces disadvantage”. Whenever you engage in digital content, you have to reasonably consider such content at least relevant, if not necessary, for the public spheres, given the contingency with other daily topics. Posting online means internalizing information, engaging critical attitudes, performing task-oriented informational dissemination, considering digital cultivation. Being banned by a community, having your content underscored and not approved by a group, being disliked or considered off topic represent behaviours and attitudes that implicitly create a sense of belonging, require critical reflection in what concerns our judgments of taste and their *disputatio*, and impose a particular agreement between our inner convictions and autonomous deliberations and the norms digitally imposed by a public sphere.

(Thesis 3). As digital capital shapes the ‘taste for the necessary’, such a trend might be ultimately counterproductive, reinforcing disadvantages (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017, p. 955).

In this regard, social inequalities appear to predetermine the taste for the digital. Those who have been digitally alphabetized from early ages tend to internalize the use of the internet as a part of a larger educational puzzle invested in their vocational study, whereas students belonging to lower classes, with less digital infrastructure, tend to ignore the internet as a core-pillar of their education. Poverty and social vulnerabilities directly influence digital habitus. Reconsider, for example, Camus’s confession that playing football used to be the most accessible hobby for his social class, and most probably this is why everything he knows about ethics has been learned from football.

There were no other affordable hobbies, because there was no discretionary income to be invested in it. Upper-middle class do have digital habitus but as they consider the use of the internet indispensable, they might engage the internet not only as a primary tool for entertainment and socializing, but also as an exclusive means for it. Consequently, the taste for the necessary digitalization might flood social practices and forms of lifestyle in which the internet should not dominate.

(Thesis 4). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *skholè*, we might find out that surfing the internet is not only in terms of time and resources, but also in terms of access and attitude, considered an investment.

Some people consider that the world wide web is a hyperbolic carrefour of information. Everything you need to find out is on the internet, the only thing left is to find out how to process information and how to convert it to knowledge. However, in education, we observe that the internet provides access to resources confronted with a scenario of scarcity. Articles accessible only from a particular data basis, mainly counter-cost, material shared only within virtual communities, valuable resources that rarely become accessible from home. Digital capital reveals that if internet users do not have struggles to access information, they “do not experience emotional costs or stress associated with budgeting their internet time” (Robinson 2009, p. 509). In the same time, the use of the internet in informal learning means understanding better time as a valuable resource in the midst of the shift between real and virtual environments. If you are less digitally alphabetized, you have to spend more time surfing the internet and select the relevant and useful information. Therefore, using the internet has both benefits and disadvantages wrapped in time-costs. The more you are a digital person, the more you will have an appetite for virtual environments; the less you have digital skills, the more you will seek to engage virtual resources into your education, as they become hostile resources.

(Thesis 5). Digital capital involves two core-attitudes: that of *homo faber*, supported by material infrastructure and digital skills, and that of *homo ludens*, developed by the playful character of e-learning.

According to Robinson,

“Their surfing sessions fall into the category of ‘gratuitous game’ or *skhole*, a category of activity that Bourdieu (1994) analyses in terms of Plato’s idea, ‘to play seriously’. According to Bourdieu, *skhole* is the disposition to invest oneself in activities that may seem wasteful to those who have not been liberated from urgency and necessity” (Robinson, 2009, p. 504)

In these terms, the taste for the necessary reappears, but, mediated by these two attitudes. On the one hand, the *homo faber* discriminates between primary and tangential resources, it develops tastes for tools that facilitate virtual behaviours and digital actions, preferences for certain products, networks, and data basis. On the other hand, as *homo faber* becomes more accommodated in virtual environments, *homo ludens* will begin to feel authenticity, freedom and self-fashioning processes being more natural and easily

to be achieved. Digital capital will perform a *skholè* model based on learning by doing, on serious entertainment and virtual creativity, but it might be less efficient for real socializing and emotional self-understanding.

Conclusions: the class expression of *homo digitalis*

One of the most important aspects drawn from this article is the capacity of *homo digitalis* to express a social-status. Virtual societies are class-societies: *homo digitalis* is the result of time and resources investments in digital alphabetization, in electronic bureaucracy, and fast e-learning. Social media becomes, in these terms, a tool that reproduces social capital engaged in digital knowledge and interactions, but keeping the same class-parameters. Sometimes, it might falsify the appearances of social-class belonging, it might offer a false impression on the authenticity of virtual users. However, it keeps individuals gathered in virtual commonwealths that reproduce, at their turn, the same social prejudgments, stereotypes and behaviours influenced by the level of education corresponding to each social class. Consequently, *homo digitalis* is the obvious proof that class-society is unavoidable and that its embodied inequalities can be massively and faster than ever be reproduced in virtual educational ecosystems.

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