

Class Conflict in the Era of Consumerism: Proletarian Resistance to the Bourgeois Market Logic

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Abstract

In contemporary capitalism, consumerism operates not only as a lifestyle pattern but also as a subtle mechanism of class domination that reshapes how exploitation and resistance are experienced. This study aims to analyze how bourgeois market logic obscures class conflict through consumption, datafication, and media culture, while proletarian resistance emerges in dispersed and hybrid forms across digital, cultural, and consumer spaces. A qualitative approach using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was employed, examining peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2021 and 2025 from multidisciplinary sources in political economy, sociology, and cultural studies. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns linking consumer culture, transformed exploitation, and new resistance practices. The findings reveal that consumerism normalizes inequality by commodifying identity and attention, while digital platforms intensify algorithmic control over labor and consumption. At the same time, resistance appears through anti-consumption movements, digital collectivism, financial activism, and the creation of alternative communicative spaces. The discussion shows that class conflict persists but is relocated from traditional workplaces to market, media, and digital arenas. In conclusion, understanding contemporary class struggle requires recognizing how everyday consumption becomes a site of domination and how proletarian resistance adapts within and against the structures of bourgeois market logic.

Keywords: Consumerism; Class conflict; Proletarian resistance; Digital capitalism; Bourgeois market logic.

1. Introduction

Contemporary capitalism is increasingly characterized by the dominance of consumer culture, where social relations, identity, and value are mediated through market transactions. In this advanced stage of capitalism, consumerism does not merely represent a lifestyle choice but operates as a subtle and pervasive mechanism of class domination. Human subjectivity, affective relations, and social recognition are commodified, transforming individuals into market-oriented beings whose worth is measured by their capacity to consume (Khanal, 2025; Bziker, 2021). The spectacle of consumption produced by mass media, entertainment industries, and digital platforms diverts attention from the structural realities of labor exploitation, stabilizing capitalist relations by generating compliant and consumption-driven subjects (Borba et al., 2025). In this context, the working class is no longer positioned solely as a producer of surplus value but is simultaneously constructed as a consumer whose



participation in the market helps reproduce bourgeois dominance (Mondal, 2021; Bziker, 2021).

This phenomenon presents a critical research problem: class conflict in contemporary society becomes increasingly obscured as consumerism normalizes inequality and masks exploitation behind the promise of lifestyle, choice, and aspiration. The classical imagery of proletarian exploitation in factories is replaced by a diffuse, everyday form of subordination embedded in consumption practices, debt dependence, digital engagement, and aspirational living. As a result, class antagonism appears less visible, even though exploitation persists in transformed forms. This creates a paradox in which the proletariat actively participates in the very market logic that sustains its subordination. Understanding this paradox is essential to reinterpreting class conflict in the era of consumerism.

The transformation of exploitation in neoliberal market societies further complicates the picture of class relations. Neoliberal restructuring, financialization, and the expansion of service and platform economies have generated what scholars describe as the precariat: a fragmented, insecure, and often highly educated working class facing unstable employment and limited social protection (Bailey et al., 2021; Rimal, 2025; Dorschel, 2022). Exploitation has shifted from the classical industrial factory to digital labor and algorithmic control, where workers are governed by data metrics, ratings, and opaque platform rules. This condition, referred to as the rise of *Homo Datum*, reflects a new form of digital proletarianization in which labor, behavior, and identity are commodified through datafication (Rimal, 2025; Artinian, 2023; Dorschel, 2022).

At the same time, exploitation extends into everyday life through wage labor, small commodity production, and unpaid reproductive labor, particularly affecting working-class women who experience what has been termed “triple exploitation” at the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy (Baglioni, 2021; Pattenden, 2024). Processes of dispossession, including land grabbing and neoliberal urbanization, convert peasants into wage laborers and semi-proletarians while simultaneously producing a middle-class consumer base that sustains commodity circulation (Mondal, 2021). Thus, consumerism is not separate from exploitation; rather, it functions as a mechanism that reproduces and legitimizes it.

Despite these transformations, class conflict has not disappeared. Instead, it manifests in new and hybrid forms of resistance. Post-crisis protest movements across multiple countries reveal that working-class mobilization has expanded beyond traditional labor unions to include anti-austerity protests, precariat movements, and cross-issue activism involving ecological, racial, and gender justice (Bailey et al., 2021; Bieler & Nowak, 2021). In the Global South, resistance appears in labor struggles within global value chains and in women’s resistance to the combined pressures of patriarchy and capitalist exploitation in horticultural and agrarian sectors (Dieng, 2024; Stevano, 2021; Baglioni, 2021; Pattenden, 2024).

Cultural and symbolic resistance also plays a significant role. Literary and cultural studies demonstrate a shift from false consciousness to class awareness, where narratives expose paternalistic forms of exploitation disguised as generosity and social care (Rebello & Lourdasamy, 2025; Nurkholis et al., 2025). In digital workplaces, communicative labor resistance emerges through online campaigns, digital unions, and grassroots organization that combine professional identity, communication tactics, and collective action to challenge precarious labor conditions (Salamon, 2022). These patterns indicate that proletarian resistance persists but in forms dispersed across economic, cultural, and digital arenas.

The research phenomenon emerging from these dynamics is that class conflict in the era of consumerism becomes more subtle, fragmented, and culturally embedded, making it less

recognizable through classical Marxist lenses that focus primarily on factory-based exploitation and unionized resistance. While numerous studies examine consumer culture, digital labor, precarity, and social movements separately, there is limited integrative analysis connecting these phenomena within a coherent framework of contemporary class conflict. This represents a significant research gap.

Existing literature tends to treat consumerism as a cultural issue, digital labor as a technological issue, and social resistance as a political issue. Rarely are these dimensions analyzed together as interconnected aspects of bourgeois market logic and proletarian resistance. Moreover, much of the research on class conflict still relies on traditional industrial contexts, overlooking how market rationality penetrates everyday life and reshapes subjectivity, identity, and forms of domination (Khanal, 2025; Borba et al., 2025). This gap prevents a comprehensive understanding of how capitalism reproduces class domination through consumption while simultaneously generating new forms of resistance.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach that connects consumerism, transformed exploitation, and hybrid proletarian resistance within the framework of contemporary capitalism. Rather than viewing consumerism merely as a cultural phenomenon, this study conceptualizes it as a structural mechanism of class domination that obscures exploitation and stabilizes capitalist relations. Simultaneously, it highlights how new forms of resistance arise within and against this consumerist logic, particularly through digital activism, cross-issue movements, and cultural critique.

This study also contributes by expanding the understanding of class conflict beyond the workplace to include everyday consumption practices, digital environments, and socio-cultural arenas. By synthesizing insights from political economy, cultural studies, and labor sociology, it offers a broader perspective on how bourgeois market logic operates and how the proletariat resists it in contemporary contexts. Therefore, based on the phenomena, research gap, and theoretical integration presented, the objective of this study is to analyze how consumerism in contemporary capitalism functions as a new form of class domination and how proletarian resistance emerges in hybrid and dispersed forms across economic, cultural, and digital spheres.

2. Method, Data, and Analysis

This study employs a qualitative design using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine how consumerism in contemporary capitalism functions as a new mechanism of class domination and how proletarian resistance emerges in dispersed and hybrid forms across economic, cultural, and digital spheres. The SLR approach is chosen to synthesize theoretical and empirical findings from multidisciplinary sources in political economy, sociology, cultural studies, and labor studies. Data collection was conducted through a structured search of international academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and reputable indexed journals. The keywords used in various combinations included “consumerism,” “class domination,” “proletarian resistance,” “digital labor,” “precariat,” “neoliberalism,” and “commodity culture.” Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2021 and 2025, written in English, that explicitly discussed consumer culture, labor transformation, class relations, and resistance movements within capitalist societies. Articles focusing solely on marketing behavior, psychological consumption studies, or unrelated economic topics were excluded. The selection process followed the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion to ensure relevance and conceptual rigor.

The selected articles were then subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring conceptual patterns linking consumerism, transformed exploitation, and new forms of proletarian resistance. Data extraction involved recording author, year, research context, conceptual focus, and principal arguments. These data were organized into a synthesis matrix to facilitate comparison across studies. The analysis was structured around three main themes: (1) consumerism as a mechanism of class domination, (2) transformation of proletarian exploitation in neoliberal and digital economies, and (3) hybrid and dispersed forms of resistance in cultural, economic, and digital domains. Through this analytical process, the study developed an integrative understanding of how bourgeois market logic operates in everyday life and how the proletariat responds through evolving strategies of resistance.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

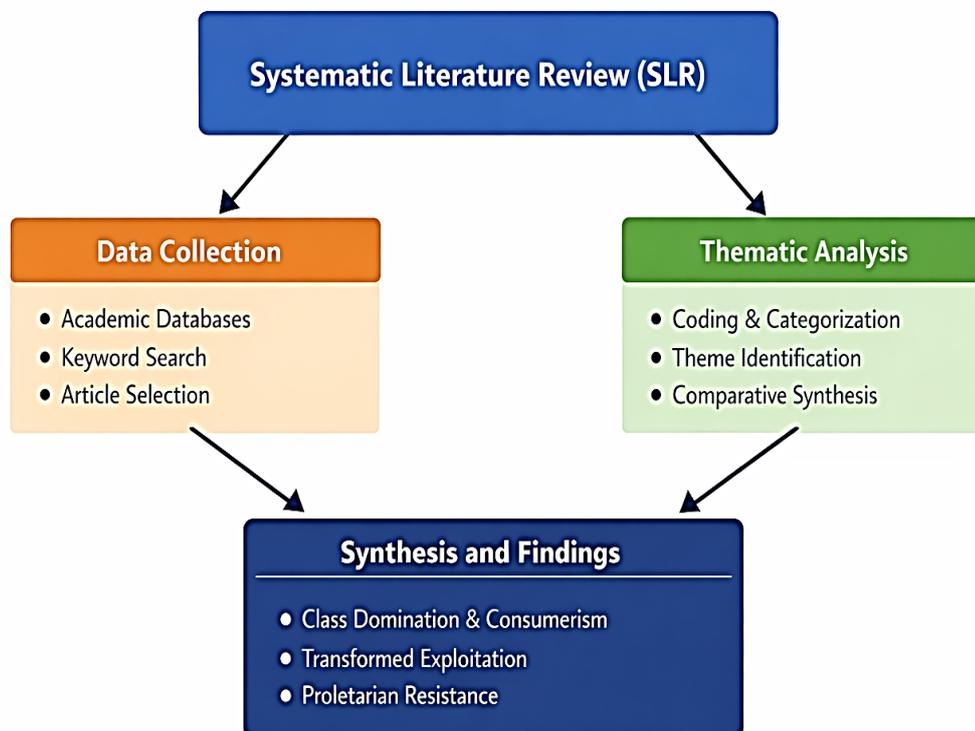


Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

3. Results

Based on the stages of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and the thematic analysis described in the method section, the synthesis of the selected literature reveals consistent thematic patterns regarding how consumerism functions as a mechanism of class domination, how proletarian exploitation is transformed in contemporary capitalism, and how new, dispersed, and hybrid forms of resistance emerge. The summary of these findings is presented in the table below.



Table 1. Thematic Synthesis of Consumerism, Transformed Exploitation, and Proletarian Resistance in Contemporary Capitalism

No	Main Theme	Key Findings from Literature	Implications for Class Relations	Sources
1	Consumerism as class domination	Commodity culture commodifies identity, status, and social relations	Class inequality is normalized through consumption practices	Khanal, 2025; Bziker, 2021
2	Spectacle of consumption	Mass media and entertainment distract from labor exploitation	Workers become compliant consumer subjects	Borba et al., 2025
3	Workers as consumers	Proletariat participates in surplus realization through consumption	Consumption reproduces bourgeois dominance	Mondal, 2021; Bziker, 2021
4	Rise of the precariat	Fragmented, insecure, educated but vulnerable workers	New form of class vulnerability in neoliberal economy	Bailey et al., 2021; Rimal, 2025
5	Digital labor & algorithmic control	Datafication governs workers through platforms (Homo Datum)	Digital proletarianization and new alienation	Artinian, 2023; Dorschel, 2022; Rimal, 2025
6	Triple exploitation of women	Wage labor, reproductive labor, and patriarchal burden	Gendered dimension of class exploitation	Baglioni, 2021; Pattenden, 2024
7	Dispossession & urbanization	Peasants turned into wage laborers and consumers	Expansion of proletarian class and middle-class consumers	Mondal, 2021
8	Cross-issue protests	Anti-austerity, ecological, racial, gender movements	Class resistance spreads beyond labor unions	Bailey et al., 2021; Bieler & Nowak, 2021
9	Global South labor resistance	Struggles in global value chains and agrarian sectors	Intersection of capitalism and patriarchy in resistance	Dieng, 2024; Stevano, 2021
10	Cultural resistance	Literature reveals class awareness against paternalistic exploitation	Shift from false consciousness to class consciousness	Rebello & Lourdusamy, 2025; Nurkholis et al., 2025
11	Digital communicative resistance	Online campaigns and digital unions challenge precarious work	New tactics of proletarian organization	Salamon, 2022

The table shows that in contemporary capitalism, consumerism does not stand apart from class exploitation but operates as an instrument that normalizes inequality and obscures class conflict through everyday consumption practices. At the same time, proletarian exploitation is no longer concentrated in traditional production spaces but spreads into digital, reproductive, and social spheres, creating new forms of proletarianization such as the precariat and *Homo Datum*. Nevertheless, these conditions also generate broader, cross-issue, and cross-space forms of resistance, ranging from social movements and women's resistance in the Global South to communicative resistance in digital environments. These findings demonstrate that

class conflict persists, but in more cultural, fragmented, and hybrid forms under the dominance of bourgeois market logic.

4. Discussion

This study set out to analyze how consumerism in contemporary capitalism operates as a new form of class domination and how proletarian resistance emerges in dispersed and hybrid forms across consumption spaces, digital environments, and communicative arenas. The thematic synthesis in Table 1 demonstrated three tightly connected dynamics: the normalization of inequality through consumer culture, the transformation of exploitation via digitalization and precarity, and the proliferation of new resistance practices beyond the factory floor. When read alongside the accredited sources provided, these findings show that class conflict has not disappeared in the era of consumerism. Rather, it has been reconfigured through what can be called the bourgeois market logic that monetizes identity, attention, data, and social relations while simultaneously generating novel terrains of proletarian resistance.

A first key insight is that contemporary capitalism monetizes nearly all aspects of life. Social relations, personal identity, and even political polarization are turned into marketable commodities through digital platforms and media ecosystems (Meng, 2025; Ulver, 2021). Algorithms do not merely organize consumption but also regulate labor, attention, and social visibility, intensifying class power in the hands of technological capital. In this environment, class domination is no longer exercised only through ownership of factories or financial capital but through control over digital infrastructures that mediate everyday life. This confirms the table's theme that consumerism functions as a mechanism of class domination by transforming individuals into market subjects whose participation in consumption reproduces bourgeois control.

This domination is further strengthened by mainstream media and popular culture, which mediate working-class experiences in ways that obscure structural inequality. Rather than framing insecurity as a consequence of capitalist class relations, crises are often attributed to marginalized groups such as migrants or peripheral communities (Mylonas, 2023). This ideological displacement aligns with what the table identifies as the spectacle of consumption and normalization of inequality. Workers are encouraged to interpret their insecurity as personal failure or external threat rather than as a result of class exploitation. Thus, consumerism and media culture function together to dissolve visible class antagonism.

The concept of hegemony and anti-class ideology helps explain why this process is effective. The negation of proletarian voices occurs through the erasure of class experience from public discourse and through the commodification of oppositional expression into harmless entertainment (Mylonas, 2023). Anti-communism and bourgeois ideology circulate through moral narratives, nationalism, and anti-socialist rhetoric in media, communities, and markets, shaping middle-class subjectivities that are hostile to labor movements (Altınoklu, 2025; Paret & Levenson, 2024). This reflects the table's theme that consumerism and ideology combine to obscure class relations, making resistance appear illegitimate or outdated.

However, despite this ideological environment, the findings show that proletarian resistance persists in transformed spaces. One important arena is the sphere of consumption itself. Consumer movements that promote anti-consumption practices, sharing economies, and direct action against symbols of luxury consumption create what scholars call "counter sites" that reject pure market logic (Chatzidakis et al., 2021). These practices challenge the assumption that consumption is a neutral or apolitical activity. Instead, they reveal that consumption spaces can become arenas of class contestation. Solidarity in these movements is

maintained through collective performances, alternative spaces, and emotional resilience even under crisis and fatigue (Chatzidakis et al., 2021). This corresponds directly to the table's identification of consumer-based resistance.

Another fascinating form of resistance emerges in financial markets, particularly in the case of the r/wallstreetbets–GameStop phenomenon. Retail investors temporarily disrupted hedge fund strategies, demonstrating that consumers can act collectively to challenge financial elites (Jones & Hietanen, 2022). Yet research also shows how quickly such resistance can be captured and reintegrated into market accumulation logic by corporations and states. This illustrates a critical tension highlighted by the study's objective: proletarian resistance in consumer and digital spaces is real but vulnerable to co-optation by bourgeois market structures.

Digital environments also become sites of proletarian organization. Online communities, digital collectivization, and technological critique represent new tactics of resistance to algorithmic control and data commodification (Meng, 2025; Jones & Hietanen, 2022). These forms of resistance correspond to the table's theme of digital communicative resistance, where workers and consumers use the same digital infrastructures that exploit them to organize counter-discourses and collective action. This reflects a shift from factory-based organization to network-based mobilization.

Equally important is the role of communication and the concept of a "proletarian public sphere." Scholars argue that resistance requires building alternative communication infrastructures that allow working-class experiences to be articulated, shared, and politicized outside bourgeois media dominance (Mylonas, 2023). This resonates strongly with the study's finding that class conflict today unfolds in communicative and cultural arenas. Alternative media, grassroots communication, and symbolic production become central tools for reconstructing class consciousness.

These patterns confirm the continued relevance of class analysis as articulated in classical Marxist thought, but with important modifications. The antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat remains, yet repression is now exercised more subtly through consumerism, neoliberalism, and entertainment, which dissolve class awareness by promoting illusions of equality among consumers and "middle-class" workers (Sun, 2023). The theoretical and political challenge, therefore, is to revive class consciousness that can penetrate these illusions and recognize the structural nature of inequality.

The discussion also shows how consumerism and digital capitalism create what can be called a "conflict market," where polarization and outrage themselves become monetized (Ulver, 2021). Class conflict is not eliminated but commodified. This complicates resistance because even dissent can be turned into market value. Thus, proletarian resistance must navigate an environment where its expressions risk being absorbed into the very system it opposes. Importantly, the study's objective is addressed by demonstrating that resistance is not confined to labor unions or workplaces. It occurs in shopping spaces, online forums, cultural production, financial activism, and alternative media. These dispersed forms of resistance reflect the dispersed nature of contemporary exploitation. If exploitation operates through consumption, data, and media, then resistance logically emerges in those same spaces.

This integrative perspective fills the research gap identified in the introduction. Previous studies often separated consumer culture, digital labor, and social movements into distinct analytical categories. By connecting them under the framework of bourgeois market logic and proletarian resistance, this study shows that they are interconnected aspects of contemporary class conflict. Furthermore, the discussion highlights the hybrid character of resistance.

Proletarian action today combines elements of consumption boycott, digital activism, symbolic protest, and communicative organization. These hybrid forms challenge traditional assumptions about what class struggle looks like. They also reveal that class consciousness can develop through cultural and digital practices, not only through workplace organization. At the same time, the vulnerability of these resistances to capture and commodification underscores the need for more structured and organized forms of proletarian politics. Without sustained organization and alternative infrastructures, resistance risks being neutralized or absorbed by market logic (Jones & Hietanen, 2022; Mylonas, 2023).

In summary, the discussion demonstrates that in the era of consumerism and digital capitalism, class conflict is not absent but concealed within market relations, data infrastructures, and consumer culture. The bourgeois market logic commodifies identity, attention, and social relations, obscuring exploitation while generating compliant consumer subjects. Yet this same environment produces new arenas for proletarian resistance in consumption spaces, digital communities, financial activism, and alternative communication networks. These findings directly answer the research objective by showing how consumerism operates as class domination and how proletarian resistance adapts in dispersed and hybrid forms across contemporary social life.

5. Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that in the era of consumerism and digital capitalism, class conflict does not disappear but becomes increasingly concealed within the logic of the bourgeois market that commodifies identity, attention, data, and everyday social relations. Consumer culture, media framing, and algorithmic control normalize inequality and obscure the structural nature of proletarian exploitation, transforming workers into compliant consumer subjects who unknowingly reproduce class domination. However, the findings also show that proletarian resistance persists in transformed and hybrid forms, emerging not only in workplaces but across consumption spaces, digital communities, financial activism, and alternative communicative arenas. These dispersed forms of resistance reveal that class antagonism remains central to contemporary capitalism, although expressed through new terrains shaped by consumerism and digital infrastructures. Thus, the study concludes that understanding modern class conflict requires recognizing how bourgeois market logic operates in everyday life and how the proletariat adapts its strategies of resistance within and against these evolving structures.

Limitation and suggestions

This study is limited by its reliance on a Systematic Literature Review, which depends on existing scholarly interpretations and may not fully capture the lived experiences of proletarian actors across diverse socio-cultural contexts. The focus on recent publications from 2021–2025 also narrows the historical depth needed to compare contemporary class conflict with earlier capitalist phases. In addition, the analysis emphasizes theoretical and conceptual synthesis rather than empirical field data, which may limit the practical illustration of how resistance operates in everyday settings. Future research is therefore suggested to incorporate empirical methods such as ethnography, interviews, and digital trace analysis to explore how consumer-based and digital forms of resistance are enacted in real communities. Comparative studies across regions, especially between the Global North and Global South, would further

enrich understanding of how bourgeois market logic and proletarian resistance manifest differently across contexts.

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