

Research on the Adjustment Mechanism for Advertising Design Anomie from the Perspective of Marxist Ethics

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Abstract: As consumer-oriented market economies expand, advertising design has increasingly exhibited ethical anomie—information misguidance, cultural prejudice, and excessive commercialization—that adversely affects social values and consumer rights. Grounded in Marxist ethical principles (all-round human development, critique of capital-driven alienation, and social fairness), this paper analyzes, from a historical-materialist perspective, the manifestations and generative mechanisms of such anomie through overseas and domestic cases. It then constructs a multi-dimensional adjustment mechanism comprising value guidance, multi-subject practice, institutional supervision, and a public-feedback closed loop. The findings indicate that Marxist ethics provides critical theoretical resources for exposing capital-logic transgression in advertising creation, curbing capital alienation to achieve a dynamic balance among commercial benefits, social responsibility, and human-oriented values.

Keywords: Marxist ethics; advertising design; ethical anomie; adjustment mechanism; consumption alienation; visual communication

1. Introduction

Driven by the market economy and digital media, advertising design today fulfills not only commodity-marketing functions but also serves as a vital carrier for disseminating social values and cultural ideas. Visual outputs—posters, short videos, and AIGC-generated content—permeate daily life and subtly shape public consumption concepts, aesthetic orientations, and cultural perceptions.

Simultaneously, the expansion of consumerism has pushed some advertising-design practices to prioritize commercial profits under capital-driven logic. False and exaggerated promotion, gender-stereotyped narratives, cultural offense, and inducement of irrational consumption have proliferated. In pursuit of traffic, certain advertisements amplify material desires and fabricate false consumption demands, harming minority-group sentiments and undermining public values. Digital image processing and AIGC technologies lower creation thresholds while introducing new ethical risks, including forged visual representations and privacy infringement. Ethical issues in advertising design have thus become a pressing concern at the intersection of design studies, communication studies, and Marxist ethics.

Existing studies on advertising ethics have largely been conducted from communication, legal, and design-ethical perspectives, focusing on phenomenon description and macro-level countermeasures. Few excavate the deep-rooted origins of advertising anomie from capital alienation based on Marxist ethics. The proposed countermeasures are often difficult to implement across the entire workflow of advertising creation, review, and dissemination. Accordingly, this paper adopts the analytical lens of Marxist ethics to explore the generative logic behind ethical anomie and to construct an adjustment mechanism adapted to industrial realities.

Three research questions guide this study: (1) What compatibilities and tensions exist between Marxist ethics and the ethical appeals of advertising design? (2) What manifestations does ethical anomie exhibit under capital logic, and how can we interpret its generative mechanism from production-relations perspective? (3) How can we construct an adjustment mechanism that balances theoretical origins with industrial operability?

The paper makes three contributions. First, it breaks from conventional jurisprudence and

communication approaches, taking Marxist production-relation and alienation theories as underlying analytical tools. Second, it dialectically addresses tensions between macro-level Marxist ethics and micro-level industrial advertising ethics. Third, it constructs a four-dimensional interactive adjustment mechanism where every countermeasure traces back to core Marxist ethical viewpoints.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foreign Research

Western academia began critiquing advertising's moral dilemmas early. Neil Postman introduced "information pollution," arguing that advertisements manipulate public psychology through media. Sut Jhally and others criticized advertising's commercial logic, calling for greater social responsibility. Frankfurt School theories provide important resources: Marcuse argued that advanced industrial society creates "false needs" through advertising, forming one-dimensional human beings. Lefebvre, from everyday-life critique, proposed that advertisements place commodity symbolic value above real human needs. These Western Marxist studies reveal capital-operating logic behind advertisements but remain at macro socio-cultural criticism, rarely descending to visual composition and symbol selection in advertising design. Consequently, they cannot be directly translated into operable ethical schemes for the industry.

2.2. Domestic Research

Domestic scholars have yielded abundant achievements on Marxist ethics. Long Jingyun systematically sorts out the complete theoretical system^[1]; Yang Chunyan and Hou Xiaotao provide contemporary explorations of Marxist ethical-moral thought^[2]. Hao Mei interprets all-round human development, social justice, and alienation critique. In advertising-design ethics^[3], Yang Chen analyzes professional ethical anomie among designers^[4]; Gao Biao and Hu Yi focus on AI-introduced ethical traps^[5]; Xue Minzhi and Liang Shiting discuss mobile-media advertising anomie^[6]. These studies identify numerous ethical risks and propose legal and supervisory countermeasures.

However, most domestic studies attribute ethical problems to insufficient practitioner morality or supervision defects, seldom excavating structural roots from production relations and capital alienation. Proposed countermeasures tend to be macro-institutional appeals, lacking operable paths docking with creation workflows. Discussions on cross-cultural ethical conflicts remain limited.

2.3. Research Gaps

Three genuine deficiencies emerge. First, systematic studies taking Marxist ethics—especially alienation and production-relation theories—as the underlying analytical framework are scarce. Second, existing countermeasures lack operable schemes descending to visual conception, symbol screening, internal review, and cross-cultural risk assessment. Third, cross-cultural advertising-ethics research rarely interprets differences in ethical judgment standards from the historical-materialist perspective of social-historical morality^[7]. Targeting these gaps, this paper constructs a complete adjustment mechanism grounded in Marxist ethics while considering tensions between theory and industrial realities.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Core Connotations of Marxist Ethics

Based on historical materialism, Marxist ethics holds that moral ideas are determined by social-material production relations. Its core connotations are fourfold.

First, the pursuit of the all-round development of human beings—the ultimate value orientation, opposing human enslavement by capital and rejecting treatment of humans as profit-making tools.

Second, critique of capital alienation and commodity fetishism—profit-chasing capital triggers labor and consumption alienation, where consumption evolves into pursuing symbols and status rather than satisfying real human needs.

Third, upholding social fairness and justice—emphasizing community interests, fighting

exploitation and inequality, and safeguarding ordinary groups' rights.

Fourth, the social-historical nature of morality—morality is rooted in specific eras' production and life, not invariant abstract norms.

3.2. *Compatibilities and Tensions*

Advertising-design ethics requires that advertisements respect consumers' rights, adhere to authenticity, and assume social responsibilities while accomplishing commercial goals^[8]. Table 1 presents the compatibilities(*Table 1*).

Table 1 Comparison between Marxist ethics and advertising-design ethics

Dimension	Marxist Ethics	Appeals of Advertising-Design Ethics
Value Goal	All-round human development, public interests	Respect consumer rights, fulfill social responsibilities
Attitude toward Capital	Critique of capital-induced alienation	Resist exclusive commercial-interest orientation
Authenticity Requirement	Oppose deception, restore reality	Authentic visuals and information
Social-practice Attribute	Morality rooted in production relations	Ethics constrained by market, culture, and time

At a superficial level, the two ethical frameworks converge on a shared opposition to deception, commodification, and the reduction of human beings to passive consumers. Both endorse the principle that commercial communication should serve, rather than subvert, the broader social good. Moreover, both recognize that ethical standards are not transcendent but are shaped by material and cultural conditions^[9].

Yet substantial tensions persist that cannot be papered over. Marxist ethics is fundamentally a critical social theory aimed at the transformation of macro-social production relations—ultimately, the overcoming of capitalism itself in favor of a classless, communitarian society. Advertising-design ethics, by contrast, is a professional regulatory framework that operates within the existing market economy. It does not challenge the legitimacy of capital accumulation; it merely seeks to circumscribe its most egregious excesses. This asymmetry entails that the adjustment mechanisms derived from Marxist principles cannot aim to abolish the profit motive or transcend commodity production. Rather, they are confined to the more modest but still important task of demarcating behavioral boundaries for capital within the existing order. To conflate the two levels—to demand that advertising ethics implement the full socialist vision—would be both theoretically naive and practically self-defeating. Hence, any viable adjustment mechanism must acknowledge this tension and operate with realistic expectations.

3.3. *Four-Dimensional Analytical Framework*

Building on the above theoretical foundations, this paper constructs a four-dimensional analytical framework that translates Marxist ethical principles into actionable analytical categories for the advertising-design field. These four layers—value, subject, institutional-supervision, and public-feedback—are not discrete compartments but interconnected levels of a dynamic system.

First, the value layer functions as the top-level normative guidance. It performs the crucial work of theoretical translation: converting the abstract, historically-grounded precepts of Marxist ethics into concrete, sector-specific ethical principles that can be directly applied to advertising-design decision-making. This layer provides the ethical yardstick against which all subsequent practices and policies are measured. It embodies the “ought” that informs the “is.”

Second, the subject layer constitutes the intermediate implementation level. It encompasses all human agents involved in the advertising-design chain: individual designers, corporate managers and creative directors, and educational institutions that train future practitioners. This layer is responsible for embedding the value-layer principles into everyday creative routines, review protocols, and pedagogical curricula. It is where abstract norms are translated into concrete behaviors, habits, and institutional routines^[10].

Third, the institutional-supervision layer provides the external constraint mechanisms. This includes formal legal regulations (statutory prohibitions on false advertising, consumer protection laws), industry self-discipline (codes of conduct, professional associations' ethical guidelines), and emerging review frameworks for new technologies (such as AIGC content verification). This layer ensures that ethical principles are not merely voluntary aspirations but are backed by sanctions and enforcement, thereby counterbalancing the structural pressures of capital competition^[11].

Fourth, the public-feedback layer captures the downstream effects of advertising communication. Audiences—consumers, citizens, and community groups—are the ultimate recipients and evaluators of advertisements. Their responses, complaints, and interpretive reactions provide crucial empirical data that can feed back into the upper layers, prompting revisions to value principles, subject practices, and supervisory rules. This feedback loop ensures that the framework remains responsive to changing social sensibilities and cultural contexts.

These four layers operate in a two-way interaction and dynamic circulation, rather than a linear, top-down cascade. Value principles guide subjects; subjects' actions are constrained by supervision; supervision is tested and revised by public feedback; and public feedback, in turn, shapes the interpretation of value principles. This cyclical, dialectical structure is essential for maintaining both theoretical integrity and practical relevance.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Typical Cases and Manifestations

Case 1: H&M "Coolest Monkey in the Jungle" (Cross-Cultural). A Black child model wearing a hoodie with this slogan drew heavy criticism, as "monkey" constitutes a discriminatory symbol in certain contexts. The design ignored cross-cultural symbolic sensitivities. From historical materialism, moral-judgment standards for identical symbols differ across cultural communities shaped by different production-and-life conditions.

Case 2: Joe Camel Tobacco Advertisement (Commercial). Camel's cartoon mascot exerted strong appeal to minors, indirectly inducing youth access to tobacco. Capital turned minors into consumption objects at the cost of public health—typical evidence of capital logic simplifying humans into consumption objects.

Case 3: Nike Colin Kaepernick Poster (Issue-Marketing). Nike leveraged racial-equality issues to attract traffic, turning social-protest narratives into commercial marketing—representing a new form of consumption alienation within brand communication.

Case 4: Excessively Retouched Domestic Beauty Ads (Local). Digital editing fabricates "perfect skin" expectations, creating appearance anxiety and false demands, tying self-worth to commodity consumption—local samples of capital fabricating false needs.

From these cases, ethical anomie manifests in four forms: (1) information distortion and visual misguidance; (2) cultural prejudice and stereotyped narratives; (3) rendering of consumer ideology; (4) new-type ethical risks from emerging technologies (AIGC, digital retouching).

4.2. Multi-Layer Causes

Root Cause: Immanent drive of capital logic and consumption alienation. Under market economy, profit acquisition is paramount. Capital logic simplifies consumers to "profit-making targets," fabricating desires and triggering consumption alienation, with social responsibilities pushed to secondary positions^[12].

Intermediate Cause: Commercial production relations squeeze designers' ethical autonomy. Designers occupy a subordinate position within capital-dominated chains. Under performance pressure, individual ethical judgments yield to commercial demands, with institutional support absent. This explains why well-intentioned practitioners produce ethically problematic work: organizational context constrains ethical agency.

External Conditions: (1) Diverse cultural value conflicts under globalization; insufficient cross-cultural research causes symbol misuse^[13]. (2) Deficiencies in industrial ethical norms and education—existing guidelines lack detail for visual-creation specifics, and professional training

seldom incorporates systematic ethics education.

4.3. Adjustment Mechanism Construction

Rooted in Marxist ethics, this paper constructs a four-layer linked adjustment mechanism.

4.3.1. Value Layer: Underlying Ethical Principles

Four principles derived from Marxist thought: (1) Authenticity—visuals faithful to product realities, opposing retouching-forged effects^[14]. (2) Human-oriented—consumers not treated as profit tools, resisting fabricated desires. (3) Social-benefit priority—advertisements must consider public interests over traffic gains. (4) Historical-dialectical judgment—ethical evaluation must be context-sensitive, avoiding abstract dogmas^[15].

4.3.2. Subject Layer: Multi-Subject Responsibilities

(1) Designers should integrate ethical self-inspection into creative workflows—a standardized checklist at conceptualization and finalization stages, assessing authenticity, cultural risks, and stereotypes.

(2) Enterprises should establish internal ethical-review bodies to evaluate commercials for compliance prior to release, with dedicated cultural-symbol assessment for cross-cultural campaigns and ethical performance metrics in project evaluation^[16].

(3) Higher-Education Institutions should embed Marxist critique and design ethics into core curricula, using case-based seminars to cultivate critical judgment and equip students to resist structural pressures^[17].

4.3.3. Supervision Layer: Self-Discipline and External Supervision

Industrial associations should issue detailed, scenario-specific guidelines for emerging categories—visual symbols, cross-cultural campaigns, AIGC content. Administrative regulators should enforce laws while distinguishing illegal acts from ethical anomie, deploying warnings for norm violations without statutory breaches^[18].

4.3.4. Public-Feedback Layer: Closed-Loop Supervision

Accessible channels should be established for public ethics complaints. Multi-party review panels—including public representatives, designers, and scholars—should deliberate on controversial cases, balancing professional rationality with public sentiment to prevent online-opinion alienation

4.3.5. Overall Operating Logic

The four layers form a dynamic, self-correcting system: value layer sets standards; subject layer operationalizes them; supervision reinforces compliance; public feedback provides empirical evidence for iterative refinement. This mechanism does not seek to abolish market competition but to circumscribe capital's excesses within a framework of human dignity.

4.4. Discussion

Unlike prior research focusing on legal sanctions and individual morality, this paper foregrounds structural dimensions of ethical failure through a Marxist production-relations lens^[19]. The deeper problem lies in systemic imperatives of capital accumulation, not merely individual malfeasance. However, our framework avoids mechanical socialist moralizing that dismisses commercial communication as inherently corrupt; advertising is a legitimate market function, and adjustment seeks to govern rather than abolish it^[20].

Tiered implementation is essential: large-scale agencies can adopt more stringent mechanisms, while small-to-medium enterprises may implement scaled-down versions. In cross-cultural contexts, the historical-dialectical principle offers context-sensitive evaluation while maintaining minimal universal protections against discrimination and deception. Finally, the public-feedback mechanism is safeguarded against populist overreach through deliberative, multi-stakeholder review processes that filter raw sentiment through reasoned debate.

5. Conclusion

This study combines literature research, multi-case analysis, and comparative analysis to examine how Marxist ethics informs the governance of advertising-design ethical anomie. Three main conclusions are drawn. First, Marxist ethical ideas—all-round human development, alienation critique, and social justice—share compatibilities with advertising-design ethical appeals, yet as macro-social-critical theories they cannot be dogmatically applied to micro-industrial norms without theoretical transformation.

Second, ethical anomie manifests in four forms—information misguidance, cultural prejudice, consumerism rendering, and technology-related risks—with its root cause lying in capital profit-chasing logic squeezing human-oriented values, jointly influenced by designers' eroded ethical autonomy, cross-cultural conflicts, and deficient ethical education. Third, a multi-linked adjustment mechanism comprising value guidance, multi-subject practice, institutional supervision, and public-feedback closed loop is constructed, with each countermeasure tracing to core Marxist ethical viewpoints.

Limitations include the lack of large-scale empirical data and the untested nature of the theoretical framework; future research should conduct questionnaires and interviews for empirical validation, explore AIGC advertisement ethics, and develop comparative studies across diverse market environments.

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