

Superficiality of Meaning in the Digital Age: An Anthropological Study of the Mechanisms of Cultural Triviality in the Tébessa Digital Space

Lebni Fatiha ¹, Bendar Nassima ²,

¹ Echahid Cheikh Larbi Tebessi University –Tebessa (Algeria), fatiha.lebni@univ-tebessa.dz

² Echahid Cheikh Larbi Tebessi University Tebessa (Algeria), nassima.bendar@univ-tebessa.dz

Received: 29/07/2025

Accepted: 14/10/2025

Published: 10/01/2026

Abstract: Superficial content is one of the most prominent phenomena in the digital age, widely spreading across social media platforms and shaping individuals' modes of expression, thought, and behavior. This phenomenon has become embedded in users' everyday practices, as it is produced rapidly within a digital environment dominated by entertainment and content lacking meaningful substance. This study explores the phenomenon from a digital anthropology perspective, aiming to understand how such content is produced, why it garners massive popularity, and how it relates to the social and cultural transformations taking place in contemporary society. The research provides an analytical reading of superficial content by examining its messages, mechanisms of dissemination, and its influence on individuals and social markers in the virtual environment.

Keywords:

Superficial content, cultural production, social transformations, digital anthropology.

Introduction

A critical review of academic literature, particularly in anthropology, reveals a marked absence or implicit marginalization of several emerging digital cultural phenomena—most notably, the phenomenon of superficial content. Despite the profound transformations imposed by the digital age on modes of expression, interaction, and meaning-making, anthropology has remained hesitant to integrate such phenomena into its research agenda, as if digital productions were unworthy of cultural analysis.

However, the emergence of digital anthropology as a contemporary subfield rooted in the social fabric has begun to shift this perspective. The digital realm is no longer perceived as a detached technical domain but rather as an extension of social and cultural life—spaces where meaning is produced, symbols are reconstructed, and identities and relationships are continuously redefined.

Within this context, superficial content can no longer be dismissed as marginal or trivial; it must instead be addressed as a symbolic indicator of new modes of cultural consumption. It reflects significant aesthetic and normative shifts in public taste and reconfigures symbolic communication in digital environments. Hence, superficial content should not merely be reduced to simplification or vulgarity but examined as a cultural phenomenon that embodies complex social dynamics.

This study adopts a qualitative anthropological approach grounded in the method of *verstehen*—interpreting social phenomena from the perspective of the actors themselves within their cultural environments. Empirical data were collected through interviews with two key groups: academics in media and cultural studies, who offered analytical and critical insights into the phenomenon, and digital content creators, who engage with it firsthand. This multiplicity of perspectives enabled a nuanced and balanced understanding that combines scholarly interpretation with field-based observation.

The study aims to deconstruct the representations of superficial content among social actors, analyze its connection to digital cultural production, and explore its entanglement with broader social transformations in the context of the Tébessa community. Ultimately, it seeks to present a multidimensional critical reading of superficial content as a structural component of digital culture and a revealing entry point into the evolving values and norms of contemporary virtual life.

Problem Statement:

In recent decades, the digital environment has undergone profound transformations that have significantly impacted the symbolic values and normative frameworks governing cultural production. One of the most visible manifestations of this shift is the rise of what is commonly referred to as "superficial content"—a form of expression rooted in momentary entertainment, visual sensationalism, and viral circulation, often devoid of depth or reflective meaning.

This content is no longer perceived as a marginal deviation from dominant culture; rather, it has become a central component of digital cultural practices, where its value is measured not by intellectual depth but by views, shares, and likes. Within this symbolic economy, the audience itself becomes an active agent—not merely a passive consumer but a key actor in reproducing and amplifying cultural superficiality through participation and interaction.

As Alain Deneault has argued, digital platforms have effectively "encoded mediocrity," turning trivial figures into symbolic role models. Similarly, Noam Chomsky has pointed to media's strategic role in shaping passive public consciousness through what he calls "silent weapons," which normalize banality and suppress critical thought.

From an anthropological standpoint, this phenomenon invites a deeper exploration of the shifting symbolic structures within local contexts, such as that of the Tébessa community, where traditional cultural codes intersect with emerging digital aesthetics, reshaping notions of identity, taste, and meaning.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following core question:

How does superficial content reshape cultural production in the context of contemporary social transformations within the Tébessa community?

Research Questions:

1. How is superficial content produced and circulated within the digital sphere?
2. In what ways has superficial content become embedded in digital cultural production rather than merely existing as a deviation?
3. What are the underlying social and cultural transformations that enable the production and consumption of superficial content in the local context?

Rationale for Choosing the Topic:

The decision to investigate the phenomenon of superficial content stems from its growing centrality in the digital cultural landscape. No longer a marginal deviation, superficial content has become a structural feature of contemporary digital culture—produced and consumed on a large scale. This shift reflects a symbolic drift toward meaninglessness, the marginalization of intellectual and ethical values, and the normalization of triviality in public discourse.

Moreover, the audience is no longer a passive receiver; it has become an active participant in the reproduction and dissemination of such content. Through mechanisms of interaction and sharing, recipients play a key role in reinforcing and legitimizing superficial narratives. This raises critical anthropological questions about the interactive relationship between the audience and content, and the cultural logics that position the public as co-producers of cultural superficiality.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the perspectives of academics and experts in media and culture regarding the rise of superficial content, identifying their interpretations of its causes and its impact on the social and cultural fabric.
2. To explore the views of content creators who oppose this form of expression, analyzing their critiques and explanations for its proliferation within digital platforms.
3. To investigate the nature of superficial content production: is it a deliberate and strategic practice aimed at gaining attention and profit, or an unintentional, spontaneous outcome of broader digital dynamics?
4. To develop an interpretive anthropological framework capable of analyzing superficial content as a new cultural form shaped by shifts in aesthetic preferences, consumption patterns, and social meaning-making.

Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to transcend traditional anthropological paradigms by adopting digital anthropology as both a conceptual and methodological lens. Digital anthropology offers powerful tools for interpreting and analyzing the behaviors and symbolic practices that emerge within online spaces—spaces where new forms of cultural expression, such as superficial or trivial content, are produced and consumed in ways that reflect deep shifts in public taste, value systems, and norms.

By focusing on superficial content as a form of symbolic expression, the study provides insight into how such content is embedded within social networks, how it contributes to the shaping of collective consciousness, and how it influences processes of identity formation and symbolic order. In doing so, the study contributes to the growing field of digital anthropology while grounding its analysis in the specific socio-cultural context of the Tébessa community.

Fieldwork Setting (Spatial Context):

The fieldwork was conducted at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Larbi Tébessi – Tébessa, specifically within the campus of Martyr Dred Abdelmajid. This academic setting provided a fertile environment for exploring how university actors perceive and interact with emerging digital phenomena, particularly in a context where cultural and symbolic shifts in taste and expression are highly visible within student and academic circles.

Fieldwork Timeline (Temporal Context):

The empirical phase of the study took place between early April and mid-May 2025, following formal approval by the research supervisor and validation by the training committee of the Sociology Department. During this period, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants, in accordance with the methodological framework guiding the study.

Challenges of the Study:

The research process encountered several epistemological and fieldwork-related challenges, which required careful navigation and critical reflection. Among the most significant difficulties were:

- **Conceptual Ambiguity of “Superficial Content”:** One of the core challenges lay in framing "superficial content" theoretically. The term remains largely normative, lacking a precise or universally accepted definition in the scientific literature. It is a fluid concept, intertwined with cultural, social, and psychological representations, and often shaped by subjective judgments and value-laden perceptions. As such, operationalizing it in a rigorous and methodologically sound manner posed a considerable epistemological challenge.
- **Scarcity of Scientific Literature:** Despite its widespread presence in digital environments, superficial content remains underexplored in academic research. The scarcity of relevant theoretical and empirical studies required the researcher to draw upon adjacent frameworks and adapt them to suit the particularities of the phenomenon under investigation.
- **Limited Access to Content Creators:** Gaining access to digital influencers and content producers proved to be particularly difficult. Many potential participants expressed reluctance or refused to engage with the study, possibly due to the perceived critical nature of the topic or its association with digital triviality. Consequently, the focus of the fieldwork was redirected toward academic professionals, whose analytical perspectives provided valuable insights into the phenomenon from a critical and scholarly standpoint.

I. Key Concepts of the Study

1. *Superficial Content – Conceptual Definition:*

The term *superficial content* is derived from the English word *mediocrity*, commonly used in critical discourse to describe something characterized by triviality, vulgarity, or lack of depth and intellectual rigor. In the digital age, this term has evolved to designate a type of cultural output that prioritizes momentary excitement, emotional appeal, and viral potential over substantive meaning or knowledge production. As Alain Deneault (2020, p. 14) notes, mediocrity has shifted from being an exception to becoming a normalized symbolic value in the digital sphere, where public recognition is often measured by visibility and interaction metrics rather than intellectual merit.

2. *Cultural Production – Operational Definition:*

For the purpose of this study, cultural production refers to the set of digital content disseminated across virtual platforms that actively shapes and reflects societal values, symbolic codes, and modes of thought. This production is not limited to text-based content but includes videos, memes, images, and other digital formats that mediate behavior and construct meaning. Cultural production, in this context, functions within dominant ideological frameworks and plays a pivotal role in reproducing social norms and aesthetic preferences within digital ecosystems.

3. *Social Transformation – Conceptual Definition:*

Social transformation extends beyond mere quantitative or incremental change; it denotes a qualitative shift in the foundational structures and relationships that organize social life. It involves deep and lasting alterations in the fabric of social institutions, values, and forms of interaction. According to Bouteille (2020, p. 168), social transformation is distinguished from gradual change by its intensity and historical concentration, typically marking periods of accelerated and interconnected social shifts compared to slower, isolated changes in previous eras.

4. *Social Transformation – Operational Definition:*

Operationally, social transformation refers to the comprehensive and systemic changes affecting the structure of society and its institutional, relational, and symbolic configurations. These transformations result from a convergence of multiple factors, including economic restructuring, political transitions, technological advancement, demographic shifts, and evolving cultural practices. They reshape not only social behavior and institutional norms but also influence how cultural content is produced, consumed, and symbolically interpreted.

II. Methodological Framework

This study employs the **descriptive-analytical method**, one of the most widely used approaches in social science and humanities research. This methodology allows for a thorough examination of the phenomenon under investigation by combining detailed description with critical analysis. It aims to identify the characteristics, contexts, and symbolic dimensions of the phenomenon while generating an interpretive understanding grounded in empirical observation.

The descriptive-analytical method is defined as: “An approach based on the collection of accurate and comprehensive information about a specific phenomenon or topic within a defined

time frame, with the aim of interpreting it objectively and aligning the analysis with the actual empirical reality” (Various Authors, 1999, p. 46).

In this study, the method has been adapted to suit an anthropological lens by focusing on symbolic meanings and cultural representations. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection tool, allowing the researcher to engage deeply with participants’ perspectives and trace how superficial content is produced and reproduced within the digital culture of the Tébessa community.

Justification for the Use of the Descriptive-Analytical Method

The adoption of the **descriptive-analytical method** in this study is grounded in its suitability for addressing the complex and multidimensional nature of the phenomenon of *digital triviality*, particularly given the dual perspectives of the two key actors involved: **academics** and **content creators**.

On the one hand, this method allows for a critical and interpretive exploration of how academics conceptualize superficial content, drawing on theoretical frameworks and intellectual discourses that link this phenomenon to the erosion of cultural values in the digital age. Analyzing their perspectives requires both precise description and deep analysis of the conceptual and normative structures embedded in their critical narratives.

On the other hand, the method enables a comprehensive understanding of **content creators** as direct agents in the digital field—individuals who not only produce but also shape the logic of digital content. Exploring their representations, motivations, and practices demands a methodological approach that can capture subjective experiences while contextualizing them within broader symbolic systems and communicative practices.

The strength of the descriptive-analytical method lies in its ability to **bridge description and interpretation**, offering a nuanced understanding of both the normative critique of academics and the practical, instrumental logic of digital influencers. This dual perspective makes it possible to uncover both the intersections and divergences between the two visions—one rooted in theoretical critique, and the other in lived digital experience.

Additional methodological justifications for adopting this approach include:

- **Its flexibility**, which is crucial for dealing with complex social phenomena that intersect cultural, communicative, and symbolic dimensions.
- **Its capacity to accommodate multiple viewpoints**, allowing for a more inclusive analysis that does not reduce the phenomenon to a single explanatory framework.
- **Its relevance for studying emerging symbolic practices** in digital environments, which often require qualitative and interpretive approaches more than purely quantitative techniques.

In light of these considerations, the descriptive-analytical method emerges as the most appropriate tool for deconstructing digital triviality, enabling the study to engage with both the epistemological complexity and the real-world dynamics of cultural production in the contemporary digital landscape.

Research Tool: The Interview

The **interview** is one of the most widely used and effective qualitative tools for collecting data in social and human sciences. It is particularly valuable when the aim is to explore individuals’ representations, attitudes, and lived experiences within their cultural and social environments. Far from being a simple conversation, the interview is a structured and purposeful research

technique that requires methodological preparation, interpersonal skill, and contextual sensitivity to ensure the collection of reliable and insightful data.

As Omar (p. 289) notes, the interview is not a straightforward task; rather, it is a **technical process** that demands careful formulation of questions, strategic interaction with participants, and adaptability to the research setting. Similarly, Mohamed (1983, p. 476) defines the interview as: “A conversation conducted by an individual with one or more people in order to obtain various types of information to be used in scientific research or for guidance and diagnostic purposes.”

Methodological Justifications for Using the Interview:

1. **Alignment with the Descriptive-Analytical Approach:** The interview provides rich, descriptive data that reflect participants' views and interpretations. This aligns well with the interpretive orientation of the study, which prioritizes meaning over measurement and seeks to uncover symbolic and discursive layers of the phenomenon.
2. **Suitability for Anthropological Inquiry:** Given that the research addresses a symbolic and culturally embedded phenomenon—*superficial content*—the interview serves as an ideal tool for capturing emic perspectives, allowing participants to express how they experience and understand the issue from within. This resonates with the ethnographic logic of “**emic interpretation**”, a key principle in anthropological methodology.
3. **Depth in Exploring Representations:** Unlike closed questionnaires, interviews allow for follow-up questions, elaboration, and flexibility in the flow of conversation. This makes them particularly effective in examining complex or ambivalent attitudes among both academics and content creators.
4. **Comparative Insight Between Actor Categories:** The interview method enables comparative analysis between the critical perspective of academics—who approach the phenomenon through analytical and normative frameworks—and the practical, experience-based perspective of digital content creators. This duality enriches the analysis by offering a **multilayered understanding** of digital triviality.

For these reasons, the interview was selected as the central tool in this study, offering access to the internal logics and symbolic structures of a phenomenon that is not only socially relevant but also culturally complex—particularly within the Tébessa community, which is currently undergoing rapid digital and cultural transformation.

Research Tool: Content Analysis

Content analysis is one of the most widely recognized methodological techniques in the social and human sciences due to its capacity to dissect and interpret a wide range of texts, media messages, and discourses—whether written, spoken, or visual. This tool aims to uncover both the explicit and implicit meanings embedded in content through a systematic and methodologically rigorous approach. It can be employed from either a **quantitative** or **qualitative** perspective, depending on the research objective, and is used extensively in disciplines such as **sociology**, **media and communication studies**, and **cultural anthropology**.

In this context, Berelson defines content analysis as: “A research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.” (Saboun & Hafssa, 2012, p. 229)

Rationale for Using Content Analysis:

The decision to adopt **content analysis** as a core analytical tool in this study—particularly for examining interview data—was based on several key methodological justifications:

1. **Compatibility with qualitative data:** Interviews generate rich, nuanced data filled with symbolic and subjective meanings. Content analysis offers a structured framework to extract these meanings accurately and systematically, avoiding arbitrary interpretation.
2. **Revealing recurring representations:** This method makes it possible to identify patterns, recurring themes, and dominant narratives within participants' discourses, shedding light on how the phenomenon of digital triviality is collectively or individually understood.
3. **Ensuring objectivity in interpretation:** Content analysis introduces critical distance between the researcher and the data. It minimizes personal bias by focusing on the content itself rather than the researcher's assumptions, enhancing the validity and neutrality of the findings.
4. **Organizing responses into clear analytical categories:** By categorizing participant responses into thematic clusters, this technique facilitates the comparison of views, enabling a deeper and more coherent interpretation of attitudes toward the phenomenon under study.
5. **Unpacking the symbolic structure of concepts:** Beyond identifying what is said, content analysis helps interpret *how* meaning is constructed—how participants define *digital triviality*, what symbols and values they associate with it, why they believe it is prevalent, and how they perceive its effects on cultural taste and social behavior.

In light of these considerations, **content analysis** proved to be the most suitable tool for deconstructing the interview data and accessing the representational logic behind participants' views on superficial content, especially within the context of rapid digital and cultural shifts in contemporary Algerian society.

Research Population

The **research population** is defined as:

“All the elements or individuals related to the problem or phenomenon under investigation.” (Tu‘ayma, 2004, p. 131)

Based on this definition, the research population in the present study consists of **two main categories**:

- A group of **university professors** specialized in media studies, sociology, and cultural studies, who possess the academic expertise necessary to offer critical and analytical insights into the phenomenon of *superficial content*.
- A group of **digital content creators**, who are directly involved in producing and disseminating this type of content within virtual platforms, thus providing an insider's perspective on the phenomenon.

Study Sample

The **sample** is defined as: “A subset of the elements of a specific research population, selected to represent the broader group in studying the phenomenon of interest.” (Ingers, 2006, p. 301)

Given the difficulty of fully delineating the research population—especially in the case of digital content creators—a **purposive sample** was adopted. Also known as a **deliberate or judgmental sample**, this approach relies on the researcher's informed selection of participants who are most

relevant to the research objectives and problem. Marsli (2010, p. 180) defines this sampling method as:

“A sample selected based on the researcher’s personal judgment and in-depth knowledge of the research population, choosing only those elements most relevant to the study without regard to randomness or systematic selection, but rather according to their relevance and potential contribution to the final results.”

Accordingly, the study sample consisted of:

- **11 university professors** who meet specific criteria of expertise and relevance to the research topic. Their selection was conducted in consultation with the research supervisor and based on internal institutional records.
- **2 content creators** who actively produce and publish digital content typically categorized as *superficial*, enabling the researcher to explore their experiences and perspectives firsthand.

This sample was deliberately chosen for its **analytical richness** and **representative value**, allowing the study to benefit from both academic and practical insights into the dynamics of digital triviality in contemporary Algerian society.

Theoretical Approaches

The Critical Theory – Frankfurt School

The **Critical Theory** developed by the Frankfurt School remains one of the most influential theoretical approaches for analyzing mass communication and its relationship with cultural structures and collective awareness. This school emerged as a reaction against the instrumentalization of reason in modern capitalist societies and drew heavily from Kant’s critical philosophy, Hegelian dialectics, and Marxist theory. It also integrated insights from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and linguistics (Mustafa, 2021, p. 38).

Key figures like **Max Horkheimer**, **Theodor Adorno**, and **Herbert Marcuse** expressed strong skepticism toward mass media, viewing it not as a neutral transmitter of information, but as an ideological apparatus that shapes public consciousness. Horkheimer asserted that media had “destroyed meaning, which is the core principle of communication.” Similarly, **Walter Benjamin** criticized mass communication as fostering a “barbaric culture” (Mustafa, 2021, p. 39). In their view, media content serves dominant ideologies and transforms individuals into passive recipients.

Through concepts such as “**cultural industry**” and “**instrumental reason**”, the Frankfurt theorists argued that media and entertainment became tools for manufacturing consent, enforcing conformity, and reproducing consumerist ideologies. Adorno’s analysis of American radio music—conducted with **Paul Lazarsfeld**—revealed that musical content had become standardized and subordinated to market logic (Zahra, p. 89). Furthermore, Marcuse emphasized how consumer culture generates **false needs**, reinforcing passivity and undermining critical thinking (Zahra, p. 90).

Application in This Study:

This theory helps analyze *superficial content* as a cultural product of the entertainment industry. It offers insight into how digital platforms commodify attention, reduce cultural production to market metrics (likes, shares, views), and trivialize intellectual depth. The theory allows us to understand how such content promotes distraction, fosters cultural passivity, and erodes independent critical thinking.

2. Jean Baudrillard's Critique of Consumer Society

French sociologist **Jean Baudrillard** provided a radical critique of modern consumer society. According to him, consumption is not merely the satisfaction of needs, but a symbolic act deeply embedded in cultural codes. Individuals consume not just products but also **meanings, images, and social distinctions** associated with those products (Fayadh, 2025, p. 5).

Baudrillard emphasized that **consumer culture** transforms everything into a commodity—art, meaning, and even identity. He argued that the value of individuals becomes linked to the material goods they display, and that consumption becomes a **language** through which people silently communicate social status and aspirations. Thus, consumption evolves from a utilitarian act into a symbolic and ideological mechanism (Fayadh, 2025, pp. 6–7).

The concept of “**consumer society**”, which gained traction after the industrial revolution and especially after World War II, refers to societies where mass production is aligned with mass consumption. According to Baudrillard, advanced capitalist societies manufacture **artificial needs**, encouraging people to consume beyond their basic requirements, often driven by the illusion of happiness or belonging (Fayadh, 2025, p. 8). He argued that this society thrives on simulation and **hyperreality**, where images and signs replace direct reality.

Application in This Study:

Baudrillard's critique is vital to this research because it explains how *superficial content* is consumed not for its substance but for its **symbolic value**—as a means of belonging, status, or amusement. It reveals how online users engage with digital content not to gain knowledge, but to participate in a consumerist ritual, driven by spectacle, instant gratification, and identity signaling. This lens also explains why the popularity of trivial content persists even when it lacks meaningful cultural or intellectual value.

Previous Studies

First Study:

The study conducted by Abdelkarim Bouabissa and Fadhila Toumi (2022) in Algeria investigated the correlation between digital education and the proliferation of what Alain Deneault calls the “culture of mediocrity,” within the framework of the transformations brought about by the network society, as theorized by Manuel Castells. The researchers focused on the negative effects of digital platforms, which have led to the flattening of thought and meaning due to the mass dissemination of low-quality cultural content. These platforms, in turn, have produced a generation of influencers saturated with superficiality and trivial values.

They adopted the **descriptive method** to explore the current state of the phenomenon, alongside a **comparative approach** to analyze the differences between meaningful and meaningless content on Facebook.

Their sample included two video posts from the Algerian N1 channel's Facebook page, dated November 5, 2020, and November 11, 2020.

However, the study did not elaborate on analytical findings, which represents a significant limitation. (Bouabissa & Toumi, 2022, p. 283)

Second Study:

In their research titled *"Entertainment Algeria through Social Media: Between Content Superficiality and Virtual Audience Contradictions,"* Sabbar Chebbat and Rabie Guerad (2024) explored the mechanisms of audience interaction with shallow and low-quality entertainment content on popular digital platforms across Algeria and the Arab world. They employed the **descriptive method** to examine the nature of the phenomenon and the contextual conditions surrounding it.

The researchers used a **purposive sample** of 9 short videos labeled under the themes "Chouchaa and Al-Alamiya," each lasting between 12 seconds and 3 minutes 50 seconds, evenly distributed across Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube.

Key findings include:

- The virtual audience significantly contributes to the widespread popularity of shallow content and the rise of pseudo-celebrities.
- The popularity of such content reflects a serious decline in cultural and artistic taste.
- Superficial entertainment spreads like wildfire across various audience segments. (Chebbat & Guerad, 2024, p. 207)

Research Gap

Although a number of media researchers and scholars interested in digitalization have addressed the phenomenon of digital triviality—examining its causes and societal effects, especially on youth—there remains a **notable absence of anthropological approaches**, particularly **digital anthropology**, in tackling such phenomena.

Digital anthropology provides the tools to analyze and interpret human behavior within digital spaces, linking it to broader cultural and social contexts. Yet, studies on digital triviality often overlook this symbolic and structural depth, reducing the phenomenon to a mere deviation from public taste, without exploring its deep-seated cultural implications.

Furthermore, most previous studies have focused on analyzing the content produced by so-called "digital fools" or influencers by studying their posts and videos, often through a descriptive or critical lens. However, **there is a clear lack of academic voices**, particularly from the fields of **sociology and anthropology**, in shaping the discourse around this topic.

Academic experts bring essential, diverse perspectives depending on their disciplines—be it psychology, sociology, or anthropology—each offering unique conceptual and methodological tools. Therefore, the role of scholars in addressing digital triviality is not only necessary but crucial in enriching the understanding of its multi-layered dimensions

Axis One: Superficial Content in the Virtual World

1) Content Lacking Value and Purpose in the Digital Space

Based on the qualitative data obtained through interviews, participants expressed varied yet converging perceptions of the concept of "superficial content." At its core, this content is perceived as a digital phenomenon marked by intellectual emptiness and a decline in cultural and moral depth.

Participant (B-Sh) defined superficial content as "videos and posts that offer no real value to the audience." Participant (A-J) described it as "vulgarity pursued for profit, even at the expense of principles and honor." Meanwhile, participant (B-N) stated that it refers to "any content shared on social media that fails to reflect the cultural fabric of society and instead promotes alien

values incompatible with our morals." Participant (Sh-B) considered it to be "manifestations of poor taste aimed at increasing viewership and dulling public awareness."

These insights point to superficial content as a manifestation of what may be termed "digital emptiness"—a type of media production characterized by a lack of informative substance or constructive communicative purpose. It often involves eye-catching, fleeting entertainment or repetitive, trivial messages that dominate digital platforms.

The danger lies in its mass consumption, which displaces more meaningful content, reinforces a "culture of instant gratification," and fosters a sense of digital alienation.

Moreover, the viral architecture of modern technological platforms facilitates the widespread accessibility and social normalization of such content. This lends it a veneer of legitimacy, despite its lack of educational or cultural value.

2) The Negative Impact of Superficial Content on Social Values

Field interview data revealed a broad consensus among participants regarding the detrimental effects of superficial digital content on moral and social values. Participant (Sh-B) noted that "such content violates ethical standards and aims to undermine the moral foundations of society by promoting vulgarity and indecency." Similarly, participant (A-J) asserted that "digital triviality is fundamentally incompatible with ethical norms," while (J-N) stated that "such content deviates from social standards and is perceived as socially deviant."

Participant (Sh-R) emphasized that "superficial content is far removed from entrenched societal values," and (M-Q) argued that "trivial content lacks purpose and contradicts moral principles, unlike cultural content, which carries intellectual and educational value." (B-Sh) also warned that "this type of media threatens Algerian cultural identity, even if it appears harmless due to its widespread diffusion." Finally, (B-N) contended that "trivial digital content is a deliberate strategy to erase moral values, especially in Global South societies."

These perspectives demonstrate that the harm of superficial content transcends mere entertainment. It promotes consumerist and individualistic lifestyles, legitimizes shallow behaviors such as fame-chasing and ridicule, and undermines critical thinking. Moreover, it encourages apathy and irresponsibility, turning excessive entertainment into an ultimate goal.

Over time, this leads to the erosion of cultural and educational values, and deepens generational gaps regarding the meanings of identity, success, and social commitment. Therefore, the ethical and cultural implications of superficial content represent a pressing issue requiring comprehensive scholarly attention.

3) Audience Power in Constructing Influencers' Fame

Interviews further revealed that participants perceive the digital audience as a central force in shaping fame and assigning the status of "influencer." Participant (Sh-B) observed, "It's the numbers and views that make them celebrities." Similarly, (B-A) stated, "It's the public that makes someone famous—not the content creators themselves." According to (B-N), "Those we call celebrities are defined by the audience's engagement, regardless of the content's quality."

Participant (Sh-R) pointed out that "the passive audience is the primary agent in producing symbolic legitimacy for influencers," while (A-H) noted, "Interactions—likes, views, shares—are enough to place someone within the celebrity circle." Conversely, (B-M) provided a different view, suggesting that "mainstream media and digital platforms play the most significant role in promoting and elevating these individuals to celebrity status."

These insights highlight a new form of symbolic capital where fame no longer stems from achievement but from the ability to trigger instant online engagement. The audience has become a legitimizing force, turning superficial content into a norm.

Digital algorithms amplify this process by boosting highly interactive content, regardless of its depth or value. As a result, superficiality is not only normalized but reproduced and circulated on a massive scale, reinforcing a media logic where quantity of interaction outweighs substance or quality.

4) The Absence of Religious Conscience as a Factor Explaining the Spread of Superficial Content

Field interviews revealed a variety of interpretations regarding the proliferation of superficial content, with most respondents pointing to the decline of moral and religious conscience as a core explanatory factor. Participant (Sh-B) emphasized that the lack of parental supervision, the weakening role of educational institutions, and the absence of internal moral guidance have created a value vacuum exploited by content creators. Similarly, (M-A) and (J-N) identified the erosion of ethical and cultural values as a direct cause for the spread of such content.

In the same vein, (Sh-R) noted that such content is often deliberately promoted to undermine societal morality. Meanwhile, respondents like (A-J) and (A-B) highlighted that financial gain and fame are powerful motivators for producing such content, especially given the ease of publication on platforms like TikTok. Participant (M-H) further argued that the technological simplicity and accessibility of digital tools have removed traditional barriers, allowing anyone to reach a wide audience regardless of content quality.

These perspectives collectively indicate that the absence of a value-based reference system among users contributes significantly to the unregulated dissemination of trivial or even offensive content. In the absence of moral or religious restraint, the digital space becomes an open arena for all forms of superficiality—undermining public taste, glorifying vulgarity, and appealing to base instincts.

This erosion of ethical awareness extends beyond content creators to audiences themselves, who not only consume but also promote such content uncritically, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of digital unconsciousness.

In the long term, this dynamic leads to a disconnect between ethical norms and digital media practices. It cultivates a perception that “digital freedom” equates to complete detachment from moral responsibility—ultimately threatening the ethical and religious frameworks guiding younger generations in the digital age.

5) The Spread of Superficial Content Between Spontaneity and Deliberation

Interview data revealed a dual perspective among participants regarding the spread of superficial content, oscillating between views of spontaneity and intentionality.

Some participants, such as (J-A) and (Sh-B), asserted that digital triviality is largely intentional, especially when targeting youth with values and ideas foreign to local culture and religion. Others, like (Sh-R) and (J-N), offered a more nuanced view, suggesting that while some content may emerge spontaneously due to cultural shallowness, a significant portion is purposefully crafted by actors motivated by utilitarian and pragmatic goals—including influencers, marketers, or even ideological campaigns (e.g., digital “troll armies”).

Participants like (A-B) and (B-N) supported this view, emphasizing that some content creators may initially produce trivial material innocently, but later exploit its viral potential for fame and

monetary gain. The ease of production and viral nature of platforms accelerates this shift, turning superficiality into a strategic and profitable behavior.

This overlap between spontaneity and deliberation makes it difficult to clearly assess intent in content production. It also contributes to normalizing superficial content as both an accepted and lucrative digital practice.

As a result, the distinction between intentional and unintentional triviality becomes blurred. What begins as innocent expression may gradually evolve into a calculated pursuit of digital influence, driven by platform algorithms that reward attention over substance. This ultimately institutionalizes superficiality within the symbolic economy of digital culture.

Discussion of Results – Axis 1: The Nature and Implications of Superficial Content

1. Superficial Content as Deliberate Digital Practice for Audience Capture

The findings indicate that superficial content is often manifested in trivial, shallow, and even indecent forms, primarily designed to boost views and engagement. This suggests that the digital sphere is increasingly shaped by commercial interests at the expense of ethical and intellectual depth.

2. Value Disruption and the Rise of Imported Norms

The study reveals that digital triviality undermines traditional value systems, replacing them with alternative norms that often conflict with local moral frameworks. This poses a cultural threat, reshaping collective awareness and reinforcing consumerist and individualistic tendencies.

3. The Audience as a Source of Symbolic Power

The results show that influencers' fame is no longer grounded in merit or substance, but rather in digital interaction and media amplification. This opens the door for figures with superficial content to gain prominence, thereby establishing a new symbolic economy based on metrics rather than meaning.

4. Religious Decline Is Not the Sole Driver

The data indicate that the spread of superficial content cannot be attributed solely to the weakening of religious or ethical restraint. Instead, material gain and the pursuit of online fame are central motivators, reflecting the dominance of utilitarian logic among content producers.

5. Intentionality Behind Triviality

The findings confirm that the production and circulation of trivial content are not random acts, but rather deliberate strategies aimed at maximizing attention and profit. This reflects the commodification of digital content, where superficiality becomes a calculated business model aligned with market dynamics.

Axis II: Superficial Content and Cultural Production

1. Superficial Content and the Transformation of Digital Cultural Production

Field data revealed a diversity of perspectives regarding the concept of digital cultural

production. Most participants expressed a critical stance, viewing current digital output as driven more by market logic than by educational or cultural missions. Many interviewees highlighted that digital cultural content often lacks intellectual depth and leans toward superficiality, becoming part of what may be described as a “cultural industry” where knowledge is commodified.

Participants also emphasized that recent years have witnessed an explosion in digital content without a corresponding improvement in its quality. Instead, the emphasis has shifted toward immediacy, visual appeal, and viral potential, at the expense of critical reflection and intellectual enrichment.

As a result, digital cultural production has become more commercial and spectacular than enlightening, reinforcing a surface-level digital culture and weakening critical engagement.

2. Superficial Content as a New Form of Mass Culture

The interviews indicated a widespread agreement that superficial content is no longer a marginal phenomenon—it has become a dominant form of contemporary mass culture in the digital age.

This content appeals to a broad, heterogeneous audience and is shaped by the logic of virality and instantaneous interaction, rather than by the quality or depth of meaning. This emergent mass culture is characterized by four key dynamics:

- **Mass Participation:** Anyone can produce and circulate content, regardless of expertise.
- **Collapse of Standards:** Quality is measured by engagement, not content value.
- **Normalization of Mediocrity:** Repetition leads to social acceptance of trivial content.
- **Cognitive Disengagement:** Audiences shift from critical thinking to passive consumption.

These dynamics reflect the critical theories of the Frankfurt School regarding the culture industry and Guy Debord’s concept of the “society of the spectacle,” where image replaces substance, and consumption replaces understanding.

Ultimately, superficial digital content has become a dominant cultural mode, reshaping collective taste and undermining the deeper functions of culture as a tool for reflection, education, and social cohesion.

Axis III: Superficial Content as a Silent Threat to Social Consciousness — and Strategies for Cultural Protection

3. Superficial Content as a Silent Threat to Social Awareness

Field interviews revealed a shared perception among participants that superficial digital content—commonly referred to as “digital triviality”—constitutes a subtle yet dangerous threat to collective awareness.

This threat is not overt but operates silently, infiltrating users’ consciousness through entertaining and repetitive content that gradually normalizes mediocrity and dulls critical thinking. Participants emphasized that this type of content introduces foreign values, weakens moral and intellectual frameworks, and promotes consumerist and shallow modes of thinking that replace reflective engagement with instant gratification.

The main mechanisms of this silent threat include:

- **Gradual normalization:** Constant exposure to trivial content makes it seem normal.
- **Instant gratification:** Quick entertainment dulls the audience's desire for meaning or depth.
- **Symbolic displacement:** Trivial topics replace serious issues in public discourse.
- **Cognitive flattening:** Minds become conditioned to short, simple inputs, reducing attention and analysis.

Protecting Cultural Production Through Awareness Campaigns and Educational Programs

Participants widely agreed that combating digital triviality requires more than critique—it demands proactive strategies that focus on awareness and education. Some emphasized the need to produce culturally rich and engaging content that competes with superficial trends by resonating with local values and aesthetics.

Others advocated for the integration of media literacy into educational curricula to cultivate critical thinking, foster ethical content consumption, and develop personal responsibility in digital behavior.

In addition, the role of cultural institutions, media, and civil society was highlighted as essential in formulating policies that protect public taste, promote meaningful digital content, and reconnect younger generations with authentic cultural identity.

These approaches aim to reclaim the digital space through constructive narratives that challenge superficiality and reinforce deep, reflective engagement.

Discussion of Findings – Axis II: Superficial Content and Cultural Production

1. The Decline of Digital Cultural Production Under Superficiality

The study revealed that the widespread diffusion of superficial content in the digital space has significantly contributed to the decline of digital cultural production. Intellectual, ethical, and value-based content has receded in favor of fast-paced, attention-grabbing materials. This reflects a major shift in the nature of cultural production, where the logic of virality and visibility has replaced the pursuit of meaning and depth. These findings align with Alain Deneault's concept of the *mediocracy of the new elite*, and Jean Baudrillard's analysis of the dominance of image and symbolic emptiness in consumer societies.

2. Superficiality as a Modern Mass Culture

Findings also indicate that superficial content is no longer a marginal or isolated trend but has become a central component of modern mass culture, produced and consumed widely in the digital space.

This signals a cultural shift where meaningless or shallow content is normalized and valorized, often prioritizing entertainment over substance. Such patterns reflect the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture as a tool for fabricating false consciousness and channeling public taste toward consumption and shallowness—undermining cultural resilience and critical thought.

3. Digital Triviality as a Mechanism of Social Reprogramming

The study shows that superficial content doesn't merely distract—it actively participates in reshaping public consciousness by introducing alternative value systems that challenge traditional ethical and cultural norms.

Through subtle messaging, repetitive imagery, and emotionally manipulative discourse, superficial content gradually alters youth perceptions of identity, success, and freedom. This

reveals the ideological function of digital platforms, which use banality and sensationalism to promote specific cultural or commercial agendas, eroding critical awareness and ethical coherence.

4. The Need for a Comprehensive Strategy to Safeguard Digital Cultural Production

The findings suggest that awareness campaigns and educational programs, while important, are insufficient on their own. A broader, multi-layered strategy is needed—one that engages families, schools, media institutions, and cultural organizations.

Cultural protection must begin with the family, which instills the first values; continue through education, which fosters critical thinking; and be reinforced by media, which shapes public discourse and perception.

A coordinated societal effort is essential to nurture conscious digital citizenship, develop meaningful alternatives, and restore culture's enlightening and transformative role in the digital era.

Axis III: Superficial Content and Social Transformations

1. Social Transformation as a Historical Necessity The findings reveal a shared perception among participants that social transformation is a necessary and inevitable process in the evolution of societies. It is not a temporary crisis but a structural response to deep economic, technological, and cultural changes.

Participants emphasized that the shift from traditional forms of social organization to more flexible and pluralistic structures is driven by globalization, the information revolution, and media influence.

Thus, social transformation becomes a conscious and dynamic process aimed at achieving adaptation and continuity, balancing the preservation of cultural identity with the renewal of institutional frameworks in a rapidly changing world.

2. Superficial Content as a Reflection of Social Change Participants widely agreed that superficial digital content is not an isolated phenomenon but a reflection of deeper societal transformations.

Such content mirrors a shift in collective values, aesthetic preferences, and modes of communication. It reflects a symbolic reconfiguration in which speed, visibility, and virality replace depth, meaning, and substance as markers of value.

This trend also signifies a broader social change in how identity, success, and belonging are constructed—moving from communal engagement to individual online performance metrics. Superficiality, therefore, is not merely a decline in taste but a cultural indicator of how society is redefining itself under the logic of immediacy and digital spectacle.

3. Social Media and the Erosion of Social Bonds The interviews revealed a clear concern among participants regarding the role of social media in deepening individual isolation and weakening the individual's connection to their community.

While these platforms promise greater connectivity, they often foster what could be termed "digital solitude," where individuals interact primarily within algorithm-driven echo chambers that filter out differing views.

As a result, traditional social bonds—such as family, neighborhood, and civic participation—are increasingly replaced by fleeting and superficial digital interactions.

Furthermore, social media encourages narcissistic tendencies, as individuals present curated versions of themselves for public consumption rather than engaging in meaningful social relationships.

Consequently, rather than being tools of social cohesion, digital platforms risk accelerating social fragmentation and diminishing the sense of collective belonging.

4) Superficial Content Promotes False Images of Life for Imitation

Interview findings revealed that superficial content often promotes idealized and artificial portrayals of other people's lives, designed to appear perfect and successful. Participants emphasized that many influencers craft false narratives about their lifestyles, relying heavily on acting, editing, and exaggeration.

These carefully curated portrayals create collective illusions about happiness and success, shaping distorted standards based on appearances and consumption. As individuals attempt to imitate these fabricated models in hopes of gaining social recognition, a deeper disconnect between their real selves and virtual expectations emerges.

Thus, the danger of digital superficiality lies not only in offering empty content but also in reshaping personal aspirations and collective values, turning life into a pursuit of unattainable digital illusions.

Discussion of Results –

Axis III: Superficial Content and Social Transformations

1) Social Transformation as a Structural Necessity The study shows that social transformation is not a voluntary or accidental occurrence but a necessary response to the evolving dynamics of contemporary life, including cultural, economic, and technological changes. Such transformation redefines symbolic structures, reshapes interpersonal relationships, and alters cultural values. Understanding transformation as a natural and ongoing process allows for a better analysis of phenomena such as digital superficiality and new modes of cultural interaction.

2) Superficial Content as a Mirror of Social Change

The findings suggest that superficial content is no longer marginal but represents a broader reflection of current social transformations. It manifests a shift in public taste, symbolic criteria, and communication styles—aligning with anthropological interpretations that view digital spaces as extensions of deep cultural and structural changes.

3) Social Media and the Rise of Isolation

The data indicate that social media has contributed not only to emotional and physical isolation but also to digital addiction, misinformation, loss of privacy, and wasted time—especially among students.

Social platforms, while designed for connection, now shape behaviors and perceptions in complex ways that weaken trust and reduce meaningful community participation.

4) Promoting False Life Models as a Psychological and Cultural Pressure

Superficial content reinforces performative lifestyles by showcasing glamorized realities that do not reflect authentic experiences. This creates a culture of superficial comparison where digital performance becomes a benchmark for success. The result is increased psychological stress and

diminished self-worth, as individuals feel pressured to conform to unrealistic and often deceptive standards.

General Findings of the Study

1. **Disruption of Authentic Values** Superficial digital content undermines traditional moral and cultural values, promoting foreign norms that destabilize collective identity and ethical balance.
2. **Influencer Fame Rooted in Reach, Not Substance** Public influence is no longer linked to merit or knowledge, but to interaction metrics and media promotion, enabling the rise of figures lacking genuine substance.
3. **Economic Incentives Drive Digital Superficiality** The pursuit of fame and financial gain are the main drivers behind the proliferation of shallow content—not merely the absence of ethical awareness.
4. **Superficiality as a Strategic Marketing Tool** Shallow and provocative content is part of a calculated strategy aimed at maximizing attention and profit, reflecting the dominance of market logic in content creation.
5. **Decline of Cultural Depth in Digital Production** Widespread superficial content has led to a decline in the quality and intellectual depth of cultural production, favoring flashy formats over meaningful content, echoing critiques by Alain Deneault and Jean Baudrillard.
6. **Superficiality Embedded in Mass Culture** Superficial content has become a core component of modern digital mass culture, produced and consumed at scale—consistent with Frankfurt School theories on manipulated public consciousness.
7. **A Threat to Social Awareness** Digital triviality promotes shallow and distorted values aligned with hidden ideologies, creating a false consciousness and weakening critical thinking—especially among youth.
8. **Cultural Protection Requires Systemic Action** Awareness campaigns alone are insufficient. Families, educational institutions, media, and civil society must collaborate to build critical and sustainable digital awareness.
9. **Social Transformation as a Structural Necessity** Social change is no longer optional—it reflects the need for adaptation to evolving cultural, economic, and technological realities, explaining the rise of phenomena like digital superficiality.

Conclusion

Amidst the rapid social transformations and the growing dominance of digital presence, this study reveals that **superficial content** is no longer a marginal or incidental phenomenon, but rather a **structural component** of contemporary cultural production. Through an analysis of circulated digital content and interviews conducted with university professors and content creators, it becomes clear that such content is not produced randomly, but is instead the result of specific social, economic, and technological conditions that facilitate its spread and reinforce its visibility.

In response to the central research question:

How does superficial content impact digital cultural production in light of current social transformations?

The study demonstrates a twofold impact. On one hand, a new mode of content production has emerged—fast-paced, consumption-driven, focused on entertainment and sensationalism—while marginalizing deep intellectual or creative content. On the other hand, it reshapes the criteria of "cultural value" in the digital space, where virality and audience engagement become the primary metrics of success, rather than content depth or intellectual quality.

Interviews with content creators revealed that many now operate within the logic of the digital market, where algorithms dictate visibility and reward simplified, humorous, or provocative

discourse. Conversely, university professors expressed concern that this trend diminishes public taste and undermines the status of serious cultural engagement, thus disrupting the educational and intellectual functions of cultural production.

Superficial content, therefore, is not merely trivial or frivolous. It is embedded within a systemic structure that includes platforms, influencers, and audiences—one that profoundly impacts the relationship between culture and the market, between knowledge and its digital medium. Addressing this phenomenon requires an **anthropological perspective** to understand the deeper transformation in how humans relate to information, and how symbolic production is mediated in the digital era.

In conclusion, superficial content plays an active role in **reshaping the digital cultural landscape**, posing major challenges to cultural actors and educational institutions, and calls for a fundamental rethinking of knowledge production tools and strategies to resist trivialization.

List of References and Sources

- Aakharoun, M. A. (1999). *Scientific Research Methodology: Rules, Stages, and Applications*. Jordan.
- Al-Zahraa, S. A. (n.d.). *Critical Theory in Sociology and Its Interpretations of Mass Communication*. *Haqaiq Journal for Psychological and Social Studies*, 89.
- Angers, M. (2006). *Scientific Research Methodology in the Humanities* (B. Sahraoui & B. S. Kamal, Trans.). Algeria: Dar Al-Kasbah Publishing.
- Bouti, C. Z. (2020). *Social Transformations and Aspects of Change in Algerian Society*. *Journal of the Researcher in Human and Social Sciences*, 168.
- Bouabbassia, A. A., & Fadila, T. (2022). *Digital Education to Confront the Dominance of Trivial Culture in the Networked Society: A Descriptive and Critical Study*. *International Journal of Social Communication*, 283.
- Deneault, A. (2020). *Mediocracy: The Politics of the Extreme Centre*. Beirut: Dar Soual Publishing.
- Saboun, S., & Hafssa, D. (2012). *Methodological Guide for Preparing Theses and Dissertations in Sociology*. Algeria: Dar Al-Kasbah Publishing.
- Shabbat, S., & Rabie, F. (2024). *Entertainment Production on Social Media Between Content and Audience Contradictions: An Analytical Study of a Sample of Entertainment Content*. *Al-Shamil Journal for Educational and Social Sciences*, 207.
- Taima, R. A. (2004). *Content Analysis in Human Sciences: Its Concept, Foundations, and Uses*. Cairo: Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi.
- Omar, M. Z. (n.d.). *Scientific Research: Its Methods and Techniques*. Cairo: Hussein Al-Tarabshi Printing Press.
- Fayyad, H. A. (2025). *The Theory of Consumer Society Critique According to Jean Baudrillard*. *Journal of Human and Sociological Studies and Research*, 5.
- Mohamed, M. A. (1983). *Sociology and the Scientific Method*. Alexandria: Dar Al-Maaref Al-Jamia'iya.
- Marsli, I. B. (2010). *Scientific Research Methods in Media and Communication Sciences*. Algeria: National University Publications Office.
- Mustafa, D. T. (2021). *Anthropology of Communication*. Algeria: Dar Al-Hamed for Publishing and Distribution.