Max-out

Self-alienation in the age of self-optimization and digital selfhood.

Author's Preliminary Note

This text emerged from a need to render intelligible certain forms of professional malaise that elude traditional analytical frameworks. It reflects a critical effort to conceptualize contemporary forms of alienation at work, forged at the intersection of years of field practice outside strictly clinical or managerial contexts, theoretical analysis, and cross-cutting observation of discourses on fulfilment, motivation, and self-realization. The aim is to contribute to a collective understanding of a phenomenon that remains largely undertheorized, by inviting discussion, empirical scrutiny, and interdisciplinary enrichment.

Abstract

As the structure of work evolves under the combined effects of digitalization, hyperconnectivity and the injunction to optimize the self, existing classifications of work-related disorders (burn-out, workaholism, brown-out, bore-out) appear insufficient to capture new forms of psychological suffering. This invisibilized form of subjugation, referred to here as Max-out, reflects a subtle, regulated and internalized dynamic. The analysis follows a transdisciplinary approach, drawing from work psychology, ergonomics, critical sociology and philosophy, in order to grasp the subjective and systemic processes operating within the growing fusion of private and professional spheres. Max-out is defined as a contemporary form of alienation in which individuals maintain a high level of functional performance, express a subjective sense of fulfilment, and perceive themselves as self-regulating, while gradually losing critical awareness and personal agency.

This work proposes a formalization of the concept, highlighting its distinct features in comparison with existing syndromes. It describes a paradoxical form of professional commitment, where individuals self-exploit while experiencing themselves as free, accomplished and voluntary. An ideal type is presented here to open a space of inquiry into a subtle, normalized form of alienation that escapes vigilance precisely because it operates through socially valued dimensions. What makes it particularly impervious to critique is its capacity to disarm critical thinking from within, by concealing itself beneath ideals that have become virtually unquestionable: fulfilment, personal development and autonomy.

Keywords

- Max-out
- Contemporary alienation
- Professional overinvestment
- Work and subjectivation
- Performance regulation
- Agency
- Gamification of existence
- Management
- Subtle control
- Work psychology
- Ergonomics
- Organizational sociology

Work is not always most dangerous when it causes visible suffering; it can be equally so when it manufactures consent without the person understanding what they are consenting to, when it exploits every resource while undermining free will, and when it wears down bodies and minds by pushing the individual to deny the real causes of their afflictions. Because to see them would mean questioning one's own relationship to work, the self-narrative built not on choice but on externally imposed stakes, on meaning assigned rather than consciously constructed. It would mean calling into question not only a status or achievements, but the only narrative still socially valorized: the fiction in which the work one performs, along with its constraints, defines who one is.

Jean-Claude works more than 55 hours a week in total. He never disconnects, remains in contact with colleagues and ongoing matters during weekends and holidays, describes himself as committed, and ultimately left a better-paid position in a competing company to return to his former team because he “feels good” there. He is convinced that he is fulfilled. This particular case will be presented in the final chapter. From our perspective, he is in a Max-out situation. Why?

To facilitate the reading and understanding of the works and concepts cited in the main text, the titles of referenced publications and French conceptual terms have been translated; however, titles remain in their original language in the bibliography.

Max-out : systemic self-alienation

The term was chosen to align with the various terminologies currently used to describe work-related syndromes and phenomena, such as burnout or boreout, even though it is ultimately unsatisfactory.

In an era of digitalized work, hybrid professional spaces, and normalized injunctions to personal fulfillment, traditional approaches to work-related suffering struggle to grasp a new, emerging form of silent alienation. Established categories such as burnout, boreout, brownout, or workaholism have helped to name certain psychological breakdowns or forms of disconnection, but they fail to conceptualize a more insidious phenomenon: that of a euphoric, regulated form of overinvestment, experienced by the individual as achievement or fulfillment.

Working hard retains an unshakable social image as a fundamental human value in the storytelling of governing institutions across all societies. It constitutes the discursive lever through which systems of control thrive and reproduce, mobilizing individual adherence and reinforcing cohesion around an objective presented as shared. This structural and normative narrative elevates effort as an end in itself, sacrifice as an ideal, naturalizes consented exhaustion, and renders any questioning suspicious, marginal, or selfish—whether psychological, ethical or social.

This phenomenon does not manifest through sudden rupture or blind addiction. It develops through slow, progressive, and durable adherence to a logic of maximal performance, in which the individual maintains the appearance of control while operating at the very limits of their psychic, social, and physical resources. Pleasure, recognition, and the pursuit of meaning no longer counterbalance alienation—they become its levers, its vectors, its justifications, and sometimes even its accelerants.

To designate this specific configuration, I introduce here the concept of Max-out, defined as a condition of maximal-limit alienation. Unlike burnout (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach & Jackson, 1981), which denotes exhaustion accompanied by a collapse of functioning, Max-out unfolds within a controlled and constructed antechamber: there is no breakdown, no complete loss of agency. The individual adapts, adjusts, absorbs, optimizes, and sacrifices themself—but at an invisible cost. And the difficulty of identification is all the greater because the external signs are socially rewarded: commitment, endurance, adaptability, operational excellence, the ability to “handle pressure,” and being a hard worker.

This article establishes the conceptual foundations of an ideal type. It describes its characteristics and internal logic through a transdisciplinary reading of Max-out, at the intersection of psychology, ergonomics, work sociology, and philosophy. The objective is to make this phenomenon intelligible in order to open a space for thought, recognition, and empirical research.

This analysis stems from empirical observations and the result of approximately ten years of maturation. It constitutes an analytical proposition that calls for the documentation of professional trajectories marked by this form of performative alienation—often experienced as personal fulfillment—while silently operating a progressive dispossession of the ability to perceive oneself accurately, to question one's choices and routines, and to evolve freely. For the deeper the adherence, the more it merges with the feeling of being in the right place—even when that place has been shaped by a system that obscures the origin of imbalances.

The concept

The concept of "Max-out," or process of boundary alienation, combines professional overinvestment, capacity for activity regulation, overestimated fulfilment, and loss of free will. I will describe a phenomenon of work's hold over the individual, as a consequence of the influence of their environment, since the entire professional sphere impacts their perceptions and their representation of the reality of their condition. It can persist for many years, insidiously, without leading to a total collapse. This initial conceptualization opens a space for research. Empirical validation and the establishment of operational diagnostic criteria must be the subject of further studies.

A silent and subtle alienation, in which the individual delights in it while losing themselves. They have constructed a fulfilling representation of their professional reality, which they validate through a sincere attachment to their activity. Their overinvestment appears "normal" to them, as they measure it in reference to that of their colleagues in similar positions, according to an apparent egalitarian logic or a desire for distinction, to be "above," more efficient, more committed. Separating their professional life from their personal life has only a limited meaning for them; they nonetheless claim to do so, yet this is not reflected in their actions. They pay little attention to the effects of their commitment on other dimensions of their life, in the short or medium term. They have difficulty understanding or conceiving the impacts, as they do not manifest in ways significant enough in their daily lives to be taken into account. Warning signs are vague, diffuse, and insufficient to trigger awareness, as they do not directly contradict their value system, a system already reshaped by managerial injunctions. This functioning does not lead to burnout, to an obvious depression, or to a sudden collapse of family ties. It rather induces peripheral alterations, difficult to connect to each other: persistent fatigue, interpersonal tensions, emotional disengagement, various physical disorders… all discrete symptoms, easily attributed to other causes or relegated to the category of "everyday hazards".

The most representative feature of Max-out is that the individual remains in the illusion of apparent control of the situation, in a form of self-regulation of their professional activity, and navigates at the limit, walking a tightrope, at the maximum of their physical and cognitive capacities and of what their social and personal environment allows, at the limit of what might begin to cause, in their view, overly significant problems from a family or social standpoint, at the limit of what might trigger depression or psychosomatic problems too substantial to be ignored, at the limit of a disabling or incapacitating fatigue, at the limit of no longer being able to work.

The individual thus carries out their professional activity at the maximum of their capacities, without nevertheless falling into burnout, nor having the same dramatic repercussions on their family life and free time as the uncontrollable addiction that is workaholism. They are able to vary the intensity of their investment according to events or periods, to “smooth” exhaustion over time, the way one spreads out an expense. They do not lose interest in their personal life; they simply devote much more to their career and are certainly pathologically dependent. For some individuals, this can extend to a sense of a tasteless existence outside their professional activity, as if the rhythms of the activity gave them such dopaminergic peaks that the rest became secondary. They only truly “exist” through this professional activity. Their work fully define them and are an inseparable part of their identity. This phenomenon goes beyond the mere social valorization of status: it engages a profound structuring of the self, in which the work is no longer a functional role, but becomes the central axis around which self-perception, affects, and the criteria of existential legitimacy are organized. Identity merges with function, the feeling of competence with the feeling of worth, and perceived usefulness with proof of existence. Individuals with few passions or hobbies are the most inclined to allow themselves to be overtaken. In the absence of alternative symbolic or experiential spaces, work becomes not only central, but exclusive as a source of gratification, self-esteem, and temporal markers. This deficit of identity diversification, this inability to construct meaning outside the professional sphere, increases vulnerability to this form of subtle alienation. Professional activity then colonizes the imagination, structures social expectations, and progressively replaces, in terms of value, anything that could constitute a counterbalance or an alternative.

This absence of extra-professional balancing poles is not always perceived as a lack: it is often rationalized by the individual as a “choice” and socially validated by the admiration it elicits in the professional sphere. In reality, it reveals an impoverished identity configuration, in which work and the professional environment, along with its relationships, are no longer one pillar among others, but the main foundation on which the entire relationship to self and to the world rests.

Within this framework, professional activity acts as a regulating source of emotions, a matrix of recognition, and a guarantor of narrative coherence. Far from being a mere strong professional commitment, this identity fusion prevents any critical distancing from work, as questioning its meaning or centrality would amount to fracturing the unity of the self. It is as if the individual could no longer extract themselves without risking a loss of existential bearings: it is in the activity that they feel what they lack, and outside it that they experience the void. This symbolic dependence, coupled with a performative self-regulation, characterizes part of the core of Max-out.

This concept shares certain characteristics with workaholism while differing from it profoundly. The “enthusiastic” professional overinvestment (workaholism) described by Spence and Robbins (1992) is characterized by the individual’s disinvestment from the rest of their life, addiction to work, failure of control, and persistence despite negative consequences, sometimes to the point of no longer enjoying their activity and ultimately having a depreciative view of their work results. The individual alienated in Max-out is not subject to the different stages of evolution of this condition either. They experience genuine enjoyment and overexcitement, a sincere sense of personal fulfilment, reinforced by an emotional dependence on work and on the interactions it carries, within a climate of implicit recognition that reinforces them narcissistically. This link is not based on an uncontrollable compulsion, but on a ritualized form of dopaminergic satisfaction, fueled by the succession of achievements, permanent stimulation, and the social and managerial valorization of overcommitment. Professional

activity becomes the main terrain of emotional and cognitive activation as well as reward. Their perception of success, as well as their apparent ability to regulate their activity or modulate their investment according to periods, accentuates their feeling of control. But this control is only a functional dressing allowing them to remain at the limit between their professional performance and the acceptability of its effects. It masks a gradual loss of free will, linked to the internalization of performance norms. The individual can no longer truly "let go," not because they do not want to, but because doing so would mean suspending a central source of meaning, identity, reward, and recognition. The rationality of their choices is trapped by the integrated norm. They remain capable of adaptability, but this adaptability itself becomes a condition for remaining in the alienating cycle, and only around what contributes to their satisfaction.

I would now like to make a brief aside on the question of context, and will then return to the description of certain details.

One of the major limitations of the most publicized work-related syndromes, such as burnout, bore-out, brown-out, or workaholism, lies in their tendency to focus analysis on the observable psychological and behavioral effects in the individual, while neglecting the systemic and contextual complexity of actual work. Yet what is grouped under the generic term "work" cannot be reduced to a daily activity or a succession of tasks: it includes a configuration of interactions located at the intersection of several systems—organizational, economic, normative, technological—that impose their own rules, structural constraints, recognition mechanisms, and engagement logics. But work is also a space of emotional, relational, and identity activity, structured by collective expectations, implicit norms, latent pressures, digital artefacts, and forms of continuous evaluation, etc. Not integrating these dimensions into the analysis is to renounce any precise and rigorous understanding of the phenomena contributing to suffering at work.

This lack of contextual grounding is partly explained by the classificatory logics themselves: in order to produce exportable, measurable syndromes that can be used in clinical or administrative settings, models must abstract from part of the contextual elements. Yet without a lucid, faithful, and ecological reading of activity, it becomes illusory to precisely identify the root causes of suffering, or to consider avenues for action. Context, in this sense, is not a mere background variable: it is an operator of fine and deep understanding. But it is also, by nature, the enemy of generalization. In the case of Max-out, context is an intrinsic component of analysis. Any assessment of the situation, whether clinical or systemic, must integrate it as a determining variable.

The contextual difference is striking between a Pakistani worker who "presses" aluminum pans in conditions unacceptable to a European, and a commercial executive in the retail sector. Yet both are certainly victims of alienation, though very differently. The first may probably be found in the alienation described by Karl Marx, while the second is a potential victim of the various "B-out," Max-out, or workaholism.

The nature of investment, the subjective meaning attributed to the activity, and the fidelity of the representations the individual has of it constitute three inseparable axes that must be jointly addressed in the analysis of Max-out. Questioning the accuracy of representations is paramount: does the individual perceive their commitment in a lucid and nuanced way, or through a distorted vision? And if so, what structures this distortion: internalized social norms, dominant narratives, managerial discourse, or even strategies of cognitive avoidance?

Then, what deep meaning do they attribute to their professional activity, and how has this meaning been constructed, defined, and sustained over time? Is the level of significance they attribute to it consistent with the actual nature of the activity performed, its place in the overall life balance, its real utility value, and the extent of its impact?

Finally, what is the origin of this investment: does it result from an autonomous, informed, and reflective choice, or is it rooted in ingrained constraints, implicit expectations, or a form of functional dependence on work and the recognition it provides?

These elements are inseparable from the work context: the systemic dynamics that frame it, the evaluation modalities, managerial logics, but also the internalized social expectations, etc. This is why the analysis of Max-out requires clearly distinguishing forms of investment, at the crossroads of meaning, free will, and contextual constraints.

Differentiating two types of investment as a lever for evaluation

It is, in my view, essential to establish a distinction between two types of investment, directly linked to context and to the question of meaning in work, in order to better understand how engagement is identified and evaluated. This distinction is structured as follows:

1. Voluntary investment
2. Imposed investment

1. Voluntary investment is rooted in a chosen dynamic and aligned with the individual's values, interests, or deep aspirations, without any direct external pressure, influence, or internalized constraint. It can, for instance, result from a process of balanced vocational orientation, as defined in my previous work on the autonomous construction of meaning in professional life. This kind of investment emerges from desire, interest, pleasure, or the compelling necessity to accomplish or engage in something. The question of meaning and the origin of the activity cannot be disconnected from the nature of the investment. It involves a deep meaning, not one that is artificially reconstructed after the fact to provide reassurance. Voluntary investment is associated with what I call intrinsic meaning.

2. Imposed investment refers to work or activity that has not genuinely been chosen by the individual, or at least not in all its components, whether in terms of its object, organization, or purpose. In contrast, it may appear voluntary but in reality be shaped by internalized external constraints, performance norms, or professional validation strategies, even as the individual believes they are making autonomous and informed choices. It refers to activity that lacks deep meaning for the individual, yet generates a continuous elaboration to justify their action. This also includes, by extension, the additional work that individuals impose on themselves, either in small or large proportions, in response to perceived necessities, fake urgencies, or multiple external expectations. It may be amplified by the influence of the context, the structure of the organization, or managerial practices. Imposed investment is associated with what I call defined meaning.

This distinction is central to the analysis of Max-out precisely because Max-out arises from a blurring between apparent voluntary investment and internalized imposed investment.

These are two fundamentally different notions of investment in work, and they clearly do not resonate the same way in daily experience, even if their effects may appear similar. This is why,

in my view, context must be taken into account, and why one must not focus solely on effects. It also invites us to reconsider the very scope of the word “work” in any analysis of investment.

The term “work” is often equated with the notion of “profession” and associated in the collective consciousness with the idea of remuneration. Here, I use the term “work” in a broader sense, as productive activity of any kind, whether paid or unpaid, whether it provides a livelihood or belongs to the realm of free practice. Without delving into a detailed comparison with slavery, we could refer to numerous artists or writers who, during their lifetime, devoted most of their time to creating without earning sufficient income from it, even though their level of commitment or the subjective value of their work cannot be denied.

That said, the concept of alienation in its most operative sense gains full meaning when work is performed with the aim of meeting basic needs, without the possibility of choosing the object or the conditions of the activity. It is this lack of choice, combined with economic necessity, that defines structural alienation. In contrast, in the case of a business owner, alienation may take another form: that of self-alienation, arising from internalized constraints, logic of self-exploitation, or an absorbing level of commitment experienced as inevitable.

I consider that an individual who is voluntarily invested in an activity they have chosen does not have a pathological relationship to their activity in the way that someone experiencing Max-out does, even if they display all the characteristic traits, and this for two central reasons: the meaning attached to their activity, and the nature of their investment, which may, for example, provide them with a form of pleasure free from self-persuasion. In such a context, it may be assumed that they have not lost their free will, their capacity for decision-making, and their emancipated autonomy.

To develop this idea of the link between investment and pleasure, it must be contrasted with fictitious pleasure, arising from the subject’s need to assign meaning to their activity not because the activity inherently possesses any, but to cope with its absence, and from a need for self-legitimation that aims to sustain the image of a desirable, deliberate, and assumed engagement.

I draw a clear distinction, on the question of investment, between what belongs to objective reality—concrete configurations of real work—and what stems from the individual’s representations, and is therefore subjective, often shaped by defense mechanisms and influenced by a range of variables.

This distinction between voluntary and imposed investment implies the necessity of evaluating the coherence between what the individual believes they are experiencing and what their objective working conditions actually allow them to express. The issue is therefore not only to gather the meaning the subject attributes to their engagement, but also to examine whether that meaning arises from a chosen dynamic, aligned with their fundamental needs and linked to the creation of a work that deeply engages them, or whether it results from a reinterpretation that justifies a constrained attachment to the activity.

This implies crossing several levels of analysis: personal representations, behavioral signs, and structural elements of the context in which the individual operates. This cross-referencing enables a clearer distinction between investment that stems from a freely affirmed choice and adherence shaped by norms or implicit expectations.

In this sense, Max-out cannot be identified solely through subjective declarations. It requires a close reading of internalization mechanisms capable of transforming an initial constraint into a form of engagement perceived as natural.

The question of meaning

I will briefly summarize here a distinction that is developed in greater detail in an unpublished essay dedicated to the question of meaning in work. It distinguishes between two types of meaning in this context.

1. Intrinsic meaning (socially recognized meaning)
2. Defined meaning

Intrinsic meaning refers to a kind of universally shared meaning, one that the vast majority of people would be likely to attribute to a given action. It denotes a type of meaning whose value is widely recognized beyond the individual, and even independently of them. It relies on a form of intersubjective recognition that is sufficiently shared to establish a social norm of value. This norm is historically stabilized, yet always culturally situated. It reflects more the dominant norms of social utility than any absolute values. In this sense, most people, regardless of their culture or social position, would agree in attributing to a given job a fundamental utility or value. This historical stabilization does not imply that intrinsic meaning is fixed or absolute. It evolves with societal transformations and shifting symbolic power dynamics. What is referred to as intrinsic, therefore, designates a temporary crystallization of dominant values that are sufficiently consensual to appear as self-evident at a given moment in time. One could thus imagine a scale of social recognition of meaning, ranging from activities perceived as vital to humanity to those considered superficial or dispensable. This is precisely what some studies on bullshit jobs highlight. It is possible, for example, to distinguish between an individual trying to solve survival problems for humanity and one who brings coffee to movie stars on set.

Defined meaning, by contrast, is the meaning that only the individual attributes to their activity, whatever the reasons or mechanisms involved. This terminological distinction will be refined in future work.

To illustrate, the medical profession has intrinsic meaning. All individuals, regardless of culture, are likely to ascribe meaning to it since it involves saving lives, irrespective of the quantitative or qualitative value one may assign to the actual work performed (since there are, of course, bad doctors). The profession of receptionist—or more broadly, support functions that are symbolically under-valued—relies on defined meaning. The individual performing this job assigns it meaning, but it does not mobilize the same level of collective recognition or self-evident utility. Of course, the criteria used for this distinction can be discussed. But for the purposes of this example, the question of meaning in work is being examined through the lens of perceived utility of an activity, or the importance of the service rendered to society, from either an individual or collective perspective, but not exclusively.

To further illustrate the distinction between intrinsic and defined meaning, consider two contrasting figures. In one, the individual saves a life. In the other, the individual operates as a scheduling device. These distinctions highlight how certain roles are socially recognized as important, while others are acknowledged only symbolically or incidentally, and often by a narrow audience. Some roles are socially perceived as useful, obvious, and vital, while others

are viewed as more secondary, even if they fulfill a need, and despite the narrative effort invested in legitimizing them. This is not a moral judgment about professions, but a critical reading of implicit hierarchies of value within the social space.

Analyzing this distribution of meaning helps to clarify discrepancies in subjective investment and to understand how certain jobs carry a direct and uncontestable sense of utility, while others expose individuals to a constant need for justification. The sincerity of fulfillment at work is not in question here; rather, it is the objective social reality of such fulfillment that is being examined. Assigning meaning to one's actions does not imply lucidity regarding their actual significance.

Consequently, when an individual reports feeling fulfilled at work, this conceptualization of meaning allows for an assessment of the objective foundations of that fulfillment by cross-referencing subjective data and socially shared benchmarks of meaning. The goal is to confront the individual's sentiment with a presumed consensual reality through a subjective scale of fulfillment evaluation. This approach does not claim absolute objectivity, but instead offers a critical calibration based on the gap between social recognition and subjective investment. It is not about declaring whether a form of fulfillment is legitimate, but about analyzing the conditions that make it possible and the mechanisms by which it is constructed. Just because an individual assigns meaning to their work does not mean they are fulfilled by it, nor that they are lucid about the nature of the activity itself. The construction of meaning can serve as a symbolic buffer against experiences of emptiness or absurdity.

This is not a reference to attempts at measuring fulfillment through social psychology, using questionnaires or interviews, nor to human resources methods that rely on observable data such as absenteeism rates, turnover at certain positions, team or company performance, etc., which are entirely subjective and fail to account for participants' biased representations.

Any serious evaluation of meaning in work must be conducted outside all managerial and societal hypocrisy.

Fulfillment at work appears possible only if the individual assigns meaning to their actions. However, not all meanings assigned to an action necessarily lead to fulfillment. For example, consider a worker exploited on construction sites in Dubai. This worker must obviously assign meaning to his actions—such as surviving, or sending money home to feed his family—but no one would imagine that he is fulfilled. Conversely, some declared cases of fulfillment in activities with low social recognition may stem from different adaptive mechanisms, where the construction of meaning symbolically compensates for a lack of external validation. This analysis does not invalidate the experience of fulfillment but interrogates its origins.

We may therefore define, in the previously cited example of the receptionist profession, that this constitutes a case of self-indulgent fulfillment, a form of socially induced self-deception reinforced by the environment. The individual constructs their own justifications for satisfaction, but this psychic construction responds just as much to identity needs as to injunctions and organizational devices. These make self-persuasion necessary for existential coherence—the ability to perceive one's professional daily life as aligned with an acceptable self-image, even at the cost of fictitious or over-adapted justifications.

It is the confrontation between intrinsic and defined meaning, enabling this distancing and relativization of the nature, effects, and value of an action, that allows for a genuine inquiry into the question of meaning in work and the potential for fulfillment.

Naturally, the very question of meaning in the context of work is a luxury accessible to only a very small minority of individuals in developed countries. The phenomenon of alienation described here pertains specifically to them.

Only after conducting this artificial evaluation of meaning in work can we attempt to identify the nature of an individual's investment. The articulation with the question of fulfillment will follow.

This distinction between intrinsic and defined meaning helps clarify the symbolic compensation mechanisms at work in certain forms of declared fulfillment. It helps identify cases in which the meaning attributed to an activity conceals an internalized constraint, an unresolved dissonance, or an illusion of autonomy. It is only by interrogating the quality of the meaning assigned—its source, its psychological functions, and its social robustness—that one can rigorously analyze the nature of an individual's investment at work, its dysfunctions, and its degree of alienation. The convergence of meaning defined by the individual and a self-imposed justification is part of what I have conceptualized elsewhere as a Max-out process: a form of committed self-alienation.

This approach thus enables not only a differentiation between forms of meaning but also an interrogation of their robustness, source, and psychological or structural functions—whether adaptive, defensive, or alienating. It constitutes a necessary methodological prerequisite for any attempt to analyze the subjective relationship to work.

Articulation of meaning and investment

The question of meaning in work, particularly for individuals who impose an activity on themselves or to whom it is imposed, deserves thorough attention, especially in the context of voluntary overinvestment. The contemporary image par excellence of this voluntary investment is that of the entrepreneur. They embody both the freedom to act, the desire to innovate, and the claimed autonomy, often presented as freely consented. Yet, mere will is not enough to dismiss the hypothesis of a Max-out. Apparent voluntarism does not guarantee real autonomy. Just because an individual chooses to invest does not mean they do so in conditions free of alienation. This is precisely where the evaluation of meaning, its articulation with the nature of investment, and the consideration of context become decisive.

Let us take the case of a business owner. They invest themselves, certainly. But why? Is it to develop a solution that is genuinely useful to a community? To advance a cause of collective interest? Or solely to capture a market share, attract investors, maximize return on capital?

If the motivation is exclusively financial, if the activity brings no substantial benefit to the community, if the product or service provided presents no identifiable intrinsic meaning, or even contributes to harming health or the environment, then the investment, even "voluntary," must be re-examined.

There is no shortage of examples. Companies that produce toxic, addictive, or superfluous products. The tobacco industry. Energy drinks with questionable compositions, promoted in

competitions that valorize hyper-risk in already extreme sports. The aesthetic packaging of a commercial strategy does not always hide the void of meaning.

In such cases, the intensity of investment, its apparent control, and the gratifications obtained are no longer sufficient to conceal the gap between the displayed commitment and the emptiness of the object. If, in addition, we observe signs of physical exhaustion, a reduction in other spheres of life, a rigid justification discourse, and the inability to question the foundations of the engagement, then we may think of a Max-out.

This is not about disqualifying financial motivation as such. Profit, economic success, or business growth can be legitimate and powerful drivers, sometimes necessary. But what interests me in this analysis is what happens when this register becomes exclusive, unexamined, and sufficient to justify total investment, even when it leads to a clear deterioration of quality of life, relationships, or health. The warning sign does not come from the financial motive, but from the absence of an alternative narrative: when gain becomes the only possible axis of meaning, any questioning of the work or its effects becomes unthinkable, even threatening to identity.

In this context, the stated motivation (profit) can serve as a narrative cover, masking, for example, a form of subjective emptiness. It is not the economic purpose that is at issue, but the fact that the individual no longer has the psychic ability to step back from their engagement without losing the image they have of themselves. This leads to a form of absolutization of the entrepreneurial posture, which prevents any reevaluation of the relationship to the activity. The Max-out does not refer to an objective excess of work, but to a drift in the relationship to work, when meaning becomes rigid, non-revisable, and investment continues despite growing existential and personal costs.

But at the other end of the spectrum, there are those to whom an activity is imposed. Those who did not choose the modalities of their work nor its object. Those for whom the social utility of the position is low or even nonexistent, but who must nonetheless find a way to survive, to hold on, to tell themselves a story. Here too, the question of meaning becomes central.

The initial lack of meaning can be filled by a process of symbolic fabrication, of self-justification. The individual will give meaning to their work not because they perceive it, but because they need it. To avoid sinking. To convince themselves that their effort is not in vain. It is about aligning with the expected self-image in a world where fulfillment has become an injunction.

The problem is therefore not so much that the individual gives meaning to their activity—because that is inevitable—but that they do so without being able to confront this meaning with any form of shared evaluation, with an external framework that would question its robustness. It is this absence of confrontation that makes possible a “self-indulgent fulfillment,” comfortable in appearance, but built on illusion or avoidance. One might even think that it is often preferable that such a frame does not exist in fixed form, because if everyone could locate themselves within such a scale and common reference...

Thus, whether one is an entrepreneur or a receptionist, a philosopher or a warehouse worker, what matters in characterizing the Max-out is not the job, nor the status, nor the level of income. It is the way the individual articulates the meaning they give to their activity with the real nature

of that activity, the origin of their commitment, and the subjective costs that this induces for themselves and their environment.

Of course, one could object that the intensity of investment is often a hallmark of passion, and that an artist, a researcher, or a passionate entrepreneur can also invest themselves "wholeheartedly" without this necessarily translating into alienation. But this is precisely where the challenge of the Max-out lies: it is not the intensity of engagement in itself that is problematic, but its psychic irreversibility, its impermeability to critique, and the absence of distancing, particularly when this engagement rests on a meaning with weak intrinsic value.

In other words, a passionate individual can work 70 hours a week without major dysfunction as long as this investment remains conscious, revisable, and compatible with a plurality of identities. The shift to Max-out occurs when this passion becomes an exclusive refuge, a closed justification system, and begins to cannibalize other dimensions of existence without being able to be questioned or adjusted. It is therefore not passion as such that is incompatible with balance, but its silent transformation into a structure of consented alienation.

To go further, a minimal analytical grid could include:
• An intensity of investment disproportionate to the real benefits (for oneself or for others)
• A rigidity in the discourse of justification, often moral or identity-based
• An erosion of other spheres of life or critical capacities
• An inability to question the foundations of the professional self-narrative

This grid is not meant to be normative, but indicative. It invites recognition that Max-out is not a fixed state, but a process. It often begins in sincere engagement. It evolves insidiously into a form of consented alienation where the individual becomes an active accomplice to their own hold. It sets in when defined meaning masks perceived non-meaning. And it worsens when any questioning becomes unthinkable because it would threaten the individual's psychic and symbolic balance.

This articulation of meaning and investment, whether voluntary or imposed, must therefore be approached not as a mere ancillary criterion, but as an essential lever for analyzing the Max-out, and it cannot be dissociated from another fundamental element: fulfillment.

Compensatory Fulfillment

The Paradox of Conscious Fulfillment

Another defining feature of Max-out lies in a fundamental paradox: fulfillment is both strongly asserted and structurally lacking. This contradiction reveals a central psychological mechanism where the staged performance of fulfillment replaces its authentic experience, creating a form of defensive satisfaction that conceals the underlying alienation.

To grasp this dynamic, it is essential to distinguish between two radically different modalities of relationship to fulfillment: lived fulfillment and displayed fulfillment. This distinction is not merely conceptual; it serves as an analytical tool for identifying situations in which intense engagement masks a form of consented alienation.

This is not about making moral judgments on individuals who express professional satisfaction, but rather about examining the discursive and cognitive mechanisms that may reveal

unconscious inconsistencies. Not every expressed sense of fulfillment is necessarily inauthentic, but the aim is to identify patterns that may indicate a gap between subjective experience and objective conditions.

Authentic fulfillment: silent self-evidence

When an activity holds strong intrinsic meaning and stems from a truly voluntary investment, fulfillment is not a matter of conscious reflection. It is experienced in the obviousness of the action itself, in the total absorption described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi through his concept of flow: the individual loses track of time, forgets self-awareness, and disappears into the activity itself. The very notion of fulfillment, along with any concern of that kind, vanishes in the face of the force that drives the action.

This form of fulfillment is characterized by its non-reflexive nature. An individual invested in a mission—whether a researcher solving a fundamental problem, an artist creating a work, or a caregiver saving lives—does not question whether they feel fulfilled. Such a question becomes as superfluous as wondering whether one is breathing during a moment of physical plenitude.

As Hannah Arendt observes in *The Human Condition*, certain forms of engagement she calls "action" find their meaning in their very accomplishment, without the need for external justification or validation of their worth. Authentic action is self-sufficient; it requires neither performance, nor demonstration, nor justification of its legitimacy.

This silent obviousness of fulfillment reveals an essential characteristic: true fulfillment is not something to be thought about—it is lived. It does not need to be named, claimed, or validated by others. It constitutes the silent trace of an engagement aligned with the individual's deep values and motivations and the fundamental needs of their personal realization.

The claim of fulfillment as a warning sign

In the logic of Max-out, it is essential to reverse the common intuition that associates the display of fulfillment with a sign of psychological well-being or role alignment. On the contrary, claimed fulfillment—the kind that is stated, justified, and exhibited—often constitutes a paradoxical signal of underlying misalignment. Far from being proof of a harmonious integration into work, it becomes a symptom of self-persuasion, a marker of silent alienation.

When work has strong intrinsic meaning, the individual becomes absorbed in action; they act without needing to convince themselves. They feel no need to verbalize or validate their fulfillment, because it is experienced as a deep and evident reality. Conversely, when the activity loses symbolic density or when engagement is structurally misaligned—constructed, hollow, or devoid of meaning—the individual enters a loop of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957): they must then construct a compensatory narrative to maintain the illusion of subjective coherence.

This dissonance often manifests as a discourse of self-validation: "I feel fulfilled," "I do meaningful work," "I've found my calling." This discourse does not speak of fulfillment—it speaks of the need to believe in it. What one tries to display is precisely what is lacking. The greater the gap between the individual and their actual activity, the more they will need to strengthen the emotional affirmation of their adherence. The narrative of fulfillment becomes a

defensive performative act (Austin, 1962; Goffman, 1973), a mechanism of identity stabilization in an environment perceived as constraining or disappointing.

This mechanism recalls well-known analogies:

- In love, one doesn't constantly repeat "I'm in love" if the bond is solid: proclamation often replaces lived certainty.
- In passion, one acts, one lives the passion; one does not claim it as a badge.

Such claims serve a dual defensive function, especially when the clarity of the commitment begins to crack, when the meaning of the activity becomes less clear, or when the personal and relational costs of the investment start to call its legitimacy into question. Through justification, it neutralizes internal doubt and disarms external criticism based on observed signs of overinvestment.

In the context of Max-out, this staged performance of fulfillment serves several psychological functions:

- Neutralizing cognitive dissonance: By asserting fulfillment, the individual reduces the tension between massive investment and the subtle signs of imbalance they perceive.
- Social legitimation: Displayed fulfillment becomes a shield against remarks from others and questions about the sustainability of one's lifestyle.
- Self-persuasion: The repetition of the fulfillment narrative helps sustain the illusion of a controlled choice and a desirable situation.

In this sense, Max-out instrumentalizes this logic. It leads the individual to internalize the need to demonstrate satisfaction, rendering any doubt illegitimate. "Since I say and think I am fulfilled, I cannot be alienated": this circular reasoning neutralizes critique and blocks conscious conflict. Fulfillment becomes not just a narrative, but a mechanism for emotional pacification, a subtle adaptation strategy to an unsatisfying situation, a lever of control through simulated adherence to a discourse.

This dynamic aligns with what Eva Illouz (2019) analyzes as the logics of emotional capitalism: affects become objects of measurement, proof, and permanent narration. Fulfillment is no longer a subjective experience but a value to produce, content to display, and a performance to sustain.

Validation as Evidence of Doubt

Even more revealing than the claim of fulfillment is the need for validation of that fulfillment, which constitutes a strong diagnostic indicator. An individual who regularly seeks confirmation from their surroundings, colleagues, or themselves that they are "truly fulfilled" reveals through this very search the instability of their condition.

This search for validation takes various forms: regularly consulting articles on professional fulfillment, participating in trainings on "well-being at work," multiplying testimonies about one's achievements and satisfaction, seeking external recognition of one's commitment, requesting targeted recommendations, etc. Each of these behaviors betrays an underlying anxiety about the reality of the fulfillment being experienced.

A vicious cycle sets in: the more the individual tries to prove their fulfillment, the more they reveal its fragility. The more they accumulate outward signs of satisfaction, the further they move away from the inner evidence that characterizes authentic fulfillment. This dynamic echoes the classic observation that the happiness one seeks is the happiness that escapes.

Validation thus becomes counterproductive: it transforms fulfillment into a project rather than a state, into a goal to be achieved rather than a natural consequence of genuine engagement. The individual spends more time verifying that they are fulfilled than living the conditions of their fulfillment.

Compensatory fulfillment and authentic fulfillment

This analysis makes it possible to distinguish between two different modes of fulfillment:

Compensatory fulfillment, characteristic of Max-out, functions as a self-narrative aimed at masking an existential emptiness or a cognitive dissonance. It feeds on external signs (recognition, performance, status), is explicitly claimed, and requires constant validation. It compensates for the absence of intrinsic meaning through the multiplication of proofs of satisfaction. This form of fulfillment is constructed rather than lived.

Authentic fulfillment, by contrast, emerges naturally from an engagement aligned with the individual's deep values and genuine aspirations. It is not conceptualized, justified, or measured. It constitutes the silent trace of a life in alignment with itself. This fulfillment is lived rather than demonstrated.

This distinction reveals one of the most subtle traps of Max-out: compensatory fulfillment can be subjectively sincere. The individual is not lying when they claim to be fulfilled; they express a real, consciously experienced satisfaction, but one built on fragile foundations and dependent on external conditions. This subjective sincerity makes diagnosis all the more difficult and awareness all the more resistant.

Fulfillment as an Inverted Symptom

This analysis leads to a novel understanding of the issue in the context of Max-out: displayed fulfillment is not a sign of psychological health, but a symptom of alienation. In this way, performed fulfillment becomes an inverted diagnostic criterion of Max-out: the more it is displayed, the more it deserves to be questioned. It ceases to be the marker of an aligned professional life and becomes an artifact of a system of psychological hold, a socially manufactured proof of supposed happiness.

Claimed fulfillment is one identifying indicator among others, not an exclusive marker. Its revealing value increases when it is accompanied by an intensification of discourse, a constant search for validation, and especially when it is expressed within a resistance to any questioning. An occasional expression of satisfaction does not fall into this logic; it is the defensive systematization of it when work engagement is questioned that becomes significant.

This diagnostic inversion helps explain why Max-out victims so strongly resist attempts to analyze their situation: they are sincerely convinced of their fulfillment. Their conviction is not feigned—it is the very mechanism through which alienation is sustained.

Fulfillment thus becomes the mask of alienation rather than the reflection of pleasure at work. It constitutes one of its most characteristic manifestations. Recognizing this allows us to move beyond the operational impasse of identification that consists in opposing fulfillment and alienation as mutually exclusive states.

The contemporary injunction to fulfillment

This dynamic is part of a broader societal paradigm in which professional fulfillment has become a normative injunction. This individual context is closely linked to organizational transformations that promote the expression of subjective engagement and fulfillment as indicators of performance, internal policy effectiveness, and overall satisfaction. By encouraging public displays of fulfillment, companies create a discursive environment that amplifies the pressure for emotional performance. This institutional mediation turns what should be a natural and spontaneous psychological experience into a socially prescribed norm, positioning fulfillment as the ultimate purpose of work. A stable or well-paid job is no longer sufficient; one must feel "aligned," "useful," "passionate," even when the activity is objectively trivial, pointless, or harmful.

This normalization of fulfillment as a criterion of professional success creates fertile ground for the development of Max-out. The individual internalizes the obligation to feel fulfilled and develops the necessary cognitive strategies to maintain this image—at the cost of a growing disconnection from their real needs and objective limits.

Compensatory fulfillment thus becomes not only an individual defense against dissonance, but also a form of social conformity to contemporary valued expectations. One can no longer simply "do their job"; they must show that it is meaningful, believe they chose it fully, feel satisfied, and view it as a form of personal achievement.

This is another effect of Max-out: the transformation of imposed work into an existential project that must be fulfilling. The individual no longer works to live—they must live to self-actualize through work. It is the capture of existential meaning by the professional sphere. It is no longer work that fits into a life, but life that must be justified through work. Max-out does not merely intensify work—it redefines one's entire relationship to existence. It is a total form of alienation that reshapes life itself around work.

Authentic fulfillment and the irrelevance of social validation

We may then question its social benefit, as authentic fulfillment requires no social recognition to exist. Its value lies not in the approval it elicits, but in the inner certainty it provides. Seeking to turn it into an object of social validation often distorts its very nature.

True fulfillment is socially "unproductive" in the sense that it does not necessarily generate symbolic capital, does not enhance one's immediate social image, and does not produce a narrative meant to impress others. How many writers or artists, now celebrated, received no recognition in their lifetime? It is self-sufficient in the isolated experience it offers. Conversely, proclaimed fulfillment is aimed precisely at producing a social effect: reassuring those around us, legitimizing one's choices, constructing an image of personal success.

Here lies a contemporary paradox: in a society that makes fulfillment a social norm, declaring one's fulfillment becomes socially expected—if not mandatory. The individual "must" be

fulfilled and demonstrate it. This injunction turns fulfillment into a social performance rather than a personal experience, creating the very conditions of its falsification.

Authentic fulfillment resists this logic: it does not lend itself to testimony, does not become advice, and does not serve as a model to follow. It remains a singular and incommunicable experience, going against prevailing expectations—often under-remunerated—which explains why it frequently escapes the radar of social analysis and remains invisible in dominant discourses on workplace well-being.

Critical approach to fulfillment

This analysis does not discredit the legitimate pursuit of professional fulfillment but seeks to reveal the mechanisms through which this aspiration is diverted in the service of alienation. It calls for critical vigilance toward discourses of fulfillment, especially when they serve as justifications for action, multiply, intensify, or require regular external validation.

In contrast to classical approaches in positive psychology (Seligman, Deci & Ryan), which present fulfillment as an indicator of well-being, this analysis offers an inverted, situated, performative, and contextual reading.

Recognizing displayed and claimed fulfillment as a potential symptom of alienation—rather than as evidence of balance and professional autonomy—opens the door to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary alienation. It allows for a clearer distinction between authentic engagement and its compensatory simulation in current work environments. This distinction is a necessary prerequisite for any meaningful support or effective prevention strategy.

The Effects of Psychological Hold

An Invisible and Consented Alienation

Unlike a visible collapse like burnout, Max-out is a state of balance, within a grey area where activity regulation capacities remain functional—and we will now delve deeper into this dimension. The individual is neither entirely dysfunctional nor fully in control of their relationship to work. The effort is constant but legitimized. Warning signs are muffled beneath internal justifications: “it’s temporary,” “it’s the price of success,” “it’s my choice.” This apparent stability is precisely what makes the condition so difficult to identify—and even more difficult to question.

Alienation here takes the form of a consent that is not truly one: not an explicit renunciation of freedom, but a constructed adherence, orchestrated by an environment that exploits emotions, the need for recognition, and cognitive adjustment mechanisms.

It is an alienation and a psychological hold that are not recognized as such, since the individual does not consciously perceive the harmful effects of their engagement, rationalizes their imbalance, and neutralizes any structural questioning through a self-narrative, valorized around effort, passion, performance, fulfillment, etc. This form of hold is often made possible—and even optimized—by work organizations in which relational systems, implicit expectations, and management styles exploit not only the individual’s physical and mental resources, but also the emotional, affective, and identity bonds they maintain with their company and colleagues.

This hold is notably exerted through the overexploitation of various types of organizational bonds, whose multiplication is not merely a side effect of collaborative work, but a strategic condition of the system. This instrumentalization operates across several distinct registers:

- Functional bonds create technical interdependencies where each action requires validation or cross-functional coordination.
- Informational bonds fragment data circulation, making each actor dependent on others to access necessary information.
- Affective bonds transform professional relationships into emotional pseudo-proximity, where a “positive atmosphere” becomes a productive imperative.
- Validational bonds link professional self-esteem to the constant recognition of peers and hierarchy.
- Symbolic bonds root identity in group belonging, making any distancing feel like betrayal or demotion.

This relational architecture produces constant mobilization, which takes the appearance of a cohesive team but functions as a tightly knit web of cross-obligations. It is a systemic cohesion without breathing room, where closeness becomes mutual surveillance and continuous validation.

Organizational Engineering

Among the key mechanisms, the very structuration of organizations plays a central role. By seeking fine specialization of roles and segmentation of skills, companies create a mesh where each actor becomes indispensable to others. Work can only be completed on the condition of maintaining a permanent connection with colleagues, which multiplies interactions and increases pressure to remain available. This hold operates insidiously, precisely because it relies on a form of active consent. It does not take the form of explicit domination, but of a functional chaining in which the individual participates in their own assignment. In line with the work of Christophe Dejours (1993) on the psychodynamics of work, this consent is often the result of a deep subjective investment in the ideal of a job well done, in peer recognition, or in an identity quest, mirrored by the collective.

Modern managerial strategy encourages functional fragmentation of tasks while promoting interpersonal dependency. Everyone's role is highly specialized but requires constant validation, information sharing, and ongoing exchange with others to be exercised. This organizational interdependence is more than a side effect: it is strategically exploited as a lever of adherence. Mutual validation becomes a condition for task progress. The individual then finds themselves caught in a circle of self-imposed validation necessity, where work advancement must constantly be confirmed by others, and where recognition no longer comes solely from hierarchy but from the social loop itself. It is a system of collective attachment that is established, similar to family dynamics, with its implicit loyalties, emotional norms, and injunction to "stand together" in front of the task or objective. Everyone is in relation with everyone else, not through freedom or initiative, but through functional constraint.

This organization produces a structural paradox: this relational model, seemingly more collaborative, objectively slows down productivity while subjectively reinforcing group cohesion. By requiring each task to go through validation, coordination, or transversal exchange, it dilutes operative time into sequences of permanent synchronization. Meetings,

phone calls between departments, messages, screen sharing, or cross-validation of information across areas of expertise take up a disproportionate amount of real time, turning an increasing share of work into work about work.

The time spent maintaining interactions, obtaining validations, and managing sensitivities in a quasi-familial environment burdens actual efficiency. Yet, this deficit is compensated for—or rather masked—by each individual's overinvestment, who also works to compensate for structural or human dysfunctions. Systemic slowdown is absorbed by an invisible intensification of real work.

This loss of output is never problematized as such: it is absorbed into a narrative of agility, adaptability, efficiency, transversality, or co-construction. Systemic inefficiency is masked by individual intensification: each person compensates for individual or collective slowness through personal overinvestment, experienced as a sign of commitment rather than a symptom of organizational dysfunction. Recognition drives action, and action calls for recognition, in a loop that substitutes interaction for actual production.

This organizational dependency is presented as a “team value,” even though it creates a loop in which recognition, validation, and the feeling of usefulness can only emerge through constant interaction. This could be called instrumental cohesion: a cohesion produced not by a shared sense of mission, but by the structural necessity to maintain a minimum relational flow to function. This relational modality fosters confusion between genuine interpersonal relationships and artificially induced professional dependency ties.

The psychological mechanisms of adherence

This is where true psychological hold unfolds: emotional attachment to work and to the group becomes an obstacle to critical thinking. The individual may be aware of certain dysfunctions—they criticize management, processes, or absurd objectives—but this awareness remains sterile. It does not lead to withdrawal or detachment, because emotional investment neutralizes any possible dissociation. Critical thinking becomes a façade, a discourse without consequences. There is a paradoxical attachment to dysfunction, as if the system—however absurd—remains familiar and therefore preferable to the unknown.

This emotional adherence can take various forms: a need for recognition from management, a sense of belonging to the team, symbolic valorization of one’s role within the organization. These elements form a system of fragmented gratification, where each micro-success (a successful meeting, a valued email, a delivered project) becomes a narcissistic “hit” that sustains the loop. We are dealing here with a logic of variable rewards, typical of behavioral addiction mechanisms.

The ability to abstract, reason, and take distance erodes. The mental bandwidth required to question the coherence of the system is consumed. The individual is convinced they remain lucid; they believe they are aware of the system they operate in. But in reality, the cognitive time available for genuine critical reflection is non-existent. Doubt is anesthetized. Questioning is boycotted.

Thinking has a cost. Thinking provokes anxiety. Refusing to think sometimes means refusing collapse. So we keep busy. We overinvest. And this overinvestment becomes a wall that keeps anxiety at bay. As Castoriadis (1975) shows, the very capacity to question social institutions is

itself socially constructed. Here, it is neutralized at its root—not through violence, but through gratification.

And yet, critical thinking alone is not enough to protect against this psychological hold. Some individuals, though extremely lucid about the limits of their organization, their leadership, or their colleagues, paradoxically remain trapped in their relationship to work. They criticize the system while overinvesting in it. Sometimes, their overinvestment even takes the form of a "critical reinvestment": an attempt to fix the system's flaws through more effort, more dedication, more exemplary behavior. This is one of the traps of Max-out.

Alienation is not always the result of ignorance. It can also stem from learned helplessness or from a subtle form of dependency. This resonates with Boltanski and Chiapello's (1999) analysis of the "artistic critique" reintegrated into modern capitalism: a portion of the critique is absorbed, neutralized, and turned into a lever for renewed engagement.

The Affective Economy of Recognition

To this cognitive loop is often added a form of deep emotional dependence, previously mentioned, which amounts to a true dependence on work or the professional environment. This need for validation, recognition, and belonging—sometimes mirroring a personal deficit or narcissistic wound—fuels a constant search for gratification, however minimal.

This complexity of emotional experience leads to a loss of bearings. The individual may feel a daily excitement derived from micro-achievements, small victories, or diffuse recognition. Every message, every validating interaction becomes a dose. The satisfaction is immediate, but transient.

In this context, the need for feedback becomes structurally embedded in motivation. It is no longer just about being praised or feeling useful, but about being constantly immersed in a relational bubble saturated with validation. The absence of a reply, a colleague's silence, or a lack of reaction become signals of insecurity. This hypersensitivity to external validation turns work into a permanent emotional stage, where everyone becomes simultaneously actor, spectator, and director of their own involvement—and of others'—within a system of interconnection.

In professions under high commercial pressure or with quantified objectives, this cycle is even more intense. Every micro-success becomes a shot of recognition. Every achieved number, an existential validation. Daily narcissism is fed by performance, however small, and the individual becomes dependent on this self-regulation through micro-achievement. Failures, in contrast, trigger gloomy states or increasingly elaborate rationalizations. Failure or criticism can then lead to a brutal collapse of self-esteem, revealing the underlying emotional precariousness.

This emotional dependence causes a cognitive recomposition of meaning: external validation no longer merely confirms the value of a completed task, it becomes the very source of that value. The defined meaning of the activity may then fade, replaced by a relational meaning entirely dependent on the gaze of others. This substitution is all the more effective as it draws on fundamental psychological mechanisms: the need for recognition, attachment to the group, and fear of isolation.

The individual no longer works to accomplish a task with intrinsic meaning, but to feed a system of mutual validation on which they have become dependent. This emotional dependence, though rarely addressed explicitly, constitutes a contemporary form of affective alienation: work is no longer merely an activity, but a site of existential validation. Joan Tronto (2013) has shown how "care," in certain managerial forms, can be instrumentalized as a productivity factor rather than as an ethical relationship: this is precisely what is at play here, within a logic of performative care.

The Ideological Ecosystem of Max-out

This psychological hold spreads within a specific ideological soil—that of contemporary managerial values that naturalize overinvestment. Agility demands constant reactivity and ongoing adaptation to change. Adaptability valorizes psychological flexibility at the expense of personal stability. Self-transcendence transforms work intensification into a moral virtue. These values, presented as emancipatory ideals, operate as normative injunctions that render the individual complicit in their own exploitation.

This ideological normalization relies on a hijacking of the vocabulary of personal fulfillment in service of organizational performance. "Well-being at work," "passion," and "engagement" become euphemisms that obscure the intensification of demands. Individuals who resist this logic are disqualified as "not engaged enough," "resistant to change," or "lacking ambition." This ideological capture results in what could be called valorized alienation: the individual adheres all the more strongly to their alienation as it is framed as a form of self-realization.

The paradox of regulated autonomy: an asymptotic equilibrium

The Max-out does not manifest as an inability to self-regulate. On the contrary, the individual constantly adjusts their level of effort, reduces or increases their rest periods, paces their involvement, resorts to micro-disconnections, and regularly takes care of physical or emotional discomfort. It is precisely this capacity for adjustment that makes the state compatible with sustained performance. But it also maintains the illusion of control. Regulation becomes the excuse for denying the problem: "If I can still manage, then it's fine." Apparent autonomy becomes a mask. Self-regulation is no longer a tool of freedom, but a mechanism of self-exploitation.

This paradox echoes contemporary critical analyses of governmentality, in which the individual is invited to become the entrepreneur of themselves, to optimize their performance, to adjust their behavior, but within a framework whose boundaries and purposes they do not control (Foucault, 1978; Dardot & Laval, 2009).

What makes getting out of Max-out difficult is not ignorance of the situation, but accepting it in all its dimensions and the connection with its effects. The individual knows that their professional life takes up too much space, but they relativize, rationalize, postpone, take a break for the weekend. They convince themselves of their ability to regulate, rely on their capacity to occasionally "disconnect" as proof that they are in control and not alienated.

This is what could be called the paradox of regulated autonomy. The individual claims to control their investment, believes themselves capable of self-regulation, proves it to themselves and to others, and occasionally does reduce their level of involvement. These momentary

regulations reinforce the illusion of control. But they do not alter the underlying trajectory. The individual believes they are choosing, believes they could stop, and constructs the structure of their self-persuasion accordingly. But this autonomy is built within implicit systems of constraint, engagement norms, and social expectations.

This regulation works because the individual constantly maintains themselves at the threshold of breakdown without ever tipping over, and this over the long term. Time thus becomes a space of internal and external justification; duration creates the norm. Unlike burnout, which is marked by a sudden collapse of regulatory capacity, Max-out sustains a form of homeostasis in which the individual continuously adjusts their level of investment to remain functional. This capacity for self-regulation paradoxically becomes the main lock of alienation: it is precisely because they do not collapse that the individual does not suspect their condition, justifies their control, and dismisses all questioning of their involvement as irrelevant. The very concept of alienation becomes even more inconceivable.

It is a perverse cognitive loop: in order to prove they are not overinvested—and certainly not alienated—the individual constantly generates evidence of control, all while remaining fully invested in a system they cannot detach from. They display functional autonomy, in that they are not broken down, but they are captive to internal mechanisms such as narcissistic dependence, fear of relational void, anxiety over change, and to external forces like expectations, recognition, and the organization of work. This regulated autonomy becomes the very instrument of their alienation. The more the individual demonstrates their ability to manage, the more they entrench themselves within the system that structures them. Regulation does not liberate; it perpetuates.

Identity-Based Resistance to Change

The self-image within the company becomes a foundation of identity. Any challenge to the hold system is experienced as a threat to this image. This is where emotional dependence becomes crucial: the company is no longer just a place of activity, but a mirror and a structuring system for the continuous construction of identity. The need for belonging, recognition, or loyalty—far from being individual pathologies—are actively cultivated by managerial systems that call on everyone to "go beyond themselves," "embody the values," or "carry the vision." What the individual risks by detaching themselves is therefore not only potentially a job, but a form of existential coherence, an identity crisis, and pseudo-friendships. This logic echoes the forms of identity alienation analyzed by Axel Honneth (1995), where the lack of recognition becomes a source of moral suffering in its own right. The company no longer merely exploits labor; it becomes a factory that transforms and exploits identity. Dependence is no longer just economic but existential.

The individual experiences moments of clarity and periodically expresses a desire for change: adjusting work hours, setting boundaries, leaving their position. These realizations, often triggered by a lack of financial reward, relational conflicts, a period of under-recognized work, or remarks from their social circle, lead to attempts at readjustment… that quickly fail. Not out of bad will, but because the attachment structure to work has not been dismantled. This hold reveals a vicious circle: personal fulfillment is now indexed to professional performance, and the individual develops a compulsive need for constant recognition and validation that reinforces their dependence on the system. This logic seems to exploit the brain’s reward circuits, creating a true behavioral addiction.

A constant dichotomy can be observed between decisions to change and their implementation. The individual "makes efforts," but they are sporadic, incomplete, or canceled out by increased investment elsewhere. The very idea of change becomes anxiety-inducing: it would mean giving up a part of oneself, a constructed image, a valued status. Identity has merged with activity. Changing, leaving the framework, the job, the position within the group, would mean questioning everything that underpins one's self-narrative. It would above all mean acknowledging the failure of a choice (of position, company, or career), or rather the impossibility of a true choice. Change may then be perceived as a level of lucidity too heavy to assume or manage emotionally.

There is often a discrepancy between intentions and actions. The individual articulates resolutions, imagines alternatives, but initiates no lasting transformation process. They justify their inaction by circumstantial constraints, obligations, or work overload. There may be an internal conflict between desire and anxiety, linked to episodic awareness of their condition, quickly smothered by daily narcissistic reinforcement. They are torn, trapped in an unconscious contradiction between reason and emotion, and between what they want to believe about themselves and reality.

An Invisible Yet Functional Condition

Max-out is not outright paralysis. It is a form of self-maintenance. The individual is both victim and architect of the system of alienation they co-construct. They have not lost their ability to act, but they have lost the will to act differently. And as long as the results remain, performance metrics, recognition, sense of usefulness, the loop stays closed.

What makes Max-out so difficult to identify is precisely this: the individual functions. They self-regulate. They produce. They even flourish. Complaints are rare, or only emerge indirectly (in their private life, through fatigue, or in interpersonal conflict). It is not an obvious pathology. It is not a dysfunction. It is an invisible condition, self-regulating just below the threshold of collapse, based on an illusion of balance reinforced by every micro-adjustment.

Recognizing it requires longitudinal observation to uncover its mechanics, to detect experienced dissonances, and to cross-analyze discourse, behaviors, and justifications. It is, therefore, a form of assessment that can only be made over time. Max-out does not manifest through sick leave or explicit complaints, but through a silent distortion of the relationship to self, others, and time. Otherwise, it risks being mistaken for other forms of intense engagement, which must be clearly differentiated. Max-out creates systemic dependency: work becomes a refuge and an almost exclusive source of satisfaction, and not for its meaning, purpose, or legacy.

Diagnostic Criteria

Identifying Max-out requires an analytical framework that distinguishes a set of features—context-dependent—that must be empirically validated on a larger scale.

Core features include:

- A massive overinvestment, including peripheral activities (emails, conversations, social obligations) encroaching on personal time, with no justification based on the content of the work.

- A paradoxical sense of fulfillment that masks imbalance and prevents questioning.
- Work that lacks intrinsic meaning that could explain such overinvestment.
- Work that is imposed: the person did not choose the object, structure, or tasks.
- The ability to self-regulate periodically to stay just below the limit.
- A gap between intentions to change and actual behavior.
- Disproportionate enjoyment from professional success and exaggerated euphoria following micro-achievements.
- Sudden and extreme mood shifts directly linked to professional events (rumors, failures, issues).
- Heightened competitiveness.
- Envy toward peers' successes.
- A constant need for validation and recognition.
- Emotional dependency on work and/or colleagues or management.
- A need to fill the void / stay connected evenings and weekends / feelings of uselessness outside of work.

Functional Alienation

Contextual differences undoubtedly exist: certain jobs, sectors, and organizational cultures are more likely to foster such forms of subtle psychological hold. Management styles, collaboration flows, and specific organizational models can act as accelerators, even for individuals already predisposed to some of the characteristics described above.

From the company's perspective, the individual affected by Max-out is the ideal resource: available, engaged, non-confrontational, self-regulating, competitive without breaking down. They embody the neoliberal fantasy of the frictionless, efficient agent. This enables a production system based on silent surrender, the progressive erosion of critical thinking, independence, and subjectivity.

This analysis aims to expose a system of relationships, expectations, affective and social constructs that, together, contribute to a contemporary form of alienation in which work becomes both a source of pride and a space of identity assignment.

Max-out challenges conventional support models: how do you support someone who isn’t asking for help, doesn’t think they have a problem, and claims to feel fulfilled? This question underscores the need to rethink therapeutic approaches in response to new forms of contemporary alienation, where suffering disguises itself as satisfaction, and hold is confused with autonomy.

The Strategic Redefinition of Private Life

In the digital age of hyperconnectivity, the boundary between professional and personal life has become increasingly complex. What used to be a relatively clear experiential and temporal separation—workplace on one side, home on the other—has progressively eroded under the combined influence of digital technologies and a profound ideological transformation in the relationship to work.

This evolution is not the result of chance. It stems from a deliberate managerial engineering that has gradually appropriated digital tools as their use exploded, in order to extend organizational control well beyond the traditional limits of the companies ground. As Maurizio Lazzarato (2019) observes in his work on "immaterial labor," new forms of capitalist production no longer simply exploit labor power: they mobilize workers' subjectivity, their emotions, social relations, and creativity.

Contemporary management has thus discovered that productivity no longer depends solely on the intensity of work during official working hours, but on the ability to maintain individuals in a state of permanent availability. This availability is no longer secured through direct constraint, which would contradict the discourse of benevolence and mindfulness it claims to uphold, but through the subtle orchestration of a relational and technological ecosystem that makes psychological disconnection costly.

The Instrumentalization of Social Media: The Hijacking of Digital Identity

LinkedIn: Symbol of a Collapsed Boundary

The case of LinkedIn perfectly illustrates this logic of appropriating the personal sphere for organizational aims. Originally conceived as a tool for individual professional networking—a "cloud-based resume" to manage one's career autonomously—LinkedIn has, in recent years, been progressively repurposed by companies as a lever for business development and communication through their employees.

When an organization asks its employees to use their personal LinkedIn accounts to "communicate corporate updates" or "prospect clients," it performs a usage shift that can be described as identity hijacking. The employee becomes an involuntary communications agent, a mobile advertising trail; their personal network is transformed into a commercial database, and their digital identity is progressively colonized by the company's brand image, leaving deep and lasting marks. This "identity hijacking" is not limited to a one-off appropriation of the LinkedIn profile by the employer: it is part of a broader dynamic of digital "deterritorialization" (Deleuze, 1980) of identity and of a paradigm shift that fuses private and professional life. The individual is gradually stripped of control over their public and personal representation, which becomes a tool of symbolic governance. This appropriation reveals a deeper process of identity substitution, far beyond mere repurposing. It fits into what Rouvroy and Berns (2013) describe as a digital biopolitics of identity, where the individual increasingly loses control over their professional self-image. Identity becomes a field of negotiation: the individual believes they are expressing their personal expertise while, in fact, they are feeding an organizational narrative that replaces their own.

This substitution operates incrementally: supposedly "spontaneous" posts begin to align with the company's communication strategy; opinions conform to corporate positions; new connections serve business objectives. The employee's expertise, personal commitments, likes, and even private posts become integrated into a corporatist narrative that gradually takes precedence. The individual becomes an involuntary contributor to a story they no longer author, blurring the line between personal identity and organizational representation. The employee is no longer just a "representative": they become an influence platform serving organizational alignment.

This practice raises several critical issues. First, it creates a patrimonial asymmetry: content generated by the employee on their personal account enhances the company's relational and communicational capital, but these digital assets do not follow the employee if they change jobs. Second, it generates identity contamination: the individual can no longer clearly distinguish between their own expertise and the employer's communication strategy. Finally, it creates systemic dependency: maintaining an "active" LinkedIn profile becomes an implicit requirement, turning connection and profile management into covert working hours.

Extending the Model: Facebook, Instagram, and the Socialization of Employer Branding

This logic of repurposing extends to all social platforms. Depending on the industry, companies encourage their employees to "embody the brand" on Facebook, Instagram, or other networks. This practice, euphemistically termed "employee advocacy," turns employees into de facto ambassadors of their organization.

The extension to Facebook reveals a new type of intrusion. Unlike LinkedIn, which is nominally a professional space, Facebook combines family, friends, political views, and moments of personal intimacy in a single stream. When a company encourages employees to "share company culture" on this platform, it directly enters the private social circle. High school friends, distant relatives, neighbors—all become involuntary commercial targets. This contamination turns spontaneous social interactions into disguised business opportunities.

Instagram pushes this logic further by exploiting the aestheticization of daily life. Employees are encouraged to "embody the values" of the company through their lifestyle, transforming domestic intimacy into an organizational showcase. Breakfast becomes a product placement, holidays a demonstration of "work-life balance," personal exercise a reflection of corporate values linked to wellness. This instrumentalization of personal aesthetics subjects every moment of life to an evaluation of its compatibility with employer branding.

These practices induce constant vigilance: individuals must constantly assess whether their personal posts align with their professional image. Spontaneity gives way to preventive self-monitoring, turning every mundane act into a strategic decision.

As Dominique Cardon (2019) points out in "Digital Culture," social networks operate on a principle of identity aggregation: they merge various aspects of identity—personal, professional, familial, political—into a unified stream. By investing these spaces, the company colonizes the entirety of the individual's digital identity, creating permanent porosity between all spheres of life.

This colonization has systemic effects. It converts personal social capital into organizational economic capital. It generates diffuse surveillance, where every post may be interpreted as a signal of loyalty or dissent. It produces constant performative anxiety: the individual must perpetually adjust their online presence to match the implicit expectations of their employer and the company's brand image.

The Gamification of Private Life as a Tool of Surveillance: The Case of Activiteam

The example of Activiteam, developed by Squadeasy—which appears to no longer exist under that name in 2025 but was migrated under the Squadeasy brand—illustrates a particularly sophisticated form of managerial control extension. Ostensibly designed to promote employees' health and well-being, this application organizes behavioral surveillance that spans the full spectrum of daily activities.

The principle is straightforward: employees are encouraged to download an application that tracks their steps, sports activities, and carbon footprint. These data are then aggregated and used to create competitions between teams or departments. The stated objective is to improve employees' health. The actual effect is the implementation of a continuous control system that transforms every movement, every physical activity, and a wide range of personal choices into exploitable data for the organization.

This mechanism leads to a full colonization of personal time: the most trivial activities—picking up bread, walking the dog, climbing stairs—become opportunities for collective performance. Every daily gesture is recoded into points, compared, and ranked. This gamification of intimacy creates a constant mental presence of the company and colleagues in what were previously considered private moments. Even social interactions are reconfigured: "friendly" calls to mock each other's performance become pretexts for professional reconnection, definitively erasing temporal boundaries.

This logic aligns with what Deleuze (1990) anticipated under the term "societies of control": forms of power no longer exercised through disciplinary confinement, but through the continuous modulation of behavior via technological tools. The individual is no longer monitored during working hours only; they are permanently modulated by a system that influences their life choices under the guise of well-being.

More insidiously, this surveillance generates its own legitimacy. By invoking positive values—health, well-being, mutual support—it fosters a form of defensive gratitude among employees, who come to perceive their company as "caring." This perception conceals other mechanisms of control and immunizes against criticism: how can one question an anthropomorphized entity that "wants what's best for you" and demonstrably shows it? This instrumental benevolence becomes an ideological shield that neutralizes potential resistance by transforming surveillance into a gift and the relationship into something desirable. This may partly explain why some individuals find it increasingly difficult to consider changing their professional environment: doing so would mean breaking an emotionally "caring" bond they are unlikely to find elsewhere.

This blurring of the line between self-care injunctions and managerial control amplifies this defensive gratitude. By feeling cared for, loved, supported, recognized, or encouraged in private spheres, the individual develops a form of emotional loyalty toward a system that in reality captures and exploits their subjective resources. It then becomes difficult to discern what stems from sincere care, what constitutes emotional marketing, and what belongs to a broader strategy of social regulation. This hypothesis deserves further exploration, particularly in light of scholarship on emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2019) and the logics of instrumentalized benevolence.

The Psychological Mechanisms of Behavioral Addiction

Activiteam exploits well-documented psychological mechanisms associated with behavioral addiction. The application relies on a system of variable rewards—scores, rankings, badges—that stimulates the brain's dopamine circuits. As demonstrated in Nir Eyal's work on "persuasive technologies" (2014), these systems generate dependency loops: users compulsively check their scores, compare their performance with colleagues, and adjust their behavior to optimize results.

This gamification turns everyday life into a measurable performance. Going out to buy bread becomes a means of accumulating points. A walk in the woods is evaluated in terms of its impact on the team ranking. The most trivial activities are instrumentalized and placed in the service of professional competition.

The effects of such quantification are twofold. First, it induces metric anxiety: the individual becomes obsessed with their performance, constantly monitors their statistics, and experiences frustration when their efforts are not "counted." Second, it produces instrumental sociability: interactions with colleagues become mediated by competition, and "informal" conversations become opportunities to mock or tease one another about relative performance, as already mentioned.

The Attention Economy and the Monetization of Engagement

The figures shared by Squadeasy on their website in 2022 reveal the underlying economic logic: "€42 million saved by our clients in 2019 (absenteeism, productivity, etc.)" and "79% of users feel better in their company." These figures perfectly illustrate the paradox of valorized alienation: the company generates substantial profits by creating in its employees a sense of well-being directly tied to their own surveillance.

This economy of engagement is grounded in what Franco Berardi (2015) describes as the "soul's capture." Digital technologies no longer merely extract value from working hours; they monetize attention, emotions, social relationships, and engagement dynamics. Every notification, every interaction, every moment of "connection" or "bonding" becomes an opportunity to deepen organizational hold.

Work-life blending: The Ideology of Controlled Fusion

The Normalization of Sphere Porosity

The emergence of the concept of *work-life blending* is not the result of a spontaneous evolution in professional practices, but rather a strategy to legitimize the managerial extension of hold. This notion, which promotes the intertwining of professional and personal activities, relies on a discourse of flexibility and autonomy: the individual is said to be able to "juggle" work and private life, choose optimal moments for each activity, and gain in efficiency and satisfaction.

This rhetoric of autonomy conceals a deeper transformation in social expectations. As Michel Feher (2009) argues, the contemporary individual is required to manage themselves as capital, optimizing performance through control over time, relationships, and well-being. *Blending* thus

becomes a marker of organizational competence: those who fail to effectively coordinate their spheres of life are seen as ill-suited or insufficiently adaptable to contemporary demands.

This individualization of responsibility leads to a shift: the intensification of work is reframed as a personal failure of time management. Individuals internalize the belief that they simply don't know how to "manage their time" effectively or that they lack agility. This personalization of structural constraints turns systemic pressures into individual problems to be solved.

As Luc Boltanski noted in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), the discourse of flexibility often serves to legitimize intensified productivity demands. The "freedom" to work at any time or during nonstandard hours quickly turns into an obligation to remain permanently available.

The acceleration of this trend during the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread adoption of remote work created a window of opportunity to normalize practices that would have been considered intrusive only a few years earlier. Lockdowns made it acceptable for the home to become a workplace, for schedules to be flexible, and for professional interactions to penetrate family intimacy. In environments where evaluation is no longer based on formal goals but on continuous digital presence—likes, shares, visibility on Slack or Teams—individuals internalize the belief that their job security depends on their ability to produce an image of constant activity and engagement. Antonio Casilli (2019) refers to this as *digital labor*, a form of hidden work based on attention capture and the staging of productivity. This algorithmic performativity encourages constant self-exposure, especially among freelancers or project-based employees, where recognition no longer depends on the actual completion of a specific task, but on visible and ongoing participation in the collective dynamic and presence.

The adverse effects of Empowerment Rhetoric

Work-life blending is presented as a form of empowerment: the individual is said to gain autonomy by managing the articulation between their various activities. This rhetoric fits within what Wendy Brown (2018) calls "creeping neoliberalism": the transformation of systemic constraints into individual choices and the imposition of personal responsibility for structural dysfunctions.

In reality, this autonomy is largely illusory. The individual who chooses to answer emails in the evening to save time the next day is not exercising freedom but adapting to time constraints imposed by work organization. The one who uses their lunch break to run personal errands is not gaining flexibility but compensating for the intensification of their working day.

Far from being a mere managerial alibi, the rhetoric of blending belongs to a broader neoliberal imaginary of self-governance. As Michel Feher (2009) explains, the individual is required to conceive of themselves as capital to be optimized, including in the management of their own time. What is presented as a conquest of autonomy is in reality merely a shift of responsibilities: adapting to the temporal intensification of work becomes an individual test of quantified organizational competence. The employee must demonstrate their ability to coordinate life spheres efficiently or risk being judged unfit, outdated, or not aligned with values of agility and resilience.

This controlled fusion of spheres has profound psychological effects.

It creates a constant decision fatigue because the individual must continuously arbitrate between professional and personal demands.

It generates diffuse guilt, as fully disconnecting comes with the sense of neglecting one's responsibilities.

It produces temporal anxiety because time becomes a scarce resource that must be permanently optimized.

This results in a persistent cognitive noise, as the individual must continuously process conflicting contextual demands. A work email during family dinner, a personal notification in a meeting, a private call during work hours all contribute to attentional overload that depletes cognitive resources before even beginning the main tasks.

This multiplication of interruptions transforms each interaction into a moment of social validation. One must signal their presence, display engagement, and demonstrate availability in every exchange, even informal ones. This relational intensification leads to what can be called communicational overload, where the energy required to maintain social ties overshadows productive efficiency.

As Yves Clot emphasizes in his work on clinical activity, it is often work obstructed by relational obligations that generates the most insidious forms of professional fatigue. To this is added another insidious dynamic, rarely measured, which generates all the more chronic 'cognitive noise' that compounds the general informational noise in which contemporary individuals are immersed: actual productivity is eroded by the invisible efforts of constant adjustment and social validation.

Far from being a marginal cost, this inflation of time spent in interactions combining validation, recognition, and proof of commitment has a paradoxical effect on real productivity. In work sociology, this is described as a systemic saturation effect: actual production is hindered not by excessive control but by interactional over-solicitation, erected as an implicit norm of facilitation and optimization. In Max-out, this over-solicitation is not perceived as a burden because it is disguised as a sign of belonging or as proof of motivation. It also serves as a form of collective cohesion—"we suffer together against the system"—and therefore constitutes a particularly insidious form of alienation, precisely because it legitimizes itself.

The Coffee Machine Effect: From Spontaneous Sociability to Orchestrated Cohesion

Ergonomics research has long identified the importance of interstitial spaces in organizational life. The coffee machine, hallways, and break rooms are informal social spaces where information circulates, alliances are formed, and strategies of resistance or adaptation are developed, strategies that are crucial to the proper functioning of a department and its collaborations with others.

These spaces have traditionally served a regulatory function. They allowed employees to create autonomous social bonds and to develop a parallel corporate culture that was sometimes critical of management. They were zones of relative autonomy, where free speech could emerge, and where organizational dysfunctions could be discussed and potentially resolved informally.

Contemporary management has gradually recognized the strategic importance of these spaces and developed techniques to instrumentalize them. Rather than eliminating them, which would provoke resistance or lead to dysfunctions, it is more effective to channel them so they serve organizational goals.

The Technological Orchestration of Sociability

Digital tools now extend and structure these moments of informal sociability. As previously mentioned, apps like Activiteam create seemingly spontaneous opportunities for interaction that are, in fact, orchestrated by the app's technical architecture.

This shaping of habit into behavioral addiction goes beyond the workplace. An entire digital ecosystem relies on the same logic and psychological mechanisms to foster engagement. Duolingo's "streaks," Candy Crush's variable rewards, smartwatches tracking health through numbers, dating apps and social networks all exploit similar tools: gamification, performance metrics, validation notifications.

As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) explains in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, these platforms are part of a behavioral economy that turns human experience into exploitable predictive data. Tinder and Activiteam are two facets of the same system that conditions individuals to accept surveillance as the price of fulfillment, fostering what could be called an addiction to self-quantification. Quantification becomes the only legitimate means of self-assessment within a framework of continuous self-optimization.

As Deterding et al. (2011) show in their research on gamification, these mechanisms systematically exploit human motivational biases to create engagement loops that go far beyond functional utility. The contemporary individual operates in a fully gamified environment, where every activity—learning, dating, communicating, working—becomes a measurable performance generating behavioral data.

This orchestration produces several effects. It extends professional interactions beyond working hours: colleagues stay in touch to compare scores, comment on performance, and help each other with challenges. It frames conversations: even seemingly personal discussions about fitness, health, or leisure become opportunities to strengthen professional bonds. It normalizes mutual surveillance: everyone monitors each other's performance, creating a panoptic dynamic in which control is no longer solely hierarchical. This instrumentalized sociability turns colleagues into reciprocal surveillance agents. Everyone becomes partially responsible for others' motivation, engagement, and well-being. This diffuse responsibility generates constant social pressure, making it difficult to withdraw from collective activities without appearing "antisocial" or "disengaged." Social exclusion becomes the main stake.

But this is not mere surveillance—it is competition, both within the workplace and the private sphere. The pressure no longer lies in explicit constraints, but in the implicit expectation of being constantly high-performing, visible, and connected. When every personal outing becomes an opportunity to shine (or fail) in the collective race, the spheres overlap until they merge. This extends beyond time management or LinkedIn image: the entire daily routine is instrumentalized. One no longer simply lives within a group; one constantly competes, even outside professional settings.

Competition is the most effective lever of engagement. Research in neurobiology and neuromarketing has shown that human engagement is more effectively mobilized through competition than through awareness or voluntary choice. Tali Sharot (UCL & MIT), a specialist in cognition and behavior, demonstrated that our brains are naturally wired to respond to competition and social benchmarks, often more efficiently than to personal awareness. In one hospital study discussed during a TEDx Cambridge talk, medical staff could see monitors in each room ranking colleagues on hand-washing performance. This simple visibility led to better compliance than verbal reminders of hygiene protocols. Why? Addictive motivational mechanisms. Sharot showed that competition triggers unconscious action: the brain responds to challenge, comparison, and the desire to "do better," often before conscious thought is engaged. Her model explains that competition acts as an emotional trigger, releasing dopamine and reinforcing sustained engagement. Subjects do not consciously reflect on why they improve performance—they are simply drawn into it.

The normativity of "emotional responsibility" (taking care of others' well-being, supporting the team, maintaining a good atmosphere) is rooted in a gendered division of emotional labor. This instrumentalization of sociability depends on an implicit division of emotional and relational roles: maintaining social ties, regulating tensions, and managing informal channels often fall to specific profiles—commonly women, junior staff, or precarious workers—without recognition as labor. This unequal distribution perpetuates what Arlie Hochschild (1983) identified as "emotional labor": invisible yet essential activity for organizational functioning. In horizontalized managerial contexts, this relational burden becomes central to cohesion, but it remains unequally distributed according to implicit criteria of gender, demeanor, status, role, or presumed aptitude. The same individuals repeatedly end up serving as facilitators, mediators, or social buffers—at the cost of extra cognitive and emotional load, and without space to formulate this contribution as legitimate.

Other studies in social neuroscience have shown that comparison with others powerfully activates the brain's reward system. This process has been analyzed by Avishalom Tor and Stephen Garcia, who highlight how social competition shapes attention, motivation, and decision-making. They show that social comparison activates the reward system more strongly than non-competitive efforts. This activation largely bypasses reflection or critical analysis. In other words, the joy of "winning" a badge or topping a leaderboard triggers stronger brain responses than any awareness campaign could.

Similarly, neuromarketing research confirms that systems using variable rewards—typical of gamified apps—stimulate dopamine circuits, creating addictive behavioral loops. These loops are especially effective when paired with competition or comparison, rather than mere notions of personal progress or self-improvement.

A study by Ball et al. (2012) on surveillance technologies in organizations showed that the line between socialization and monitoring is increasingly blurred. Collective cohesion tools—contests, wellness apps, sports challenges—act as subtle-discipline instruments, made more effective by a playful aesthetic. These tools generate implicit behavioral norms: not participating becomes suspicious, while being too competitive becomes stigmatized. This group calibration, mediated by social technologies, creates a form of collective self-regulation that bypasses traditional hierarchies' circuits while still serving performance goals.

This is engagement lever by design.

The Political Economy of Engagement: Productivity and Value Extraction

The example of Squadeasy reveals a crucial dimension of contemporary management: the quantification of engagement. Companies no longer limit themselves to measuring direct productivity (hours worked, objectives met); they now seek to quantify previously intangible dimensions such as motivation, emotional attachment to the company, and workplace well-being.

This quantification relies on sophisticated metrics: participation rates in activities, frequency of interactions, and satisfaction levels expressed in surveys. These data are then correlated with traditional economic indicators (absenteeism, turnover, productivity) to demonstrate the "return on investment" of engagement initiatives.

This approach turns engagement into a measurable commodity. It creates a market for engagement where companies like Squadeasy sell "solutions" to improve employee well-being. It legitimizes investment in surveillance technologies under the guise of personal fulfillment.

The Capture of Relational Value

Beyond direct productivity, these mechanisms allow for the extraction of relational value generated by interactions among employees. Every conversation, every exchange of information, every moment of solidarity becomes an exploitable organizational resource.

This extraction takes several forms. Behavioral data collected by these applications can identify informal leaders, influence networks, and group dynamics. These insights may be used to optimize work organization, detect talent, or anticipate conflict. The social interactions facilitated by digital tools strengthen team cohesion, reduce turnover risk, and improve collaboration.

This engagement economy transforms human relationships into organizational capital. It monetizes aspects of professional experience that were previously considered part of private life or individual autonomy.

Towards Alienation 2.0: Control Through Fulfillment

The Sophistication of Control Mechanisms

Contemporary management has developed unprecedentedly sophisticated forms of control. Unlike traditional disciplinary approaches based on coercion and direct supervision, new managerial techniques generate adhesion and complicity.

Individuals no longer passively endure organizational constraints; they actively participate in their reproduction. They voluntarily download tracking applications, share their personal data, and engage in inter-team competitions. This active participation creates an illusion of autonomy that conceals the expansion of managerial control.

This sophistication relies on the exploitation of cognitive biases and psychological mechanisms well documented in behavioral sciences. Gamification techniques exploit the need for

recognition and validation. Competitive logics activate group dynamics. Reward systems create behavioral dependencies.

This model of emotional capture is not neutral. It mobilizes emotional, relational, and adaptive skills that have historically been overinvested by women in the workplace. As noted by Paperman and Laugier (2011) in their work on the ethics of care, implicit expectations of benevolent engagement or communicative cheerfulness weigh differently depending on gender. The feminization and maternalization of managerial language ("care," "support," "connect,") do not imply equality but rather extend relational injunctions into personal spheres that were once separate. The engagement economy thus produces a double alienation: through measured fulfillment and through the unequal distribution of expected skills.

Fulfillment as a Mask for Exploitation

The paradox of alienation 2.0 lies in its capacity to generate a sense of fulfillment in the very individuals it exploits. Unlike traditional forms of exploitation, which produced suffering and resistance, the new forms of managerial hold create a perception of satisfaction and engagement.

This inversion is made possible through the capture of affects. Digital technologies make it possible to mobilize positive emotions—pleasure, pride, belonging—in service of organizational objectives. The individual experiences genuine pleasure in improving performance, outperforming colleagues, or receiving congratulatory notifications. This authentic pleasure conceals the fact that one is actively participating in their own exploitation.

This alienation through fulfillment is particularly difficult to criticize, as it relies on positive values—health, well-being, personal development—and generates real benefits for individuals, such as improved physical condition, enriched social relations, and a sense of accomplishment. Any critique risks being perceived as pessimism or bad faith.

In this context, modern voluntary servitude no longer resembles docile submission but rather an enthusiastic participation in the established order, in which critique appears discordant, almost blameworthy. This new form of subjugation is no longer merely a question of organizational structure; it involves an anthropology of the productive subject. It reveals a shift in power toward affective and cognitive devices that train individuals to desire what diminishes them. The analysis of this affective engineering now constitutes a political imperative—not to morally condemn those who adhere to it, but to understand the social and historical conditions that make such adherence both comfortable and desirable. Only under these conditions can a liberating critique become thinkable again.

Conclusion

The analysis of these managerial mechanisms reveals the emergence of an unprecedented form of voluntary servitude. Unlike the servitude described by Étienne de La Boétie, which was grounded in fear and habit, contemporary servitude is based on desire and satisfaction.

Modern management has understood that optimal productivity is not achieved through coercion, but through the orchestration of an environment in which engagement becomes

desirable. It is no longer about forcing individuals to work, but about creating conditions in which they willingly choose to invest themselves.

This evolution radically transforms the nature of work and exploitation. It gives rise to forms of psychological hold that are all the more powerful because they are invisible and consented to.

This machinery sustains Max-out: a displacement from visible work toward forms of subjective investment that remain hidden, yet evaluated, valorized, and conditioned. The adhesion to work as a self-project, under the influence of a narrative of joyful performance, is part of a broader logic of life-sphere saturation. This progressive colonization of non-work spaces by digital governance tools reveals that Max-out is not exhaustion in the classical sense, but rather a state of maximal activation maintained by the promise of recognition. Understanding this psychic and political economy of engagement allows us to envision an ethics of withdrawal or reappropriation.

Such understanding is essential to developing forms of resistance adapted to the new modes of hold. Freedom at work can no longer be limited to demanding better conditions of exploitation. It must interrogate the very foundations of what is at play within us and at the systemic level that leads us to desire our own alienation.

The problem is that the system that has produced this new organization of work also prevents visible conflict. One no longer knows where to direct grievances, since the manager is no longer directly responsible. Furthermore, by gradually erasing the boundaries between private and professional spheres, these mechanisms also dissolve the conditions required for a conscious and clearly delineated problem that could give rise to an explicit conflict.

It is no longer work that intrudes brutally upon private life, but rather private life that is subtly absorbed into the logics of work. Emotions, leisure, and social relationships themselves become variables of collective performance. This shift produces a depoliticization of disagreement, as analyzed by Boltanski in *On Critique* (2009): by transforming antagonisms into interpersonal adjustments, conflict is displaced, privatized, even internalized, and thereby loses both its logical grounding and its capacity for resistance.

As a result, critique may be perceived as a lack of engagement, and dissent as a betrayal of the collective. By dissolving the conditions for a debate about the meaning and purposes of work, the fusion of spheres renders consent natural and conflict a sign of maladjustment or disengagement. By reframing potential disagreement as a matter of personal adjustment, this engineering dilutes the political dimension of work.

Perspectives and Limitations

This exploratory analysis of Max-out calls for several empirical extensions:

- Quantitative validation on representative samples
- Study of variations according to job types, sectors of activity and organizational contexts
- Differential analysis based on sociodemographic profiles (age, gender, level of education)

- Development of standardized measurement tools
- Longitudinal research on the evolution of the phenomenon

A specific case of Max-out

Let us take, to illustrate, the example of a travelling sales representative for a large company, mentioned in the introduction. Nothing in the following description is exaggerated; some elements have been phrased provocatively to anchor the issues at stake. This account is based on daily observations over a five-year period. It aims to illustrate a representative pattern of normalized professional practices in certain sectors. It must be noted that this is not a client, but an acquaintance. The reader should understand that what is being analyzed here is the system, the machinery, the alienation—not the individual who was caught up in it despite himself.

Jean-Claude, a travelling sales representative, spends most of his time in the car. He jokes about himself by creatively distorting with puns the song by Gérald de Palmas with the chorus: “I was on the road all damn day.” He suffers from insomnia, irritability, musculoskeletal disorders and muscle atrophy. Yet, among all these ailments, he only seriously questions his back pain, which he links to his many hours of driving. For the rest, he seems incapable of any critical reflection on his condition, nor does he question its origins. To him, it feels disconnected and he is not receptive to exploring its link to his intensive work activity.

He spends his days with his mobile phone at his ear, whether talking to clients or colleagues, whether about work or gossip. He routinely and openly enjoys working 55-hour weeks, not including personal time spent on evenings and weekends, and considers this “completely normal,” claiming “it’s part of the job.” The concept of the workaholic, working over 50 hours a week—often attributed to Mosier (1983)—applies to him, while the French national average sits around 40 hours according to some statistics.

Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

He fights daily against a slow and inefficient bureaucratic system, intrusive managers, overwhelmed colleagues and utterly disengaged secretaries. He must constantly follow up to obtain the elements needed for his own tasks. He works around fake emergencies that punctuate his days, in addition to evenings, weekends and after-work drinks, conferences, trade shows, endless meetings, workplace social gatherings and countless minor office celebrations for increasingly trivial occasions, including traditionally private events like “a famous music celebration day” or, almost comically, the birthday or first tooth of Monique’s child. This reveals an organizational will to exploit every possible pretext for socialization. Everything seems orchestrated to multiply ties to the company and colleagues, to create a semblance of a second family.

For him, the concept of urgency ranges from a Saturday morning call at 8:30 am from a colleague—just like a Monday—about gossip that shouldn’t have reached Bastien, to the email that the client “must” receive by tomorrow morning or else a €50,000 contract might not be signed. As if the intensity of his involvement had a direct effect on performance.

He cannot refrain from monitoring ongoing cases during his vacations, making numerous calls to colleagues still at the office to ensure he has the latest updates, convinced that his agitation will have a decisive impact on the client’s decision. To avoid appearing as if he calls only about

work, he also calls to “check in” on them personally, instead of fully enjoying his holiday and truly disconnecting—as if maintaining personal contact could help disguise, even to himself, the true nature of his inability to switch off. When questioned about his level of commitment, his discourse is rooted in denial and normalized justification: when away for three weeks, he’ll say “No, I don’t call them twice a day,” “It’s normal,” “Everybody does that.”

At stake is a frantic erosion of meaning, a chimerical disconnection held in place by the annual bonus that must not be jeopardized.

The meaning struggles to stay afloat in this endless race, the goal of which is not even to deliver quality service to clients, given the endemic dysfunctions he constantly and openly complains about.

The individual no longer seems to possess the capacity for lucidity about his condition, his work or his potential alienation. He convinces himself and tries to convince others that what he does is important, meaningful, helpful and fulfilling.

In reality, Jean-Claude presents all the characteristics of Max-out. He is under the sway of a system with multiple influences, unable to perceive his situation beyond his own perspective, where “fulfilment” becomes a reassuring justification rather than a genuine experience.

When Changing Companies Becomes Unbearable

When a new professional opportunity arose and was chosen after vague hesitation and an inability to rationalize, without any attempt to analyze the nature of his difficulties, I observed an incapacity to tolerate the sudden change in environment, workplace structure, company culture and colleagues, along with a disabling emotional release and, ultimately, a reversal of his initial motivations for change.

Jean-Claude eventually decided to go back to his former job—less well-paid—after just a few days, following numerous unconvincing hesitations. This emotional confusion appeared, from the outside, widely disproportionate to the actual professional and personal stakes.

Jean-Claude seemed dispossessed of his capacity for free will, unable to engage in deep reflection or to make a professional and strategic decision based on clear elements and a sound rationale. He found himself tossed about by the winds by his emotions. His return was driven by affective “obviousness”: the lack of daily contact with Monique, his long-time work partner, outweighed the prospects offered by the new role. Emotional attachment to his team and the relational habits of his former department prevailed over any other professional or strategic consideration.

However, this kind of reaction should not be hastily interpreted as a direct indicator of Max-out, and it should not be confused with the case of so-called “boomerang employees” who return to their previous roles after leaving, based on specific dynamics. This case illustrates a singular configuration in which decision-making elements appear to dissolve into an unexplored emotional dynamic, where affective ties take a central role in the decision without any critical distance.

Indeed, in this new work environment, with redefined objectives, a new manager, new colleagues, and the absence of tangible achievements, there was nothing to refill the

“narcissistic reservoir.” Everything had to be rebuilt: recognition, implicit status, group belonging. Yet this identity realignment collided with a void left by years of over-adaptation, where personal worth had been continuously validated through performance, informal relationships and collective micro-rituals.

The discomfort and perceived loss were not due to the different work tasks, but rather to the collapse of self-image. This collapse visibly triggered deep anxiety and persistent rumination. That self-image had been constructed through peer recognition, mastery of routines, the feeling of no longer needing to prove oneself. In this new context, the image no longer held, and with it fell part of his identity, unable to generate alternative representations, recreate a vision, or tolerate the wait. Yet the position was similar, and he had been recruited for his past achievements.

The anxiety that emerged was not only about change, but about a lack of projection: the inability to imagine a future with meaning, a deserved career evolution, outside of the system that had shaped him. Behind this situation lies the result of deep conditioning—educational, managerial and social—that gradually extinguished the ability to dream, to allow oneself to branch out, to conceive and live fulfilment in any other way than through normative forms of recognition.

This may not simply be a case of difficulty adapting. It is the outcome of an orientation never truly questioned, a professional path guided more by conformity than by awareness, where the initial choices were neither constructed nor owned, but accepted as obvious—just one option among others on the road to self-sufficiency and autonomy.

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    - Vivier, P. (2025). *L'orientation professionnelle désassignée : Reconstruction méta-analytique transdisciplinaire d'un choix conscient* (1re éd.) Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15607008

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