

## EXISTENTIALISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

### The 'Look' of the 'Crowd'

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## Abstract

Social media has become a basis for helping us maintain human contact, especially as our alienation from our phenomenological experiences of 'being human' is becoming apparent due to the pandemic. I argue for how existentialist philosophy is crucial, more than ever, to interrogate our social media usage, which is a 'necessary evil' in our daily lives. Firstly, Kierkegaard's critiques of the crowd and of the press are equally applicable to social media, which plays both roles: enabling an anonymous mass of public opinion and doubling-up as an information source, reducing responsibility on the individual. Secondly, social media leads to an intrinsic pressure to objectify one's self (as portrayed) due to the possibility of an omnipresent Other, based on the technological design of networks. I will link my arguments on social media to other existential ideals and will conclude by suggesting changes that may promote existential ideals in one's social media portrayal and engagement.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst worldwide lockdowns to stop its spread, our *alienation* from our existing phenomenological experiences of 'being human' is becoming apparent (Carel et al., 2020). Existentialist philosophy has, thus, become more relevant, in a time of flux - reminiscent of the post-war days of 20th century existentialists - where nothing seems to be 'normal' anymore<sup>1</sup>.

In my paper, I argue for how existentialist philosophy is crucial, more than ever, to interrogate our social media usage, which is a 'necessary evil' in our daily lives. I argue that harm to existential well-being is a persistent, but oft under-discussed threat; where existentialist concepts are pivotal in unpacking our relationship with social media.

I will structure my overall thesis thus: I will first argue that the inherent network structure of *asymmetric* social media predicates the emergent phenomenological effects, by tying them with crowd psychology and a shift to the unprecedented, rapidly-evolving arena of online communications.

My first existentialist argument is on a macro level, where social media as both an information source and an outlet for anyone to vent their spleen is cause for concern, when seen from the level of its emergent effects-as-a-whole. Kierkegaard's critiques of the *crowd* and of the *press* are equally applicable to social media, which plays both roles. This critique from Kierkegaard's day can easily be applied to the ubiquitous use of social media today.

Following that, I argue that social media leads to unfulfilling communication (Lopato, 2016), and an intrinsic pressure to objectify one's self as portrayed on social media, due to the possibility of an omnipresent Other, based on the technological design of social networks. In other words, user behavior on social media – driven by technological companies' designs for increased

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<sup>1</sup> Work by de Beauvoir, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre are standard examples. In fact, Sartre (and Heidegger, in the first half of the 20th century) engaged with the concept of 'alienation' as alluded to at the start of the paragraph. See e.g., Crowell (2017) for a broad overview of existentialism.

attention to, and monetization of data – accelerates the omnipresence of the *Other's*<sup>2</sup> look on social media. Consequently, we are constantly forced to curate our online presence, in addition to our own day-to-day conception of ourselves in the world (Goffman, 1959). Now, in addition to curating our social *veridical* selves, we have both the digital wherewithal – and the need – for curating our online personas.

Next, I will use digital humanities techniques to empirically illustrate the conceptions and curations of one's self when portraying oneself on Instagram, with emphasis on what it means to be *authentic* on social media. Authenticity is an ideal of social media engagement especially from advertisers' and celebrities' perspectives. I aim to analyze how social media users evoke pride from the omnipresent *Other's* engagement with their content.

Finally, to recap from an individual level to a collective level, I will link my arguments on achieving existential ideals on social media, and will conclude by suggesting changes that may promote existential ideals in one's social media portrayal and use, as well as highlight possible avenues of further inquiry.

## 2 ASYMMETRY: TECHNOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGHS (OR PROBLEMS) TO HUMAN COMMUNICATION

I shall first start by arguing for the role of technological design in social media in our existential relations with Others. Empirical philosophical analyses on online social networks (OSNs) focus mainly on social epistemology (Sullivan et al., 2018; Zollman, 2007, 2012). Here, the term 'social network' represents the underlying structure of social media sites, and was an alternative moniker for such sites.

Early studies of real-world social networks have their ethos in mapping out social relations between humans, via say, direct observation<sup>3</sup>. One important point worth mentioning here is that traditional offline social networks are roughly symmetric – i.e., having the connections equal between both members – with some exceptions. In other words, their connection is dyadic, from social network terminology (Cheong, 2019; Pattison & Robins, 2002). Said symmetry is adopted as the basis for early OSNs: such as MySpace, Friendster, and the original (and still ongoing) Facebook's 'Friends' system.

To borrow my initial formalization, this symmetry is present in, say, a real-world friendship between **A** and **B**. This also works for, say, a social network 'friend' on MySpace or Facebook. Both mutually acknowledge the other, with a roughly *symmetric* connection or link between them (i.e., mutual esteem, respect, and regard for each other). Formally, this is expressed in mathematical graph notation as  $\mathbf{A} \leftrightarrow \mathbf{B}$  where the bidirectionality of the arrow indicates that this is *symmetric* (Cheong, 2022b).

However, the asymmetric mode of communication came to the fore with the advent of Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook's 'Fan Pages' feature, Reddit, and other social media platforms (Cheong, 2013; Hu et al., 2014; Krishnamurthy, 2009). This asymmetry meant that a user, **A**, can now "unilaterally engage user **P**... with user **P** not necessarily reciprocating" (Cheong, 2019) nor with any expectation to do so. For reference, this asymmetry is represented in graph notation as  $\mathbf{A} \rightarrow \mathbf{P}$ . Examples of this is, say, a fan (**A**) liking a celebrity, say, Taylor Swift (**P**), on YouTube; or a user (**A**) retweeting a post by an opinion leader (**P**) on Twitter. In both these cases, Taylor

<sup>2</sup> I shall elaborate on the concept of the 'Other' in Section 4.

<sup>3</sup> A full review of extent studies on social networks and relations between members is beyond the scope of this paper: a good literature review is in the edited volume by Alhajj and Rokne (2018).

Swift and the opinion leader have no obligation to reciprocate, and oftentimes could raise the possibility of parasocial relationships (Medelli, 2022).

The asymmetry is inherent in the actions users can take on such sites: ‘liking’, ‘following’, ‘retweeting’, and such. The new mode of communication, with the asymmetry present, introduces the following issues: (a) **A** and **P** need not have a connection between their veridical selves; (b) the **A** → **P** connection can easily involve third parties: e.g., having one’s retweet being further propagated by a number of third-party Twitter users (Salis, 2019); and (c) there is no precedent in large-scale activity of this nature in real-world networks based on existing sociological and social psychology theories (Dunbar, 1992; Homans, 1958).

To wrap up this technical exposition, I will briefly revisit the two broad concepts of asymmetry of *attachment* and asymmetry of *influence* in my earlier work (Cheong, 2019, 2022b). The former is directly related to graph/network theory and mathematics, where *preferential attachment* (Albert & Barabási, 2002) – or the *Matthew Effect*, as referred to in other disciplines (van de Rijt et al., 2014) – plays a role. To wit, nodes in a social network (say, TikTok videos) are likely to gain more new links (say, views) if they already have lots of links (again, say, view counts, thanks to going viral) compared to if they do not. Similarly, a highly-followed TikTok user will be likely to have more new followers; a highly-liked Instagram post will tend to grow in ‘likes’: a fact compounded by the effects of personalization algorithms (Pariser, 2011). The latter asymmetry – which I dub ‘the asymmetry of *influence*’ – is a side effect of the propensity for asymmetric attachment. Examples I raised include:

*“popularity/inspiration (as in the case of celebrities or those with social identity); or high epistemic authority (as in the case of opinion leaders); or even potential business leads (in the case of using OSNs for marketing)”* (Cheong, 2019).

However, recall that **A**’s and **P**’s relationship is not equal by design, with neither the same goods as discussed above, nor deep emotional engagement, nor “faithful focus” on *genuine* conversation (Salis, 2019). This reciprocation can merely be ‘on the surface’, fulfilling some form of *exchange* (Homans, 1958) – via the limited *affordances* in social media – endorsing, retweeting, liking, etc. (Cheong, 2019; Marsili, 2020; L. McDonald, 2021; Theocharis et al., 2023).

One consideration I’d like to emphasize is about how online social media, as a technologically-mediated experience, can exacerbate these asymmetries. It can be argued that in real life, experiences may still be mediated (Timmins & Lombard, 2005), e.g., via the news, or via email/text messages. The key distinguishing factor is the speed and volume of interactions that social media can facilitate, which is unrivaled in other mediated experiences. To borrow an oft-used maxim from ‘big data’ studies, social media has a higher volume, velocity, and variety<sup>4</sup> of information, social connections, and contexts, and places a high demand on its consumers. The ‘always-on’ interconnectedness between users facilitates this, again, to an unprecedented degree. These asymmetries set the stage for the following arguments on existential implications. I will first expound on Kierkegaard’s views, tying into contemporary Kierkegaardian analysis of social media which has hitherto not been active since the turn of the millennium (Dreyfus, 1999; Prosser & Ward, 2000).

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g., <https://www.oracle.com/au/big-data/what-is-big-data/>.

### 3 KIERKEGAARD: CROWD IS UNTRUTH, AND NOW CROWD AS PRESS

On a macroscopic level of human behavior, studies on the ‘wisdom of crowds’ were popularized in the early 2000s (Surowiecki, 2005), though the emergent behavior of crowds have been documented as early as the 1800s<sup>5</sup>. The ‘madness of the crowd’, inversely, can be used to define events such as social media pile-ons: celebrity feuds or mob-like behavior in support of discord. Hence, such projections by underlying human actors (via their online personae) deserve philosophical consideration.

A volume of existentialist critiques can be used to justify this mob mentality<sup>6</sup>, but for this first argument, I shall focus on Kierkegaardian interpretation of why they behave *untruthfully* (pre-dating Sartrean *inauthenticity*). Two key Kierkegaardian critiques come to mind: (a) social media-as-news being dangerous; and (b) the Crowd is “Untruth” due to dilution of responsibility and ‘the lazy mass’ for the individual to retreat into. Religion aside, Kierkegaardian existentialism is compatible with social network analysis: on the “... customary mores [and] ...the prevailing social norms” (W. McDonald, 2017) of today’s consumption of social media.

Firstly, social media has a role as the *de facto* press. As prior studies from various disciplines would describe (Kwak et al., 2010; Thi Nguyen, 2020; Wihbey et al., 2021), social media is widely regarded as a source of news and information, with 62% of Americans using social media as a news source (Rainie et al., 2017); and as surveyed by the UK Ofcom more recently, about 28% of youth use video-based sites such as TikTok and YouTube for news (Suleiman & Oatis, 2022). One example illustrates the pervasiveness of social-media-as-news. Facebook’s recent decision to ban news in Australia due to legislative changes (Albeck-Ripka, 2021; Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2021), led to various stakeholders decrying the changed status quo: Facebook, a social media site, will be disentangled from its function as a news dissemination platform for Australians. This ban was interestingly overturned, after various discussions between Facebook and media companies.

Back to Kierkegaard: given his 1846 attacks by *The Corsair* newspaper (W. McDonald, 2017), Kierkegaard’s critique of the press epitomizing the crowd, and the ‘numeric’ masses (Anthony Storm, 2012), is wholly compatible with social media being the modern gatekeeper of news. This illustrates our sheer dependence on social media platforms playing the role of the Kierkegaardian press. To continue: “No one has to answer for...” anything they voice out “with help from the press” (Kierkegaard, 1846), drawing huge parallels to acerbic attacks on social media by anonymous users, endemic on asymmetric social media sites. Social-media-as-press “makes its readers more ... mediocre” and “create[s] the impression that many people think the same way” (Jansen, 1990) – an effect compounded by epistemic side effects such as filter bubbles and online echo chambers (Pariser, 2011; Thi Nguyen, 2020).

The second point paralleling Kierkegaardian observations is that the ‘crowd’ on social media is ‘untruth’ and a ‘lazy mass’ a particular individual can retreat into, in the guise of anonymity. A definition of Kierkegaardian terminology is needed here:

*Reminiscent of Heidegger’s das man, Kierkegaard’s critique of the Crowd is that “...its very concept is untruth, since a crowd either renders the single individual wholly*

<sup>5</sup> See e.g., (Mackay, 1850): the idea behind crowd psychology and its destructive behaviors – *cf* mob mentality and the bystander effect, amongst others – appeared in the mid-20th century.

<sup>6</sup> This ranges from Kierkegaardian ideals of authentic, God-fearing human behavior; to Sartrean bad faith and authenticity; to de Beauvoir’s study of the ‘Other’; to Camusian absurdity – however, for the purposes of this paper, we only focus on the former three.

*unrepentant and irresponsible, or weakens his responsibility by making it a fraction of his decision” (Kierkegaard, 1846).*

*Note that, to nuance this, Kierkegaard is not denying that the Crowd could render ‘truth’ (to, say, factual questions), but rather, he speaks from the perspective of things which are “...ethical, the ethical-religious... [as] ‘the truth,’ and seen [from an] ethico-religious... [perspective]... the crowd is untruth” (Kierkegaard, 1846).*

To this, Kierkegaard adds, his observation of a “...lazy mass, which understands nothing and does nothing... seeks some distraction, and soon gives itself over to the idea that everything which someone does, or achieves, has been done to provide the public something to gossip about...” (Søren Kierkegaard, 1962).

All these parallel modern social media phenomenon of online pile-ons (Boren, 2020; Brown & Sanderson, 2020), to mindless ‘doomscrolling’ in the pandemic (Markham, 2020), to the propagation of disinformation (Marin, 2020; Ojea Quintana et al., 2022; World Health Organization et al., 2020). As pointed out towards the end of Section 3, while this problem has been acknowledged by Kierkegaard as far back as the 19th century, the technological advancements underpinning social media have magnified the effects of the ‘numeric mass’ and its pervasiveness in our daily lives. Simply put, it can happen to anyone who engages in social media, not just opinion leaders like Kierkegaard.

This claim, however, will benefit from a bit of nuance. In contrast to the Kierkegaardian ‘lazy mass’, social media can also be conversely construed as a *commons* (Collins et al., 2020; Kwet, 2020; Maxigas & Latzko-Toth, 2020) – a democratic and fair enabler – for the accomplishment of authenticity (Botin, 2019). While I do not disagree with the idea, an important distinction needs to be made between the *ideal* social media environment which ‘enables’, and the *current* form of commoditized social media (the likes of Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, and the like). For starters, the idealized ‘commons’ can only be accomplished by an ‘old school’ (Maxigas & Latzko-Toth, 2020) social media environment (such as Internet Relay Chat, or IRC, of yore) which is not constrained by “platformization” (Maxigas & Latzko-Toth, 2020). The landscape of social media has, for better or for worse, rapidly evolved since the heyday of IRC: modern-day equivalents are guilty of *optimizing for engagement*, as engagement (e.g., continual, sustained usage, ostensibly increasing advertisement views) contributes to revenue for the companies behind them (see also Cheong, 2022a for a broad review).

Sadly, this turn of “platformization” is a bane to a potential-for-authenticity. Users’ attention spans are not focused on how they could realize their best selves – their *authentic* projects, in existentialist nomenclature – but on what could sustain their attention the longest. To quote Floridi (2014)’s study of *The Onlife Manifesto* by The Onlife Initiative, “attention itself [is an]... inherent human attribute that conditions the *flourishing* of human interactions and the capabilities to engage in *meaningful action*” online. If this finite resource is diminished for the sake of improving the bottom line for tech platforms, we are back to square one, posited by Kierkegaard two centuries ago.

In my view, asymmetry is – I emphasize – a major culprit behind this. What alternative does the individual have, in a world of social media technologies being a prerequisite for, e.g., communication, news dissemination, social belonging? Conversely, the agency made available to a user is reduced: the ability to act in a social media environment is limited to the subset of actions – affordances – made available to social media users via the platform<sup>7</sup>. I’ll revisit this point in the conclusion; but for now, I shall turn to yet another phenomenological conundrum

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<sup>7</sup> I shall revisit this point later in Section 4 by introducing the issue of affordances and the gamification of social media.

of social media warranting attention – one which is private on an individual level, yet pervasive amongst all users.

## 4 DE BEAUVOIR & SARTRE: (DON'T) LOOK AT ME, YOU OTHER!

Switching from a birds-eye view of social media to its constituent parts – the user – what other existentialist issues can we uncover? I will now draw upon the mid-20th century brand of French existentialist philosophy to consider what it means to be a popular user on social media to begin this exploration. Dowden (2017)'s work on "Sartrean existentialist reading[s]" on the social media presence of celebrities finds that Kim Kardashian-West projects "vulnerability and willingness to be exposed", with a caveat: it can also be a "calculated projection of a cultivated image of vulnerability" (Dowden, 2017) instead. Now, recall that, from Section 2, in asymmetric networks, a user can engage a celebrity (**A** → **P**), and that, thanks to the limited affordances of social media, **P** tends to be an Object for the other's appreciation, adoration, and target of an asymmetric connection.

To put in another way, channeling Sartre, **A** is casting their *Look* on **P**'s posts (Sartre, 1969), all italics mine. The *Look* (with an uppercase-L) is a key concept in existentialist philosophy that deserves some contextualization here:

Based on *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1969): the 'Look' can be defined as "how the self gains thematic awareness...[,] forming a public and self-conscious sense of how the body appears to others...[and] illustrates affective and social [a]ffects of embodied being" (as paraphrased in Cheong, 2019; citing Dolezal, 2012; Lopato, 2016).

The Look can also be described as, simply, "a signification of a direct encounter with another subjective individual" (Stack & Plant, 1982), which may lead to objectification of the self.

To continue my exposition, our online selves are constantly subject to revision, which adds another complicating layer in our veridical self's relationship with the online 'other' user. An example is "remov[ing] instances of my facticity from public display" (Lopato, 2016) – one can, on a Facebook profile, selectively curate a profile of themselves (Goffman, 1959). My curation of my online self is required to attract attention from the *Other*<sup>8</sup>, especially as social media's design ethos is for maximum engagement (Solon, 2017). Again, as the *Other* (with an uppercase-O) is an existentialist concept, an operational definition would help contextualize things:

*The uppercase-O 'Other' illustrates the point of view from an abstract, third-party, "point of view which is not my own" (Cox, 2008; Dolezal, 2012; Lopato, 2016).*

To paraphrase Sartre (1969): "I must obtain from the [o]ther the recognition of my [online persona]..." This Other is omnipresent: One's public posts are constantly out there for (concrete) other users to see and engage with. Algorithmic effects such as the aforesaid filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) and other personalization techniques in the name of gamification (Thi Nguyen, 2021) increases the likelihood of a user and her contents being viewed – as an object of the look of – another. In other words, the distance from the abstract Other (Dolezal, 2012) can instantly be reduced, once another user (or computerized algorithm such as the news feed or 'trending topics' list) consumes or appreciates one's profile or post. This omnipresent 'threat' of a Look does not really enable me to "me to love others... [nor] effectively learn about myself or

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<sup>8</sup> In its general sense, the noun 'other' (lowercase-o) is reserved for a concrete third-party (e.g., another person, another online user).

my possibilities... [nor] intimately reveal myself to the Other”, resulting in “unfulfilling” communication (Lopato, 2016).

Lopato’s (2016) reading of *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1969) indicates that “just the mere possibility of a Look” (Cheong, 2019) may result in me – or fragments of my veridical self, in my user profile or posts – being judged, in the Sartrean quest for avoiding shame and instilling pride (Sartre, 1969). I want to “avoid shame in my online activity”, and “I want to be proud of who I appear as online” (Cheong, 2019). To wit, I want to hide parts of my Facebook profile so that those viewing my profile can see me at my best self, something I am proud of. This shame/pride is represented on social media as a finite subset of *quantitative* measures – likes, posts, and view counts (BBC News, 2019) – all mere proxies for real-world forms of engagement (Thi Nguyen, 2021). These measures are powered by the limited *affordances* (Norman, 2013) that constrict our range of possible behaviors and actions on social media.

In spite of social media asymmetry, there is a non-zero possibility<sup>9</sup> of the Other’s Look simultaneously affecting other users! To paraphrase Bergoffen and Burke (2020), “I am... the facticity of their situation” (De Beauvoir, 1944; de Beauvoir & Simons, 2004). As such, the ideal of freedom, the existential Other being “immune to my power” (Bergoffen & Burke, 2020), is a pipe dream. ‘Likes’ are taken for granted, in a feedback loop for dopamine hits<sup>10</sup> which not only affect my social media experience, but also the experiences of whom I engage with online. The quantitative measures of ‘like’ counts effectively flatten the gamut of human expression, care, and concern into a gamification exercise (Thi Nguyen, 2021) for myself and other social media users.

What other existential conundrums can the look of the abstract Other, or the easily-realized consumption of our social media presence by another user, can Sartrean philosophy unpack? Golomb’s analysis summarizes this, which sets the scene for the next section:

*“...this exposure of the transcendent ego [i.e., my real-world transcendence which is linked, but not equivalent to, my online representation – but constantly subject to online judgment]... to public scrutiny and the constant awareness that one is being watched by the ‘other’ ... impels us to escape this judgemental ‘hell’... We turn to disguises and acts of bad faith.” (Golomb, 1995), italics and paraphrasing mine.*

## 5 SARTRE: FOR ITSELF, OR FOR-ITSELF-IN-ITSELF?

*Authenticity* and the avoidance of bad faith is a key tenet of existentialist philosophy: authenticity is a subjective truth which is an (internal) ideal for an existentialist philosopher (Søren Kierkegaard & Dru, 1938). Previously, a study on authenticity on social media – using celebrities as our focal point – noted that a “calculated projection of a cultivated image of vulnerability... assum[es the celebrity’s] own objectification and conceives of herself as an object as well as the audience’s bad faith” (Dowden, 2017). The bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) mode of being (Sartre, 1969) defeats any claims of authenticity.

I argue that when treated as an object, or an end goal, the self-styled ‘authenticity’ on social media is tantamount to Sartrean ‘bad faith’, when it comes to our relationship to others. Existentialist authenticity is a *means*, but never an *end* (Golomb, 1995); it is made aware to us only when we flee it (Sartre, 1969); and claims to encapsulate authentic social media

<sup>9</sup> An exception will be a private social media profile without real-world information (e.g., wholly using pseudonyms and incomplete information), used to only consume media but not produce any posts nor user profiles.

<sup>10</sup> A design mindset for social media is to “...consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible” (Solon, 2017), quoting Sean Parker of Facebook, via the optimization of ‘dopamine hits’ (Brooks, 2017; Solon, 2017) to encourage ongoing use.



engagement is problematic as we can't even define its essence (Golomb, 1995; Guignon, 2004; Trilling, 1972).

The problem is when “nearly all ... [social media sites] invoked authenticity...” (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017) as their ethos. My key critique to this turn of events is that on social media, authenticity on social media is regarded as an *end* (for others to see): as a *be-ing*, not a *be-coming* (i.e., an always-in-motion, ongoing, *project*<sup>11</sup>). Still, this never stops ideals of authenticity from manifesting in the user base of social media sites.

A prior empirical study (Cheong, 2018) of social media sites, purportedly invoking the concept of ‘authenticity’ on social media, studied two popular hashtags on Instagram, #nofilter and #liveauthentic<sup>12</sup>. The hypothesis is that certain features of a post are “emphasized in such images, accomplished by (and as a byproduct of) a mindful curation of the images, to accomplish certain ends”: contrary to the claim of ‘authenticity’ (Cheong, 2018). Out of over 5,000 images on Instagram, over 31.82% of posts have their captions revised to curate (Goffman, 1959) what others see, and optimize for engagement (for an argument on engagement, see also (Cheong, 2022a)). With regards to the actual image content, predominantly we see that key subjects in such photographs include positive depictions of humans – including selfies, swimwear, gym photos, etc. (Cheong, 2018) – for invoking pride, and repelling *shame*, from the Other (Sartre, 1969).

All these behaviors indicate a particular act of image-curation (Duffy & Hund, 2015), and raises the following paradox, from (Cheong, 2018): *If authenticity is personal* (per Golomb, 1995), *why then is the need to exhibit or affirm to the world – through careful curation of one’s online portrayals – that one is, indeed, authentic?* This enigma will lead into the penultimate section: what does the incongruence between existentialist ideals and actual exhibited behavior indicate? And what does it mean when, collectively, this emergent behavior is reflected in the macro level as an untrue crowd and ‘wannabe press’, in the spirit of early Kierkegaard?

## 6 IF THE CROWD IS UNTRUE, THE SELF IS CONSTANTLY JUDGED, IS AUTHENTICITY INAUTHENTIC?

In this penultimate argument, I shall work back up from the individual (micro) level to the crowd (macro) level, by discussing the incongruence between social media-favored authenticity and the actual existentialist ideal of the same name, channeling Kierkegaard (and Sartre, to a certain extent) on generalizing this to the overall picture of social media.

To continue my previous argument on authenticity, the existential concept of *authenticity* itself needs revisiting:

*“striving as self-making, an ongoing project on a personal level”* (Cheong, 2018), *per definitions in* (Golomb, 1995; Guignon, 2004); *in other words, a strive only I can evaluate, to achieve ‘truthfulness with respect to oneself’* (Cheong, 2018, emphasis mine; Guignon, 2004).

Thus, if one were to pre-suppose that one is *#authentic* on social media, it would be antithetical to the existentialist tenet itself. Two findings from Sartre and Golomb solidify this: if one “seek[s] authenticity for authenticity’s sake...[paradoxically, they] are no longer authentic” (Sartre, 1992) because acting “authentically for the sake of ... being hailed as an authentic person... is to will to be defined as being-for-itself-in-itself, as a conscious thing in-the-world,

<sup>11</sup> To borrow de Beauvoir’s terminology.

<sup>12</sup> Ethics clearance (Project Number: 13762, Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee) has been obtained from the IRB where the study was conducted (Cheong, 2018).

which is not possible” (Golomb, 1995). If this authenticity is a favored normative quality ascribed to, say, increased engagement and sales (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017), it is a misnomer and far removed from the *existential* ideal of authenticity.

Moving up one level to the broader scheme of things, the constant pressure to be *Looked* upon by an omnipresent *Other* (Section 4) is inescapable, as I have argued, due to the asymmetric nature (Section 2) of social media and the constant nudges to increase our engagement by way of personalized algorithms and other habit-forming design choices. By way of how Australian users strongly reacted to a (now-reversed) Facebook news block, it goes to show how pervasive social media is in our daily lives. The more we consume and produce data on social media, the more likely it is that the data we provide ends up abused, as the Cambridge Analytica scandal on Facebook has illustrated (Ward, 2018).

And on the other side of the coin, dangerous, *freedom-denying* (De Beauvoir, 1944) *inauthentic* behavior – at scale – results in phenomena such as online trolling, cyberbullying, flame wars, celebrity feuds. All these have prior precedent in crowd psychology, such as the role of anonymity in provoking dangerous crowd behavior, something Kierkegaard (Section 3) has talked about in his day. Golomb writes: “authentic relations [are] wherein each person regards the other as an end-in-itself and not just as a means of furthering her own projects and whims” (Golomb, 1995). Hence, objectifying another person by setting them up as a target of attacks or harassment is a clear manifestation of inauthenticity: denial of responsibility (Kierkegaard, 1846); denial of one’s *transcendence* (with the freedom to *stay away* from the pile-ons, or report them to authorities); and in clear existential (Sartrean) bad faith.

This section has presented a dour, bleak picture of social media - from personal authenticity being nigh-impossible, to a macro-level danger of a technologically-mediated-untrue-crowd (*a la* Kierkegaard). With pervasive use of social media today, is there anything that can be done to avoid the ultimate sin of *bad faith*?

## 7 QUO VADIS? DESIDERATA IN RECLAIMING OUR EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

All hope is not lost, as I argue that there are ways in which individuals and the social media ecosystem can change to nudge us toward existential freedom.

First: let’s focus on the technological considerations of an asymmetric social network. Challenging the domination of the asymmetries of influence and attachment (Section 2), social media companies can act to improve the diversity of users and viewpoints, and the epistemic wellbeing of their users (Wihbey et al., 2021), rather than prioritizing popular users and content in the hopes of getting higher engagement. This is difficult to achieve in practice: as it will have to change the prevailing fetishization of optimizing-for-attention, the *raison d’etre* of social media algorithms. Still, this is not impossible: Instagram’s controversial removal of ‘like’ counts<sup>13</sup> is a good start to diffusing the role of the asymmetries. To temper the harms of asymmetries, the emergence of new norms of social engagement online is also a promising first step<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> This is controversial as some claim that the move is motivated to increase advertising revenue. See e.g., (BBC News, 2019; Rodriguez, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Two examples of this are: (a) when high-follower, high-status accounts are held by their followers to account when they misuse their position in the social network (e.g., YouTube followers rapidly unsubscribing to Fine Bros Entertainment due to latter attempting to control the creation of fan videos via trademark registration, as discussed in <https://www.vox.com/2016/2/3/10906032/fine-brothers-youtube-trademark>); and (b) the original

Second, we turn to the macro-scale criticism in Section 3, *viz.* Kierkegaard's claim of 'the crowd is untruth'. Social media should not be regarded as a solid purveyor of news: again, the Australian Facebook news block, though temporary, serves to show that news can be decoupled from social media, albeit painfully. Similarly, at least until technology companies prioritize user wellbeing over engagement, social media should also not be regarded as a source of information, but rather a mere weak *heuristic* or epistemic shortcut at best. Kierkegaard's work predicted the misinformation and 'dilution of responsibility' a social media-enabled virtual crowd is capable of. However, an important contribution of Kierkegaard to existentialism, the theory of *stages*, may explain what is going on. In *Stages on Life's Way* (Søren Kierkegaard, 2013), Kierkegaard posited three stages, or 'spheres' – aesthetic, ethical, and religious – providing "an account of a path to authentic selfhood" (Evans, 2009). In brief, the aesthetic stage deals with the 'immediate', living "for 'the moment'", or the "natural, spontaneous sensations that lie at the heart of conscious human existence" (Evans, 2009). This has parallels with the 'immediacy' of gratification for social media users via, say, 'likes' by other users (or, by one's idolized celebrity on social media). Only when the paradigmatic switch to the 'ethical' sphere takes place, is when one is cognizant of the broader responsibilities and deeper questions with social media use. Still, future work includes identifying a panacea to the online pile-ons which parallels The Corsair's treatment of Kierkegaard; and more interestingly, how (and when) does the Kierkegaardian 'ethical' stage take hold.

Thirdly, we examine our relationship with the omnipresent Other on social media (Section 4). Minimizing our involvement with social media, ranging from social media diets to disabling/deleting accounts on sites, seem to be a straightforward (albeit drastic) way to reduce the multidimensional capital-O Other we are exposed to. If social media is a necessary evil, then protecting ourselves against harms would be a logical move: tightening privacy settings; gaining an awareness of social media sites' Terms of Service; limiting the amount of personal data on social media, amongst others. This not only protects our existential wellbeing online, but as our actions affect others in our network online as well, these will protect the freedom and wellbeing of others; this is even touted by Ward (2018) as a *categorical imperative* in thwarting future threats to our autonomy such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Finally, the issue of authenticity on social media comes into question (Section 5). Is it worth having authenticity as an ideal on social media, given that it is used to market more effectively or improve engagement, rather than embraced as an existential ideal? Early social media's ethos on having one's veridical self being matched as closely as possible online seems to have backfired, as we have seen in various controversies (again, Cambridge Analytica being the most damning). A pivot, then, is by achieving *existential authenticity* instead of self-styled, Other-facing, 'social media authenticity'. Paradoxically, existential authenticity is a *better* version of authenticity to approach<sup>15</sup>: recall that our enabling of others' existential freedom to achieve their own projects is, per de Beauvoir, a prerequisite for freedom to flourish for us (Bergoffen & Burke, 2020). If we won't attack someone in real life for having opposing views, why would we, then, do the same online, emboldened by the crowd and with a cloak of anonymity? While it is true that we have a different phenomenological experience with online large-scale engagement, the effects of our denial of someone else's freedom are *as real as* when we are looking eye-to-eye at someone<sup>16</sup>.

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poster on comment threads having the 'last word' to end disagreements and censure rule-breakers (e.g., on Reddit threads).

<sup>15</sup> I do not use the term 'attain' here, as authenticity, by its very nature, is an active project: a point which I clarified in Sections 4 and 5.

<sup>16</sup> While on the subject, Marina Abramović's performance art piece, 'The Artist Is Present', is an interesting anecdote. Briefly, Abramović sits full-time in an art gallery while members of the public sit across from her and literally look her in the eye. This is phenomenologically very different from the 'look' of the 'Other' on social

## 8 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that our engagement on social media deserves an existential unpacking of the key issues which can be detrimental to our autonomy as well as our capabilities as autonomous humans. I started by arguing that the large-scale asymmetric social network concept is without prior precedent; its asymmetries, coupled with the design ethos of social media and underlying algorithms, can lead to existential harms.

On a macro scale, Kierkegaard's prescient existential analysis on the untrue crowd, inspired by his bitter experience with *The Corsair* (epitomizing the press) can easily apply to modern social media which plays both roles. On an individual level, the phenomenological Other is easily realized as concrete 'many others', by the design of social media personalization algorithms, which exacerbates existential tensions with other people.

This then raises the question of authenticity, an ideal sought-after by social media influencers and the like, which ironically runs contrary to the existential ideal of the same name. I have then concluded by going through several changes that are possible – on both scales – in reducing the harms to our existential freedom. The work on unpacking our relationship with others, with social media, and with technology in general – through the lens of existentialism – has only skimmed the surface (Dolezal, 2012; Jose, 2018, 2019; Lagerkvist, 2017; Lopato, 2016).

Much more can be done in this space, as after all, existentialism helps us understand our relationship with our fellow humans, technologically-mediated or otherwise: "recurrent calls to strive for authenticity summon us not to embrace solipsism or nihilism, but, rather, to live a committed and active life— not in a social void or underground, but within a community" (Golomb, 1995). Ongoing challenges, which deserve further inquiry, include the emergence of *parasocial* relationships online – "illusions of [a] face-to-face relationship" (Horton & Wohl, 1956) with, say, an online celebrity – driven by asymmetric social networks. Lacking prior precedent in social networks online, nowadays, one could as easily be a 'follower' of a celebrity just as a 'follower' of a close confidant with the click of the "Follow" button (see also Medelli, 2022). Much more can be done to explore our existence in the realm of social media, where social structures are different, the Look of the Other is inherently unpredictable, and where users find themselves existentially *thrown* into a constantly changing, technologically-mediated world, at such an unprecedented speed and scale.

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No new data generated or analyzed.

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media. See e.g., [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010/). Thanks to Kobi Leins and Simon Coghlan for this and other suggestions which have improved this manuscript.

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