

**BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS**

**Social Media and the Crisis of Identity: The Systematic Alienation of the  
Individual.**

**BACHELOR THESIS**

Martin Klein

Bratislava, January 2022

**BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS**

**Social Media and the Crisis of Identity: The Systematic Alienation of the Individual.**

**BACHELOR THESIS**

Undergraduate Study Program: Liberal Arts  
Study Field: 3.1.6 Political Science  
Bachelor Thesis Advisor: Cole Simmons PhD.  
Qualification: Bachelor of Arts (BA)  
Date of Submission: January 31, 2022  
Date of Defense: May 17, 2022

Martin Klein

Bratislava, January 2022

## **Declaration of Originality**

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis is a work of my own and has not been published in whole or in part elsewhere. All literature sources used in this thesis are attributed and cited in references.

In Bratislava, January 31, 2022

Martin Klein

**Author:** Martin Klein

**Title:** Social Media and the Crisis of Identity: The Systematic Alienation of the Individual

**Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts Thesis Advisor:** Cole Simmons PhD.

**Thesis Defense Committee:** Prof. PhDr. František Novosád, CSc., doc. Samuel Abrahám, PhD., prof. PhDr. Iveta Radičová, PhD., Mgr. Dagmar Kusá, PhD., prof. Silvia Miháliková

**Head of the Defense Committee:** Prof. PhDr. František Novosád, CSc.

**Place, year, and scope of the thesis:** Bratislava, 2022, 43 pages, 12 575 words

**Qualification:** Bachelor of Arts (BA)

**Keywords:** social media, alienation, Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, existentialism, advertisement

### **Abstract**

This thesis studies the problematics of social media sites and their impact on society and individuals. It intends to analyze, from a theoretical point of view, the potential impact of social media sites on the phenomenon of identity transformation and alienation. The analysis articulates the relationship between several philosophical theories, namely Marxism, existentialism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the concept of alienation. Specifically, it contemplates how several topics are proposed in and relate to these theories (technological determinism, psychological impact of social media sites on individuals, socio-economic impact of social media sites on society, materialism, and advertisement) and subsequently cause the state of alienation. A further intention of this thesis is to describe a ‘system of alienation’, manifested by social media users functioning as workers. The thesis concludes by proposing several potential ways in which humanity could act against this described alienating system. However, none of these theoretical outcomes provides definitive relief from alienation itself.

**Autor:** Martin Klein

**Názov Práce:** Sociálne Médiá a Kríza Identity: Systematické Odcudzenie Jednotlivca

**Univerzita:** Bratislavská medzinárodná škola liberálnych štúdií

**Školiteľ:** Cole Simmons PhD.

**Komisia pre obhajoby záverečných prác:** Prof. PhDr. František Novosád, CSc., doc. Samuel Abrahám, PhD., prof. PhDr. Iveta Radičová, PhD., Mgr. Dagmar Kusá, PhD., prof. Silvia Miháliková

**Predseda komisie:** Prof. PhDr. František Novosád, CSc.

**Miesto, rok, rozsah bakalárskej práce:** Bratislava, 2022, 43 strán, 12 575 slov

**Stupeň odbornej kvalifikácie:** Bakalár (Bc.)

**KLúčové slová:** sociálne médiá, odcudzenie, Marxizmus, Lacanovská psychoanalýza, existencializmus, reklama

### **Abstrakt**

Táto práca sa zaoberá problematikou stránok sociálnych médií a ich dopadom na spoločnosť a jednotlivcov. Má v úmysle analyzovať z teoretického hľadiska potenciálny vplyv stránok sociálnych médií na fenomén transformácie identity a odcudzenia. Analýza artikuluje vzťah medzi niekoľkými filozofickými teóriami, konkrétne marxizmom, existencializmom, lacanskou psychoanalýzou a konceptom odcudzenia. Konkrétne sa zamýšľa nad tým, ako viaceré témy navrhované v týchto teóriách (technologický determinizmus, psychologický vplyv stránok sociálnych médií na jednotlivcov, sociálno-ekonomický vplyv stránok sociálnych médií na spoločnosť, materializmus a reklama) následne súvisia s, alebo spôsobujú odcudzenie. Ďalším zámerom tejto práce je popísať 'systém odcudzenia', ktorý sa prejavuje tým, že používatelia sociálnych médií fungujú ako pracovníci. Téza sa uzatvára návrhom niekoľkých možných spôsobov, ako by ľudstvo mohlo zasiahnuť proti tomuto opísanému odcudzovaciemu systému. Žiadny z týchto teoretických výstupov však neposkytuje definitívnu úľavu od samotného fenoménu odcudzenia.

## **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor Cole Simmons PhD. and secondary advisors Jon Stewart PhD., Dr. habil. phil. et theol., and Prof. PhDr. František Novosád, CSc., who all helped me immensely in my journey of writing this thesis.

I would also want to thank my family, my classmates and Barbora Churaňová who all contributed and helped me organize my thoughts on the subjects discussed in the thesis itself.

## **Table of contents**

<b>Abstract</b>	i
<b>Abstrakt</b>	ii
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	iii
<b>Introduction</b>	5
<b>Chapter 1</b>	7
<b>1.0 A Note on Alienation</b>	7
<b>1.1 Social Media – The Illusion of Choice</b>	7
<b>1.2 Social Media Sites are Inherently Capitalistic</b>	9
<b>1.3 The Marxist Concept of Alienation Applied to Social Media</b>	12
<b>Chapter 2</b>	15
<b>2.0 A Second Note on Alienation</b>	15
<b>2.1 Vanity as an Agent to Alienation</b>	16
<b>2.2 Facebook and the Positive Action</b>	18
<b>2.3 Social media and the Concept of Desire, the Fantasy of the Ego</b>	20
<b>Chapter 3</b>	24
<b>3.0 A Third Note on Alienation</b>	24
<b>3.1 Social Media Sites are Spectacular</b>	27
<b>Concluding Thoughts</b>	35
<b>Resumé</b>	37
<b>Bibliography</b>	39

## **Introduction**

There seems to be something ‘off’ about our social interaction in the last two decades. The modern age is often characterized as strange and confusing. Because of the rapid technological advancements of the last decades, humanity is facing a form of dissociation, which has arguably made an impact on our individual lives. Considering that we are social beings who must be social to function properly, we can say there is a need for sociality. With the invention of social media platforms which provide an artificial method of social interaction, the feeling of alienation is perhaps even more prevalent, exactly because the nature of social interaction on social media is artificial and dissociates us from reality itself. Even though this complicated feeling may be experienced by many people in the modern time, they often fail to determine the precise cause of this feeling. My estimation of this phenomenon that we are facing is that social media sites are one of the main causes of this state of alienation.

This feeling of alienation can be seen as a form of estrangement. Estrangement from social structures which influences interpersonal relationships while experiencing estrangement towards identity itself. Even though social media platforms intend to bring people together, my estimation is that the direct opposite is happening. Artificial form of interaction is precisely the problem, not the solution like many would argue. In recent years, there have been numerous changes within human social interaction. Moving to an online setting, creates a tendency towards individuals reconstructing identity. In the modern age, it becomes substantially harder to define the self, exactly because we tend to reconstruct our identity online in exchange for a better social status. These factors among others which will be discussed in this thesis, contribute to a situation which I describe as a system of alienation.

This system manifests itself in several dimensions. First, I will be defining the inner workings of social media sites, primarily, why do we even participate in them. Furthermore, I will be describing alienation and its application to social media from the Marxist economic perspective, precisely because alienation is frequently mentioned in Marxist terminology. The same can be said about Marxist critique of capitalism, which I will use to define some prevalent issues found in the economic structure of social media sites. I wish to argue that on social media we are not only the



## Klein: Alienation of the Individual

laborer, but also the product of our collective work, using the Marxist definition of work as a form of self-realization. This will be further applied to the process of data collection through which social media sites produce their monetary gains.

Second, I will discuss the existentialist form of alienation. This is relevant to consider because social media sites themselves have a 'quality' of identity deconstruction due to their nature of transforming the self (real person) into artificial self (profile). Another aspect that will be considered is the specific points of user interface designed by the social media platform, Facebook. This will be argued from the standpoint of the user as a deliberate reductionist system and the existentialist contemplations about the reason why this reduction of choice is alienating. The end of the second chapter will concern itself with Lacanian psychoanalysis as an explanation of the inner workings of alienation and desire. I determine desire as being one of the most important aspects to consider when examining participation on social media sites. Lacanian psychoanalysis can effectively help us to identify the relationship between desire, identity, and alienation.

Lastly, my intention is to create a synthesis of the topics and their respective conclusions. The final chapter is going to describe this alienating system with the use of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, utilizing everything from the first two chapters. This thesis is an analysis with the conclusive statement proposing several theoretical situations of how humanity could potentially deal with this system of alienation that I intend to describe.

## **Chapter 1**

### **1.0 A Note on Alienation**

An important factor of this thesis will be the concept of alienation. The original, Marxist-Hegelian concept of alienation is known as a form of economic alienation. The second form of alienation is existentialist alienation, which is much more individualistic and essentially means that we are not only alienated from the world but more importantly from ourselves. The third point is the psychoanalytical form of alienation more specifically Lacanian alienation, which presupposes that a human being is inherently alienated, because of the way our ego is established. All of these forms of alienation, have different meanings, but I believe they more or less contribute to the same state of being. The way of distinguishing between them will be apparent from chapter to chapter, based on the interpretative content that will be discussed. A more detailed analysis of the relation of these approaches to alienation will be provided at the beginning of the third chapter. This analysis is a crucial point to the thesis, the following topics discussed in this chapter, and the conclusions I make out of them will be later used to create a synthesis of the main argument.

### **1.1 Social Media – The Illusion of Choice**

Social Media have become a driving force of modern time. The social aspect of social media is to an extent a key factor. If we are social creatures living in a society that requires the use of social media, we are driven by our natural desires to make use of an unnatural and alienating form of social interaction. Fuchs (2021, p. 6) argues that only the action of using modern computing technology is inherently social. We can further argue that the participation in such an artificially created system is a driving force of the modern time, because of the subject (the user) and the object (cyberspace) dynamic is available from anywhere, anytime. This raises the question of technological determinism, which seems to be what is currently happening on the social level, and theoretically has been happening ever since technology has existed.

Technological determinism is a reductionist theory, which not only describes technology having a significant impact on our lives, but a ‘harder’ form of technological determinism argues that

“technology is the main or the only significant driver [of the current social and cultural trends]” (Adler, 2006, p. 1). This is even more relevant today, considering the fact that social media appear to have created a form of a cultural zeitgeist, where nearly half of the world population is on social media, and this number will exponentially rise in the years to come (Statista, 2021). The emphasis on social media use has been the most significant especially in the younger generations, mostly due to peer pressure (van Dijck, 2013, p. 157), inducing the inability to escape the artificial social structure of social media due to fear of exclusion from social interaction.

All these factors are to a considerable extent creating a situation, where social media stop being a technological tool, but become a dystopic reflection of the real world, which we, as a society, cannot leave. Because of the deterministic nature of technology, in this scenario, we lack free will. Not only is it hard to be excluded socially, but the further technocratic emphasis of the modern age makes it almost impossible for us to simply be absent from the new form of social order, which is connected via the internet. This is especially true for younger generations. In other words, looking at the issue from the point of view of technological determinism, we must participate on the internet, because we are socially and culturally determined to participate in the current technological trends. The struggle to escape cyberspace is not only hard socially, but social media sites make it substantially more difficult for the user to simply leave, due to the fact that the system itself is thriving only when people are actively using the sites as much as possible and is designed in a way to keep the users coming back (van Dijck, 2013, p. 154). Because there does not seem to be an alternative to sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. they effectively created a monopoly on the interconnected eco-system. Van Dijck (2013, p. 174) argues: “interconnected platforms engineer sociality, using real-life processes of normative behavior (peer pressure) as a model for and an object of manipulation (popularity ranking).” Because there does not appear to be an alternative, people are facing an illusion of choice, where it seems like we are in control of our means of social communication, but in truth we have no control. This artificial bubble only leads to further polarization, and more importantly alienation, which I will demonstrate further on in the thesis.

This goes hand in hand with the concept of internet solutionism, which is an ideological point of view, arguing that the internet is the answer to all societal problems. This view has often been argued for by numerous Silicon Valley entrepreneurs (Fuchs, 2021, p. 134). Seeing the internet as a form of a symbolic savior is also comparable to a deterministic sort of approach towards society itself, meaning the view that people are rather biological machines, that can be programmable through the use of social media and internet advertising. The omnipresence of social media and the interconnected area of cyberspace in turn makes it possible to track, hoard and distribute information for monetary purposes. The passive experience of consuming information, due to external ideological forces creates a form of habituation of using social media even more, strengthening the deterministic nature of technological advancement.

## **1.2 Social Media Sites are Inherently Capitalistic**

Social media sites in the present form are inherently capitalistic. The very function of social media, making monetary gains by means of advertising, does not appear to be significantly different from other forms of media, like the print. However, social media sites are generally more competitive among one another because they share the same virtual space to compete on, which is always just a click away. This environment is creating a situation of social media sites competing for attention of the users themselves, because active interaction and consumption of a certain domain is a prerequisite of success.

The internet at this point seems to be oriented towards maximizing profit, rather than the original idealistic orientation, namely, that the internet would be a system of sharing information, available for anyone in the world. The idea was that it would basically be a form of communitarian cooperation. The original ideology of the internet was more oriented around sites creating content for the user. With the emergence of Web 2.0 at the turn of the new millennium, which was supposed to be significantly more dependent on user-generated content and participatory culture, social media sites started to emerge. Social media sites since their creation made their monetary gains from advertisement, information gathering and distribution of said information.

[Google] collects the gigabytes of personal information and creative content that millions of Google users provide for free to the Web every day and sells this information to advertisers of millions of products and services. Through its major advertising program, AdWords, Google runs an instant auction among advertisers to determine which one is placed highest on the list of ads that run across the top or down the right-hand column of the search results page. (Vaidhyathan, 2011, p. 26)

Large internet sites like Google created a virtual market for information about their users. Every action and decision no matter how insignificant it may seem is recorded and resold to the highest bidder. For example, if a person would post a picture of their dog on social media, the algorithm social media sites implemented to their platform would take that information and offer it to specific companies for targeted advertisement. In this case, that would most likely be a dog food or a dog toy company. The person posting the picture of their dog on social media would very soon start getting advertisements relevant for their four-legged companion. This creates an interconnected system that works based on a supply and demand of information, and the ever-expanding domain of social media sites, profit from exactly this. Providing communication and entertainment in exchange for personal information. The fact that social media sites and other tech giants have a monopoly on this market (Smyrnaio, 2013, p. 445) does not exactly meet the criteria for a 'healthy' competitive environment which is said to be the pride of capitalism.

This development of the capitalist status of social media perhaps makes it viable for us to create a tangent towards the Marxist school of thought. After all, Marx is one of the most important critics of capitalism, and while his ideas are less relevant today considering the complicated capitalistic state of the real world, a closed system such as the internet does not have as many variables like the real world that would make Marx's theory less viable. Meaning that the internet can be looked at as an effective case study of the modern capitalism, due to its 'closed' environment, and carefully constructed design. Marx wrote extensively on the topic of communication in society in his works *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, and numerous journal articles. As a critical journalist, interested in technological aspects of global capitalism, he saw the importance of the means of information distribution and the rise of the information age (Fuchs, 2021, p. 12). Interestingly enough, he seemed to be ahead of his time by essentially predicting something very similar to social media in his book the *Grundrisse*, in which Marx describes a form of a globalized information network,

where “everyone attempts to inform themselves”, and “connections are introduced”. (Marx, 1993, p. 161). Furthermore, in relation to this, Marx adds: “Although on the given standpoint, alienation is not overcome by these means [of communication]” (Marx, 1993, p. 161). This means that Marx was not only critical towards the globalization of information distribution but understood the power of technological advancement and the inherent need for sociality. This is one of the reasons why Marx can be viewed as a ‘timeless thinker’ and perhaps makes the implementation of his ideas to social media and cyberspace even more relevant. Alienation in this globalized information network is not absent, in fact, I wish to argue further that it is strengthened.

Because the environment of social media sites is inherently capitalistic, an appropriate critical look at social media can be argued from the Marxist perspective and could be beneficial to form a statement on the socio-economic nature of the internet. Even though Marx generally discusses physical products, resources can be also non-physical, like information (Fuchs, 2021, p. 18). Marx was also interested in ideological power plays, which are the product of progressive accumulation of profit and commodities under capitalism (Fuchs, 2021, p. 79). This can extend to political power, but also perhaps social influence, thus creating ‘influencers’ on social media. The power dynamic on social media has also been predominantly dictated by the programming of the companies, where users who are ‘irrelevant’ cannot have the same exposure as influencers, celebrities, or large companies. This disturbs the original community-based status of social media, while creating an unhealthy obsession with role models, who are elevated even further into their hierarchical social position. Almost every social medium site (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc.) has implemented the concept of a verified account, which elevates the relevance of the account by being displayed next to the account during any activity on the respective platforms. Fuchs (2021) argues that this emphasis on certain powerful actors, creates a similar situation like to the statement in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: “some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell, as cited by Fuchs, 2021, p. 19). This dynamic could be interpreted from the Marxist perspective as a form of a class struggle, where the role of the bourgeois is substituted by verified users, while the role of the proletariat are the common users making the majority of social media sites demographic. I will demonstrate further in the thesis, that this is not exactly the case.

This hierarchical status only fuels the existentialist interpretation of alienation because there seems to be little to no relevance to the voice of an individual, counterintuitively in a system which should be based on equality between users. The concept of existentialist alienation will be explained and applied to social media later in the thesis.

### **1.3 The Marxist Concept of Alienation Applied to Social Media**

Alienation in the view of Marx, has been defined strictly as an economic characteristic. This goes against the loosely defined existentialist interpretation, where it has more of an individualistic meaning, where people are estranged from themselves, while being estranged from the world simultaneously. The Marxist form of alienation is a form of economic alienation, from the point of the worker. There are four criteria Marx attributes to the concept of alienation. Workers can be alienated from: each other, their species essence, their relation to their product of labor defined as an ‘alien object,’ and themselves as a form of self-estrangement (Marx & Engels, 1988, p. 71-78).

One of the Marxist interpretations of alienation stands on the concept of labor being an inherent human activity, meaning the activity of our species. Furthermore, Marxist tradition describes further conditions of alienation: “In conditions of alienation, work is reduced to its ‘animal’ character, it becomes a mere means to satisfy our purely material needs... thus we become alienated from our species being” (Sayers, 2011, p. 81). Marx emphasized the point of us identifying our own species being as humans being universal, therefore free. Production and work is a free form of activity, where man duplicates his life into a product intellectually and physically alike. This freedom is however disturbed by the nature of modern capitalistic work, meaning tearing away man’s product of labor, therefore taking away his condition of species being (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 76-77). This basically means that what defines our human condition is work, which on the social level can be described as the necessity of cooperation. Social media site owners seem to also know that we participate on their platforms to not only satisfy our social means on social media, but also our material means - this can be seen by the monetization of ads for users to buy physical goods, which is a naturally integrated part of the social media structure.

Marxist concept of alienation originally takes inspiration from Hegel, 'borrowing' his ideas. According both to Hegel and Marx, the process of work does not have to be performed only in order to achieve material gains, but it is also a way of acquiring some form of self-realization (Sayers, 2011, p. 21). In other words, work is one of the only ways how we as individuals can make changes to the world. However, the most problematic aspect of this, is that consuming things right after they have been produced does not create some form of freedom of will because it is not consumed from necessity, but desire (Sayers, 2011, p. 21), and so it arguably deepens the state of alienation, as we cannot realistically achieve even relative freedom. Desire is an important factor to consider within the function of social media sites as well, and it will be discussed in detail further on in the thesis.

Originally, social media have been created for the users, by giving them restricted tools, building an environment which they can organize for themselves and creating some basic laws. However, the majority of labor on social media is done by the users themselves. According to the Marxist point of view, we are effectively working in order to satisfy our material means, which in turn makes us self-realize our human condition, making work our life activity. Or how Marx puts the distinction between animals and human beings:

The animal is immediately identical with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life-activity. Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life-activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being. Or it is only because he is a species being that he is a Conscious Being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. (Marx & Engels, 1988, p. 76)

This condition can extend to social media usage, where any activity can be called a form of work, and because of this activity, social media sites profit. Therefore, we are intellectually alienated from other people by work being reduced to its animal condition, or rather that we are being driven by desires (meaning entertainment social media provide). Even though Marx thought of work as being socially necessary, the deterministic factors I defined previously make the tangents I wish to make in this argument viable. Furthermore, considering the fact that social media sites are completely free to use, regardless of location, we in turn become the product ourselves, because



the information and data we provide to social media sites are the real commodity they make their capital gains from. Therefore, we are not only the laborer, but also the product of our collective work. Because Marx thought of work as self-realization of the human condition, the dynamic of users cooperating to create an information-based commodity that is also us (information about our persona), potentially creates a new conceptualization of self-realization, which could directly translate into a form of changing our identity through our shared labor. This would then perhaps create a notion of not only dehumanization attributed to social media use, but a completely new conceptualization of the human condition.

Modernity is often characterized by external factors that are slowly but surely changing humanity. Perhaps, technology and the exposure to it is from the Darwinist perspective creating a new point in human evolution. The fact that we will develop a sixth finger on each hand, can be taken as potential evidence for this claim. Neanderthals had larger brains than us, and this could have been due to the fact that they did not have as many cultural props (which internet exposure provides) constantly surrounding them like we have, so they had to ‘think for themselves’ unlike us in the digital age (Taylor, 2010, p. 31). But only in the last couple of decades, human activity affected by technology has changed drastically, and the very concept of our nature changing in the span of just a few decades, can potentially create very deeply rooted psychological and identity issues.

Coming back to alienation, we can view it as an agent of a modern identity crisis because we are conditioned to cooperate in an environment that seems to create a hierarchical status of users and at the same time, substantially and passively affecting the ‘common users’, and not the ‘verified’ ones. Verified users are posting to social media in order to influence the others, while the majority of social media users are being alienated by almost a paradoxical identity problem of selling their self-realization to the owners. In other words, not only do we lack free will as I have argued before, but the ‘common user’ from the Marxist perspective is selling their own human condition, comparatively speaking substitutes humanity for an animal-like character.

## Chapter 2

### **2.0 A Second Note on Alienation**

Social media seem to be creating a shift within our own psyche. They bring out a concept of change not only on the societal, structural level but also a change within something as deeply individualistic as our own persona. Due to the individualistic tendency of the modern time, there seems to be a general shift from the religious concept of unity (understanding religious activity as a searching for a form of social community, while there is the absence of existential turmoil because of universal faith in a higher power) to a more solitary, symbolically much more meaningless age of technology. This is not a particularly bad turn of events, of course; the shift during the Enlightenment has brought society into a new stage of being, where we can create our own morals, which are not based only upon the fear of divine punishment. However, this shift has also brought with it the meaninglessness of existence, or the concept of being alone in the universe, where there does not seem to be a natural hierarchical order. This meaninglessness is perhaps the true ‘existentialist’ alienation, where we are not only estranged from the universe but more importantly, we are estranged from ourselves.

“In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger” (Camus, 2013, p. 5). To really grasp the existentialist problematics of the modern world, we must also understand the fact, that alienation can be a result of a certain form of psychosis. Camus and his contemplation of suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is perhaps one of the most striking descriptions of alienation, where a person is alienated because they understand the absurd nature of life. While we try to understand life itself, we come to the conclusion that the world makes less sense, the more we know about it. And in the information age, where phenomena we see are split into separate, confusing factoids, where we are essentially being exploited for profit and do not even understand a concept of the self anymore, alienation is a serious problem. That is the case not only because of the absurd nature of the world but because of our perception and misinterpretation of

it. If we need to find our self-worth and self-realization from within, how can that be possible, if we cannot even define who we really are anymore?

I have already delineated the Marxist point of alienation in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I will be discussing the specific existentialist phenomena we are experiencing in the modern age and why those phenomena contribute to the alienating nature of social media sites. These topics will be namely the concept of vanity and the design of Facebook's interface. The third and last topic in this chapter will be the already mentioned concept of desire, which will be explained by using Lacanian psychoanalysis. In the third and last chapter of the thesis, there will be a synthesis of everything that I have discussed in the first two chapters, especially the relationship between the different interpretations of alienation, and how exactly they relate to the modern age and social media.

## **2.1 Vanity as an Agent to Alienation**

In the modern age, social media sites have created the possibility for us to create our own illusion of ourselves, where we not only lie to other users, but we are untrue towards our own identity. The projection of the self to a virtual identity has created a precarious situation, where we cannot distinguish our own true self because we are constantly shifting between different constructed profiles on different platforms. The fetishization of appearance in the modern age, rather than a focus on the concept of an inner meaning has greatly influenced this phenomenon and arguably made us even vainer in the process.

The concept of vanity was described in Schopenhauer's philosophical essay *The Wisdom of Life*, where he defined numerous forms of criteria that define a person's happiness in life. The three types of joy a man holds are first, 'what man is', meaning generally personality and the character traits that come with it, such as "strength, beauty, moral character, intelligence, education" (Schopenhauer, 2015, p. 6). Second is the material aspects a man has, meaning simply "property and possessions" (Schopenhauer, 2015, p. 6). The third and the most interesting aspect

Schopenhauer defines it as “How a man stands in the estimation of others: by which is to be understood, as everybody knows, what a man is in the eyes of his fellowmen, or, more strictly, the light in which they regard him. This is shown by their opinion of him; and their opinion is in its turn manifested by the honor in which he is held, and by his rank and reputation” (Schopenhauer, 2015, p. 6).

This can be directly translated into how social media profiles are constructed. The basic form of information a person might disclose is character traits, such as education, a profile picture showing how beautiful or strong a person is and showing the material means they possess. These aspects of profiling oneself to look like a person who has these characteristics, that according to Schopenhauer create a joyous individual then work together to influence the third point, meaning simply social rank. In the real world, this would be apparent from day-to-day social interaction, however, on social media this has been reduced merely to the simple click of a button, resulting in a like or a heart. Honor is then the equivalent of the number of artificial praises one might get on the internet; however, because it is of an artificial nature, the result is an even stronger form of vanity. Vanity is then a phenomenon that makes us perceive the self on the surface rather than examining reality more deeply.

This illusion that we created of our persona is estranging us even further from ourselves, making us alienated much like Narcissus was from the world. The only difference between the Greek myth and the modern time is that Narcissus was staring at his reflection in the water, but we are staring at our reflection on a computer screen. Therefore, we are being estranged from ourselves because we are slowly ceasing being us, as we are shifting towards the identity we have created online. The existentialist turmoil is perhaps exactly in this, due to the uncertainty of who we really are, because of the number of different personas we appropriate on the daily basis. Linton's theory of roles is one of the ways, how to explain this situation, meaning appropriation of certain societal and cultural statuses into our identity. The normative status of these roles makes us not question our decision-making when appropriating them however, because it is exactly, a norm. Thus, from this perspective, alienation is really about the unstable concept of choice, where we cannot really

choose an identity to 'stick with'. This reduction of choice seems to be also apparent in Facebook's design, which appears to have a contributing factor to the alienation social media sites are creating.

## **2.2 Facebook and the Positive Action**

Most social media today have only a few limited actions on what to do with posts. This restrictive concept makes it of course easier so that practically anyone can use them; however, it also brings out the issue of control. Are we really in control while we use social media, if the tools we were given were carefully constructed for a higher goal? Facebook seems to be the best in this control of user action, specifically with the use of the like button: "Because of the ubiquitous presence of Like and Share buttons, Facebook has overwhelmingly won in the department of social networking, forcing others to penetrate a different niche" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 156).

Different social media sites have been shifting from other forms of user action on social media towards the positive action as well, most recently in the year 2021 YouTube even removed their dislike button. The notion of a platform having a like button, while simultaneously there being no dislike button, then arguably creates a deep psychological connection towards firstly, a positive input, and secondly, a strong connotation towards desire. If a person 'likes' something, it can be a completely natural thing to like, for example a friend's post about their trip to Italy, or a sketch from a famous comedian. However, this positive action that is the only form of reaction is also used to like clearly negative things. For example, Fuchs (2021, p. 160) discusses "many people liked a posting on the Facebook page of the Auschwitz Memorial page that says that 70 years ago 1500 Jews were killed in the gas chambers in Auschwitz". This is due to the ideological implications of Facebook's business model, because it is more profitable for the platform to only have the like feature, rather than the risk of larger companies which produce add revenue for Facebook getting negative reaction from the public (Fuchs, 2021, p. 160).

This reductionist concept of choice has been in some way addressed by Facebook, when they introduced the new reaction system in 2016, with the ability to not only like, but also to react with sad, angry, or laughing smiley faces. Even with the addition of different emoticons though, there still does not seem to be a clear negative connotation of constructive disappointment with certain

posts or pages. It reduces reaction to very basic emotional states such as anger, sadness, awe, or love. Therefore, Facebook reduces negative reaction to something deeply emotional, which does not have to be and in most cases should not be emotionally driven. This also fuels the argument of Facebook thriving in a hate and fear mongering environment, like the investigative journalists Frenkel & Kang (2021) argue in their book *An Ugly Truth*. This emotional reaction is then perhaps creating a deep psychological state of indifference, because as we use emotion inducing reactions as a primary means to communicate in a social environment such as Facebook, the real emotions we experience are then driven to being less meaningful, which corresponds with the abstract 'feelings' a person has: "In the digitalized universe of simulation, the Imaginary overlaps with the Real at the expense of the Symbolic" (Žižek 1998, p. 484). Žižek in his paper on the topic of cyberspace here refers to Lacanian psychoanalysis, and post modernist philosophers, who argue that the the digital space restricts us from maintaining a critical or reflective outlook. By my estimation, thinking 'symbolically' is problematic in cyberspace, due to the fact that the information it provides and our potential reaction to it is in a way influenced, arguably even scripted.

The mentioned symbolic importance of emotional reaction, is of course deeply humanistic, which we can connect to the importance of choice as well from the view of Sartre's claim from his work *Existentialism is Humanism*:

This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human (Sartre, 2007, p. 53).

This inherent need for choice, which from Sartre's perspective defines humanism, is the real reason why a restrictive environment which leaves us choiceless can be alienating, because the notion of free will is the true condition of being human. In other words, we can be truly free as long as we have the liberty to choose. And a situation where we are socially predetermined to be in a system that makes us farther from meeting the criteria for a human being (from the Marxist perspective, and existentialist alike) is then inherently not humanistic in any way imaginable.

### **2.3 Social media and the Concept of Desire, the Fantasy of the Ego**

The environment of social media greatly benefits from desire. Desire can be interpreted for example by us desiring other people physically, while trying to be desirable ourselves. There seems to be evidence of people presenting themselves in a more deceptive way, when they are describing themselves in a virtual environment in order to seem more desirable (Guadagno, Okdie & Kruse, 2012). The same can be said about the tendency to change or enhance pictures people post of themselves (Fox & Rooney, 2015). Desire is then one of the key aspects why would people change their identity online in order to seem more desirable. This creates an environment which is full of hyperbolic images of the real, that does not, however, mean that augmented necessarily means 'better'.

If we look at desire itself, we can perhaps argue, from Schopenhauer's perspective, that everyone and everything is striving, or desires a change of form. To change oneself for the better seems to be generally what almost every person strives for in life, or rather there seems to be a consensus that this is a virtue. We can perhaps further argue that desire or striving is the goal itself. When we think of desire, the joyous moments within one's life are really the points of striving, rather than having. This can be demonstrated not only towards a vain and artificial form of self-improvement like I argued before, but a critical look on materialism also tells us that once we gain an item we really wanted for some time, the anticipation and wishing were much more emotionally driven and enjoyable than when we finally acquire, use, or just generally own the desired item. This is perhaps the desire for attention we want, which substitutes the concept of the desired object, into the subject (our ego) itself, as we do not physically have it, but rather appeal to our ego with the thought of the object within our fantasy.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan worked extensively on the topic of desire and the mentioned importance of fantasy. From his point of view, the ego is much more important, or rather the 'real actor', opposed to what most psychoanalysts claim (Johnston, 2018, para. 3). The ego in Lacanian theory is substituted from the position of the object to the position of the subject, which works well with the attention-seeking nature of desire I have defined previously. Desire from the Lacanian perspective is manifested within the original stage of ego creation, meaning the

Mirror Stage (Johnston, 2018, para. 25). In the Mirror Stage, an infant is first confronted with the existence of a self, by seeing its own reflection in the mirror. This moment of identification can be also called an *imago-gestalt* (Johnston, 2018, para. 28) because just as a child is confronted with its own self, the notion of continuation is introduced, meaning that not only does the child understand the *moi*, but it also understands that the holistic wholeness of the persona introduced. This basically means that the child starts understanding its ego not as a combination of specific parts (namely the Freudian distinction of the consciousness), but as a combined unity, enabling forming a persona.

While the *Mirror Stage* is introduced, the mother figure is defined as a source of all love, this omnipresent *real other* being heavily dependent on the child's proper cognitive and societal function. The distinction between the mother and the child firstly emerges when the child starts understanding that an imaginary concept of the phallus exists, not exactly in the anatomical sense of a literal penis, but rather an imaginary concept as a manifestation of the mother's desire, which the child cannot provide, only the father figure can evoke (Johnston, 2018, para. 28-30). This phallus is one of the first objects of a final desire. Desire is shifted from a necessity or need towards a final object of desire, IT (capitalized it) is a final *telos*, which can never be truly reached (Johnston, 2018, para. 28-30). This final fantasy, however, cannot be realistically achieved. We will always strive for more, and this is true from the psychoanalytical standpoint, but also from the standpoint of the repetitive, seemingly never-ending materialistic tendency of the modern age. Even when we would acquire this final IT, there will always be another. Exactly like Slavoj Žižek, one of the most famous Lacanian interpreters argues: "desire's *raison d'être* (justification for existence) is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire" (Žižek, 2009, p. 53).

Perhaps, what social media sites are really doing within our psyche is exactly creating a supply of *telos*, or this final IT. Because there is a clear demand for wanting within the human function, social media sites are keeping the user active within their respective part of cyberspace by setting artificial goals for them, however, compared to the real world, the achievement of these goals is meaningless in the grand scheme of things. The inability to achieve something meaningful is then



the perfect agent for alienation because the addictive nature of social media leaves us wanting more. While the seemingly random content of the Facebook wall and the Twitter feed being entirely consisted of carefully constructed pieces of information, is interlaced with advertisement, to create a psychological connection between desire, product, and satisfaction of our most basic needs, such as social interaction. This ‘materialistic conditioning’ will be explored further on in the thesis.

Constant comparison of oneself to other people through the artificial and constructed pictures we see on social media creates a situation where we are perhaps rediscovering our ego once again. Lacan seemed to argue that the Mirror Stage does not necessarily have to be introduced by a physical mirror, but also how we are seen from the other’s perspective (Johnston, 2018, para. 31), meaning the comparison of oneself to another. We are yet again the infant standing in front of the mirror, however, this time we are looking at an artificial being, rather than a real self. Furthermore, the *imago-gestalt*, this meaningful wholeness is being pushed to the side, as we stop understanding things in the holistic sense, in place of this understanding information about other users and ourselves on social media sites is being atomized into digestible chunks of separate content. Therefore, social media sites take away from the meaning of understanding the world and its people as a complex place and change it into a series of discreet phenomena, which look separate from one another. This only fuels the notion of an image of a narcissistic individual, comparing himself to others, devoid of all meaning within the content provided, passively wanting more and more. The Lacanian externality of the ego, being of course rather an object than a subject, makes even the placement of the individual on social media even clearer, as the ego seems to be really the profile picture staring at the human in front of the computer screen, rather than the other way around. The externality of the ego is staring straight at us through our respective technological device.

Because we understand social media usage in our daily life as something ‘necessary’ and a neutral part of life, it is important to stress that the use of social media sites is not natural for humans and should be treated as such. This can be demonstrated by the psychological impact of social media, more specifically by a phenomenon known as the ‘social media dopamine loop’. Research shows

that the effect social media have on neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, is comparable with the relationship of desire and social media, I have defined previously. The relationship works like this: any action on a social media platform (sharing, posting, commenting), results in an anticipation of reaction (answer to the comment, liking a post etc.), which in turn rewards us with dopamine, the ‘neurotransmitter of pleasure’ (Macit, Macit & Güngör, 2018, p. 11). The activity of checking an electronic device, with the anticipation of stimulus, works a lot like a slot machine, because while checking the device itself, there is an element of randomness, meaning that there simultaneously can and does not have to be a message (notification). This element of randomness in turn makes the quantity of dopamine released even more significant, which really is true with any other form of addiction.

This phenomenon is a clear case of a biologically induced desire. Even though this is a subconscious activity it shows that there is perhaps again a biological deterministic factor towards the use of social media. In other words, this seems to imply that we have no influence over our subconscious, more specifically, chemical reactions in our brains. In the previous chapters I discussed the possibility of there being an illusion of choice, where we must participate in social media sites because we are inherently social beings, affected by peer pressure. This theory seems only more viable now, due to the fact that there is a clear addictive factor involved with the use of social media sites, where our own bodies work against our free will. What Lacanian psychoanalysis tells us about this situation is exactly that we are always striving for more dopamine, just as we are striving for the final *telos*.

## Chapter 3

### **3.0 A Third Note on Alienation**

In the previous chapters, I was describing how the relationship between the social media platforms and users themselves work. The Marxist point of view is that the workers themselves should own the means of their production, which was apparent in the idealistic beginnings of the internet. With the introduction of Web 2.0, which at the end of the 1990s emphasized user-generated content, rather than site owners creating the content themselves, things seemed to be headed in the right direction. This participatory culture, however, during the span of two decades shifted towards users not only being the laborer, but also the product of their collective work. In other words, today users themselves work or create the content that social media disseminate, which is a way of self-realization; however, the product of the work is really the entertainment that social media provide to their users. As was mentioned before, the real commodity social media sites use is the information about us that we provide to them. This creates a situation, where we are being alienated from the product of our work and we are encountering a paradoxical identity problem of selling our own self-realization to the site owners (meaning from the standpoint of the Marxist species being, and our own individualistic identity). The narcissistic tendency of social media users makes them effectively sell their character traits as well especially in the context of profiting from their beauty (beauty bloggers), strength (athlete influencers) etc.

What I was describing previously were specific points why social media sites can be alienating. The Marxist, or economic point of view, transitions to the existentialist alienation since the issue of self-realization within the world is exactly the existentialist (lacking a self, therefore no self-realization is possible) interpretation as well. The existentialist perception of alienation is based on a concept of otherness, meaning, being estranged from anything which is not part of the self. Sartre's concept of existence preceding essence is really the way how we self-realize our potential, from the standpoint of absolute freedom. In other words, what Sartre meant by this claim, is that we are born without any deterministic factors present within our development, and we are the sole actors who design our self-worth (or potential) so consequently self-realization.

Both traditions presuppose a different set of circumstances in order for alienation to manifest itself. However, I believe the caused ‘feeling’ of alienation as a consequence is either very similar, or the same in both existentialist and Marxist interpretations of alienation. This means that the sense of belonging to social structures and the status quo is absent, and the alienated individual is losing a sense of humanity, by being further from the natural state of being. This is true considering the fact that existentialist alienation has the characteristic of estrangement from science and technology, because the alienated person cannot fully understand them, while the Marxist tradition attributes alienation to losing the sense of our species being, therefore the natural state of being. Marxist tradition was also criticizing changes in technology, especially direction of communication technology as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. This is then a factor, which both traditions share, at least their critical stance towards the technocratic tendency of the modern age. I also attributed the existentialist point of ‘losing humanity’ to the reduction of choice within the social media platform. Furthermore, I described vanity as an agent to alienation. This vanity is applicable both to fetishization of appearance and the fetishization of commodities. Fetishization of commodities is an essential concept for Marx:

The commodity form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [dinglich] relations arising out of this. (Marx, 1992, p. 165).

According to Marx, we tend to attribute an almost transcendental importance to commodities, to the point, that they start to be an autonomous actor within society itself. Therefore, the alienating aspect of vanity is clear. Because we attribute to commodities this status, commodities and their value replace the inter-personal relationships between people. This only alienates us further since commodities do not appear to be the direct production of human work, but rather have a higher, almost religious meaning, estranging us further from reality.

The Existentialist concept of vanity can be described as us being untrue towards our own identity, or rather conforming to an imaginary, or illusionary character like Stewart (2019) argues about Kierkegaard’s loosely defined sense of alienation:

## Klein: Alienation of the Individual

The individual who lives in the fantasy of the imagination is in despair since he is not who is really is. He is living a dreamed role in a dream world and not his real life in the real world. In Anti-Climacus' language, this means that the individual 'lacks a self.' (Stewart, 2019, p. 206).

Vanity is then the synthesis of both the Marxist and the existentialist tradition, where we are alienated from ourselves. The consequence of vanity within the scope of social media is the uncertainty of who we really are due to the shifting nature of different social media profiles. Another consequence can be attributed to the unilateral estrangement of social structures because commodities have become this 'social actor' with a 'social status.'

The Lacanian interpretation of alienation was used as a way of explaining the inner psychological workings of alienation, meaning that the caused state or feeling of alienation is again the same. The way how we psychologically achieve the state of alienation was interpreted by the prolonging aspect of desire being one of the driving factors on social media sites. This desire works as a way of satisfying our ego, which in turn contributes to the identity crisis, because we are subconsciously desiring commodities. It creates a psychological connection between desire, product, and the satisfaction of our most basic needs, such as social interaction. The biological aspects of desire, which I described by the social media dopamine loop, consequently, always leaves us wanting increasingly more, creating an almost deterministic situation, which we cannot realistically escape, because we are being addicted to more and more content.

In the present chapter, I wish to discuss and try to demonstrate this system of alienation, I just described. This system has arguably been in place long before the invention of the internet.

Considering the relationship between social media and the society that created it, it is an interesting question, of which one of these really drives the modern man to the state of alienation. Furthermore, this relationship is theoretically interchangeable or reciprocal. In other words, the modern feeling of alienation does not have to be created by social media but can drive us towards social media in the first place. There are several points, why this could be, but one of the most important ones is that the modern age has had the characteristics of an alienating *zeitgeist* ever since certain technological advancements, like the television, started to become an integral part of

each household. This is because of the globalized aspect of advertised information sharing. Globalized information sharing has been in place long before the invention of the internet, due to the technological advancements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Marx and his description of the already mentioned global information network, where everyone attempts to inform himself, can be one of the arguments for the existence of this system. Another argument can be made using the philosophy of Guy Debord, a French philosopher, who in his book *The Society of the Spectacle* describes an alienating modern world. The following chapter will utilize all the factors of the alienating system of social media sites I defined previously and apply it to Debord's concept of the spectacle.

### **3.1 Social Media Sites are Spectacular**

The modern age is characterized by a set of pre-selected images. We see these images in our everyday life, when we take a walk through a city, while we watch television, when we check social media on our phones. All of this is a manifestation of a passive ideological output of this system of alienation. The system I am describing is the content of *The Society of the Spectacle* written in the 1960s. The spectacle is a form of critique of the consumer culture under capitalism, which is an omnipresent reality, effectively standing only as a realm of appearance, rather than actual substance. "Its sole message is: 'What appears is good, and what is good appears.' The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearance" (Debord, 2002, p. 7). Social media sites are a herald of this globalization of capitalism, because essentially, their most important ideological output is exactly this concept of 'what appears is good, and what is good appears'.

This can be basically attributed to the concept of the 'invisible hand of the market', first defined by Adam Smith, and that is the subtle message that social media sites keep pushing for and presupposing for their own benefit. They don't exactly need to regulate their own platform because just like the market, the platform regulates itself. However, the problem with this is that if the users are technically entrepreneurs, social media sites are taking a symbolic role of the state. Because I defined the information market appropriated by social media sites, social media site owners become these market mediators, which is a role of state appointed ministry of finances. The general

rhetoric of social media site owners seems to be not only set on raising influence on states, but somehow surpassing them. This is even more apparent from some of the internal information from within Facebook's management, as Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder seemed to push for the rhetoric of "Company over state" regularly describing it as his personal mantra (Frenkel & Kang, 2021, p. 127). This rhetoric is not merely a libertarian expression of ideology from Zuckerberg, but it shows the ideology of his platform as well. Social media sites work as an autonomous actor, which is even above the concept of the state, due to their globalized character and massive social influence.

Debord described the spectacle, as an "autocratic reign of the market economy" (Debord, 1998, p. 1) in which we all unwillingly participate. The message of this autocratic reign is shown to us through a series of images or spectacles. In the last decade, social media sites have been shifting their content orientation towards mostly images as well. Debord describes the spectacle as follows: "Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at", and "it [the spectacle] is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 2002, p. 8). What Debord is talking about is clearly the modern propaganda of products. He does not simply mean advertisement, but rather that there exists a complicated system of a 'message', that is hidden behind and enforced by a hopelessly complex system, which is being transmitted everywhere, always. We can attribute the system Debord is talking about directly to social media sites, because social media sites are exactly a pseudoworld of their own, while the aspect of social relation is mediated by images. Alienation happens, because we do not understand this system, and we can't fully understand this system, because the algorithmic workings of social media sites are deliberately hidden. This is true due to the complicated nature of modern technology, which we all use, but many of us do not understand its inner workings. If social media are spectacular, which I believe they are, I will try to define this already mentioned 'message' at the end of this chapter.

As I already mentioned before, the passivity described by Debord is an important factor of social media sites, meaning the passive consumption of information, which seems to be exactly the form of consumption on social media. Žižek defined a word of his own creation *interpassivity*, which

## Klein: Alienation of the Individual

means passivity with the potential for a form of interactivity. This concept of *interpassivity* is perhaps even more fitting, because as we browse, there is a potential for interactivity, therefore, the passive experience of image consumption is that much less fulfilling.

One of the main ways the spectacle shows itself is an uneven distribution of work life and leisure. Or rather, that there can be no real freedom to speak of, due to the spectacle eliminating the barrier between leisure and work:

There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle activity is nullified — all real activity having been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle. Thus, what is referred to as a ‘liberation from work,’ namely the modern increase in leisure time, is neither a liberation of work itself nor a liberation from the world shaped by this kind of work. None of the activity stolen by work can be regained by submitting to what that work has produced. (Debord, 2002, p. 4)

This brings out social media pages, and the uneven distribution of work it profits from. Social media have arguably created a spectacular dimension, where the main point of participation seems to be predominantly entertainment. Internet memes, comedy sketches, satire and fan clubs are a substantial part of social media platforms. However, we still seem to be under the illusion of the original communitarian aspect of the beginning of Web 2.0. The users are the products themselves, not only creating and consuming content, but upholding the monetary status quo of the site. Without the users, there would be no content. And our *interpassive* consumption fuels this system, serves as work, and is not merely a form of purchase, because it is free to use. In other words, I browse, therefore I work.

This is from the Marxist point of view clearly alienating because not only are we being alienated through the detachment from the product of our work, but more importantly, we do not even realize that we are working. Previously I argued that this creates a situation, where the people who can get some kind of monetary benefit from using social media, meaning celebrities, and other ‘verified users’ could be called the bourgeoisie, but that is not exactly the case. Marx defines the bourgeoisie as the social class which owns the means of production. And on social media, that is the social media owners themselves.



Furthermore, the definition of a ‘successful’ person in the modern age is harder to grasp because people who are defined as successful today, can acquire this success only by ‘being famous’ (for example participating in a reality tv show, social scandals etc.). This is an important point, because the modern capitalistic system is basically emphasizing that we are in a way responsible for our own success. However, this is not realistically achievable. There exist social concepts of imitations of the choices of others, Lacanian psychoanalysis calls this the ‘big other’. The big other works as an imaginary externality of social convention, often attributed to concepts such as law and language. Imitation of choice is an important factor to consider because conformism to others is exactly the reason why we are on social media in the first place and continue to uphold the status quo of cyberspace. From this concept of us choosing to create our own destiny is an illusion, especially on social media platforms, because of the restrictive nature of the interface I have talked about previously. This concept works together with the already mentioned phenomenon of vanity and desire. We desire to be like role models, and the inability to achieve success within the social media systems is making us less like us, therefore vain. This inability to choose is then again the existentialist condition of alienation.

The general user does not seem to be aware of this alienating aspect of social media. The concept that Debord describes, where commodities have a sovereign power over consumers and workers, by my estimation is a play of appearances. Transposing the appearance of having, rather than actually having same as confusing the appearance of being with actual being.

The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing — all ‘having’ must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances. At the same time all individual reality has become social, in the sense that it is shaped by social forces and is directly dependent on them. Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real. (Debord, 2002, p. 11)

The function of appearance is apparent on social media in general, considering that people with a lower social or economic ranking tend to appear better online, by modifying their self-presentation in the hope of gaining the ability for vertical social mobility (Pitcan, Marwick & Boyd, 2018). This is alienating from the existentialist perspective since we are being untrue towards our own selves.

This concept of appearance is apparent also from the standpoint of advertisement on social media platforms. Commodities have shifted from being advertised as a utility to being an advertisement of a certain status. Therefore, the presentation of commodities shifted towards a realm of images or spectacles. For example, the feeling that an advertisement of a Coca-Cola can create, transcends the consumption and physical state of the can of soda itself. In other words, the social status that commodities have are more important than the physical commodities themselves. This is exactly the fetishization of commodities that Marx described, where we give an almost transcendental meaning to products. This is alienating because commodities having a social status by themselves gives them a social meaning, therefore alienating us from other people (users), because they substitute the relationships between people. Furthermore, the very concept of online shopping can be alienating exactly because we first do not see the product as a physical good, but rather we see it in a certain form of carefully constructed presentation from the salesperson. This works as a further way of alienating us from the product of work.

Debord emphasized the importance of authenticity. Authenticity which is hard to achieve under the autocratic reign of the spectacle. He seems to suggest that capitalistic production, is not only about the want, or the desire, but that the modern man inherently needs more commodities. Due to the fact that we are social beings, we need communication as well. This creates a clear necessity towards the combined virtual space of social media sites because they provide both. This relationship crushes authenticity because our identity on social media is essentially fragmented. The inherent need for commodities creates a disorder within social structures, and communication becomes unauthentic: “Behind this exacerbated *mise-en-scène* of communication, the mass media, the pressure of information pursues an irresistible deconstruction of the social.” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 54). By this pressure of information, we can understand the commodification of information, and the pressure, this overload of information we see on social media works as a ‘deconstruction’ of authentic social interaction. The same can be said about authenticity of self-presentation, especially on social media platforms. Umberto Eco’s concept of hyperreality, where something being an imitation of reality, is trying to actually improve upon reality itself is exactly the phenomenon we see on social media sites. Social media sites content is often not merely descriptive, but it is trying to imitate reality while distorting the very concept of reality in the

process. To elaborate: “The ‘completely real’ becomes identified with the ‘completely fake.’ Absolute unreality is offered as real presence.” (Eco, 1986, p. 3).

The reason why the spectacle would benefit and directly produce alienation is due to the fact that our utilization of technology, as something that should ultimately make our lives easier, and our spending of time more efficiently, makes us utilize our free time as further feeding of the system itself. While we understand the relationship between work and free time as a form of opposites, the reality is that both the activity of work and the free activity of our passive consumption of hyperbolic images in television and on the internet only fuels the spectacle, as the nature of the work and the nature of leisure are both predetermined by the spectacle. In other words, the concept that we have more free time in the modern world does not mean that we are freer.

This can also be seen, for example, in specific instances of big tech companies effectively breaking down the border between free time and work, further showing their ideology which, they implement in cyberspace as well. For example, Google created a policy for their software engineers that they can spend twenty percent of their work time on the projects they are ‘passionate about’ (Fuchs, 2021, p. 132); however, this time utilized by their employees is consequently very beneficial for Google, as they can incorporate any original software into their leviathan-like platform, further showing this ideological message of modernity. That is not to say, that Google is stealing the software created by their employees, however, they are in a way manipulated to contribute to Google’s platform, which in turn looks like a spontaneous action from their software engineers. This practice of eliminating the distinction between free time and work is, from the Marxist point of view, alienating because there is further estrangement of the worker from the product they created. Furthermore, this is practically the existentialist turmoil that Camus describes in his description of the absurd man. The repetitive, mundane, and continuous characteristic of the modern life, consisting of just working and entertaining oneself, is even more apparent. The notion that we cannot even distinguish between personal matters and work, or rather, we come home from work to work some more on social media is then immensely absurd.

The advertisement on social media sites, as it shifted towards the realm of images, has created a situation tangential to Plato’s allegory of the cave (*Republic*, 514a–520a). Plato’s original question

was the question of what exactly reality is. The allegory was a metaphor for life and the theory of philosophical knowledge, where people are chained up in a cave, seeing shadows of real things on the walls. Then when a person, perhaps by chance would somehow get out of the cave and see the world as it really is, it is something that, even though imperfect, is still real. Social media tend to use this exact formula as well. Advertisement, images of events, internet memes and other things are shown like these shadows on the wall. Advertisements specifically, are shown in this reflective, illusionary form, because advertisement on the internet is carefully constructed, and generally unlike the actual product. However, because there is no critical analysis and philosophical process (which are arguably the conditions of leaving the cave), we are perhaps under the impression of leaving the cave, even though we are still firmly chained inside.

Cyberspace has created this concept of a 'perfect' environment, where all our needs can be satisfied, and forms as a way of escapism from the real world. Perhaps the complete form of defiance of this system is exactly like Plato suggested, critical thinking and philosophy. Because if we understand the ideological message that the social media transmit, only then can we truly leave. Like in the allegory of the cave, a person not engaged in the modern interconnected world of social media is alienated from their peers, exactly like the philosopher after returning from the real world in Plato's narrative. This however means, that while trying to defy the alienating system, we would be facing a different form of alienation. Participating and not participating has the same conclusion, therefore there is no escape.

The last point that I would like to make about the philosophical meaning behind social media is the message the spectacle portrays. Even though there is this notion that social media sites are a collection of messages, there seems to be a higher meaning to these messages. Facebook announced in 2021 that it is shifting from a mere site, towards the new 'Metaverse'. This Metaverse should be completely virtual. Only the meaning behind the name 'Meta' and its complete virtual reality setting is elevating itself as something 'above reality'. This alternate reality is deeply problematic, as everything that was discussed in this thesis should apply towards this new Metaverse, but even more strongly. The ideology of the Metaverse is to eliminate the distinction between work life and play, the distinction between reality and fiction. People using the virtual

reality headsets, will be able to buy products that are not even real, but objects for their ‘virtual homes’, that is, completely virtual real estate (Meta, 2021).

The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle’s estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual’s gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere. (Debord, 2002, p. 11).

This concept of an even more encompassing environment, which basically replaces reality, which seems like the product of sci-fi cinematography rather than something that is actually happening, can potentially create a materialized concept of alienation that Debord was warning us about. This concept of ‘living less’, directly translates to what future social media sites seem to provide. This is why social media are and will be even more spectacular in the future. If the message of social media shifts from just a means of communication to communication for the sake of communication, then the real message of social media is the medium itself.

## Concluding Thoughts

Alienation has then become an inherent part of modernity. The notion of a seemingly inescapable system, which is alienating us through social media sites is deeply problematic, exactly because of its ominous omnipresent nature. Like I said, participating and not participating has the same conclusion, therefore it seems impossible to find peace. However, human nature is most amazing due to its adaptability. And our adaptability could theoretically make us utilize technology in the best way possible, not in the exploitative way of how the nature of work on social media functions.

After defining this complicated system of alienation that we are facing in the modern age, the only thing left for me to do is to set forward specific theoretical solutions of how to deal with the situation at hand. Philosophy has always been a way of analyzing not only human nature, metaphysical concepts, but also the practical effects of current societal functions, and what they mean for humanity. Furthermore, philosophy can be used as an effective tool to set forward ethical and normative actions that we should take in order to benefit our lives. If we consider the question at hand, of how exactly we as humanity could theoretically battle this systemic alienation that the social media produce, there are three most probable solutions.

First, there is the most obvious solution, and that is simply defiance. Or as Albert Camus argues in *The Rebel*, the only way to effectively deal with an unfree world is to become absolutely free, so that our own very existence is an act of rebellion (Camus, 2022). This basically translates to refusing to participate in social media sites. The notion of defiance, however, is of course unrealistic for most people because social media sites have become such an integral part of our everyday life that this decision would perhaps be seriously considered by only a handful of current users. Furthermore, this would in turn be alienating for an individual, due to sociality being shifted to a virtual environment.

Second, there is the option of social media sites becoming a paid membership service. After all, in a capitalistic society, practically everything can have a monetary value assigned. Many technological platforms work on a form of subscription, and this could theoretically be a way to get rid of not only targeted advertising techniques, but also advertising in general. The problem

with this is that it is an extremely unlikely option. Social media sites work on a basis of a ‘catch-all mentality’, and the main way they make money is through targeted advertisement and gathering information about as many individuals as they can, further selling that information, and creating complicated databases of personal data. This system is a deeply integrated part of cyberspace and changing it would disturb the interconnected ecosystem of the internet itself, arguably creating economic deficits for social media sites. Therefore, this is unlikely to happen.

The third point I would like to make is to consider the option of social media sites paying the users. This may seem preposterous, but in my opinion, it makes the most sense. Because we understand the user as an unconscious worker of sorts, the only way to compensate this work is if the social media sites start paying small fees to users, for interaction, and passive consumption alike. This method would not make the alienating aspect of the system I described itself better, or more bearable; however, it would compensate the users for their involuntary information distribution. This seems to be exactly what certain platforms like Twitch is doing, with their slogan being ‘take back your data’. It is of course not probable that social media sites would come to this ‘compromise’ on their own, and there would have to be a firm shove in the right direction from the point of social scientists, and consequently legislators. But as I said, this is exactly the point of philosophy because critical analysis is the first and equally crucial point of this process. A solution is needed, because if we do not act against this alienating system, we will eventually all fall victim to the social media process of alienation.

The theoretical conclusions we would make of course again, do not exactly combat the system of alienation I propose. However, it would perhaps make it substantially fairer. And that is better than nothing. The feeling of alienation I described is by my estimation (not to sound overly fatalistic) practically unsolvable. Modernity keeps a steady pressure on us by confusion, dissociation, and alienation. Even though my analysis of this problematic situation is quite cynical, I believe that we must be realistic enough when looking at societal issues, in order to make an efficient form of criticism. While understanding the situation as an unsolvable issue, we can always strive for individualistic freedom. Perhaps it would be beneficial for everyone to take a step back and find some kind of comfort in exactly that.

## Resumé

Zámerom tejto práce je popísať odcudzujúci systém sociálnych médií. Moderná doba je často charakterizovaná istou formou disociácie a táto forma odlúčenia od ostatných ľudí, aj reality samotnej, by sa dala nazvať ako odcudzenie. Tento fenomén môžeme z veľkej časti pripísať k forme dnešnej komunikácie, resp. k časti kyberpriestoru sociálnych médií. Autor definuje tri primárne spôsoby členenia odcudzenia, marxisticko-ekonomickú formu, existencialistickú formu a odcudzenie z pohľadu psychoanalýzy Jacquesa Lacana.

Autor v prvej kapitole k teórii technológie pristupuje s pohľadom technologického determinizmu, ktorý hovorí, že technológia samotná vytvára akúsi formu kultúrneho a sociálneho zeitgeistu. Táto teória teda vysvetľuje, prečo je také ťažké nepodieľať sa na sociálnych médiách. Okrem iného sú dôležité aj aspekty ako tlak rovesníkov, čo potom prakticky vytvára ilúziu voľby a slobody, pretože forma odcudzenia je prítomná aj v prípade odmietnutia sociálneho tlaku. Ďalej autor rozoberá, ako sociálne médiá fungujú interne, najmä ich spôsoby peňažného zisku. Vzhľadom na náтуру zisku stránok sociálnych médií, teda predávaním osobných informácií užívateľov, ktorí svojim spôsobom vykonávajú formu práce (interakcie a vytváranie obsahu sociálnych médií), sa autor ďalej venuje aplikácii marxistickej teórie odcudzenia. V rámci tejto tradície je práca definovaná ako forma seberealizácie a druhového bytia. Autor teda aplikuje túto teóriu na sociálne médiá, kde nielen argumentuje, že používatelia pracujú, ale ďalej sú zároveň technicky aj produktom kolektívnej práce, čo vytvára akýsi paradox, kde používatelia predávajú formu svojej seberealizácie a ľudskej identity, čo je fenomén jasne dehumanizačný.

V druhej kapitole sa autor venuje najmä javom problematiky identity, ktoré sociálne médiá prinášajú. Prvý je koncept márnosti, ktorý opisuje z hľadiska Schopenhauerovej filozofie, kde líči, ako sú používatelia nepravdiví ohľadom svojej vlastnej identity na sociálnych médiách. Demonštruje to na tendencii užívateľov vytvárať si rôzne profily na jednotlivých platformách sociálnych médií a klamať o svojom fyzickom a spoločenskom statuse. Ďalej sa venuje špecifickým konštruovaným formám užívateľského rozhrania platformy Facebook a ich vplyvu na reštrikciu voľby užívateľov. Túto voľbu analyzuje z hľadiska Sartreovho pohľadu na slobodu vôle,



teda z pohľadu existencialistickej tradície. Posledná časť kapitoly sa venuje konceptu túžby, ako dôležitému aspektu motivácie na platformách sociálnych médií. Na túto tému používa psychoanalýzu Jacquesa Lacana, ktorý sa konceptu túžby dlhodobo venoval. Z Lacanovho pohľadu je túžba akýmsi neustávajúcim kolobehom snahy doceliť formu finálnej fantázie. Toto potom autor demonštruje na fenoméne 'dopamínového kolobehu sociálnych médií', ktorý ďalej okrem iného ukazuje deterministické faktory používania technológií.

V poslednej kapitole autor pracuje so závermi predošlých subkapitol, kde popisuje svoju konceptualizáciu moderného systému odcudzenia. Toto odcudzenie je manifestované vo všetkých použitých prístupoch, teda marxistickom, existencialistickom a psychoanalytickom. Autor argumentuje, že aj keď pripustíme fakt, že tieto metódy dochádzajú k fenoménu odcudzenia inými spôsobmi, finálny pocit odcudzenia je rovnaký. Tento systém odcudzenia potom aplikuje na filozofické dielo Guya Deborda, *The Society of the Spectacle*, ktorý argumentuje, že moderná doba je charakterizovaná ako autokratická vláda trhovej ekonomiky, ktorá sa manifestuje v rámci všadeprítomných obrazov. Toto dielo je rozoberané zo záverov predošlých kapitol, najmä z už definovanej marxistickej konceptualizácie práce a existencialistickej disociácie reality. V závere sa autor venuje teoretickým východiskám ľudstva z tohto odcudzovacieho systému a dôležitosťou sprostredkovanej analýzy sociálnych médií.

Autor vidí tri východiská. Odmietnuť participáciu, zmenu funkcie sociálnych médií na formu predplatného a nakoniec tú najpravdepodobnejšiu situáciu, a to je možnosť, že by sociálne médiá platili za interakciu užívateľovi samotnému.

## **Bibliography**

- Adler, P. S. (2006). *Technological Determinism*. Published.
- Baudrillard (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation (The Body, In Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism)* (33601st ed.). University of Michigan Press.
- Camus, A. (2022). *Rebel*. Vintage Books.
- Camus, A. (2013). *The Modern Classics Myth of Sisyphus (Penguin Modern Classics)* (J. Obrien, Trans.). Penguin Classic.
- Debord, G. (1998). *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Verso.
- Debord, G. (2002). *The Society of the Spectacle*. Hobgoblin Press.
- Dijck, V. J. (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Eco, U. (1986). *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (1st ed.). Harcourt.
- Fox, J., and Rooney, M. C. (2015). *The Dark Triad and Trait Self-objectification as Predictors of Men's use and Self-Presentation Behaviors on Social Networking Sites*. 76, 161–165. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2014.12.017
- Frenkel, S., & Kang, C. (2021). *An Ugly Truth: Inside Facebook's Battle for Domination*. Harper.
- Fuchs, C. (2021). *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (Third ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Guadagno, R. E., Okdie, B. M., and Kruse, S. A. (2012). *Dating Deception: Gender, Online Dating, and Exaggerated Self-Presentation*. *Comput. Hum. Behav.* 28, 642–647. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2011.11.010
- Johnston, Adrian, "Jacques Lacan", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/lacan/>>.
- Macit, H. B., Macit, G., & Güngör, O. (2018). SOSYAL MEDYA BAĞIMLILIĞI VE DOPAMİN ODAKLI GERİBİLDİRİM ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA. *Mehmet Akif Ersoy Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 882–897. <https://doi.org/10.30798/makuiibf.435845>
- Marx, K. (1992). *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy (Penguin Classics)* (B. Fowkes & E. Mandel, Trans.; Illustrated ed.). Penguin Classics.
- Marx, K. (1993). *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Penguin Classics)* (M. Nicolaus, Trans.; Revised ed.). Penguin Classics.

## Klein: Alienation of the Individual

- Marx, K., Engels, F. (1988). *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto (Great Books in Philosophy)* (1st ed.). Prometheus.
- Marx, K., Engels, F. (1978). *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd Revised & enlarged ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Meta (2021). *The Metaverse and How We'll Build It Together -- Connect 2021*. (2021, October 28). [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvufun6xer8>
- Pitcan, M., Marwick, A. E., and Boyd, D. (2018). *Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World*. *J. Comput. Mediat. Commun.* 23, 163–179. doi: 10.1093/jcmc/zmy008
- Plato. (1943). *Plato's the Republic*. New York: Books, Inc.,
- Sartre, J. (2007). *Existentialism and Humanism* (New edition). Methuen Publishing Ltd.
- Sayers, S. (2011). *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes* (1st ed. 2011 ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schopenhauer, A. (2021). *The Wisdom of Life*. Amazon.
- Smyrmaios, N. (2019). Google as an Information Monopoly. *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 23(4), 442–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2019.1718980>
- Statista. (2021, September 10). *Number of Global Social Network Users 2017–2025*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>
- Stewart, J. (2019). Kierkegaard as a Thinker of Alienation. *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 24(1), 193–216. <https://doi.org/10.1515/kierke-2019-0008>
- Taylor, T. (2010). *The Artificial Ape: How Technology Changed the Course of Human Evolution (MacSci)* (1st ed.). St. Martin's Press.
- Vaidhyanathan, S. (2011). *The Googlization of Everything (and Why we Should Worry)* (1st ed.). University of California Press.
- Žižek, S. (1998). Cyberspace, or, How to Traverse the Fantasy in the Age of the Retreat of the Big Other. *Public Culture*, 10(3), 483–513. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-10-3-483>
- Žižek, S. (2009). *The Plague of Fantasies* (second edition). Verso.