

Curated Selves: The Philosophical Dimensions of Identity in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

This paper aims to study how social media platforms enable the construction of curated identity and self, leading to the scenario where the curated identity becomes more important than the actual real world identity, using the philosophical foundations of Marshal McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard. As people grow their social circles online, the depth and quality of their relationships might change because it becomes challenging to keep strong and meaningful connections with a large and ever-growing group of acquaintances. This change in how people interact, combined with the powerful impact of digital social media, can greatly influence identity development based on modern social media trends and activities. The abundance of shallow connections can intensify feelings of disconnection. While this paper focuses on the philosophical dimensions of identity formation in the digital age, it refrains from passing judgment on the moral implications of these changes. Instead, it focuses on analyzing how social media reshapes the very nature of human interaction and self-perception without engaging in an ethical evaluation of these developments.

Keywords: Identity, Social Media, Baudrillard, McLuhan, Hyper Reality, Medium is the message, Curated Identity

Introduction

According to Backlingo, 5.17 billion people worldwide use social media, more than double the 2.07 billion users in 2015. On average, adults now spend approximately 2 hours and 20 minutes on social media daily (Backlinko 2024). This represents a 59% increase from the average time spent in 2012. These statistics underscore the growing influence of social media in everyday life. In India, average internet user engages with 7.8 social media platforms. (Dixon, Stacy. Statista 2024)

A few years ago, websites like gmail, yahoo, ebay were the most commonly and widely used platforms on internet. These websites dominated the internet traffic with the services they offered to the public. But over the time significant changes happened to the way people use internet. Today, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become more prominent with their increased traffic on the web. The evolution of these websites from simple entertainment and social networking tools to highly developed ecosystems where human interaction was entirely redefined happened in a progressive but rapid manner. The real time nature of contemporary social media enables individuals to remain informed and connected with events occurring across the globe. On top of that, social media allows users to express themselves and create their own digital identity, where they can curate their own personas and engage with others. This option to curate their own life and sometimes themselves has made social media not just a medium of communication, but a crucial aspect of personal and professional life in the digital age. It may appear that by showcasing carefully curated lifestyles, users are just communicating with others on a

superficial level. But this superficial communication process then becomes the reality of the digital life which then gets reflected on material real life.

Various online platforms, including communities, groups, and news portals, now have a level of influence on both public and private life with a gravity that was previously unimaginable. In this light, the progress of online platforms as tools for interpersonal communication becomes a topic that requires in depth study and analysis. The emergence of contemporary social media sites, such as Facebook and TikTok, has profoundly affected how people interact with the digital world and present themselves. The transition from traditional "media" to the interactive and personalized realm of "social media" has introduced new challenges and opportunities for identity formation, particularly during the critical adolescent and young adult stages.

Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have experienced exponential growth in recent years. TikTok's active user base continued to expand even after the app was banned in India, which represents one-sixth of the global population. The integration of social media into daily life, serving as a source of entertainment, news, and communication tailored to various demographics, has accelerated its growth and made it an integral part of modern living. The potential for monetization within the social media ecosystem has particularly attracted younger individuals, leading many to pursue careers in this field. The increased use of the internet and mobile phones during COVID-19 lockdowns, coupled with brands seeking to capitalize on this surge, has significantly amplified the influence of social media. Careers like influencer and social media expert have become as common as traditional technical roles. The influencer career is supported by the digital ecosystem, which includes a number of online platforms owned by various companies. While TikTok and Instagram are platforms for short-term, engaging content, YouTube serves as a platform for more detailed, mid- to long-duration content, while YouTube Shorts offers a space for quick, concise videos, although the platform's primary strength remains in its more extended content formats. The role of algorithms in personalizing content is crucial, as they tailor feeds to individual preferences.

This growth of social media as a daily tool comes at an increased risk of privacy concerns, and moreover, the basic individuality. Studying social media from a philosophical perspective is essential to understand its profound impact on contemporary society, individual cognition and how social media enables us to explore the ways in which these platforms shape our perceptions of reality, identity, and truth. As social media is becoming more than mere communication instrument, understanding its deep and far reaching implications in society and individual, particularly in relation to identity formation, social behaviour, ethics and the construction of reality.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that social media has been, and continues to be, widely utilized for impactful and positive political and social movements. Jasmine revolution of 2010 is the prime example for social media's power in political activism. Facebook was being used as a platform for protesters to communicate and organise. Social media also acted as an alternative information dissemination system to traditional media which was under heavy censorship. The widespread canvas of Facebook helped tunisian people to get international support.

Similarly, black lives matter started as a hashtag campaign due to the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and then grew into a political and social movement. Over time, BLM became a symbol of racial justice. Social media helped to create an awareness across borders which traditional media was never able to.

Another online movement that gained momentum just like black lives matter is the MeeToo movement. Started as a hashtag campaign, metoo suddenly became something that women around the globe find

protesting. While meeto was initially founded in 2006, it actually gained international level attention by 2017 after actress Alyssa Milano encouraged women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted to share their stories using the hashtag #MeToo.

In India, the framers' protest in 20-21 against three controversial farm laws enacted by the government of India made substantial use of social media to mobilise supporters and increase awareness. Farmers and activists used Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to air their grievances, organise protests, and counter misinformation. The hashtag #FarmersProtest trended globally, drawing international attention to the farmers.

Social Media and the Construction of Identity

The concept of digital identity has been gaining much more attention recently. One could say that there is a parallel life where this digital landscape is becoming more and more real. This digital parallel life is supported by material reality by technicalities like monetization where likes, comments and shares become a commodity and even sometimes, a digital currency. And this leads to the blurring of the boundaries between the 'real' and the 'virtual'. Slowly, for people who spend more time in the virtual, the virtual representation of real becomes more original. This extreme level of self curation offered by social media empowers users to carefully select and present a idealized version of themselves to create a digital identity. This curation begins from the selective representation and then migrates to manipulation of reality often using filters, photo editing tools, and carefully crafted narratives. This curation is not random but driven by complex algorithms and social expectations, which often push individuals to conform to certain standards of beauty, success, and happiness (Michikyan, Minas, and Carola Suárez-Orozco. 2016). The feedback loop of validation reinforces certain traits while suppressing others, further distancing the online persona from the offline self.

According to Social identity theory by Henri Tajfel, individuals form their identity based on the groups they belong to, such as ethnic, religious, or professional communities. Identity, in this context, is tied to group membership and the desire for social validation within those groups. But in the case of social media the algorithm acts as a key player in shaping identity. Platforms use algorithms to determine what content is visible to users, influencing what individuals see, engage with, and aspire to. The content an individual consumes on social media can reinforce certain identities and suppress others, leading to a feedback loop where algorithmically driven content steers personal identity development in ways that may be beyond conscious control.

Moreover, Social media platforms allow users to select target audiences for paid posts and advertisements. This targeted approach means that users are not just passive consumers of content but active participants in the commodification of their digital identities. Users can shape their online personas to fit marketing narratives by targeting specific demographics or interests, which frequently prioritise commercial appeal over personal authenticity. This commodification extends to users, who become products in a system that monetises attention and engagement. The algorithmic nature of social media can lead users to curate their identities in ways that appeal to advertisers, making self-representation more about marketability than authentic expression. The desire for likes, shares, and followers can turn identity into a commodity, with self-worth becoming linked to audience engagement and validation. At the same time "Evidence suggests that it is not narcissistic self-involvement, but openness to sharing information about oneself that predicts self-focused status updates and photo sharing on Facebook" (MANAGO, ADRIANA M. 2015)

Social media as the medium and message- McLuhan

Marshal McLuhan argued that every new medium alters the way we think and perceive reality . For instance, the transition from print to electronic media transformed society from a text based mode of understanding to a more image centric perception. When McLuhan's theory is applied to social media, it becomes clear that platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are fundamentally reshaping how individuals experience social interactions, understand reality, and present themselves. According to McLuhan's theory, social media can be seen as an extension of human faculties. Particularly the need for connection, visibility, and validation. Platforms extend our ability to interact with others far beyond geographical limits, creating digital personas that exist alongside or even in place of our physical selves. Social media does more than just transmitting content. It also transforms interpersonal communication into public performances, which are frequently influenced by algorithms and feedback mechanisms (likes, shares, and comments). This causes a shift in identity construction from a private, authentic self to a curated performative digital persona. In the case of social media, users are influenced by the medium itself rather than just the content (photos, statuses, or videos). The design of platforms, their interactivity, and feedback loops all encourage users to craft and curate their identities in specific ways. The ability to edit, filter, and selectively present oneself results in hyper-real versions of identity. The immediacy of social media shape a new form of public selfhood, where users continuously negotiate their identity in response to an audience and algorithms that reinforce specific behaviors and appearances. When social media first emerged, many saw it as a mere extension of traditional forms of communication (such as the telephone or email). Early platforms like Facebook were seen as digital equivalents of social gatherings or written communication between friends. However, it became clear with the evolution of social media that these platforms were not just new ways to communicate, but they created entirely new forms of social interaction and self-presentation which is far beyond what traditional media could offer. The shift from interpreting social media as "just another form of communication" to understanding it as a medium which fundamentally reshapes identity, politics, and social relationships exemplifies McLuhan's rear-view mirror effect.

Hyper Real Identities

Philosopher Jean Baudrillard, in his work, simulacra and simulation introduced a concept called simulacrum' where the representation becomes more real than the original. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is key to understanding how social media identities diverge from reality. Social media platforms provide a canvas for self-expression and the construction of online identities, which may not always align with an individual's offline reality (Manago, 2015). This phenomenon can be better understood through Baudrillard's ideas about simulacra, simulation, and hyperreality. While having the power to shape our online identities can feel freeing, it can also create a sense of alienation. The real self, with all its flaws and imperfections, might start to feel less valuable or relevant compared to the perfect, hyperreal versions we present online. This fragmentation can lead to a crisis of authenticity, where individuals no longer feel connected to any single version of themselves. Rather than revealing their authentic, unmediated selves, users on these platforms are empowered to carefully curate and manipulate the image they project to their audience, selectively highlighting only the most idealized and flattering aspects of their lives . The option to delete and edit any action online after realising its sudden or primary consequences equips the user with a sense of control which is contrary to the irreversible nature of real world. And this option to change the past at least up to an extend makes the online digital identity more

sophisticated and safer choice for users. The early versions of the social medias were more in relation with the actual world. For example, Initially facebook required users to have a university email address, emphasizing real life connections among students. Profiles were often reflections of users' actual lives. Later, it was open to public and eventually became an advertising medium. Similarly, snapchat was originally launched without filters. Then features like stories, filters and snap map entirely transformed the platform. Same can be said about the message unsend option in facebook messenger, instagram and whatsapp which enables the users to undo their actions. Furthermore, the quantifiable nature of social media engagement, such as likes, shares, and follower counts, adds to the hyperreal condition by transforming interpersonal interactions into social currency. This "social approval economy" encourages users to constantly seek validation and recognition from their online audience, which often comes at the expense of genuine, meaningful relationships. The constant need to curate and maintain a performative online presence can lead to a sense of alienation, as users become preoccupied with their digital persona rather than their lived experiences.

This alteration of the self can have serious psychological consequences. As people invest more in their online personas, they may notice a disconnect between their true self and their digital identity. The pressure to maintain a certain image online can lead to a loss of authenticity, as people may suppress aspects of their real selves that do not align with the expectations set by their curated persona. This dissonance can result in feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and a distorted sense of self-worth, as individuals measure their value by the standards of social media. The pursuit of digital validation can overshadow real life interactions and experiences and could lead to a superficial engagement with the world. The constant comparison with others' idealized portrayals can further erode self-esteem and foster a sense of inadequacy.

Echo Chamber and News Validity

Moreover, algorithms are designed in a way that users should be bombarded with the content they'll prefer to watch. This can create echo chambers where users are exposed primarily to content that reinforces their existing beliefs and interests, further separating their online personas from their real-life experiences. (Mamgai, Namrataa. Priyanka Kardam. 2023) .Unlike traditional media which had editorial standards as verification process, social media platforms operate on a model that ensures speed and independence and that causes the rapid circulation of content before it undergoes fact-checking. This translates to posts being circulated among huge number of users instantly with no verification.

The nature of algorithm design of social media platforms particularly instagram and tiktok takes the issue further. By the time content reaches a larger audience, the point of verification is lost. Another factor that contributes to the echo chamber effect is the temporary nature of content on platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp. Instagram Stories, for example, are designed to disappear after 24 hours, creating a sense of urgency and immediacy. This temporariness encourages users to post quickly, often without considering the accuracy or implications of the information being shared. Similarly, WhatsApp and Facebook updates are often seen as ephemeral and informal, leading to a more casual approach to content sharing. This can contribute to the spread of misinformation resulting in users sharing information without fully verifying its authenticity. Unlike permanent posts or articles, which can be reviewed and scrutinized over time, temporary content is designed to vanish quickly, leaving no trace. This makes it difficult for fact-checkers to track and address misinformation that circulates in these formats. The temporary nature of online content can make people feel less responsible for the accuracy of the information they share, since they

expect their posts to vanish quickly. This lack of permanence can reinforce the echo chamber effect, as individuals might not take the time to think about the long-term impact of their posts. The role of algorithms in amplifying echo chambers cannot be overstated. In a study, Four of the six interviewees saw the presence of a verified badge (a blue tick) on an account, which Instagram issues to denote the authentic accounts of public figures or organisations (Meta, n.d.), as a sign of authority, if not reliability. Participant 3 (P3) stated that while the blue tick and high number of likes do not necessarily indicate reliability, they are more likely to believe it has some weight in their opinion. (Burrows, E. 2023.)

The spread of false information on social media, even from verified accounts, shows how hard it is to stop fake stories online. Verification, meant to prove an account is trustworthy, is often misused to make misleading content seem real. A clear example is from the recent Israel-Palestine conflict. A verified account on X (formerly Twitter) shared a violent video, claiming it showed a Hamas attack on Israel. It was later found to be old footage from Syria in 2016. Still, the video got about 2.5 million views before fact-checkers corrected it . This shows how fast fake news can spread.

Experts say the amount of false information during this conflict is the worst they've seen. Fact-checkers have struggled to keep up, as many fake stories were shared by verified accounts. Compared to the Russia-Ukraine war, misinformation in the Israel-Palestine conflict has been much worse, with more than double the false claims exposed in just the first week (International Fact Checking Network, 2024). This surge in misinformation highlights the problem with social media verification, especially when platforms focus more on getting attention than on ensuring truth. Tanishka Sodhi. “‘No moderation, algorithm, paid blue ticks’: How social media fuelled fake news on Israel-Palestine conflict.” (Newslaundry 2023)

The echo chambers created by social media algorithms impact identity formation by reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. When users are repeatedly exposed to content that aligns with their pre existing views, their sense of self becomes closely tied to these often narrow worldviews. This can lead to a more rigid, polarized identity where users internalize the values and ideas that dominate their social media feeds, mistaking these highly filtered perspectives for broader social reality. As social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok prioritize content that generates engagement, users may also shape their online personas to fit the ideals and opinions favored within their echo chambers, further distancing their online identity from the complexity of their offline self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media, like any major innovation, has transformed how people communicate and socialize. The way social media functions reflects the ideas of Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard. McLuhan’s statement that "the medium is the message" is particularly relevant here. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok do more than facilitate communication; they actively shape how identities are constructed, performed, and perceived. The design of these platforms emphasizes interactivity, immediacy, and visual engagement, pushing users to create highly curated versions of themselves. As a result, the digital self is shaped by the platform's expectations, which frequently prioritise visual appeal, engagement, and social validation. These platforms function as extensions of our human faculties, transforming personal identity into a public performance in which the curated self is frequently a filtered version of the real user.

Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality can offer further insights into social media and its impact in identity formation. According to Baudrillard, in a hyperreal representations can overshadow and replace reality. This could be considered valid where the identity and digital self crafted online take a greater significance

than the realities of everyday life. As users construct their digital presence carefully according to data and algorithm driven feedback, their online selves starts to resemble a simulation which is disconnected from authentic real life experiences

This simulated hyperreal identity can feel more authentic because it gains validation through likes, comments, shares and followers. This feedback loop, which is data that determines the success rate in social media becomes a reinforcement to the digital persona.

This digital persona then becomes the commodity in social media. Social media profiles interact not just with friends and families but with advertisers and potential employers. Algorithms personalize the content and advertisements by making use of engagement metrics, turning users into products in the digital marketplace. Moreover, platforms allow advertisers to target specific users and audience for paid posts and advertisements further reinforcing the algorithm. The targeted approach makes the users not passive consumers but active participants in commodifying their identities. The echo chambers created by the algorithm bombards users with content that matches their preferences. This creates digital environments where users mainly see information that aligns with their views, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. McLuhan's concept of the "global village" illustrates how social media influences identity formation. Social media has broken down geographical barriers, allowing people to interact with a global audience. This interconnectedness provides new opportunities for socialisation and exposure to different cultures, but it also contributes to the commodification and fragmentation of identities. Users create digital personas not only for their immediate social circles, but also for a larger, often global audience, supporting McLuhan's claim that media technologies fundamentally alter human interaction. Individuals may prioritise developing a marketable, globally appealing identity over developing an authentic or local self, blurring the lines between reality and hyperreality.

In summary, the combination of McLuhan's media theory and Baudrillard's hyperreality provides a better understanding of social media and how it affects identity formation. Algorithms and curated content promotes the creation of hyperreal, fragmented identities that diverge from traditional theories of identity development. the "social approval economy" in these platforms are capable of converting users into commodities at the same time blurring the line between real life and digital life by opportunities like monetization and fame. The ongoing question is whether individuals can reconcile the tension between their authentic selves and the hyperreal personas they create online or if the commodified digital identity will continue to overshadow the real one.

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