Are the Activities of "Influencing" and "Following" on Social-Media Driving Users into an Existential Crisis?

هل تؤدي نشاطات "التأثير" و "المتابعة" على وسائل الاتصالات الاجتماعية إلى أزمة وجودية؟

Les Activités d « Influencer » et « Suivre » sur les Réseaux Sociaux conduisent- elles à une Crise Existentielle ?

Karima Saoudi

الجزائر 2 Alger

Introduction

In July 2020, Statista[1] featured fifteen most important social media platforms in the world according to their popularity among users. At the top of this ranking, Facebook comes with 2.45 billion active monthly users, Youtube and Instagram follow with 2000 million and 1082 million respectively. Others like Tiktok, Snapchat and Pinterest come after with no less than 350 million users. (Statista 2020). The popularity of these platforms is inextricably linked with the different contents they offer to the active users, ranging from news, lifestyles, professional opportunities and entertainment to commercial interests. However, their prevalence in nowadays life is not without any negative consequences on people which has become a topic for different fields of research. With a psychological approach to the issue, Mari Swingle mentions four cases when "digital media" becomes questionable : "(1) when one can't do without, (2) when one can't stop, (3) when one chooses an Internet or i-tech activity consistently over all others, and finally, (4)… when the usage starts to have the properties of addiction" (Swingle 2016 :10) . The four cases sum up the kind of common dangers that subscribers have been exposed to so far ; nonetheless, such dangers may grow in intensity when recent activities appearing on social media platforms such as "influencing" and "following" are further examined.

The phenomenon of "influencers" and their "followers" became a worrying issue when brands started relying on the formers to promote their articles resulting in the rising number of both categories . What is disturbing is the fact that the activities of "influencing" and "following" leave little freedom of choice for the subject and the object of the action. The present article aims at highlighting the fact that far from allowing people to be creative as they promise, the activities of "influencing" and "following" on social media platforms

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1.- Statista is an online portal that provides statistics on different fields.

https://aleph-alger2.edinum.org/4138

impose roles on their users and drive them to live an existential crisis. The article will first explain why existentialism, basically a humanist and philosophical approach, is relevant in such a study about social media .It will then focus on examining the reasons behind the emergence of the activities of "influencing" and "following" and how they make an existential crisis possible. Lastly, the article will try to read the roles of "influencer" and "follower" according to Jean Paul Sartre's existential concepts "self-deception" and "bad faith".

1. Why is Existentialism Relevant ?

1.1. The Appeal for Human "Subjectivity"

The relevance of Existentialism in a study of social media lies in its interest in human existence on earth, and therefore, life and experience in the world . Jean Paul Sartre states that "every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity" (Sartre 1947 : 18) implying thus the importance of the human's subjective decisions in defining his being on earth. He further adds that "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (Sartre 1947 : 22) . This applies well on social media in the way they offer a new humanly invented "environment" where human reactions to them can be studied . Furthermore, his advocating the importance of human "subjectivity" relates with the basic principle upon which social media platforms are built, that is to say, providing virtual free spaces where users can be "subjective" and self-creative by expressing their thoughts, sharing their inventions or life experience and defining their own identities. Facebook's famous welcoming messages " What do you want to say" and " create your story", Tweeter's " what's up" and Instagram's invitation to introduce oneself through personal pictures put forth this concern with human identity, self- creation and freedom of choice .

1.2.Bad-Faith" and "Self-deception"

On another hand, Jean Paul Sartre warns against the dangers that may lead the human being to an existential crisis . This happens when one denies one's freedom to choose what to be and believes that "characters are fixed and unchangeable". This is what he calls "bad faith" that most people go through in order to avoid the anguish of choosing for oneself (Webber 2009 :73). "Bad faith" also implies the act of "self-deception" that entails lying to oneself about one's real nature and giving "universal value to lies" (Webber 2009 : 25). Being essentially virtual, social media platforms expose users to "bad faith and "self-deception" by creating atmospheres favorable to adopting roles, identities and attitudes other than the users' real ones.

2. Seeking Fame and the "Brand-Influencer Industry"

2.1. The Psychological Factor :

Before moving to the existentialist reading of the activities of "influencing" and "following" on social media, it is necessary to throw light on the facts that seem to cause this existential crisis among users. One such fact is the tremendous increase of the number of "influencers" and "followers" alike and social media platforms created especially for this purpose during the last years for different raisons. Gayle Stever explains this explosion as "the desire for fame" (Stever 2019 : 186) and associates it to some psychological factors such as "ambition, meaning derived through comparison with others, psychological vulnerability, attention seeking, conceitedness, and a desire for social access" (Stever 2019 :185) . It is important to specify here that social media in general create the most appropriate space where these psychological issues can find relief, for they make it easy for anyone to achieve fame if the picture, the video or the story about whatever content they posted is liked and brought about subscribers to their page, account, blog or channel. The successful stories of social media " micro-celebrities" abound on the internet, therefore, the world witnesses daily the birth of a huge number of these people who become famous for heroic or unheroic actions .

2.2. The Financial Factor

A more important factor is the appearance of the "brand- influencer industry" where brands recruit "influencers" and pay them to promote their products in " posts, videos, stories and blogs". The money that could be made out of such activities has risen enormously during the last years a "research suggests that influencer-sponsored posts grew by 150 % in [2019], with the use of the hashtag #ad more than doubling." (Wakefield 2019 : 11). As a result, becoming a social media "influencer" attracts more and more people who are ready to quit their jobs to embark on an online career and encourages already established celebrities to join the business. What is more, being principally a liberal out of office job, it appeals to all categories of people even to children. In a BBC technology business report, Suzanne Bearne observes that "from toddlers appearing on carefully curated accounts set up by their parents, to teenagers creating their own channels on YouTube, more kids are becoming social media influencers" (Bearne August 2019 : 2) . The entrance of children into the field might signal to one complex reality, that the business behind the "brand- influencers industry" is so profitable that neither parents nor brands

worry about children's exploitation . In other words, as long as there are people who reward such practices with a like, a follow up, a subscription or simply by becoming consumers of the advertised products, there is less questioning that the job may turn unethical.

One might ask about the "followers' " uncritical opinions and wonder how the celebrities manage to keep fans especially when their fame is built on daily routine or unheroic actions. Stever explains this in terms of "similarity" or "homophily", that is a person may "follow" another person or a star on social media because he thinks they are similar in certain ways. (Stever 2019 :173). It is necessary to notice that brands recruit "influencers" whose audience is likely to be interested by their products, while young people are often seen in fashion and lifestyle advertisements, couples promote travelling destinations and parents sponsor children intended products . It is perhaps fair to say that the "followers' " identification with "influencers" leads to their desire to be like them, or more interestingly from a materialist angle, to purchase the same products. Last but not least, it is necessary to admit that social media platforms changed the relationship between the star and his fan. Stever explains that they reduce the distance between them by creating a space where they could interact directly with each other (Stever 2019 :160). At the time when it is difficult to check whether well-established celebrities communicate with their "followers", some "micro celebrities" confess not being able to interact with the totality of their fans. The interaction space remains, therefore, more of a profit zone where positive feedback increases the "influencer's" gain and the follower's" self-identification. However, it is obvious that neither part can do without the other .Put differently, whether social media users decide to influence, to sub-scribe, to befriend or to follow another person, all of these actions may reveal an existential crisis.

3. "Influencing" and " Self-Deception"
3.1. Fame Based on Lies

"Self-deception", as Jean Paul Sartre explains, implies " falsifying once char-acter: the fixed nature that one ascribes to oneself does not adequately reflect one's actual qualities " (Webber 2009: 89). He adds that it implicates perform-ing " publicly observable behavior" that other people will see as representing the performer's "fixed nature" and that will convince them that he or she is as such. (Webber 2009 : 84). This public behavior may require the performer to invest his "thoughts, decisions, emotions, and actions to seem … to manifest a fixed character" (Webber 2009 : 100). This said, it is perhaps fair to say that

when fame and money are at stake in a virtual world, it is difficult not to be trapped in "self-deception". "Influencers" seem to be more exposed to such behavior, as they are ready to present an image of themselves that is far from reality to make financial gains and remain popular.

Next to being virtual, therefore, difficult to verify, communication on social media platforms functions not only by writing, but also through sharing pictures, on live and behind the screen videos which facilitates "self-deception". In their Book, *The Language of Social Media,* Seargeant and Tagg agree that " People …present themselves in different ways depending on the particular contextual circumstances in which they are operating" and " visual semiotics" are becoming an important tool for " self-representation" (Seargeant & Tagg 2014 : 6). The opportunities that the different social media platforms offer for self-representation, or falsifying one's character in our concern, vary from one another. They also differ in their regulations about the "brand-influencer industry". It is worth noting that the more the platform relies on "visual semiotics" the more influence and "self-deception" there are. In this field, Facebook and Twitter compete less with TikTok, YouTube and Instagram which, purposefully meant to share pictures and videos, champion in allowing "influencers" to false represent themselves. Instagram, particularly, is often reported to show the "perfect", "amazing", "great", " glamourous" and "idealized" life of influencers who meet beauty standards, afford expensive products and live a happy life full of free time, adventures, travels and entertainments. Yet, some stories of Instagram "influencers" demonstrate another reality. Fashion "Influencer" Jordan Bunker confesses his real life is not as it is seen on Instagram, while his "followers" believe his life is " great", he actually lives with his parents and "works from a desk in his room" (Bearne, Mar 2019 : 4). Emily Lavinia, another fashion "influencer", speaks of her "online persona" that is different from her reality and admits having "imposter syndrome" that makes her feel ashamed. (Bearne Mar 2019 :14). Blogger Scarlett Dixon declares that her "feed isn't a place of reality" and that all her appearances are "staged" (Hern 2018 : 7). It is essential to add that "influencers" may suffer from " uncertain incomes, performative vulnerability and [a] hustle for sponsorship", they also have to work hard, promote products they do not need, face " competition", give up their privacy and cope with too demanding followers (Blum 2019 :1) . Sartre's self-deception makes sense when we consider that the "influencer's" life is based on lies, first to himself because he has to endure a standard imposed by social media consumerism, second to his "followers" by making them believe that he is no more than a satisfied "influencer".

3.2. Lack of Authenticity

The words "public persona" and " "imposter syndrome" in Emily Lavinia's previously cited story equates "influencing" with being deceitful and qualify it as a psychological sickness ; this echoes Sartre's claim that self-deception implies keeping hidden in the unconscious what one would not consciously announce (Webber 2009 : 138). They in other words, deny the "influencer's" responsibility to be authentic. Here again Sartre's statement that the human being rejects the responsibility of choosing for himself is relevant. To back up this argument, the story of Daniel Volland, a resigned "influencer", who admits that the commercialized tendency of Instagram centering on advertisements and celebrities suffocate the " artistic freedom" it guaranteed in its beginning in 2012 (Blum 2019 :16) is of help . Supportive too is Reporter Jenni Gritter's declaration that 12 of the "influencers" with whom she conducted her report confessed of feeling "tied to a static inauthentic identity" (Gritter 2019 :11). The stories, in fact, tell about social media platforms liability to control human behavior through well-fixed expectations and roles. Volland's reference to the commercialized side of Instagram is but an acknowledgment of the material-ism that conditions human existence on earth transforming him into an object to be used for certain purposes. Put differently, denying authenticity and free-dom of choice for "influencers" cause them an existential crisis, whose effects are perhaps more overpowering on "followers".

4. "Following" and "Bad-Faith"
4.1. Social Pressure and the Established Standards

The activity of following somebody else or a trend may itself indicate one's inability to be creative and authentic, it is ; therefore, a performance of "bad faith". Sartre explains that " the basic aim of bad faith is to opt for a " fixed nature" which is out of one's control rather than acknowledging his responsi-bility for "the way" he is, " the way things seem" to him and " the way " to "re-spond to them" (Webber 2009 : 88) . "Bad faith can" also "involve expectations that people will behave in ways that conform to the view that they have fixed natures, expectations that can be enforced through social pressure." (Webber 2009 : 99) .It cannot be denied that there is a whole frenzy about "following" on social media platforms during the last few years that applies on both "influ-encers" and "followers" of all categories and ages. The first reason behind this phenomenon can be purely financial ; for example, "influencers" can earn up to £ 20-25,000 annually if they have 2 million followers out of advertisements for brands (Shaw 2020 :4). Hence, every "influencer" wants to "follow" the

example of a more famous "influencer". For instance, "Influencer" Damian Camarillo's father wonders why his son cannot make $ 25, 000 a year like " that kid" and mentions that " that's the goal" (Sherman 2020 :13).

The other reason is that social media establish lifestyle standards that every user have to "follow". In Sartre's terms, they exercise some kind of "social pressure" to make the user adopt "the fixed nature" of a "follower" ; that is, how to be a model "influencer" and "follower". Whereas "influencing", as seen previously, is conditioned by the numbers of subscribers and the income they make, a whole range of varied standards condition the "follower" ; these may include the next instructions : how to be fashionable ? What is to be beautiful ? How to eat well to stay fit and healthy ? What to do to stay updated ? How to be good parents ? How to be good husbands and wives ? How can a child be happy ? Assuredly, these rules imply what products to buy to fit the socially established standards, otherwise, alienation or anxiety ensue. Reporter Jenni Gritters finds that social media baffle "our social comparison radar. We're constantly trying to figure out if we're more or less attractive, smart, and accomplished than everyone else", if not that " makes us feel worse about ourselves" (Gritters 2019 : 8). While anxiety fosters compulsive buying of advertised products, social comparison leaves little room for the disciplined "follower" to decide whom to be, what to buy and how to live.

4.2. Masochism

So far, we have seen whether social media users decide to be "influencers" or "followers", they are all driven, in a way or another, into living an existential crisis. Nevertheless, it is extensive to admit that both rely on each other to exercise their "fixed character". Sartre clarifies that in "bad faith", there is a process of assimilation where a person tries to make another person affirm that the first one has a "fixed character", on the other hand, the first person affirms in his turn that the second person has "a fixed nature" too. They are in, other words "allies" in approving of each other's "fixed character" (Webber, 2009 :137). The "influencer"- "follower" relationship demonstrates such an assimilation, indeed, where the "influencer" depends on the subscription of the "followers" to achieve the status of "influencer". At the same time, the "follower" relies on the "influencer" to show him the acceptable standard to follow and gain self-confidence. Yet, at the light of all what has been developed up to this point, it is tempting to read their relationship in terms of what Sartre calls "masochism" . Instead of looking forward to be loved as a person with particular "value", " one aims rather to become simply one object among others, aiming to be desired simply as 'an instrument to be used' " (Webber 2009 :137) . In this way,

the "follower" becomes only a means to increase the "influencer's" income, while the latter is the advertiser whose role is to ratify socially the "follower's" tastes and standards. In both directions, the relationship is not based on human feelings and consideration, but on materialist ones. Despite the fact that social media seem to put forward the importance of the human being by advocating creativity and human "subjectivity", they end up reducing the human into a machine whose behavior is just programmed.

Conclusion

This article is an attempt to read social media platforms differently by using the philosophical and humanist approach that is existentialism. The study allows reviewing the place of the human being amidst a more and more technological, mechanized and virtual world, where social media platforms appear to offer the appropriate space for the human's "subjective" creativity, but end up suffocating the uninspired human leaving him to choose between well-established standards and social anxiety. The article focuses on the study of two main activities on social media which are "influencing" and "following" and comes to the results that these emerged due to two main factors. The first one is financial, "influencing" and "following" grew in intensity when brands entered the market and started paying well "influencers" to promote their products, this led to the growth of the number of social media advertisers because it promoted an easygoing life style job open to all categories and ages. The second factor is psychological, social media platforms open the most appropriate place where some psychological desires can find relief such as the desire to become rich and famous in the case of "influencers" and the identification with some socially recognized figure in the case of "followers".

The analysis of the two activities according to Jean Paul Sartre's concepts "self-deception" and "bad faith" resulted in demonstrating that users seem to be exposed to the dangers of an existential crisis. First, the "influencers" are predisposed to "self-deception" as they are encouraged to base their life on lying to themselves by endorsing a role in life they do not represent in reality, then to "followers" by transmitting a false image of happiness and satisfaction. Second, "followers" are subjects to " bad-faith" as social media platforms exert on them some kind of social pressure to adopt well accepted standards. Finally, the article concludes by reading the relationship between the two parts according to what Sartre calls "masochism". The relationship is, subsequently, based on reciprocal interests where the "influencer" uses the "follower" as a consumer to increase his financial income and the "follower" uses the "influencer" as a guide to gain social acceptability. Social media platforms seem, therefore to

deprive the user from performing his human capabilities of subjectivity and authenticity. By reading social media through the humanist and philosophical approach that is existentialism, the article aims to open new perspectives in the field of media studies.

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Abstract

The dangers of social media platforms on internet users have become important topics in the field of media studies for different types of research and approaches. The present article aims to study the specific activities of "influencing" and "following" on social media from the humanist and philosophical approach existentialism. Starting from the idea that social media platforms encourage human authenticity and "subjectivity" that existentialism advocate, the article analyses how internet users may go through an existential crisis by reading the activities of "influencing" and "following" according to Jean Paul Sartre's concepts of " self-deception "and " bad faith " . Next to uncovering the psychological and financial reasons behind the emergence of the "brand influencer industry" that increase the number of "influencers" and their subscribers, the article reaches the results that these activities may hamper human subjectivity by imposing well fixed roles to both the "influencer" and his "follower".

Keywords

Social media, influencing, following, "bad faith", "self-deception" .

مستخلص

أصبحت خواطر وسائل المواصلات الاجتماعية على مستهلكي الانترنت موضوع مهم لمختلف المناهج والأبحاث المختصة في وسائل الإعلام. يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة نشاطات التأثير والمتابعة على وسائل الاتصالات الاجتماعية باستعمال المنهج الإنساني الوجودي. انطلاقا من الفكرة أن وسائل الاتصالات الاجتماعية تشجع الأصالة والذاتية الإنسانية المؤيدة من طرف الفلسفة الوجودية، يقوم البحث بتحليل الأزمة الذاتية التي قد يعيشها مستعمل وسائل الاتصالات الاجتماعية بتطبيق مفاهيم الفيلسوف جون بول سارتر "الإيمان السيء "و"التكفير عن النفس". يكشف البحث عن الدوافع النفسية والمالية التي أدت إلى ظهور نشاطات المتابعة والتأثير وازدياد عدد المؤثرين والمتابعين، كما يقوم بإثبات أن هذه النشاطات تعرقل في الحقيقة الذاتية الإنسانية بفرض أدوار على المؤثرين والمتابعين

كلمات مفتاحيّة

وسائل الاتصالات الاجتماعية، التأثير، المتابعة، الإيمان السيء، التكفير عن النفس

Résumé

Les dangers des réseaux sociaux sur les usagers d'internet sont devenus des sujets très importants pour les recherches d'études médiatiques de différentes approches. Le présent article a pour objectif d'analyser les activités « d'influencer » et « suivre » sur les réseaux sociaux à partir d'une approche philosophique et humaniste qui est l'existentialisme. Tenant compte de l'idée que les réseaux sociaux encouragent l'exercice de la créativité et subjectivité humaines que l'existentialisme défend, l'article analyse comment les usagers d'internet peuvent traverser une crise existentielle en appliquant les concepts du philosophe Jean Paul Sartre « mauvaise foi » et la « duperie de soi ». En plus de dévoiler les raisons psychologiques et financières derrières l'émergence de « l'industrie marque-influenceur » qui a contribué à l'augmentation des nombres

des « influenceurs » et de leurs abonnés, l'article arrive aux résultats que les activités « d'influencer » et « suivre » font obstacles à la subjectivité humaine en imposant des rôles bien précis aux deux catégories d'usagers.

Mots-clés