**Experimental investigations of #authenticity online.**

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## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

Studies in existentialist philosophy are often revisited to shed light on current society, despite having been through its peak during the days of de Beauvoir and her contemporaries. One such element in the existentialist's toolkit is the concept of 'authenticity', where authors such as Golomb (1995) and Guignon (2004) revisit the work of earlier existentialists when placed in the context of modern times.

With the advent of the web and new media, the term 'authenticity' is highly-valued and often bandied around, especially with regard to social media sites (which will be abbreviated to SMS for the sake of this paper). From a social science perspective, 'authenticity' takes many forms: examples of how a person can be 'authentic' with their online portrayals of themselves (Salisbury & Pooley 2017) include:

- using real names and biodata online, congruent with their real-world selves, and across social media platforms.
- sharing carefully curated personal details (Duffy & Hund 2015) - e.g. "fashion bloggers pepper their Instagram feeds with children and pets" (Salisbury & Pooley 2017) or mumpreneurs carefully framing their Instagram photos to exhibit a certain homely look (Byrne 2017)

An important one to preface my argument is Salisbury and Pooley's observation of "nearly all [SMSes they surveyed] invoked authenticity" (Salisbury & Pooley 2017), and more gravely, "authenticity" is a key attraction for marketers, to be used as a means to an end.

In this paper, I will argue that *the modern SMS use of 'authenticity' as a means to an end is against its very definition*. In doing so, my paper will first revisit 'authenticity' through the lens of existentialist philosophy, with emphasis on critiques on modern, SMS-based, authenticity[2]. Next, using a large-scale experimental (machine-learning/big-data) approach on popular posts on Instagram, I will argue that certain attributes in users' supposedly 'authentic' portrayals of daily life online are *curated to exhibit certain characteristic features as a whole*. Using the results of the empirical study, I will argue that a supposedly 'authentic' portrayal online is *counter to*

[1] I have chosen the Existential Philosophy (*ExPhi*) track an avenue for this paper, as it couples empirical approaches in big data, social media analysis, and machine learning with my earlier analysis of existentialism in online social networks. However, no prior knowledge of any computer science methods are needed, and all the prerequisite information and empirical data analysis will be presented in the slides.

[2] This draws upon my earlier work on Kierkegaard at AAP2017 (Cheong 2017a) as well as Sartre/Nietzsche at ASCP2017 (Cheong 2017b).

*existentialist ideals on authenticity*. Finally, drawing upon Golomb et al. with reference to 20th century existentialist ideas, I will argue that *'authenticity' on SMSes seeks to turn the 'for-itself' into an 'in-itself'.*

## 2.0. EXISTENTIALISM, AUTHENTICITY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

We shall revisit existentialist accounts of contemporary SMSs, to understand the connection between SMSs and authenticity. But first, drawing upon Golomb (1995), Trilling (1972), and Guignon (2004) what IS the existentialist's understanding of authenticity? Authenticity is often defined 'in-absence', and not positively (Cheong 2017b): we are only aware when we flee it, cf. Sartre[3] in *Being and Nothingness (Sartre 1969)*.

Parables are used to demonstrate the concept, notable examples being the authenticity of Nietzsche's Ubermensch (in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1888) and the inauthenticity of Sartre's Waiter (in *Being and Nothingness*). On a more personal level, authenticity is said to achieve "truthfulness with respect to oneself" and as subjective truth "which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die" (Kierkegaard 1938).

To introduce the idea of existential authenticity on SMSs, I refer to Dowden (Dowden 2016), who considered "a Sartrean existentialist reading" on Kim Kardashian-West and concluded that Kim (in her media appearances and social media selfies) projects "vulnerability and willingness to be exposed", hinting at a potential authenticity. The caveat is that, if it's a "calculated projection of a cultivated image of vulnerability, where Kim assumes her own objectification and conceives of herself as an object as well as the audience's bad faith and assumption of objectivity" (Dowden 2016) , then in the Sartrean perspective, she's assuming the 'in-itself' - the *en-soi (Sartre 1969)* - and her claim to authenticity is unfounded.

In my previous investigation on online social networks as a collective (Cheong 2017a), I have argued that, when seen through Kierkegaardian existentialism, the collective crowd is "inauthentic, irresponsible, [and] untruth". Kierkegaard's perception of the crowd is that it's "untruth [as it]... renders the single individual wholly unrepentant and irresponsible, or weakens his responsibility by making it a fraction of his decision" (Kierkegaard 1846). SMSes exhibit similar behaviour - dilution of responsibility is found in cases such as cyberbullying and trolling online. Another related argument is that, as people become more dependent on SMSes for news, the "irresponsibility" of the crowd now extends to the "irresponsibility" of the crowd *acting-in-the-capacity-of*-the press. This is drawn from Kierkegaard's experience of being

[3] Sartre tried to define it in his *Réflexions sur la question juive* (translated into English as *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 1948) as: "having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate." However, in his attempts to define a phenomenological ontology, he wasn't 100% successful and moved on to 'action politics' instead.

attacked in the Danish press, where "no one has to answer" or claim responsibility for (Kierkegaard 1846)[4].

More recently, my investigation of personal authenticity on SMSes draws from a reading of Golomb (1995), where (in)authenticity can be thought of as Sartrean 'bad faith' in-relation-to-others. This is in contrast to earlier forms of online communication (such as Internet Relay Chat), as users can adopt nicknames or personas online as they please. "To analogise ... one is merely an *actor* in amateur theatre playing The Waiter (Sartre 1969) in a cafe scene. [In an impersonal, role-playing, chat setting] one can choose to be a Grocer etc. at will. There is no claim of authenticity here" (Cheong 2017b). However, once the spirit of 'authenticity' is invoked in almost all SMSs (Salisbury & Pooley 2017), as explained in S1.0, it can give rise to bad faith. Consider this: are we now transformed into The Waiter (from Sartre) who also runs a Facebook Page? To paraphrase Sartre, is "the waiter in the cafe play[ing] with his condition [and their Facebook presence] in order to realize it[?] ... The public demands of them [waiter-esque acts and waiter-posted promotional selfies on the cafe's Facebook] that they realize it as a ceremony..." (Cheong 2017b).

## 3.0. WHAT CONSTITUTES AN #AUTHENTIC POST, AS DEEMED BY INSTAGRAM USERS?

To find out what everyday users of SMS mean when they invoke the concept of 'authenticity', this next part will discuss a large-scale quantitative study of SMS posts on Instagram. On Instagram (now owned by Facebook), users can upload user-generated images, often complemented by a caption and numerous #hashtags to categorise the image, as well as network/socialise with other users[5].

Two popular hashtags on Instagram are **#nofilter** and **#liveauthentic** that espouse authenticity. The former[6] simply means uploading an image without Instagram 'filters' or enhancements: which is "a contest[7] for authenticity... [by means of] filter-free sharing" by competing SMS sites (Salisbury & Pooley 2017). The latter[8] is "a collective interest in authenticity... a need to prove how real we are to ourselves and to others" (Whiting 2016).

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[4] Furthermore, Kierkegaard observes that the press "makes its readers more ... mediocre" and "create[s] the impression that many people think the same way" (Jansen 1990).
[5] Instagram complies with the definition of an online social networking site due to the two properties mentioned, as discussed by Krisnamurthy (Cormode et al. 2010).
[6] See https://www.busbud.com/blog/exposing-the-nofilter-movement/
[7] In my interpretation, as well as taking from Salisbury & Pooley (2017), there is a perceived 'arms race' amongst social media companies to introduce more features to their products. The usage of filters have extended to the use of animated/augmented reality ones on Instagram's competitors such as Snapchat.
[8] See https://www.washingtonian.com/2016/05/05/the-problem-with-liveauthentic/

An experiment[9] was devised to determine what elements are found in Instagram images -- hashtagged by their creators as **#nofilter** or **#liveauthentic** -- as well as their associated captions and metadata[10]. My hypothesis is that certain characteristics are emphasised in such images, accomplished by (and as a byproduct of) a mindful curation of the images, to accomplish certain *ends* - a dangerous counter to the claim of 'authenticity'.

Over a period of 5 days, 800-1000 images and associated captions/metadata are downloaded[11] per day for each hashtag from Instagram's public hashtag feed (to respect privacy, any accounts marked as private are not considered at all). As some downloads are often incomplete due to missing files and limitations of the software used, random sampling was done to select 500 images (with metadata intact) daily, for a total of 2,500 per hashtag, equivalent to 5,000 images in total. To systematically analyse the contents of such as large collection of images, the Amazon Web Services (AWS) platform, a 'cloud' platform for big data analysis was used. Using AWS "Rekognition" technology[12], employing deep-learning algorithms, each image was analysed[13] to determine:

- the various features/subjects in the image,
- faces and emotions (if found) within, and
- potentially suggestive content.

The metadata for each image was also analysed for statistical features such as the number of hashtags, etc. We will now discuss some summary findings centred around our experiment, and their implications on what constitutes a self-styled authentic Instagram posts.

### 3.1. Post Metadata: Caption Revisions

Out of the 5000 images, Instagram identifies 31.82% - 1591 of the 5000 posts - as having their captions revised. This is a significant percentage I did not expect which I argue has to do with the careful curation of what one would like others to see. It is therefore ironic that an authentic Instagram post needs quite a few 'rehearsals' and 're-posing' (Cheong 2017b).

### 3.2. Trends: Likes and Hashtag counts

Most posts have few hashtags, while the number of posts with extremely large hashtags are rare (i.e. a statistical power-law distribution). There is an interesting spike at 30 hashtags - correlating with the maximum number of hashtags supported by Instagram[14]. Hashtags in

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[9] Ethics clearance for this experiment (Project Number: 13762) was granted by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee on 29/05/2018. One of the conditions stipulate that the image/post dataset should not identify any person; as such the results are discussed in aggregated form in this paper and the accompanying slides.

[10] Metadata simply means [supplementary] 'data about data' - in the context of Instagram this includes e.g. number of likes, number of edits for the caption, etc.

[11] Using Martin Larralde's open source project at https://github.com/althonos/InstaLooter

[12] See https://docs.aws.amazon.com/rekognition/

[13] The slides contain a bird's-eye view of the experiment as well as a description of the algorithms' results on a sample image of the author.

[14] While any hashtags past 30 are not recognised as a hashtag by Instagram, the maximum we've seen is 60 hashtags in a single post. The number of hashtags used follows a power-law distribution, commonly seen in studies of the Internet and other SMS sites. See also (Green 2014) .

general “makes it possible for others to easily find messages with a specific theme or content”[15] - in other words, there is a want for others to see, appreciate, and acknowledge the posts - especially considering that it is meant for the public’s gaze. A related finding is the discovery of “likes” received by an image - it follows the same power-law pattern, with several images disproportionately receiving up to 4,713 likes!

### 3.3. Trends: Semantic network of image features/content

With regards to the actual image content itself, we have collated identifying features in all our images, as well as any emotions detected in faces, in two visual analyses.

The first one, a semantic-network approach pioneered by Alfano et al (2018)[16], has been used to measure the strength of correlations between features/content found in our pool of images. As an example: with a first image (with, say, a person, cafe, and food), and a second (with, say, beer, food, alcohol), by our semantic-network approach, we find that food is a key feature in common, and that alcohol/beer are closely associated.

From the salient features found in our 5,000 images, we obtain a network that highlights what features are commonly found. Predominantly we see that key subjects in such photographs include humans - selfies, group photos etc. The next set of subjects contain elements from nature (from terrain to flora and fauna). Features from the built environment and urban areas (roads, towns, cars, etc) are also present, as is elements from daily life (paper, ornaments, etc), and food (reflecting a trend of food photography). One interesting observation is the prevalence of suggestive themes (swimwear, tattoos and gym photos, etc) in our sample of images[17].

### 3.4. Trends: Portraits and emotional valence

Considering the 1,671 photographs which include faces, another interesting trend is observed. A treemap (where square size indicates the number of photos found) was constructed to visualise the connection between the number of human subjects in an image and the proportion of negative/positive emotions detected. A significant proportion (more than half) of photos containing faces exhibit positive emotions[18].

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[15] Wikipedia Contributors (2018). See also previous discussion on the two hashtags used

[16] The original approach was for identifying Virtues and Values in obituaries, where “trends in the co-occurrence of descriptions of the deceased within obituaries” (Alfano et al. 2018) were visualised in a network. This approach has then been extended by Alfano to map the concepts found in Nietzsche’s work as well as to map topics covered in the US press for 2016.

[17] Byrne & Cheong (2017)’s study of algorithms-in-society is alluded to for an important caveat that has to be highlighted here - algorithms are no substitute for human understanding. As the images are interpreted by an algorithm without human intervention or validation, there is a margin of error involved. The confidence scores by Rekognition cannot be used as a benchmark - a more preferable option is to use human judgement as the ‘ground truth’. The margin of error is not published in existing literature.

[18] The facial emotions as analysed by the algorithm provides an estimated probability score of the likelihood a given face is exhibiting a given emotion. Here, positive emotions include ‘happy’ or ‘calm’ values with scores >0.5, negative ones include ‘angry’, ‘disgusted’, or ‘sad’ with scores >0.5.

## 4.0. AUTHENTIC POSTS: PERSONAL PROCESS OR PUBLIC ARTIFACT?

The findings on **#liveauthentic** and **#nofilter** posts - cf. the revision of posts, effective hashtagging, and the portrayal of the human subject in photographs with constant 'positive emotions' - indicate that there is a need to carefully curate one's public image before presenting it to a wider audience. The act of image-curation has been the subject of prior studies of sociology and anthropology (Byrne 2017; Duffy & Hund 2015).

If authenticity is inherently personal (Golomb 1995), why even bother exhibiting to the world - through careful curation - that one is living authentically? I will now discuss how such posts are problematic when it comes to the existentialist perspective on authenticity.

Authenticity should be regarded as a *'be-ing'* - i.e. striving as self-making, an *ongoing* project on a personal level (Guignon 2004)[19]. Interpreting Nietzsche, "only the *individual who strives* to attain authentic life is able to feel whether he or she has been successful..." (Golomb 1995): *emph mine*. *My* constant curation of posts and *my* self-styling them as **#liveauthentic**, is not about *my ongoing strive* which only I can evaluate (which Nietzsche alludes to) - but merely as a *means of* creating an *end product* (an online persona, an artifact) for *others* to see/evaluate/act on. Golomb's reading of Kierkegaard echoes this: though a "... committed 'relation' to ourselves and by concentration on creating ourselves we are *continually* ('eternally') becoming authentic individuals" (*emph. mine*).

A potential counterargument to this is that the openness or honesty of an author of SMS content allows for the achievement of authenticity. I turn to Guignon (2004), who claims that the "intensity of the commitment" is crucial "...but so is "the *nature of the content* of the commitment" (Guignon 2004): *emph. mine*. Authenticity is not the same as sincerity nor honesty (Trilling 1972) - again, authenticity is an *ongoing, self-making, project* to achieve "truthfulness with respect to oneself" (Guignon 2004). *Even if* we assume that authenticity is indeed achievable (say, via **#liveauthentic** posts and honest audience engagement) - if one "*seek[s] authenticity* for authenticity's sake…[paradoxically, they] are no longer authentic" (Sartre 1992). The justification by Golomb (1995) is that acting "authentically for the sake of … being hailed as an authentic person… is to will to be defined as being-for-itself-in-itself, as a conscious thing in-the-world, which is not possible" (Golomb 1995). This leads into my final argument on how self-styled 'authenticity' on SMSes are used to achieve certain ends, which could dangerously turn the 'for-itself' into an 'in-itself' (per Sartre).

### 5.0. TURNING THE FOR-ITSELF INTO THE IN-ITSELF

In a naive yet quantifiable form, having a good **#nofilter** or **#liveauthentic** post on social media will result in the abundance of "likes" - i.e. points received if the post finds favour in, or agreement of, others (Salisbury & Pooley 2017). More concerningly, the invocation of

[19] Based upon my earlier work in the ASCP (Cheong, 2017b).

authenticity is favoured by marketers to increase sales, incentives, or popularity, exemplified by quotes such as:

- "Authentic engagement involves a healthy mix of strategy and spontaneity (as is humanity) … The first step to engaging authentically is to pinpoint users and accounts that would truly benefit from your activity and commentary as well as give you new ideas for content and regrams."[20]
- "With time, growing your Instagram followers will grow your business…. As your influence builds, brands may even pay you to review or advertise their products…" followed by a set of steps to "...get authentic followers without trickery."[21]

Turning to the Sartrean concept of authenticity in-relation-to-others, "authentic relations [are] wherein each person regards the other as an end-in-itself and not just as a means of furthering her own projects and whims" (Golomb 1995). This means that any 'authentic' social media engagement with others, if it exists, *cannot* be *as a means* to achieve 'likes', page views, marketing value, or any sort of gain. Our earlier quotes found in social media advice pages -- particularly "*[authenticity for] growing your Instagram followers will grow your business*"[22] -- suffers from this flaw.

Recalling the work of Dowden (2016) earlier, claims by Kim Kardashian-West on being 'authentic' online can be negated if she were to assume "her own objectification [online] and conceives of herself as an object", coupled with "the audience's [e.g. her followers on Instagram's] bad faith and assumption of objectivity". By having carefully curated posts on social media - exhibiting positive emotions in **#nofilter** selfies, posting photos from travelling as a way to **#liveauthentic**, to name a few - one runs the risk of turning themselves into an *object,* a *thing-in-itself* rather than a *subject*.

I turn to Sartre's discussion on the pour-soi vs the en-soi. The use of the cloak of *authenticity* to portray oneself (and one's activities, adventures, etc.) on SMSes as an *object-of-consideration* (for likes, clicks, monetisation etc) is, according to Sartrean existentialism, a form of *bad faith*. Here, one is denying oneself as a *transcendent* being, a being with "freedom to make oneself into something very different" (Varga & Guignon 2014); but instead choosing to focus instead on one's *facticity* - "acting as if one were a mere [self-styled authentic] thing".

I paraphrase (*in italics*) Varga and Guignon's example to reflect on the context of a **#liveauthentic** post:

> "...the person who thinks [*by travelling the world, posting their experiences on SMS, and claiming that they are living authentically*] "just as a matter of fact" is excluding from view

[20] See https://schedugr.am/blog/guide-authentic-engagement-instagram/
[21] See https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/07/31/how-to-go-from-zero-to-thousands-of-engaged-instagram-followers-in-less-time/#73469cc2328b
[22] Ibid.

> the ability to transform [*their existence*] through [*actually, say, striving to continually improve oneself through lifelong study or healthy living habits etc.*] ...a denial of transcendence or freedom." (Varga & Guignon 2014)

This is even more pronounced with high-profile, active, SMS users such as influencers and celebrities with countless followings and 'likes'. "Sartre identifies the bad faith of the 'they' with the bourgeois ethic of 'self-important people' ... who regard their selves as serious and solid 'objects' (en-soi) and who die as copies" (1995). This links back to our earlier reading of Dowden (2016) - Kim Kardashian-West treating herself as an *en-soi* if she "assumes her own objectification" as a social media user.

**6.0. CONCLUSION**

In summary, I have argued that the existential notion of authenticity is lacking in self-styled authentic posts - based on three points. Firstly, the existentialist's concept of a continual process (as a means and as an end) of attaining a personal, subjective truth is absent in posts evoking and invoking authenticity. Secondly, turning the 'authentic self' into an object, especially when it is used as a catalyst for other ends, is Sartrean bad faith - reducing a human to an in-itself (en soi). The last point is perhaps an interesting one, central to my main argument, which can lead to further discussion: the use of empirical methods, especially social media analysis and 'big data' methods, to study philosophical connotations of real-world social interaction.

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