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Program:	:	UMW UWTSD DUAL AWARD SUMMER TEACHING
Course	:	WAYS OF THINKING / IUMW4005
Semester	:	SUMMER (MAY 2025)
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Authenticity, Social Media and Loneliness in The Modern Day

A Contemporary Scenario / Divergent Thinking

You are lonely.

Picture the scene in your head. You're a young adult in the city, in your late teens or early to mid 20s. You encounter crowds every day, be it from commuting to and from school, university or work. You are surrounded by people at all times, from students to co-workers to random passerbys. The city is vibrant. It's full of life, of activities, or things to do and see, full of people milling about, living their own lives and living out their own stories. The city feels like it's getting busier and more populous every day, and the world is definitely getting more populous every day, at a time with more living people than any other time in human history.

But yet, you are alone.

Everywhere you go, you see people find their places. Their communities. Their *people*. You see them sitting together in cafes, restaurants or parks. You see friends chatting together on the bus ride home. You see loved ones share a kiss nearby, or talk to each other face-to-face through the screens of their phones. Everywhere you go, you see people together. You see people happy. You see people who seem to have a sense of community, connection and camaraderie.

And yet, you feel alone.

So you open up your own phone, bombarded with notifications and social media feeds. If the real world feels so lonely, perhaps the digital world can serve as a form of escape. Social platforms call people you willingly engage with 'followers' or even 'friends'. You engage

with others, you get to read their stories and thoughts, see their photos and videos, all snippets of a life. You may even share a line of communication with them through messaging or voice calls. You engage with people, some may even be considered friends in spite of vast physical proximity from one another, because despite the physical distance, you feel surrounded and immersed in a digital crowd.

But it's not enough. You still feel alone.

Borrowing a phrase from the second chapter of *Point Blanc*, the second entry in the popular *Alex Rider* book series, “the worst time to feel alone is when you’re in a crowd” (Horowitz, 2003, p.14), in relation to the main character being surrounded by fellow schoolchildren but unable to relate his life to theirs. And to a growing number of people, in what many scientists and researchers are coining as a “loneliness epidemic” (Johnson, 2023), that’s not just an image in their head, but their day to day reality. If you’re a person that feels lonelier than ever, you are, ironically, not alone in that loneliness.

But why do we feel this way? Is this a result of living busier lives (Burkeman, 2016), either working longer or feeling like we need to be working even when we’re not, thus isolating ourselves from communities and friends? Are we starved of opportunities to bond with new people, either by the lack of ‘places’ (Rao, 2024) and shared sense of community? Are we scared of people both familiar and unfamiliar in evolving times, taking into account the ubiquity and prominence of social media and how it affects our social outlooks and social capabilities (Chesak, 2021)? To delve into humanist and post-humanist theory, are we truly capable of authenticity in this era of algorithms and influencers, or are we all doomed to live in bad faith by the technological environment that shapes both ourselves and society?

Understanding Bad Faith and Authenticity / Convergent Thinking

When discussing ‘bad faith’, it is important to draw a distinction between the dictionary definition of the term, and the definition of the term in an existential sense. Synonymous with deception, bad faith can simply mean to have ‘a lack of honesty in dealing with others’ (Merriam Webster, 2025). However, in the existential sense, ‘bad faith’ is often defined by Jean-Paul Sartre’s definition of the term, which is that bad faith is a wilful form of lying to

one's self in a deliberate and conscious manner (Sartre, 1956, p.48). In simple terms, this means that 'bad faith' in the existential sense is still a form of deception, but specifically *self-deception*.

Sartre also further defines living in bad faith through denial of freedom, as "an inner disintegration in the heart of being" (Sartre, 1956, p.70), and this denial is not just living by the rules and norms of other people, but under influential institutions and belief systems as well (Merchey, 2021). This can be understood as people being more than just their traits and labels, imposed internally or externally, as this would reduce us to static 'things' rather than as dynamic 'beings' (Maden, 2023). This denial is not just a received feeling either, as it also applies to the denial of the freedom of others as well, since Sartre also acknowledges that other people are equally as free (Sartre, 1956, p.270) and thus we can impose bad faith onto others as well.

Bad faith can be imposed through pressures from aforementioned institutions and beliefs that can lead people to live in bad faith. Sartre provides multiple examples of these pressures in his work, such as that of a waiter, who is bound to their role by the terms of their occupation (Sartre, 1956, p.60), and of a grocer, who must limit himself to his function in order to not be seen as 'offensive' to a buyer (Sartre, 1956, p.59), thus the threats of social and economic ramifications can thus lead a person to act in bad faith as an act of personal preservation.

'Bad faith' also implies the existence of 'good faith', its antithesis. If bad faith details how people deny their own freedom by living according to the rules and norms of others (Merchey, 2021), then good faith should be understood as a conscious "project of being spontaneously willing to be critical and open" (Catalano, 1985, p.81). However neither term draws their definitions from morality or ethics (Thomas and Das, 2022, p. 1181), but rather through their connection to 'authenticity'.

In existentialism, for something to be authentic is for something to be "of uncontested origin or authorship" (Thomas and Das, 2022, p. 1180) and to live in accordance with one's own values despite external pressures (Thomas and Das, 2022, p. 1180). While living authentically is thus seen as the cure to living in bad faith, much can be said on the ability, and possibility, for people to live fully authentic lives, or if people have to inevitably live at least partially in bad faith, due to social lives and work making it easy to become detached

(Maden, 2023). It is more rational to frame authenticity not as something that can be fully achieved, let alone permanently, but as a goal to strive towards. Indeed, Sartre himself described authenticity as something to be earned (Sartre, 1956, p.246), which further supports being authentic as a continuous effort rather than a default state of being, especially in a dynamic and evolving world.

Authenticity & Social Media / Lateral Thinking

In regards to the evolving and ever-changing state of the world, it is worth noting the discussion of bad faith and authenticity is rooted in humanism, which is to say a strand of existentialist philosophy that centers the individual and their capacity for reason and decision making (Merriam Webster, 2025). Using this humanist lens, we can see the ongoing evolution of technology as another influence that may cause us to live in bad faith, akin to an institution of influence that we engage with both actively and passively.

There is much that can be said about the effect of social media on our methods and habits of thinking, but there are key takeaways that can be likened to Sartre's philosophy of bad faith can concern the social's tendencies to foster constant comparisons and surface-level interactions, which makes users impressionable due to inadequacy and deprives the user of deeper conversations and social engagements (The School of Positive Psychology, 2024). This can be likened to Sartre's distinction between operating as a "thing" and as a "being", with shallower interactions making us function as the former rather than the latter, thus making our actions and interactions less authentic.

This lack of authenticity can go a ways to explaining how loneliness proliferates due to social media. And perhaps we can understand human inauthenticity as a result of social media being inherently inauthentic, due to being less meaningful and real but merely an illusion of communication (Artushin, 2024), or even as a 'simulation' intending to be a copy of such (Baudrillard, 1983, p.6), replacing authentic real world communication with a spectacle, or to quote Debord, where "everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord, 1970, p.2).

However, there are still manners in which authenticity can still be achieved even on social media, where we can exercise our dynamism as ‘beings’ rather than passively using social media as ‘things’. Key to this is to curate our experiences critically and carefully. Users of social media platforms can be compared to actors on a stage (de Kosnik, 2019, p.30), and usage on these platforms can be broadcast to tens, hundreds, thousands or even millions of people, and this is an audience that can respond both directly and indirectly to a user, despite many people’s capacity for socialization being constrained at around 150 people (Korte, 2020, p.108). If we are to behave with authenticity on social media, we must use social media in a way that does not cause us to disengage from critical thought and thus engage with others in bad faith.

Loneliness is a subjective feeling for many people. People have different emotional needs and requirements to avoid or defeat loneliness. The lack of physical ‘third places’, a social venue that goes far beyond being an alternative to home and work (Oldenburg, 1999, p.21), but as a social space characterized by more playful moods and the support and comfort that it offers to its regular occupants (Oldenburg, 1999, p.42) is certainly a contributing factor (Rao, 2024), but as social media posits itself as the new ‘third place’ for many, one that is missing a critical physical and face-to-face element, it adds further weight to its position as an inauthentic simulacra of socialization, which compounds loneliness rather than remedies it.

Perhaps then, it is worth not relying on social media as a channel for authenticity and for social interaction, but rather as a channel of communication that enables plans for physical social interaction, where users can, in good faith, seek authentic experiences and relationships with others and interact as beings, rather than merely things within their social feeds.

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