



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

MODULE: IUMW4005 WAYS OF THINKING

LECTURER: KYLIE BOON

ASSIGNMENT TITLE: ESSAY

NAME	STUDENT ID
HANNAH ABDUL MANAN	2423919

Part 1: Descriptive and Persuasive Writing

The Contemporary Human

The bus ride is ordinary, faces lit by the glow of small screens, bodies swaying with every stop. Yet what I see is not mere commuting. It is performance. A teenager curates their TikTok identity, a professional polishes her “always-on” work persona, and even I am rehearsing my own role as I scroll through Instagram. We are no longer simply living, we are staging ourselves. Shakespeare’s famous line captures this truth perfectly: “*All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.*” The stage, however, has changed. Today, it is a digital one.

The contemporary human is defined less by *who they are* and more by *how they appear*. Research shows the average internet user spends over two hours daily on social media (Statista, 2023). This is not passive entertainment, it is active participation in a performance economy. Every post is a script, every selfie a costume, every “like” is an applause. We are performers, and the audience is everywhere, but let us ask the uncomfortable question. What does this performance cost us? Psychologist Sherry Turkle (2011) argues that we are “alone together,” connected in appearance but isolated in substance. We curate highlight reels while concealing our fears, doubts, and imperfections. The result is a fractured self, one polished for the public eye and another hidden, uncertain, and often exhausted. Isn’t it troubling that we feel pressure not only to live but to prove that we are living?

This is where persuasion becomes urgent. I contend that the culture of performance risks eroding authenticity. We are told to be “real,” yet algorithms reward only what is clickable, shareable, and marketable. The digital stage demands not truth but spectacle. And so, contemporary humans risk becoming caricatures of themselves, trapped in endless comparison, validation-seeking, and the fear of invisibility. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) reminded us that social life has always been theatrical. But unlike in his time, our stages are multiplied and magnified. There is no “backstage” where the contemporary human can retreat. Notifications follow us to the dinner table, into our bedrooms, and even onto the morning bus. Do we control the performance, or does the performance have now taken control of us?

Yet I am not calling for abandonment of the digital stage. To reject it entirely would be to erase ourselves from modern society. Rather, I argue for a conscious awareness of the roles we

play. Performance is inevitable, but it need not consume us. We must resist the illusion that the mediated self is the whole self. By embracing vulnerability, by daring to show imperfection, we reclaim our humanity from the script of perfection that social media writes for us. So, what is the contemporary human? We are both the actor and the audience, creators of our digital selves and victims of their demands. But if Shakespeare's stage endures, then perhaps our greatest act today is not flawless performance, but the courage to be imperfect, even under the spotlight of a million screens.

Part 2: Convergent thinking and Expository writing

Problem solving

Imagine a quiet café table, occupied by two unlikely conversationalists: Jean-Paul Sartre and Bernard Stiegler. Between them lies the question of what it means to be human in the twenty-first century. A question shaped by freedom, technology, and the paradoxes of modern life. Sartre begins, true to existentialist form, “The contemporary human is condemned to be free. Even in this digital world, each person must choose who they become. Social media, work, or love, none of it dictates us. We dictate ourselves through choice.” For Sartre (1943/1993), human beings are defined by radical freedom and responsibility. To him, even the algorithms of Instagram or the demands of the workplace cannot strip away the individual’s ultimate responsibility for their actions.

Stiegler interrupts with caution. “But freedom is not so absolute. Our very attention is captured, our desires conditioned. The ‘contemporary human’ is shaped by what I call the *proletarianization of attention* (Stiegler, 2010). Digital technologies reprogram our cognitive habits, shaping not only what we see but also what we desire. How free is the human being when their imagination is colonized by the endless scroll?” This is where the problem emerges. Sartre emphasizes the irreducible agency of the human being, insisting that even under structural pressures, we are always free to resist. Stiegler emphasizes the systemic conditions that undermine agency, suggesting that freedom is constrained, distorted, or even eroded by technological environments.

Nietzsche might hover in the background, reminding them that the human being is also a creature of becoming, striving to overcome its limitations (*Übermensch*). For him, technology could be a tool of empowerment, but also of enslavement if it numbs the will to create (Nietzsche, 1883/1999). So, what is the contemporary human’s problem? It is the tension between freedom and conditioning. On one hand, Sartre’s framework empowers individuals to recognise responsibility in every act, an antidote to passivity. On the other hand, Stiegler reveals how late-capitalist technology exploits human psychology, reducing autonomy and narrowing possibilities. Together, their perspectives force us to ask: *Can humans still be truly free in a world designed to manipulate their attention?*

A convergent way of thinking seeks not to privilege one answer but to synthesize insights. Perhaps the solution lies in recognizing both dimensions simultaneously. The contemporary human must acknowledge Stiegler's warning: that freedom cannot be naïvely assumed when digital infrastructures shape habits and desires. Yet Sartre's insistence on responsibility remains crucial: only by exercising conscious choice. Through digital literacy, critical awareness, and resistance to passive consumption, are humans able to reclaim their agency.

Thus, the expository lesson is clear. The contemporary human problem is not freedom versus determinism, but freedom within conditioning. Agency must be understood as fragile, threatened, and yet not extinguished. We must cultivate practices that strengthen awareness, resist manipulation, and reassert responsibility. The café dialogue, then, does not end with consensus, but with recognition of a shared problem, that the stage on which we act is increasingly digital, and the quality of our performance depends on whether we submit to scripts written for us, or choose to write our own.

Part 3: Lateral Thinking and Narrative Writing

Who am I?

The city hums differently at night. Streetlights paint the sidewalks in soft gold, cars drift past like fragments of forgotten conversations, and the shopfront glass reflects me back, a figure both familiar and strange. I watch myself walking, as though I am a character pulled from a book I haven't finished reading. Who am I? A narrator, an actor, or simply a fiction constructed for the eyes of others? Jean-Paul Sartre's words return to me: to live in *bad faith* is to deny freedom, to hide behind roles rather than accept responsibility for choice (Sartre, 1993). Am I guilty of that? On Instagram, I am the curated version. Smiling at the café table, sunlit on the beach, thoughtful in captions that make me sound wiser than I feel. It is a stage, and I slip easily into costume. Yet when the screen darkens, I wonder if the performance has devoured the player.

Walking under neon signs, I recall how often I measure my worth in numbers. Followers, likes, comments. Each click feels like validation, but it fades as quickly as it comes, leaving only the hunger for more. This is the script written for the contemporary human. Perform, gather applause and repeat. But if I am only what others perceive, who am I when no one is watching? I think about the stories I tell myself. That I am ambitious, creative, independent. That I know where I am going. But late at night, I catch the cracks. The doubts that whisper: perhaps I am not choosing freely, but following paths that society maps out, study hard, find success, stay visible, stay relevant. Do I live as myself, or as the version of me that the world expects?

Erving Goffman once argued that life itself is performance, and that we wear masks suited to each social situation (Goffman, 1959). Perhaps there is no "real" self behind the masks, only shifting selves depending on the stage. But Sartre would push back, reminding me that masks are choices too, and to pretend otherwise is to slip into bad faith. The philosopher's challenge stings: am I choosing, or am I hiding? Sherry Turkle (2011) adds another layer to my wandering thoughts. She writes of how we are "alone together," tethered to our devices, caught between intimacy and isolation. I feel that paradox acutely tonight. Surrounded by glowing windows and buzzing notifications in my pocket, I am both connected and profoundly solitary.

I stop at a quiet corner, where the hum of the city softens. The glass of a closed boutique reflects me once again. I lean closer, half-expecting the reflection to speak back. Maybe identity is less a fixed essence and more a story I keep editing. A fiction, yes, but one that can be rewritten. That thought steadies me.

So who am I? Tonight, I am a character in motion. Part creation, part truth, a self-in-progress. I am both the actor and the author, both trapped in performance and free to choose differently. To admit this duality is, perhaps, to live more authentically, and maybe that is enough. Not to find a final answer, but to keep walking, rewriting, and refusing to surrender my freedom, even under the glow of a thousand digital spotlights.

References

- Goffman, E. (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Nietzsche, F. (1999) *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by T. Common. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. (Original work published 1883).
- Sartre, J.-P. (1993) *Being and nothingness*. Translated by H.E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press. (Original work published 1943).
- Shakespeare, W. (1623) *As you like it*. London: First Folio.
- Statista (2023) *Daily time spent on social networking by internet users worldwide from 2012 to 2023*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/433871/daily-social-media-usage-worldwide/> (Accessed: 13 September 2025).
- Stiegler, B. (2010) *Taking care of youth and the generations*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Turkle, S. (2011) *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.