

# The Impact of Social Media on Identity, Authenticity, and Related Risks

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In the digital age, **social media** and online platforms have become an integral part of our daily lives, changing the way we communicate, interact and perceive ourselves. According to Professor Leucadito's notes "*Being in the net alters our perception of identity, community and relationship, it offers us a flat, asynchronous time*" (e.g. read a message and reply after). The numbers that social networks reach are incredible: for example, in 2023, Instagram had 2 billion monthly active users, with people spending 33.1 minutes per day on the platform, while X/Twitter 619 million active users and about 34.1 minutes per day [5]. These numbers should make us reflect: Why are social media so used? For a simple matter of convenience, fashion and participation, or because they allow us to show others a different and better version of ourselves? Does operating in the online/digital world alter our ability to live an authentic life, as described by Heidegger in "Being and Time"? In this short essay I will analyze these and others themes, reflecting on the concept of identity and authenticity in the digital world. I will also discuss the potential risks that people encounter while being online.

Social media offers unique opportunities, allowing users to communicate with others across incredible distances, share thoughts and opinions, and present curated versions of themselves. However, they also introduce numerous challenges related to **authenticity** and self-awareness. Our authenticity is therefore strongly questioned in the digital and social media world. Being on the internet affects our perception of **identity**: identity is the relationship we establish with ourselves. A social profile does not describe our total identity, since online we are the directors of our lives, we can choose what to show others and instead cut out the boring, frustrating, sad and uninteresting parts. You have surely seen an Instagram story or post of a public figure and thought: "What an exciting life they leads, always doing something interesting, never bored and or sad". The truth is that, as just stated, social media gives us the power to show others only a very small part of our lives, and naturally we are likely to show only the best parts.

I would like to refer to the **Heideggerian** concept of **Dasein**. This German term means "to be here" or "existence" (from the German *da sein*). It's not just about being present, but about being conscious of your presence. For Heidegger, authentic Dasein involves being aware of and accepting one's existence in its totality. However, social media can encourage an individual to move away from this authenticity. The concept of "being here", when applied to social media, becomes problematic as online presence often does not correspond to **authentic presence**. Social media interaction is mediated and filtered, making an authentic experience of Dasein difficult.

Another aspect is **Mitsein**, which means "to be with". "With" represents the "others". Heidegger claims that we are born and, at the same time, have people around us. In this sense, social media helps us a lot to communicate with others and be "close" to them, not literally, but virtually and socially. However, this closeness can be superficial, based on external approval and recognition rather than authentic relationships. Connections on social media are

often built around likes, comments and shares, which can create a sense of **artificial closeness** and **apparent authenticity**, but which rarely replace the deep, meaningful relationships that develop through face-to-face interactions. But **what is a like?** It's not an opinion but an agreement. Professor Leucadito states: *"They do not represent an argumentative form of thinking, but express a preference, which has no qualitative content, measured only on the basis of their quantity"*. In other words, likes do not contribute to meaningful discussion or mutual understanding, but serve only as numerical indicators of popularity or superficial consensus.

We have two other concepts that describe two different ways in which individuals relate to their own being and to the external world: **Selbsein**, which means "to be him/herself", and **Alssein**, which means "to be in a role". The former involves authenticity and personal integrity, where an individual acts and expresses themselves in a manner consistent with their personal identity and values. This involves being honest with both yourself and others, without compromising your authenticity to fit social norms or external expectations. In contrast, **Alssein** refers to situations in which an individual takes adopts a behavior or identity that is more influenced by external expectations and social roles, rather than inner authenticity. In these cases, a person may not act sincerely about themselves, but adopt behaviors that reflect the role or image that others expect to see. On social media, a contrast between **Selbsein** and **Alssein** is often evident. Maintaining a balance between the two is crucial to maintaining your personal integrity and fostering authentic relationships.

An additional concept in the digital world is that of **Alter Ego**, which indicates a substitute for a person or another self, a second personality within the same person, with characteristics clearly distinct from the first [3]. Reflecting on the notes *"Our identity is not something that is already given to us at the moment of our birth, but built with the other (alter) and sometimes even against others. Our being in the network protects us, shields us from the other, from his body and his gaze"*, this implies that identity on social media is not static but is shaped through online interactions with other users. These interactions include comments, reactions, shares, and conversations that help to defining an individual's public image and self-perception. Moreover, social media offers a form of **protection from others** and their direct judgments. Users can control and select what to present online, filtering what to share and with whom. This process can sometimes make us feel more confident, but also lead to arrogant behavior. Information technologies give us the power to transform our reality, to be multiple characters at once, pretending to be younger, man, woman or more attractive than we really are. This gives us more control over our public representation, but at the same time can lead us towards a state of **inauthenticity**. As **Pirandello** famously said, *"Se per gli altri non ero quel che finora avevo creduto d'essere per me, chi ero io?"* [1].

In the second part of the essay, I will delve deeper into the **legislative aspect** and the implications of behavior on social media. We have previously

discussed about “protection from others”, the power to select what we do or do not want to show to the public. However, while using social media offers us a sense of protection behind a screen, it paradoxically exposes us more to the public and others. What we publish online, whether photos, comments or posts, remains accessible, shareable and archiveable even without our explicit consent. This dual nature of social media raises important questions regarding privacy and personal data protection. With the growing number of online interactions and the dissemination of personal information on social media, many legislations have introduced regulations aimed at safeguarding user privacy. A key example is the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**, which regulates the processing of personal data and imposes restrictions on digital platforms to ensure responsible handling of user information [4].

When using social media for the first time, users are asked to accept the GDPR to comply with European privacy regulations. One of the most relevant aspects of the GDPR is **explicit consent**: users must provide their explicit consent for the processing of personal data. Additionally, the GDPR grants users the right to request the deletion of their personal data, also known as the “**right to be forgotten**”. This allows users to delete information that could damage their reputation or violate their privacy.

Another fundamental principle of the GDPR is **transparency and communication**. Digital platforms must be transparent about how users’ personal data is collected, used and shared. Users must be clearly informed about who has access to their data and for what purposes it is used. Despite these protections, significant concerns remain regarding security and privacy on social media. Data breaches, misuse of personal information, and difficulties in controlling the spread of published content are real and persistent problems. Furthermore, the perception of being “protected” may lead users to share more personal information than they would in a non-digital context, increasing the risk of data exposure and abuse.

I would like to finish by discussing about an important issue regarding the concept of identity in the digital life: the **Identity Theft**. The latter occurs when an individual obtains and uses another person’s identifying information, such as their name, identification numbers, or credit card details, without consent, to commit fraudulent activities or other criminal acts [2].

In the realm of **Cybersecurity**, identity theft is a critical concern. Cybercriminals employ various tactics to steal personal information, including **phishing**, **malware**, and **data breaches**. Phishing involves deceptive emails or messages that trick users into revealing personal information. Malware, on the other hand, is malicious software that can infiltrate a user’s device to capture sensitive data. Data breaches occur when hackers infiltrate databases containing vast amounts of personal information, often from companies or institutions, compromising the data of millions of users.

To combat identity theft, essential Cybersecurity measures include, for example: Regular Updates and Patching, **Encryption**, Authentication methods such as Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA), but above all **educating and in-**

**forming** users about the risks of identity theft and how to recognize and avoid phishing attempts and other scams. Thus, in the digital era, safeguarding one's identity becomes crucial not only for practical and economical reasons but also to preserve the philosophical authenticity and integrity of one's being in the world.

In conclusion I can say that I have discussed the topic extensively, raising various important questions and reflections; however, this paper represents only a small part of a complex and very important subject. I believe that social media are an incredible tool, now essential in daily life. While these platforms offer us great opportunities to communicate, express ourselves and connect with others, they pose significant challenges to our concepts of Identity, Authenticity and Privacy. Often the version we show on social media clashes with our true identity and with the Heideggerian concepts of Dasein and Mitsein, leading to a possible **loss of authenticity**. Additionally, issues like identity theft highlight the dark side of the digital world, underscoring the importance of taking robust **Cybersecurity** measures. A further aspect that I have not covered concerns the addictions that social media can cause in individuals, making it even more difficult to use these tools with awareness.

# Bibliography

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