

Kierkegaard for the Information Age

Analysing the Impact of Social Media on the Self and Selfhood

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Abstract

The adoption of social media technologies as a ubiquitous means of self-expression in the twenty-first century has precipitated a multi-disciplinary academic discussion over whether the use of these technologies has a “positive” or “negative” impact on the individual self. The discipline of theology has also engaged in this discussion, asking critical questions about the impact of social media use on the self before God. Despite significantly predating twenty-first century technology, I argue that Søren Kierkegaard’s work exploring the impact of communication activities on philosophical and theological questions of self and selfhood contributes to this discussion. Drawing primarily on Kierkegaard’s texts, *Sickness Unto Death* (1849) and *Two Ages* (1846), I engage Kierkegaard’s work in an interdisciplinary conversation in order to offer a Kierkegaardian analysis of the impact of social media use on the self and selfhood. Therefore, the article aims to contribute to a broader theological debate concerning the “positive” or “negative” effects of social media use on the self.

Introduction

The emergence of social media technologies—such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube—has facilitated the widespread adoption of digitally mediated personal profiles and



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communication tools.¹ The rise of the “selfie”—a photo taken by an individual of oneself and often uploaded to a social media account—is emblematic of a broader turn whereby individual selves routinely represent themselves to others using social media accounts.² These particular forms of digital media communication provide the self with new ways to mediate itself to itself, itself to others, and itself to God. Given Søren Kierkegaard’s “proto-interdisciplinary” interest in the impact of communication activities on philosophical and theological questions of self and selfhood, the premise of this article is that Kierkegaard’s work has something valuable to contribute to similar conceptual questions in the twenty-first century. The aim of this article, therefore, is to ask: what does a Kierkegaardian analysis of social media contribute to a discussion of the impact of these forms of digital media on the self and selfhood?

Within the academic disciplines of media, communication, and psychology, there is already a well-established body of literature that has sought to understand whether “mass self-communication,”³ or “self-representation in social media,”⁴ has a positive or negative impact on individuals and society. The question of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood is evident both in enthusiasm for new opportunities of “authentic” self-expression,⁵ and also in concerns over the self’s commodification through “self-branding,”⁶ or the use of “in/authentic” social media identities for commercial or political ends.⁷ Mirroring these debates, academic work within the Christian theological tradition has begun to address similar critical questions concerning the impact of social media on the “dynamic of personal identity formation” and the self before God.⁸ Angela Williams Gorrell’s research, for example, found that church-goers themselves believed that social media facilitated spiritual growth, nurturing “Christian formation”, facilitating prayer, community growth, and mission.⁹ Sceptics such as Kathryn Davelaar, however, argue that the “practices created”

¹ In 2020, DataReportal estimate that 3.8 billion people use social media; Simon Kemp, “Digital 2020 Report,” DataReportal, 30 January 2020, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-global-digital-overview>.

² Jill Walker Rettberg, “Self-Representation in Social Media,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, eds., Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell, (London: Sage, 2017).

³ Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

⁴ Rettberg, “Self-Representation in Social Media”.

⁵ Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, “Being ‘really real’ on YouTube: Authenticity, Community and Brand Culture in Social Media Entertainment,” *Media International Australia* 164, no. 1, (2017): 71–81.

⁶ Jennifer M. Whitmer, “You are Your Brand: Self-branding and the Marketization of Self,” *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 3, (2019).

⁷ Gunn Enli “‘Trust Me, I Am Authentic!’: Authenticity Illusions in Social Media Politics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, eds. Axel Bruns, Gunn Enli, Eli Skogerbo, Anders Olof Larsson, and Christian Christensen, (London: Routledge, 2016), 121-136.

⁸ Ron Cole-Turner, “Commodification and Transfiguration: Socially Mediated Identity in Technology and Theology”, *HTS Theological Studies* 75, no. 1, (2019): 1-11.

⁹ Angela Williams Gorrell, “Social Media, Churches, and Christian formation” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2016), 199.

around digital media communications inhibit the “present attentiveness” required for a relationship with God,¹⁰ while Michael Xiarhos suggests that mobile technology and “social media specifically” is a potentially “dangerous distraction” from spiritual goals.¹¹

In this article, I offer a Kierkegaardian analysis of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood—informed by an interdisciplinary approach—to obtain insights that are relevant to these broader theological questions and the wider academic study of social media. In suggesting that Kierkegaard’s works contribute to a “theological” discussion of the question of selfhood and social media, “theology” and the “theological” are understood broadly in this article as pertaining to any discussion of God. These terms are not, therefore, only conceived narrowly in the sense of “Theology” as an academic discipline. Peter Vardy notes that Kierkegaard would have rejected systemising disciplines such as academic Philosophy and Theology, which “objectify knowledge”.¹² As C. Stephen Evans argues, however, in the context of the question of whether Kierkegaard is a philosopher, this categorisation presupposes a certain post-Enlightenment understanding of the nature of scholarly work pertaining to “philosophy” and “theology”.¹³ It is also notable that, despite the Christian (rather than “Theological”) emphasis of works such as *Sickness unto Death*, the terminology of the “theological” is not alien to it—significantly, in this context, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, describes the self before God as “theological”.¹⁴

In order to avoid an anachronistic analysis of Kierkegaard’s work, I follow Patrick Stokes’ approach to Kierkegaard’s work methodologically by first providing “an exegesis and interpretation” of Kierkegaard in his own context, before turning to the “application of Kierkegaardian concepts” to a contemporary twenty-first century question.¹⁵ In the first half of the article, I offer an account of the self and selfhood in Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death* (1849).¹⁶ This text represents the “consummation of [Kierkegaard’s] ‘anthropological contemplation’”,¹⁷ summarising much of Kierkegaard’s thinking on selfhood in relation to anxiety and despair. Kierkegaard also regarded *Sickness unto Death* as presenting the Christian “demands of ideality” to “their maximum”,¹⁸

¹⁰ Kathryn Ann Davelaar, “Embodied Attention: Learning from the Wisdom of the Desert and Saint Augustine”, (PhD diss., Duke University, 2014), iv.

¹¹ Michael G. Xiarhos, “The Connected Pilgrim: The Potential for Transformation in the Social Media Age”, (PhD diss., Salve Regina University, 2016), iv.

¹² Peter Vardy, *The SPCK Introduction to Kierkegaard* (London: SPCK, 2008), xi.

¹³ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

¹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening [SUD]*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), XI 191.

¹⁵ Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 20.

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening [SUD]*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Hong & Hong, “Historical Introduction”, *SUD*, 6.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, cited in Hong & Hong, “Historical Introduction”, *SUD*, 11.

publishing the work under a pseudonym, Anti-Climacus,¹⁹ because he did not believe he could live according to the ideal that the work described.²⁰ The account I offer will not be exhaustive; rather, the aim here is to demonstrate that Kierkegaard's two aspects of despair in *Sickness unto Death*—namely the aspect of the syntheses of infinitude/finitude and necessity/possibility, and the aspect of self-consciousness—form a useful basis for discussing the impact of social media on the self and selfhood. The discussion of *Sickness unto Death* is supplemented by an analysis of *Two Ages* (1846),²¹ where Kierkegaard develops more specific insights into how particular forms of media and communication might affect the journey of selfhood.

The second half of the article begins by questioning previous work that has relatively straightforwardly extended Kierkegaard's criticisms of the "press" to the internet and the information age. These conceptual observations represent an important starting point for a subsequent analysis of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood. Here, I will argue that Kierkegaard's insightful dialectical and paradoxical understanding of selfhood assists an analysis of the apparently paradoxical impacts of social media on the self and selfhood. Focusing on the perspective of the social media user,²² I will show how participation in social media might contribute to Kierkegaardian despair in finitude/necessity and/or infinitude/possibility. I will also discuss the impact of social media use on the self and selfhood in relation to the Kierkegaardian aspect of self-consciousness. At the same time, a nuanced approach to Kierkegaard and communication suggests that participation in social media as a means of self-representation and interpersonal communication is not necessarily precluded from Kierkegaard's religious sphere. Social media technologies can be used for the sort of "inward" reflection, "essential speaking", and formation of "real commitments" necessary for the Kierkegaardian journey of selfhood. Given the "objective" possibility for social media use both to inhibit and encourage the development of the self before God, I will conclude that, in Kierkegaardian terms, it is ultimately a "subjective" task for the self—as "a single individual"—to ascertain the impact of social media use on its own self and other selves.

¹⁹ I will largely avoid discussion of how far Kierkegaard aligns with Anti-Climacus (or any other pseudonym), as I am less interested in what "Kierkegaard himself" ("essentially" or otherwise) might think, and more concerned with how the ideas in his texts can constructively engage with the question of social media and selfhood. It is also worth noting that Kierkegaard's decision to author a number of his works pseudonymously, and so conceal or reveal his "self" through a "profile", speaks to discussions over the extent to which social media profiles reflect the user's "self".

²⁰ Hong & Hong, "Historical Introduction", *SUD*, 11.

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). [TA].

²² The self might well be affected by the economic, political, social, and technological structures of social media technologies without participating in social media itself, but these wide-ranging impacts lie beyond the scope of this article.

The Self and Selfhood in *Sickness unto Death*

What is the Self?

To understand the impact of social media on the self and selfhood, we must consider what a “self” is and what “selfhood” looks like in Kierkegaard’s work. Although psychology, media and communication literature often discuss whether individuals are representing their “hidden”, “actual”, “ideal”,²³ or “authentic”²⁴ selves using social media technologies, they far more rarely discuss what “the self” who uses social media technologies actually is. Much twenty-first century academic work in media and communications concerning the self, regards anything pertaining to the theological as beyond its epistemological or disciplinary remit, whereas for Kierkegaard “the facts of selfhood are always theological”²⁵—in the sense that the self is understood in relation to God. Given Kierkegaard’s attention to the concept of “the self”, his work offers some valuable conceptual insights in this regard, even if only to highlight the significantly differing epistemological assumptions underlying conceptions of self and selfhood in media and communications research.

At the beginning of *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard outlines a definition of the self as “spirit”—one is not a “self” by mere virtue of being a human being. A human being is a dialectical “synthesis”, a relation between the “infinite and the finite”, the “temporal and the eternal”, and between “freedom and necessity”.²⁶ The human being only becomes a self, however, if this “relation relates itself to itself”.²⁷ The self is therefore spirit for Kierkegaard because it is a relation: it is not merely a substance or entity, but it is rather a dynamic relationality which subjectively participates in a process of existing. Kierkegaard had anticipated the role of relational reflexivity in selfhood in his earlier work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where his pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, emphasises the importance of the “reflection of inwardness”,²⁸ or “double reflection”.²⁹ Self-consciousness also facilitates reflection on the process of becoming a self—human beings are able to relate to past selves, look forward to future selves, and reflect on what an ideal self ought to be.³⁰

²³ Gwendolyn Seidman, “Self-presentation and belonging on Facebook”, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 54, (2013): 402-407.

²⁴ Cunningham and Craig, “Being ‘really real’ on YouTube”, 71-81.

²⁵ Stokes, *The Naked Self*, 14.

²⁶ *SUD*, XI 127. (Where Roman numerals are used in citations, they refer to the volumes of Søren Kierkegaard Samlede Værker.)

²⁷ *SUD*, XI 127.

²⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript [CUP]* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 197.

²⁹ *CUP*, 73.

³⁰ Evans, *Kierkegaard*, 48.

For Kierkegaard, however, a self is not merely a “relation that relates itself to itself”, it is also a relation that “in relating itself to itself relates to *another*”.³¹ C. Stephen Evans notes that when one considers the broad context of *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard must understand the process of becoming a self to be influenced by other human beings, as in outlining the nature of despair, Kierkegaard suggests that we can will to be other human selves that we are not.³² Nevertheless, what Kierkegaard principally has in mind in his definition of the self in Part I A is his contention that, metaphysically, the relating self is dependent on an “Other” relation—namely its relation to God. Kierkegaard thus rejects the possibility that the self establishes itself metaphysically or ontologically outside of its establishment by God in the act of creation.

A self’s relationship to God is at the heart of Kierkegaard’s paradoxical understanding of the self. On the one hand, the human being is given infinite freedom to be any number of possible selves as a gift—an “infinite concession” to humanity as part of God’s creation.³³ God thus “releases” the self “from his hand”.³⁴ The very *possibility* of being a self is “an excellence”, as it is the location of human freedom. “The self is freedom”.³⁵ As such, it represents humanity’s superiority over the animal and indicates that the human being has a self which is spirit. On the other hand, the *actuality* of this freedom is despair over the self. It is thus also a “ruination”.³⁶ The result of this possibility/actuality paradox is that, in exercising one’s God-given freedom to be a self, despair is inevitable, and one’s true or authentic self is only found in relation to God, who retains an eternal “claim” on the self.³⁷

The Goal of Selfhood: Becoming a (True) Self

A recurring theme in contemporary media, communications and psychology literature is a concern as to whether participation in social media encourages or inhibits representations of an “authentic” or “genuine” self. Often, research relies on self-defined understandings of authenticity: does a social media user believe that they are representing their “authentic self”?³⁸ Studies are also concerned

³¹ *SUD*, XI 127.

³² Evans, *Kierkegaard*, 48-49.

³³ *SUD*, XI 135.

³⁴ *SUD*, XI 129.

³⁵ *SUD*, XI 142.

³⁶ *SUD*, XI 129.

³⁷ *SUD*, XI 135.

³⁸ Katie Warfield, “Digital Subjectivities and Selfies,” *International Journal of the Image* 6, no. 2, (2015): 1-16. For some social media users, “authentic” images “capture the mundane because the banality of everyday life is deemed more “authentic”. This is far from the goal of “authentic” selfhood for Kierkegaard.

with goals of selfhood—the aim for an “ideal self”³⁹—but, again, the emphasis here is on a self-reported ideal, rather than on identifying a “true” and universal understanding of ideal selfhood and its self-representation. In stark contrast, Kierkegaard outlines a clear conceptualisation of what becoming a “true” or “authentic” self entails in *Sickness unto Death*. He also suggests that many people are actually ignorant of the ideal goal of selfhood, despite their self-reported assertions.⁴⁰

For Kierkegaard, then, selfhood is not the “presupposition of one’s (self-defined) existence”, but is instead—as Merold Westphal observes—a “goal”.⁴¹ The human person does not exist in “the mode of ‘being’, but in the mode of ‘becoming’ ”.⁴² The task of the self is “to become itself, which can only be done in relationship to God”.⁴³ In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard appears to concentrate negatively on the ways in which a person might “lose” their self, either because they have no consciousness of their “self” as spirit, or because they have “lost” their self, as a consequence of despair over their self. Ostensibly, Kierkegaard devotes less time positively outlining how one becomes a self. I would argue, however, that *Sickness unto Death* must be understood in its own dialectical spirit. For Kierkegaard, the goal of authentic selfhood can only be understood in relation to an intensifying despair over the self and, paradoxically, is only obtained by travelling through this despair.

Following Alastair Hannay,⁴⁴ Geoff Dargan highlights that Kierkegaard’s journey towards the “goal” of becoming a self can be mapped onto Kierkegaard’s three stages of existence—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.⁴⁵ In an aesthetic stage of existence, the human being is concerned only with the “immediate” and has not developed any sense of being engaged in a project of selfhood. In an ethical stage of existence, the human being has begun a process of self-reflection by which it has taken responsibility for its relation to others in the world. In the highest, religious stage of existence, a reflecting self has also become conscious of its tremendous relation to its creator God. This reflecting self “before God” has, therefore, become aware of its own sin, and “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself” it “rests transparently on the power which has

³⁹ Neill Watson and Randolph H. Watts Jr., “The Predictive Strength of Personal Constructs Versus Conventional Constructs: Self-Image Disparity and Neuroticism,” *Journal of Personality* 69, no. 1, (2001): 121-45.

⁴⁰ *SUD*, XI 135.

⁴¹ Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996), ix.

⁴² Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 107.

⁴³ *SUD*, XI 143.

⁴⁴ See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 159.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Dargan, ‘The Possible Self’, (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2016), 6.

established it”.⁴⁶ Kierkegaard thus articulates an ideal of selfhood—when all despair is completely rooted out—that is only possible when the self finds rest in God.⁴⁷

Although Kierkegaard references these stages of existence in *Sickness unto Death*, and it is worth bearing them in mind as the discussion proceeds, his text actually considers selfhood from the perspective of two aspects. First, Kierkegaard considers selfhood from the perspective of the synthesis of the human being—particularly the syntheses of the infinite and the finite, and of necessity and possibility. Second, Kierkegaard considers selfhood from the aspect of self-consciousness. I shall now consider these two aspects in more detail as they will form the basis of an understanding of selfhood for a Kierkegaardian analysis of social media in the second half of the article.

The Self under the First Aspect: (A) The Synthesis of Finitude/Infinitude

As I have already noted, Kierkegaard regards the human being as a synthesis of the finite and the infinite. The finite in Kierkegaard’s thought refers to the limited, the temporal, and the earthly—that which corresponds to the affairs of the world. The infinite concerns the unlimited, the eternal, and the divine—that which belongs to God. We might also understand this synthesis as reflecting the tension in Christian thought between the idea that human beings are created finitely in the world by God, and the notion that, by virtue of being created in the image of God, they have a relationship with the infinite. The authentic self for Kierkegaard is thus a “synthesis of infinitude and finitude”.⁴⁸ Becoming a self therefore requires “an infinite moving away from itself in the infinitising of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitising process”. In other words, the goal of selfhood is neither to “become infinite”, nor “finite”, but to become a “concrete” “synthesis” of both. Inauthentic selfhood, or more accurately in Kierkegaardian terms a loss of selfhood, occurs when attention to either the infinitude of God or the finitude of one’s own worldly existence is lacking. Any such “misrelation” in the synthesis causes the self to despair.⁴⁹

If the self lacks finitude, then Kierkegaard suggests it is caught in the despair of the fantastic and the unlimited. The imagination is drawn to the infinite as fantastic and thus the person increasingly departs from who they are as a created finite self in the world. As a consequence the self becomes increasingly abstract: “The self [...] leads a fantasised existence in abstract infinitising or in abstract

⁴⁶ *SUD*, XI 128.

⁴⁷ *SUD*, XI 128.

⁴⁸ *SUD*, XI 143.

⁴⁹ *SUD*, XI 128. The possibility of a “misrelation” is echoed in twentieth century self-concept theory where disparities in perceptions of the “real” (finite) and “ideal” (infinite) self are associated with depression and neuroticism. See Watson and Watts, “Predictive Strength”, 121-45.

isolation, continually lacking its self, from which it only moves further and further away”.⁵⁰ Kierkegaard argues that this self might appear to be occupied with “temporal matters”—might “marry”, “have children”, “be honoured and esteemed”—but this merely obscures the fact that the self understands its self abstractly, and lives a life rooted in fantasy. In a deeper sense, then, such a person “lacks a self”.⁵¹

If the self lacks infinitude, then Kierkegaard argues that it despairs in reductionism and narrowness. The self is thus “completely finitised”, entirely concerned with the intellectual, the aesthetic and the “indifferent”. Indeed, Kierkegaard regards the “secular mentality” as the erroneous “attribution of infinite worth” to the “finite” triviality of everyday life, the “indifferent”.⁵² Kierkegaard describes this loss of self as a loss of personal individuality, as a personal failure to be the “single individual” that God has created a person to be. In such circumstances, the self “forgets himself”, “forgets his name divinely understood” and becomes “a number”, “just one more repetition”, a “copy”, a “mass man”.⁵³

Kierkegaard argues that the loss of self in this manner is caused by fear of others. Social or peer pressure is exercised on the self by “hordes” of others, all “absorbed in secular matters” and thus the self allows “itself to be tricked out of itself by ‘the others’ ”.⁵⁴ The self does not have the confidence or belief to hazard being its self, and thus it becomes like a “smooth stone”—not seeking to stand out from the crowd, nor “venturing” to be a single individual.⁵⁵ Implicitly referencing Matthew 16, then, Kierkegaard suggests that, although such people might go along “superbly in business and social life”, “gaining the whole world”, they ultimately lose themselves by suppressing their authentic self.⁵⁶ The implication of Kierkegaard’s thought is that authentic selfhood requires the self to be sufficiently brave and courageous to be its God-given self in the face of the pressure of social conformity found in the world.

The Self under the First Aspect: (B) The Synthesis of Possibility/Necessity

The second synthesis of “personhood” that Kierkegaard discusses is that of possibility and necessity.⁵⁷ The category of possibility is closely related to that of infinitude, and necessity to that of finitude. If a self lacks necessity, then it despairs in possibility. The self is so overwhelmed by the

⁵⁰ *SUD*, XI 145.

⁵¹ *SUD*, XI 146.

⁵² *SUD*, XI 146.

⁵³ *SUD*, XI 147.

⁵⁴ *SUD*, XI 146.

⁵⁵ *SUD*, XI 147.

⁵⁶ *SUD*, XI 147.

⁵⁷ *SUD*, XI 153.

vast array of possibilities that the self might become as a free gift of God, that it loses its awareness of its being as a “necessary” self—a “very definite something”—that has been created by God.⁵⁸ The self thus loses sight of the “limitations” of its finitude, the characteristic features of oneself that limit the extent to which one could be any self that one chooses. The self thus either desires and craves to be a person that it is not, or “becomes a victim of anxiety”.⁵⁹ In light of *The Concept of Anxiety*, the latter could be understood here as the “anxious possibility of being able” to be any possible self⁶⁰—the “dizzying” freedom that God bestows on humanity in creation.

If the self lacks possibility, however, it is in despair because everything has become necessary or everything has become trivial. A “fatalist” or “determinist” self either has no concept of God or has a concept of God in which there is no possibility. As such, there is no possibility for the self to become itself in relation to God as there is no possibility in God. A “philistine-bourgeois mentality” also lacks possibility because everything has become trivial. Such a self lives within “a trivial compendium of experiences” based on how things probably go and what usually happens.⁶¹ Here, possibility is controlled by the probable, leaving no space for the possibility of God. The self suffocates itself because its becoming is limited by the necessary.

Kierkegaard suggests, therefore, that authentic selfhood is the necessary self believing that for God “everything is possible”.⁶² Indeed, “true” or authentic selfhood appears to recognise its necessary limitations and understands that a despairing fall (into sin) is inevitable. It is faith in the God of all possibility, however, that assures salvation: “the believer sees and understands his downfall [...] but he believes [...] that for God everything is possible”.⁶³ Thus an authentic self is a synthesis of the necessary and the possible.

In the syntheses of finitude/infinity and possibility/necessity, then, Kierkegaard develops a paradoxical and nuanced understanding of the self that can be compared and contrasted with contemporary academic discussions around social media. Kierkegaard’s concern with the “finite” reflects the critique that social media encourages constant engagement with the everyday and the banal, limiting reflection on that which is (eternally) significant. His concern with the “infinite” parallels discussions of the technological abstraction of individuals by social media platforms. He also describes features of social comparison that resonate with discussions around new processes of peer pressure and social conformity facilitated by social media technologies. Finally, the synthesis of necessity/possibility speaks to the apparent paradox of identity in the digitally mediated world,

⁵⁸ *SUD*, XI 149.

⁵⁹ *SUD*, XI 149-50.

⁶⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, [COA] trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 44.

⁶¹ *SUD*, XI 153.

⁶² *SUD*, XI 182.

⁶³ *SUD*, XI 151.

whereby individuals can both create and access infinite representations of the self, and yet also find themselves tied to a necessary identity. I will develop these strands in the second half of the article, but, first, I will consider Kierkegaard's understanding of the self in relation to the second aspect: self-consciousness.

The Self under the Second Aspect: Self-Consciousness

Having discussed selfhood in relation to the syntheses of humanity, Kierkegaard turns to consider how selfhood is dependent on the degree of one's self-consciousness. Kierkegaard argues that the more self-conscious one is, the more one is in despair. Paradoxically, however, the more self-consciousness one has, the closer one will be to the goal of authentic selfhood. Indeed, to become an authentic self, Kierkegaard believes that despair cannot be avoided; it must be journeyed through in the right way.

Ignorance of Being in Despair

At the lowest level of Kierkegaardian selfhood lies "despair that is ignorant of being in despair".⁶⁴ In this state, the self is so "dominated by the sensate", the "pleasant and unpleasant", that the self has no concept of being "spirit"—in other words, it has no concept of its existing in relation to God.⁶⁵ This form of selfhood is "the most common in the world".⁶⁶ A self that is a level higher towards its goal will be aware that there is "something eternal" within it.⁶⁷ This can lead to two forms of despair—the first is the "despair not to will to be oneself" or "weakness",⁶⁸ the second is the "despair to will to be oneself" or "defiance".⁶⁹

The Self in Despair in Weakness

The self that does not will to be its self in weakness is either tied up in the "immediacy" of everyday life or is hidden behind "inclosing reserve".⁷⁰ The "immediate" individual is only concerned (aesthetically) with the other so far as it desires, craves, and enjoys the other. Again, it is a self preoccupied with the pleasant and unpleasant, with good luck and bad luck. This self is fragile. Such

⁶⁴ *SUD*, XI 155.

⁶⁵ *SUD*, XI 155.

⁶⁶ *SUD*, XI 157.

⁶⁷ *SUD*, XI 158.

⁶⁸ *SUD*, XI 158, 165.

⁶⁹ *SUD*, XI 178.

⁷⁰ *SUD*, XI 175.

a self experiences something in the world which makes it unhappy and thus it despairs because its immediate self is dealt a “crushing blow”.⁷¹ As a consequence, this immediate self despairs because it no longer wills to be itself, or even worse, wishes it were somebody else. The “immediate” self, then, actually has “no self”. It does not know itself, because it has no deeper internality. It is entirely defined by its own externalities and the external world—it is completely finitised, “quite literally” defined by the “clothes” that a person wears.⁷² Thus, the person of immediacy is “unable to hold anything back”, and rejects “solitude” in favour of engagement in “the constant sociality” of modern life.⁷³

The person of “inclosing reserve”, on the other hand, recognises that it is weakness to despair over the earthly and to afford infinite worth to that which is finite. This self understands, therefore, that its “hours have something to do with the eternal”,⁷⁴ and is concerned with relating itself to itself. Nevertheless, such a self never goes beyond that, and it despairs over its weakness. Kierkegaard suggests that the despair of such a self is ultimately pride. The self of inclosing reserve that does not experience an upheaval which puts it onto the path of faith will, therefore, either continue in this form of despair, or seek to be a self that it is not, becoming a “restless spirit” that wants to return back to “immediacy”.⁷⁵

The Self in Despair in Defiance

The self that despairs over its weakness and wills not to be itself can experience an intensification of despair. If this occurs, then the self can despair over willing to be its self. This is despair in defiance. Again, Kierkegaard believes an increase in one’s level of self-consciousness is required in order to despair in this manner. This self is conscious of despair as an act which comes directly from itself, and not from the external misfortune of life’s circumstances. This self is conscious of the possibility of the infinite self and wills to be this abstract possible self without maintaining the relationship with the finite, necessary self. Indeed, the implication of Kierkegaard’s thought is that this form of despair is an example of despair over a lack of finitude and a lack of necessity. Such a self defiantly wants to be the self that it wants to be. It thus wants to be a god-like “master of itself”, “to create itself”, “to determine” the nature of its concrete self. Critically, this self actually severs any relation to God—the “power that has established it[s] [self]”.⁷⁶ It is therefore a self that

⁷¹ *SUD*, XI 164.

⁷² *SUD*, XI 165.

⁷³ *SUD*, XI 176.

⁷⁴ *SUD*, XI 176.

⁷⁵ *SUD*, XI 177.

⁷⁶ *SUD*, XI 179.

is not capable of losing its (false or inauthentic) self in order to win its (true or authentic) self.⁷⁷ It is ultimately “no self” because it has “nothing eternally steadfast”.⁷⁸ A self in defiance is a self that wants to “go it alone” and not to seek help from others. Most critically, it is a self that does not want to “hope in the possibility of help, especially by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible”.⁷⁹

The Self “Before God”

The final intensifications of despair occur when the self becomes aware of its “theological self”—it is thus conscious of existing “before God” and not merely before other human beings.⁸⁰ A “true”, “authentic” theological self has God as its “criterion”.⁸¹ More particularly, as Joel Rasmussen highlights, the theological self must be “in Christ” for only then “is it true that God is man’s goal and criterion or the criterion and the goal”.⁸² Whereas the “pagan” and “natural man” only have the human self as their criterion, a higher self is aware of its relation to God.⁸³ The self is thus capable of ever-greater selfhood as it continues to relate itself to God: “the greater the conception of God, the more self there is; the more self, the greater the conception of God”.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, such a high level of self-consciousness means that the self becomes aware that in being in despair, it is also in sin before God and before Christ. This is thus also the greatest intensification of despair for a self, because the “more self, the more intense the sin”.⁸⁵ Such intense despair, however, also appears necessary to reach authentic Kierkegaardian selfhood. For, in such a state of despair, it is finally possible for the self to make a “leap”—a genuine “passionate” commitment to faith in Christ. Paradoxically, this leap appears to involve losing one’s (false) self or selves in order to win one’s (true or authentic) self, through “the aid of the eternal”.⁸⁶ This is a leap of faith, therefore, from despair over one’s false selves to belief in the (humanly) impossible, but divinely (possible) forgiveness of sins for the true relating self. It is a leap only made possible because, absurdly, “God allowed himself to be born, become man, suffer and die also for the sake

⁷⁷ *SUD*, XI 179.

⁷⁸ *SUD*, XI 180.

⁷⁹ *SUD*, XI 182.

⁸⁰ *SUD*, XI 191.

⁸¹ *SUD*, XI 192.

⁸² *SUD*, XI 193; Joel Rasmussen *Between Irony and Witness: Kierkegaard's Poetics of Faith, Hope, and Love*, (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 129.

⁸³ *SUD*, XI 193.

⁸⁴ *SUD*, XI 193.

⁸⁵ *SUD*, XI 224.

⁸⁶ *SUD*, XI 179.

of this self"⁸⁷—and thus Christ provides the self with the ideal human life of faith to imitate.⁸⁸ The opposite of despairing sin, therefore, is faith. And such faith roots out all despair from the self. Faith lived out in the imitation of Christ is authentic true selfhood for Kierkegaard: a self that “in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God”.⁸⁹

Kierkegaard’s second aspect—self-consciousness—is valuable, then, in two critical respects for an analysis of social media. First, it further develops understandings of the self which resonate with the self within a social media environment, such as concerns over the “constant sociality” of everyday life, and the self caught in the concerns of the “immediate”. Second, it offers a theological understanding of selfhood in relation to self-consciousness that substantially differs from non-theological approaches. Again, these threads will be analysed in the second half of the article.

The Impact of Communication and Media on Selfhood in *Two Ages*

Having established a solid foundation for Kierkegaard’s journey of selfhood in *Sickness unto Death* according to the two aspects of the syntheses and self-consciousness, I will now outline Kierkegaard’s understanding of the impact of media and communication on this journey as developed in his work *Two Ages*. Written in 1846, *Two Ages* is a piece of social criticism masquerading as a literary review of Thomasine Gyllembourg’s novel of the same name.⁹⁰ A discussion of Kierkegaard’s critique of media and communication in this text provides valuable material for a Kierkegaardian analysis of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood.

In *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard critiques the contribution of the communicative practices of his day to what he calls “leveling”.⁹¹ For Kierkegaard, leveling is a process whereby by the “single individual” or the self is divested of individuality and becomes an abstraction that makes individuals part of an anonymous “public”. Although leveling is not explicitly discussed in *Sickness unto Death*, it is closely related to the Kierkegaardian self that is in despair because it lacks infinitude. As we have seen, a self that lacks infinitude loses its individuality—it “forgets himself”, “forgets his name divinely understood” and becomes “a number”, “just one more repetition”, a “copy”, a “mass man”.⁹² It does so because it is caught up in finitude—it fears comparison with others and judges its self-worth in relation to the “socially-accepted criteria of comparative worth”.⁹³ Ultimately, Kierkegaard

⁸⁷ *SUD*, XI 223.

⁸⁸ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 129.

⁸⁹ *SUD*, XI 194.

⁹⁰ Andrew F. Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue: The Communication of Capability,” *Communication Theory* 18, no. 1 (2008), 73.

⁹¹ Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue,” 73.

⁹² *SUD*, XI 147.

⁹³ Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue,” 73.

suggests in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* that it is possible for a “heaped-up pile of comparisons” to overwhelm a person.⁹⁴

In such circumstances, “envy” becomes a “negatively unifying principle” in society.⁹⁵ A self looks to others’ material and social capital, and desires what others have, striving to be like other selves. The self does not, therefore, have its attention on the inward relation of itself to itself as a basis for other relationships: “inwardness is lacking”.⁹⁶ As a consequence, selves participate in a process by which they do not (relate themselves to themselves) and thus do not “relate to each other”,⁹⁷ but rather “carefully watch each other”, becoming “rivals in a game”.⁹⁸ This undermines the true relation between individual selves—all that remains is a relational “state of abstract non-cessation”.⁹⁹ In other words, the self remains in a tensive, watchful, and envious relation with others, not in a true relation of individuality with others. The implication of this state of affairs is that selves are “leveled”: they are imprisoned in an endless (false) reflection of themselves, because they are reflecting in relation to others on the immediate and finite externalities of everyday life, and not reflecting “inwardly” on themselves and their relation to God. Selves thus lose their individual selves, and instead despairingly will to be selves that are acceptable to a socially conformed mass. Critically, for Kierkegaard, such a self is thus restrained from taking the decisive acts of individual selfhood that are necessary for the life of faith.

Kierkegaard argues that leveling is a feature of modernity itself—an “abstract power” that subordinates the particularity of individuals.¹⁰⁰ Selves thus risk becoming abstractions or representations. They cease to be individual selves and become numbers, copies, types or representations of ideologies—anonymous figures in the crowd.¹⁰¹ Although leveling had already been a tendency in modernity, Kierkegaard believes that the invention of the concept of the “public” was necessary for “leveling really to take place”.¹⁰² Kierkegaard regards the public as a “monstrous abstraction”—an “all-encompassing something that is nothing”.¹⁰³ It is a crowd that does not essentially exist. The “public” has appeared in modernity, Kierkegaard argues, because of a lack of communal life that was previously characteristic of antiquity. It has become necessary, therefore, to invent a “phantom” whereby “unsubstantial individuals” who are never united in any

⁹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* trans. Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 189.

⁹⁵ TA, VIII 76.

⁹⁶ TA, VIII 74.

⁹⁷ TA, VIII 74.

⁹⁸ TA, VIII 74.

⁹⁹ TA, VIII 75.

¹⁰⁰ TA, VIII 79.

¹⁰¹ SUD, XI 147.

¹⁰² TA, VIII 84.

¹⁰³ TA, VIII 84.

situation or organisation are “claimed to be a whole”.¹⁰⁴ In this phantom whole, all “the relative concretions of individuality” are annihilated.¹⁰⁵ We might think of the “public” in the terms of Kierkegaard’s selves in despair—the public becomes thought of as a self, but it is an abstract, fantastic, infinitely possible self that lacks any finitude or necessity and is thus no self at all. Critically, the single individual self is thus lost in an amorphous public; it becomes an anonymous entity.

Kierkegaard argues that the press plays a key role in the development of the anonymous public—a thought that is echoed in much later academic work. For example, in his influential work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson contends that national newspaper reading was largely responsible for the “community in anonymity” that is the “hallmark of modern nations”.¹⁰⁶ Kierkegaard was critical of the way in which these two anonymous abstractions—the press and the public—interact with one another to contribute to the process of leveling. Perhaps reflecting his own experience of public vilification at the hands of the Danish satirical political magazine *Corsair*,¹⁰⁷ the individual self is thus not primarily leveled by other individuals, but by groups of individuals who become an abstract “public”. Public leveling is aided by the press—“a third party”—which performs the leveling on its behalf. In this regard, the public both participates in leveling through the means of the press and divests itself of responsibility because it can blame the press for the leveling.¹⁰⁸ In turn, “the press” itself is an abstraction that also escapes individual responsibility for its actions. Communication by the press is thus “anonymous, impersonal and public”.¹⁰⁹ By providing a steady flow of news and in creating public opinion, Kierkegaard suggests that individuals are drawn away from the inwardness required for selfhood and encouraged to despair in selves overly concerned by externalities. These are the conditions for the “immediacy” identified in *Sickness unto Death* which characterises a self that lacks infinitude.

In a world of immediacy, self-reflection and the development of self-consciousness are replaced by “chatter”.¹¹⁰ Kierkegaard states that “chatter” is a consequence of “the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking”. Those who speak “essentially” are those who are able to remain silent. Silence is inwardness—it is necessary for “inner satisfaction”, “quiet contentment” and the “religiously sensitive” development of the self. It is also necessary for

¹⁰⁴ TA, VIII 85.

¹⁰⁵ TA, VIII 86.

¹⁰⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 34-6.

¹⁰⁷ Hong & Hong, “Historical Introduction,” TA, x.

¹⁰⁸ TA, VIII 88.

¹⁰⁹ Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue,” 74.

¹¹⁰ Herrmann, “Kierkegaard and Dialogue,” 74.

“cultured conversation”.¹¹¹ In this regard, to speak (*at tale*) essentially is contrasted with chatter (*at snakke*).¹¹²

Chatter begins when selves are “oriented towards externalities and to each other” and consists of talk “about anything and everything and continues incessantly”.¹¹³ This appears to foreshadow Kierkegaard’s description of the immediate self in *Sickness unto Death*, a self who despairs in weakness, rejecting “solitude” in favour of engagement in “the constant sociality” of modern life.¹¹⁴ Chatter also erodes what Kierkegaard regards as the “distinction between what is private and what is public”.¹¹⁵ It is “private-public garrulousness”, for the “public is public opinion that is interested in what is utterly private”.¹¹⁶ Perhaps the implication of Kierkegaard’s thought is that a (true) self paradoxically speaks out of silence, whereas the (false) self endlessly chatters about private matters in public.

In *Two Ages*, then, Kierkegaard develops several terms and concepts that are also relevant to an analysis of social media. The “press” remains an important part of the new media system itself, using, engaging, and interacting with content posted on social media sites. The concept of the “public” also remains highly relevant and could be extended to the way in which “public opinion” is now also formed through reference to trending hashtags on social media sites. Kierkegaard’s concept of “leveling” as a consequence of envious “watching” of others echoes concerns over the potential for social media technologies to facilitate negative processes of social comparison. Kierkegaard also alludes to the collapse of private and public contexts, which is often discussed in social media research,¹¹⁷ particularly in work that builds on sociologist Erving Goffman’s pre-internet conceptual work in this area.¹¹⁸

In the first half of this article, then, I have identified an array of Kierkegaardian conceptual ideas in *Sickness unto Death* and *Two Ages* that are relevant to the potential impact of media communications on the self and selfhood. We are now able to undertake a Kierkegaardian analysis of the potential impact of social media on the self and selfhood.

¹¹¹ TA, VIII 92.

¹¹² TA, VIII 91, fn 69.

¹¹³ TA, VIII 91.

¹¹⁴ SUD, XI 176.

¹¹⁵ TA, VIII 93.

¹¹⁶ TA, VIII 93.

¹¹⁷ Danah Boyd, “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics” in *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi, (London: Routledge, 2010), 39-58.

¹¹⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, (London: Penguin, 1990).

A Kierkegaardian Analysis of the Impact of Social Media on the Self and Selfhood

In the second half of this article, I will begin by considering social media as a technology for representing the self, suggesting that previous attempts to extend Kierkegaard's thinking around the press to the internet have been complicated by social media technologies. From this starting point, I will analyse the impact of social media on the self and selfhood by recourse to Kierkegaard's two aspects of despair—namely the syntheses of finitude/infinity and necessity/possibility, and the aspect of self-consciousness. I will demonstrate that a nuanced Kierkegaardian analysis of social media provides insights into both potentially “negative” and “positive” impacts upon the self and selfhood. I will argue that Kierkegaard's paradoxical and dialectical approach to the self is a valuable tool for exploring some of the seemingly paradoxical effects of social media. This will highlight that perhaps the paradoxical self impacts upon social media use as much as it is affected by it. I will demonstrate that aspects of social media use clearly resonate with Kierkegaard's understanding of despair in finitude/necessity. Paradoxically, I will also suggest that research into anxiety and social media might be informed by Kierkegaard's concept of despair in infinity/possibility. At the same time, by acknowledging Kierkegaard's own use of a mediated technology—the book—for self-representation, and attention to his regard for “essential speaking”, I will argue that social media technologies can be used as a means by which the self strives to become an “authentic” or “true” self in Kierkegaardian terms.

Social Media as a Technology for Mediating the Self

Previous technology literature at the turn of the twenty-first century argued that Kierkegaard would have been highly sceptical that the internet could contribute to the development of authentic selfhood. The work of Hubert Dreyfus, professor of philosophy at the University of California, was a significant influence in this regard. In an article in 1999, which formed the basis for a book chapter in *On the Internet* in 2001, Dreyfus argues categorically that Kierkegaard would have “hated the Internet”.¹¹⁹ For Dreyfus, Kierkegaard would have seen in the internet the “hi-tech synthesis” of the “worst features of the newspaper and the coffee house”.¹²⁰ Dreyfus claims that the internet promotes the “nihilistic” aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence over the religious sphere. In this domain, selves can “discuss any topic endlessly without consequences” on “web sites full of anonymous information from all over the world”.¹²¹ The self on the internet despairs in “immediacy” simply by visiting “boring” or “interesting”¹²² sites where nothing is “too trivial to

¹¹⁹ Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs. Commitment in the Present Age,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, (1999), 96.

¹²⁰ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 102.

¹²¹ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 105.

¹²² Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 108.

be included”,¹²³ or despairs in the possibility of “a risk-free simulated world”,¹²⁴ whereby firm commitments or responsibility for actions are not required. The implication of Dreyfus’ argument is that the self is caught in Kierkegaard’s “fantastic”, becoming the illusory infinitised self of “imagined commitments” and “stimulating images”, leading to “a simulated life”.¹²⁵ Ultimately, for Dreyfus, the “simulated” world of the internet exists separately to the “real world”.¹²⁶

Dreyfus’ work also influenced Brian Prosser and Andrew Ward’s approach to Kierkegaard and selfhood. For Prosser and Ward, Kierkegaard’s “pessimistic view” of technologically mediated communication lies in his belief that the “real life” contexts of “embodied interaction create a particular interaction that is essential to communication”.¹²⁷ As they saw it, the subsequent problem with the internet from a Kierkegaardian perspective is that it “disembodies and dislocates” information.¹²⁸ Extending their critique to social media, it is evident that the self is—at least potentially—disembodied and dislocated by these technologies which, in their view, would threaten the development of the authentic self. As Kierkegaard saw “all communication” by “the press” as “impersonal” and as abolishing “personality”,¹²⁹ so Prosser and Ward suggest that the internet might lead to the “fracturing of the self”¹³⁰ into impersonality.

As we shall see, aspects of Dreyfus’, and Prosser and Ward’s Kierkegaardian critique of internet technology still resonate twenty years later, but the emergence of social media has complicated a straightforward extension of Kierkegaard’s thinking on the “press” to the internet. For contrary to the “impersonal” communication technology of the “press”, social media technologies have created spaces for “personal” and “interpersonal” communication. The increasingly impersonal trajectory of modern communications that Dreyfus, Ward and Prosser all highlight—and with which Kierkegaard was undoubtedly concerned—appears to have been fundamentally disrupted by social media technologies. In theory, at least, social media re-individualises media representation against the grain of the de-individualising development of modern public technological communications. Of course, the press, as part of the mass media, still operates in this new communications ecology and, critically, still retains considerable power in the media system. The problem of de-individualisation whereby individuals are subsumed into “crowds” and “publics” remains, even as

¹²³ Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 79.

¹²⁴ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 96.

¹²⁵ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 109.

¹²⁶ Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet,” 109.

¹²⁷ Brian T. Prosser and Andrew Ward, “Kierkegaard and the Internet: Existential Reflections on Education and

Community,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 2, no. 3 (2000): 174.

¹²⁸ Prosser and Ward, “Kierkegaard and the Internet,” 171.

¹²⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers* trans. Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong, Gregor Malantschuk and Howard A. Johnson, Vol. 2, (Princeton University Press, 1978), F-K, #2152.

¹³⁰ Prosser and Ward, “Kierkegaard and the Internet,” 174.

technology has allowed for greater individual media representation. Nevertheless, we ought to question whether it follows that an era of “mass self-communication”¹³¹ automatically leads to the same Kierkegaardian “mass man” of an era of mass media.

A Kierkegaardian analysis which considers his own communication activities alongside his views on the “press” also suggests that social media might be a means used by individual selves to relate themselves to themselves, themselves to others, and themselves to God. Indeed, as much as Kierkegaard criticises the press, he also placed considerable value on the self communicating itself through a mediated technology. For what Dreyfus, and Prosser and Ward substantially overlook—almost ironically—is Kierkegaard’s own decision to communicate through the written book. It seems strange to claim that Kierkegaard would have regarded “true” communication of the self as entirely dependent on “embodiment” and a particular (physical) “locality”, when he actually devoted much of his life to communicating his thoughts on selfhood through a technology—the book—that similarly disembodies and dislocates information.

The substance of the critique in the articles by Dreyfus, and Prosser and Ward is also built upon an implicit dichotomy between the internet and “real life” or the “real world” that has been questioned more recently. Michael Xiarhos notes that, in the Western world, (internet-connected) “technology is endemic and inescapable”,¹³² while Beth Coleman highlights that there is “no longer a distinction between ‘real life’ and ‘online life’”—“it has all morphed into one continuous understanding of what is real”.¹³³ In the second decade of the twenty-first century, it has become apparent that participation in social media technologies often represents a significant personal commitment. Individual selves who participate in social media can expect very personal consequences from their publishing activities, ranging from overwhelming encouragement and support, being catapulted unexpectedly into the public eye, being subjected to fierce mocking and critique, losing their job, being taken to court, and even facing death threats. Personal social media accounts are often mediated extensions of individual selves and cannot be understood merely as a “simulated”, “risk-free” diversion from “real life”. Social media technologies are “real life” means by which a self records, communicates, documents, represents and reflects oneself for a variety of purposes and ends. They also enable a self to interact interpersonally with others. Indeed, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media technologies have become primary forms of communication for millions of individuals. All of which arguably suggests that there might be merit in reconsidering Kierkegaard’s work in relation to social media and selfhood.

¹³¹ Castells, *Communication Power*, 4.

¹³² Xiarhos, “Connected Pilgrim,” 70.

¹³³ Beth Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011), 85.

Social Media Considered in Relation to the First Aspect: The Syntheses of Finitude/Infinitude and Possibility/Necessity

Before we delve more deeply into a Kierkegaardian analysis of social media, we must acknowledge that there is a difference between “the self” and any media representation of the self. There is an insurmountable gap between (in)authentic selfhood and the representation of (in)authentic selfhood on social media. This is because, in Kierkegaardian terms, the self is a subjective entity that is only known (or not known) to itself and by God.¹³⁴ It is impossible for us to objectively state, therefore, what (in)authentic selfhood might look like from the perspective of a media representation of the self. This dilemma is found in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*—externally Kierkegaard’s ideal “knight of faith” is “outwardly indistinguishable from the proverbial man in the street”.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, the implication of Kierkegaard’s *Two Ages* is that (media) self-representations are related to the self, and that beyond reflection on our own selves, these self-representations are all we can ultimately use to judge questions of selfhood more generally. I shall now consider the impact of social media on self and selfhood by reference to Kierkegaard’s first aspect of despair in *Sickness unto Death*—namely the syntheses of infinitude/finitude and possibility/necessity.

Kierkegaard closely relates despair to his concept of anxiety—the dizzying possibility of being able. Although Kierkegaard probably would have understood much modern day medically defined “anxiety”—“a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe”¹³⁶—as a form of “despair”, psychologists tend to study anxiety rather than “despair”. What is interesting, here, is that psychological science is exploring a possible correlation between anxiety and social media use. This remains an emerging debate in the literature: “little is known about the relationship between social media use and anxiety”.¹³⁷ While studies by Kross, Hampton, Muench and their colleagues suggest that social media use is not associated with worry, perceived stress, or fears of social evaluation, studies by Vannucci, Campisi, Morin-Major, Schou Andreassen, and their colleagues have shown a positive correlation between the use of social media and anxiety or stress.¹³⁸

Here, I will take a closer look at the Vannucci et al. study. This research shows a positive correlation between higher daily social media use and anxiety in 18 to 22-year-old US adults.¹³⁹ Vannucci et

¹³⁴ CUP, 192, 197.

¹³⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 20.

¹³⁶ “Generalised Anxiety Disorder”, NHS, <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/>, last reviewed 19 December 2018.

¹³⁷ Anna Vannucci, Kaitlin M. Flannery, and Christine McCauley Ohannessian, “Social media use and anxiety in emerging adults,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 207, (2017): 164.

¹³⁸ See Vannucci et al., “Social media use”.

¹³⁹ See Vannucci et al., “Social media use”.

al. offer a range of possible reasons for this finding. First, they suggest that social media use might induce psychological stress responses as a consequence of being bombarded with information, negative feedback, bullying from peers, becoming aware of stressful events, etc. Second, they suggest that social media use might trigger negative social comparisons. Third, they suggest that the correlation might be explained by anxious individuals turning to social media in search of validation of self-worth, or as a means of escaping the fear of social evaluation and rejection in physical face-to-face social settings.

These hypotheses resonate with several Kierkegaardian themes. In particular, they suggest that perhaps anxiety—although in Kierkegaardian terms it would be called despair—is a consequence of a lack of infinitude and a lack of possibility. Considering Vannucci's findings, it appears that social media might facilitate a process of Kierkegaardian envy whereby individuals do not “relate to each other” but rather “carefully watch each other”, becoming “rivals in a game” of self-worth. Perhaps, at best, it is an anxiety-inducing “game” of social comparison whereby the self that lacks the infinite becomes caught up in the immediacy of finite. The self thus becomes preoccupied and anxious about “trivial” and “indifferent” matters posted on others' social media accounts, attributing infinite worth to the finite “triviality of everyday life”. This “immediate” self perhaps also feels pressure to re-create itself in the “finite” by discarding its externalities—constantly updating and amending its social media self-representation—without any concern for an “infinite” relation with God.

These observations appear to echo contemporary concerns with what is regarded as inauthentic “self-branding” in online culture,¹⁴⁰ whereby the self needs to be constantly “on trend”, and continually aware of how its self is presented in social media spaces as a “brand” in relation to other selves, in order to “go along superbly in business and social life”.¹⁴¹ Are selves being “tricked out” of themselves by “the others” because social media spaces make it harder to hazard being oneself? At worst, it seems that the social media “game” of social comparison can descend into more serious “leveling”, whereby individuals are negatively censured or bullied for willing to be themselves. The potential for a re-individualisation of self-representation that social media facilitates is potentially undermined, therefore, by a new de-individualising “leveling” process of social comparison, whereby individuals do not necessarily “venture” to be a self and thus become despairing Kierkegaardian “smooth stones”.¹⁴²

I would suggest, however, that an engagement with Kierkegaard's work alerts us to an additional hypothesis: perhaps psychologists could also more explicitly explore the question of whether social media use is correlated with anxiety because individuals despair over a lack of finitude and a lack of necessity. As we have seen, a self that lacks finitude is caught in the despair of the unlimited and

¹⁴⁰ Turner-Cole, “Commodification”, 4.

¹⁴¹ *SUD XI*, 147.

¹⁴² *SUD XI*, 147.

fantastic, while a self that lacks necessity is overwhelmed by possibility. Pre-modernity, it is possible that belief in a God-given identity was stronger than in the information age—particularly in parts of the world that have become more secularised. In the information age, the existentialist turn to the notion of creating oneself—without any reference to a grounding necessary identity—informs the self that it can be whoever it wants to be. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser argue that in the “networked age” identity as a concept “tends to be much more fluid”—a “sixteen-year-old has many more choices available to her when it comes to making modifications of her identity” (even) than in the industrial age.

Moreover, in pre-modernity, examples of possible selves were often limited by family, friends, and restricted work contacts. Previous research has shown that physical social networks on average number 125.¹⁴³ Social media use as part of a global communication network in the information age ultimately exposes people to a perhaps dizzying number of possible selves. In 2008, the average Facebook user had 217 network members.¹⁴⁴ By following people on social media and engaging in modern life’s “constant sociality”, individuals are exposed to a potentially infinite number of possible self-representations.

Critically, however, research seems to suggest that it is not sheer numbers in a social network that might be most significant here; it is the extent to which any network is grounded in Kierkegaardian “necessity” or rather reflects Kierkegaard’s “abstract” “possibility”. A study by Hui-Tzu Chou and Nicholas Edge demonstrates that if people have more Facebook friends, they are less likely to say (perhaps enviously) that others have a better life.¹⁴⁵ They hypothesise that this is because they have met more people in person; to become a Facebook “friend” people usually have met beforehand. In Kierkegaardian terms, these friendships are grounded in necessity. If, however, people have more Facebook friends “that are not personally known” to them—“friends” that are more likely to be abstract possibilities—then they are more likely to say (perhaps enviously) that others have a better life. Kierkegaard’s despair that lacks finitude might, therefore, be more prevalent in circumstances where people use social media accounts to follow others who they do not significantly know beyond their media (self-)representations. Moreover, if it is the case that other social media users post content that presents an “idealised self”¹⁴⁶ or a carefully managed

¹⁴³ Russell A. Hill and Robin IM Dunbar, “Social Network Size in Humans,” *Human Nature* 14, no. 1, (2003): 53-72.

¹⁴⁴ Chou, Hui-Tzu Grace, and Nicholas Edge, “‘They are Happier and Having Better Lives than I am’: The Impact of Using Facebook on Perceptions of Others’ Lives,” *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking*, 15, no. 2, (2012): 118.

¹⁴⁵ Chou and Edge, 117-121.

¹⁴⁶ Nicole Ellison, Rebecca Heino and Jennifer Gibbs, “Managing Impressions Online: Self-presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment,” *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 11, no. 2, (2006): 415-441. Of course, the presentation of an “idealised self” is unsurprising in the particular context of online dating, but this tendency is evident in other social contexts as well. See Hogan below.

“exhibition” of oneself,¹⁴⁷ is the temptation not to will oneself to be greater? Would the self rather be a self that it is not, given the array of alternative ideal selves that are being presented to the self in social media spaces?

Answering these questions in the affirmative would have to demonstrate social media’s specific role. After all, it is significant that Vannucci et al.’s study explored what they described as “emerging adults”—the 18 to 22-year-old bracket—precisely because it represents “a high-risk period of an anxiety disorder”.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps increased social media use is a consequence of anxiety over one’s identity at this critical moment of self-development. Kierkegaard’s work reminds us that anxiety and despair over oneself are not new phenomena. An awareness, however, that (additional) anxiety might be caused by the dizzying possibilities that social media offers to the self highlights a potentially fascinating area of future research: namely, whether there is a negative correlation between anxiety and individuals who have a concept of, or believe in, a necessary self-identity, such as the idea of being created in the image of God. Finally, Kierkegaard’s work also challenges presumptions of anxiety as straightforwardly “negative” in psychological research: for in Kierkegaard’s understanding “anxiety is freedom’s possibility” in humanity, and thus learning to be “anxious in the right way” is a necessary feature of the journey of selfhood.¹⁴⁹

Social Media Considered in Relation to the Second Aspect: Self-Consciousness

In the previous section, I primarily considered social media in relation to Kierkegaard’s concept of selfhood from the aspect of the syntheses of infinitude/finitude and possibility/necessity. In this section, I will turn to consider Kierkegaard’s second aspect: self-consciousness. An interesting starting point here is whether Kierkegaard’s critique of the “constant sociality” of modern life means that many people are in ignorance of the self being “spirit”—the lowest level of Kierkegaardian selfhood in *Sickness unto Death*.

It is clear that technological connectivity is completely reversing humanity’s predicament regarding communication. Prior to a globally interconnected communications environment, communication was often difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. Indeed, prior to the twenty-first century, humanity has expended considerable time and energy attempting to overcome these communication difficulties. Although challenges remain, social media technologies facilitate an extraordinary level of global self-representation and interpersonal communication. For all the benefits of these developments, we might, however, view social media technologies as facilitating

¹⁴⁷ Bernie Hogan, “The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30, no. 6, (2010): 377-386.

¹⁴⁸ Vannucci et al., 164.

¹⁴⁹ COA, 155.

a particularly extraordinary extension of Kierkegaard's "chatter", whereby people talk "incessantly" about "anything and everything".¹⁵⁰

In *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard's critique of the "age of publicity, the age of miscellaneous announcements: nothing happens but still there is instant publicity" might be a more fitting description of some aspects of twenty-first century communicative culture than that of his own time.¹⁵¹ The instantly gratifying nature of social media feedback in terms of likes, shares, favourites, retweets, etc. encourages a new form of Kierkegaardian "constant sociality".¹⁵² The extraordinary "immediacy" of twenty-first century communication—whereby social media technologies both facilitate instant global publication and thus contribute to a culture of keeping up with what is most current—is certainly not what Kierkegaard understood by his own concept of "immediacy". The "immediacy" of social media technologies nevertheless facilitates the publication of constant streams of Kierkegaardian "immediacy", the triviality of everyday life. In this regard, matters that ought to remain private—because they are trivially insignificant in Kierkegaard's view—are continually and incessantly aired in the public domain. In the identification of "chatter" with this form of "private-public garrulousness"—whereby the "distinction between what is private and what is public is eroded"—Kierkegaard's work foreshadows concern over social media's tendency to collapse "private" and "public" contexts.¹⁵³ Perhaps, the Kierkegaardian critique here is that social media potentially encourages the making public of overly insignificant "private" matters which blinds the self to that which is (eternally) significant.

Critics have also argued that, although social media technologies facilitate self-representation and interpersonal communication, the economic interest of companies who provide these communication tools fundamentally impacts their design.¹⁵⁴ The *telos* of these communication spaces as far as social media companies are concerned is not particularly focussed on the development of Kierkegaardian self-consciousness. Rather, as far as the goal is the facilitation of self-representation and interpersonal communication, it is, at least, also the monetisation of these social media activities through data collection for the purposes of advertising.¹⁵⁵ Social media technologies are, therefore, specifically paradoxically designed to both consume an individual's time and attention, while periodically distracting the individual so that the individual can visit the websites of the social media company's commercial partners and purchase their products.¹⁵⁶ Taken

¹⁵⁰ TA, VIII 91.

¹⁵¹ TA, VIII 66.

¹⁵² Xiarhos, "Connected Pilgrim," 92.

¹⁵³ Hogan, "Presentation of Self," 383; Danah Boyd, "Why youth (heart) social network sites," in *Youth, Identity and Digital Media*, ed. David Buckingham, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 2007-16.

¹⁵⁴ James Williams, *Stand out of our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 28.

¹⁵⁵ Turner-Cole, "Commodification," 2.

¹⁵⁶ Williams, *Stand out of our Light*.

together, one might see these features of social media technologies as facilitating a state of self that is in Kierkegaardian terms “dominated by the sensate”,¹⁵⁷ a self that is in despair, because it is not aware that it is in despair.

Developing Self-Consciousness through “Silence” and “Essential Speaking”

To develop one’s self-consciousness beyond this base level, the implication of Kierkegaard’s thought is that “silence” and “solitude” are important. Potentially, the challenge for those who are becoming selves in the twenty-first century is to find ways to cultivate silent solitude away from the communicative noise with which lives are often consumed. This observation appears to align Kierkegaard’s work with sceptics of social media such as Xiarhos, who suggests that a “state of complete separation” is necessary for authentic selfhood, and Davelaar, who argues that digital media communications inhibit the “present attentiveness” required for a relationship with God.¹⁵⁸

As we have seen in *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard argues that silence is “inwardness”. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, informs us that “inwardness” is also closely related to “subjectivity”, to “spirit” and to “Christianity” itself.¹⁵⁹ “The most passionate inwardness” is “the highest truth there is for an existing person”.¹⁶⁰ It is inwardness that is thus essential for faith and for the self’s critical Kierkegaardian goal of relating itself to itself, and grasping its relation to God. Indeed, in Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety*, a self that wants to be truly educated by possibility/anxiety into faith is best placed in “the middle of the Jutland heath, where no event takes place or where the greatest event is a grouse flying up noisily”.¹⁶¹ Reidar Thomte highlights that after a visit to the heath in 1840, Kierkegaard wrote in his journal that:

here [on the heath] everything lies naked and unveiled before God, and here is no place for a lot of distractions, those many odd nooks and corners where the consciousness can hide [...] Here consciousness must come to definite and precise conclusions about itself. Here on the heath one must truly say: ‘Whither shall I flee from thy presence?’¹⁶²

It seems that on the Jutland heath, Kierkegaard found a place where the conscious self was alone before God. It is in such places that Kierkegaard suggests that the self can become aware of “something eternal” within it—required for the second stage of increasing self-consciousness in

¹⁵⁷ *SUD*, XI 155.

¹⁵⁸ Davelaar, “Embodied Attention,” iv.

¹⁵⁹ *CUP*, 33.

¹⁶⁰ *CUP*, 203.

¹⁶¹ *COA*, 159.

¹⁶² See Reidar Thomte, “Notes to Pages 157-62,” *The Concept of Anxiety*, citing JP III, 2830; Pap. III A 78.

Sickness unto Death—and perhaps aware of its relation to God as a “theological self”, which has Christ as its criterion, a deeper third stage of self-consciousness.

Xiarhos’ concern, in the context of pilgrimage, is that social media is a “dangerous distraction” that undermines the silence and solitude of spaces that are required for the development of authentic self-consciousness.¹⁶³ Similarly, citing Rowan Williams, who argues in *Where God Happens* that a self is “a unique kind of echo of God”, Davelaar argues that in order to “hear this echo we need to silence ourselves long enough to hear, and still ourselves to see”.¹⁶⁴ Davelaar wonders, therefore, whether in the future “those who know nothing aside from being highly networked” will be drawn to “times of silence and stillness”.¹⁶⁵ But perhaps we are already seeing the development of these practices. It appears that we are beginning to learn to regulate our communicative availability, whether that is through Facebook fasts, turning off notifications from social media apps, or turning off mobile phones in certain contexts. Paradoxically, internet-connected mobile apps such as Headspace and Calm claim to be able to assist in facilitating silence and solitude through guided meditations and mindfulness.

As much as Kierkegaard’s work appears to buttress the position of these sceptics, it nevertheless also offers two very significant caveats. The first is that we ought to be wary of the generalisations about social media use that we have already made in the process of the above critique. The very real risk here is that we “level” the individuals who use social media, effectively rendering them a single Kierkegaardian “public” based on the social media self-representational activities of only *some* individuals. If we return once more to the book analogy as a medium of self-expression, it would be ludicrous to define Kierkegaard’s own work as merely reflecting immediate, trivial, and finite concerns on the basis that a lot of books are fictional novels about everyday life. So too is it impossible to generalise about how individuals express themselves on social media.

The second related caveat is that a Kierkegaardian analysis suggests that there could be a role for “essential speaking” using social media technologies. As we have already seen, Kierkegaard was not averse to communication, nor to self-representation *per se*. Moreover, Rasmussen highlights that a significant concept in Kierkegaard’s later work is that of “witness to the truth”.¹⁶⁶ Rasmussen emphasises that “witnessing” can refer to both “testimony as narrative” and “testimony as act”—words as well as action. He argues, therefore, that Kierkegaard understands his own “poetic productions” as “narrative testimony to the Christian ideal”.¹⁶⁷ As such, Kierkegaard regarded his communication activities as both necessary and important, not only in themselves as speaking to

¹⁶³ Xiarhos, “Connected Pilgrim,” iv.

¹⁶⁴ Davelaar, “Embodied Attention,” 60.

¹⁶⁵ Davelaar, “Embodied Attention,” 61.

¹⁶⁶ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 154-5.

¹⁶⁷ Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 155.

the truth, but also as a means by which he could continue “striving” in his actions to become a self before God.¹⁶⁸ Although Kierkegaard acknowledged that his actions never lived up to his narrative of the ideal, he claimed the communication of such an ideal influenced his actions. Moreover, Kierkegaard also believed that his communication activities benefited the journeys of other selves beyond himself. His communication activities were important because they might “influence another to strive more”.¹⁶⁹

We might also argue, therefore, that communication through social media technologies could contribute to the Kierkegaardian journey of selfhood, if they are used for the purposes of “essential speaking” and what Kierkegaard would regard as “witnessing to the truth” of the Christian ideal, particularly if participation encourages a life lived in the imitation of Christ. There are hints of the use of social media for self-development in a related manner in media scholar Rettberg’s claims that blogging and writing about one’s life on social media platforms is a “means of becoming more sure of oneself and more aware of one’s preferences and opinions”.¹⁷⁰ Viviane Serfaty’s 2004 study, meanwhile, links blogging to the practice of diary keeping by the English Puritans who used this form of self-expression as a means of “religious self-discipline”, by which they recounted a “spiritual journey towards personal salvation”.¹⁷¹ Similarly, although people undoubtedly kept diaries relating to all sorts of matters, both diarising (Kierkegaard’s own journals being an obvious case in point) and social media self-expression are not necessarily excluded from Kierkegaard’s religious sphere of self-reflection.

Social Media and a Commitment to the Self-Conscious Life of Faith

Silence and inwardness in Kierkegaard’s thought, however, are not the end of the journey of selfhood, but rather a pre-requisite to a clear decision and commitment to the life of faith—a life whereby the self “rests transparently in God”.¹⁷² As we have seen, Kierkegaard’s “leap” into the passionate commitment of faith is dependent on the self’s awareness of its self as a theological self, a self before God in Christ. At this final level of self-consciousness, a self becomes intensely aware of its sin before God, and thus realises that it must die to its (false) self or selves in order to will to be its (true) self. Such a leap is only made possible through “eternal aid,” the Christian understanding that Jesus Christ died for the sake of the sins of the individual self.¹⁷³ We might ask,

¹⁶⁸ See Rasmussen citing Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 6.6528; Papirer, X2 A 184 (n.d., 1849).

¹⁶⁹ See Rasmussen citing Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 6.6528; Papirer, X2 A 184 (n.d., 1849).

¹⁷⁰ Rettberg, “Self-Representation in Social Media,” 11.

¹⁷¹ Viviane Serfaty, *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs*, (Amsterdam Monographs in American Studies, 2004), 5.

¹⁷² *SUD*, XI 194

¹⁷³ *SUD*, XI 223.

then, whether ultimately participation in social media can be said to encourage this Kierkegaardian leap.

Writing before the emergence of many social media technologies, Dreyfus argued that Kierkegaard's primary concern with "the public" is not the merging of the individual with a group, but rather that the single individual who belongs to a "public" does not make "a real commitment".¹⁷⁴ *Two Ages* contains a sustained critique of endless reflection that avoids making *passionate* commitments.¹⁷⁵ Dreyfus' subsequent contention is that the internet also overwhelmingly discourages real commitments, and that it more usually facilitates shallow aesthetic "virtual commitments" that impinge on the goal of selfhood. The individual self who uses the internet is seduced by the ease of making choices, leading to the "inevitable breakdown of serious choice",¹⁷⁶ and an inability to make the "serious commitments" of the ethical sphere.¹⁷⁷ Dreyfus is even more sceptical of the internet's capacity to encourage the "unconditional commitments" required for Kierkegaard's goal of selfhood within the religious sphere. He argues that a decision that defines the very life of a self—such as a commitment to a lifelong partner or to God—is highly unlikely. Ultimately, Dreyfus simply extends Kierkegaard's criticism of the press to the internet: "Kierkegaard is right", Dreyfus proclaims, "the press and the Internet are the ultimate enemy of the unconditional commitment which is the basis of Christianity".¹⁷⁸ Only a Kierkegaardian leap into a religious sphere—a sphere which in Dreyfus' thinking exists entirely outside of the internet—can "save us" from the leveling of the self at the hands of mediated communication technologies.¹⁷⁹

Before I explore some of the difficulties with these conclusions, it is worth considering whether elements of Dreyfus' critique hold in an era of social media. A particularly interesting question here is whether participation in social media potentially inhibits a Kierkegaardian commitment to a process of dying to (false) inauthentic selves in order to leap into (true) authentic selfhood. (Kierkegaard argues that the real sickness of despair is an "inability to die".¹⁸⁰) As I have already discussed, one possible avenue for future psychological research is the possibility that selves "despair"—or experience anxiety—because of the self-possibilities of social media representations. At the same time, the paradox of these technologies is that they can also reinforce a particular, (potentially false), self-(representation).¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 101.

¹⁷⁵ *TA*, VIII 66.

¹⁷⁶ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 106.

¹⁷⁷ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 105.

¹⁷⁸ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 109.

¹⁷⁹ Dreyfus, "Kierkegaard on the Internet," 109.

¹⁸⁰ *SUD*, XI 131.

¹⁸¹ Palfrey and Gasser, *Born Digital*, 25, 37.

The increasingly default position for many young people growing up today is to have “a public” social media profile.¹⁸² Obviously teenagers operated in public life in the past, but arguably they are far “more public” as a consequence of their social media activity in the twenty-first century. Potentially, it is the case that it is easier to die to the more “private” false selves of the past, than it is to the more “public” false selves of the information age. Such a contention might be underpinned in several ways. First, it is possible to create an identity and sense of self that is subsequently reinforced by social media feedback by others, encouraging the false self to continue to represent this self to the world. From a Kierkegaardian perspective perhaps the risk is that social media feedback contributes to a process by which the self in defiance wills to be a self that is formed by others and not by reflection on itself as it relates to God. Second, the data collected by social media companies is used to push information and sell products to the false self that is presented, potentially reinforcing this false self. The self risks becoming narrower, despairing for a lack of (the infinite) possibility (of God) as it increasingly inhabits its own finite “filter bubble”.¹⁸³ Third, the false self leaves digital traces that are not always easy to eradicate, a problem that is evident in the introduction of the European Union’s concept of the “right to be forgotten” as a human right. This law appears to recognise that in Kierkegaardian terms it is hard to die to a false self if others are either contributing their own social media representations of this false self outside of the individual’s control, or constantly resurrecting archived or long-forgotten social media posts and activity of this false self. Is it the case that even greater leaps of faith will be required by twenty-first century selves than Kierkegaard imagined in the nineteenth century?

Dreyfus’ portrayal of the internet as the “ultimate enemy” of “unconditional commitments”, however, seems problematic in an age of social media. Dreyfus suggests, for example, that it is “highly unlikely” that anybody would meet in a chat room and fall in love, and yet twenty years on, many individual selves have made lifelong commitments to people they have met online. The widespread use of personal social media profiles by individuals that are clearly self-representations intimately connected to a sense of self—rather than anonymous or pseudonymous participations in the pre-social media internet space—mean online communications have acquired a greater sense of personal commitment. Indeed, the reason why malicious “leveling” in the social media world—online bullying and abuse etc.—is so harmful is precisely because the self is personally invested in these self-representations and committed to positions and choices that have been made. Moreover, the ability of groups to easily communicate and coordinate through social media has also allowed people to find solidarity with others to strengthen their own—and others’—commitments to social and political causes. The use of hashtags—such as #metoo and #blacklivesmatter—can be regarded as a means by which individuals can “speak essentially” as part of a re-individualised “public” to bring about social, political, and theological change. Finally, I have

¹⁸² Palfrey and Gasser, *Born Digital*, 11.

¹⁸³ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

also argued throughout this article that an understanding of the internet as precluded from Kierkegaard's religious sphere is no longer tenable. This was already evident in the widespread use of social media technologies both by churches and adherents to the Christian faith,¹⁸⁴ but it seems particularly obvious in 2020 when many of the communicative activities of Christian worship, fellowship, and, indeed, the journey of Christian selfhood, have been conducted using social media technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion: The Kierkegaardian Impact of Social Media on the Self and Selfhood

It seems highly likely that social media technologies will continue to become increasingly ubiquitous means of self-representation and interpersonal communication in the twenty-first century. We are still in a period of relative infancy in grappling with the implications of these new forms of digital media technology for and on our lives, and answers to the question of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood will undoubtedly continue to evolve. Although answers will be informed by recourse to a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches, I have contended in this article that a theological perspective can contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discussion. Specifically, I have argued that a Kierkegaardian understanding of the self in *Sickness unto Death* as a series of paradoxical and dialectical syntheses, and of selfhood as a "goal" dependent on developing self-consciousness, offer useful conceptual ideas and frameworks for analysing the impact of social media on the self in the twenty-first century. The value of these ideas and frameworks is strengthened by Kierkegaard's "proto-interdisciplinary" reflection in *Two Ages* on the impact of the mediated technologies of his day on the self and selfhood.

In undertaking a subsequent Kierkegaardian analysis of social media, I have sought to develop a nuanced approach to the question of the impact of social media on the self and selfhood. On the one hand, I have suggested that social media could facilitate Kierkegaardian despair in finitude and necessity, contributing to a process whereby individual selves are caught in the "immediate" triviality of everyday life, and by which they are "leveled" through processes of envious social comparison and targeted advertising. I have contended that the "constant sociality" and digitally mediated "chatter" of twenty-first century life might undermine the silence, solitude and "inwardness" required for a self to relate itself to itself and relate itself to God. Finally, I have questioned whether social media might inhibit the self from a Kierkegaardian leap into faith on the basis that social media technologies have the potential to reinforce "false" selves that must be lost in order to gain one's "true" self.

At the same time, I have departed from earlier work on Kierkegaard and the internet which regarded the digitally mediated online environment as existing outside of Kierkegaard's religious

¹⁸⁴ Davelaar, "Embodied Attention," 62.

sphere. I have highlighted that Kierkegaard communicated through a mediated technology—the written book—as a means of self-expression and that social media representations are now as heterogeneous as self-representations in books. I have argued that social media representations can entail considerable personal commitments to choices and decisions, with far-reaching consequences for individual selves, because social media is part of “real life” and not separate from it. Social media self-representations can be regarded as genuine extensions of the self. Finally, I have suggested that in representing itself on social media, the individual self might participate in Kierkegaard’s religious sphere, that it might “speak essentially” and articulate a Christian ideal, and that it might consequently strive to become a self before God and influence others to “strive more”.

There are undoubtedly significant challenges in the application of these insights to the disciplines of media, communications and psychology which are underpinned by different epistemological foundations and assumptions. I have argued, however, that a Kierkegaardian analysis of social media can make a contribution to an ongoing interdisciplinary conversation over whether social media has a “negative” or “positive” impact on the self and selfhood, even if only to highlight these epistemological differences. Such a Kierkegaardian analysis certainly does not settle the debate over the impact of social media on the self and selfhood. Perhaps the fact that it does not do so, however, reminds us that the question can only ultimately be answered “subjectively” in Kierkegaardian terms.¹⁸⁵ Attempting to answer the question is an important “objective” task for theology and other disciplines, but it is perhaps, more significantly, a “subjective” task for the self. It requires the self to reflect—as a single individual, as a self that relates itself to itself, as a self before God—on what the impact of social media is on its own self and on other selves.

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¹⁸⁵ CUP, 17.

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