

Firstly, we will examine widespread impression management, claims of connection, and free speech regarding social media platforms. Next, we will explore the more pungent experience of alienation wherein social media users are unknowingly employed as laborers. At that point, the scope of the study must be shrunk to specifically scrolling-based video platforms. Finally, we will argue that social media de-regulates individuals, leading to currents of anomie if one deletes social media. In the digital age, corporations manage impressions to coerce users into signing onto alienating, scrolling videos, and the result is a threat of disconnection and de-regulation from institutions, leading to anomic currents.

Social Media

What constitutes social media? They are internet-based communication platforms designed to create and share content on said platform. The other term to be defined is impression management. Goffman argued “that the structure of social establishments generates a kind of theater that involves impression management” (Class Slides, April 17, 2024). The theater generated by our social establishments requires us to manage impressions. Normative impression management is dependent, and stable social establishments are independent. The result of entering into a social establishment is normative impression management. Goffman’s theory was only applied to micro-level interaction, but it occurs broadly at the highest echelons of society. Specifically, social media corporations are guilty of impression management.

The CEO Theater Troupe

When the Internet was first introduced to the world, it promised freedom and connection to people worldwide. The ensuing marketing of social media to the public was one

of the greatest feats of impression management accomplished. Using Goffman's impression management, we can identify why and how social media corporations manage impressions. Farganis describes social establishments where impression management is experienced, "Within the walls of a social establishment, we find a team of performers who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation" (Farganis^{7th}, 2024:307). Social media had to deliver a specific definition to ensure it would become populated. That message was one of connection and digital freedom. Elon Musk's impression management is a more aggressive yet successful application. His acquisition of Twitter was met with harsh criticism. Musk touted that it was to 'save free speech.' He wrote before acquiring Twitter, "the platform isn't living up to its potential as a bastion of free speech" (Sato, 2022). Furthermore, Musk recently tweeted a meme depicting two castles. One was bright and shiny with a picture of X (Musk's rebranded name for Twitter), and the other was dark and gloomy and had pictures of Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, Threads, YouTube, and TikTok. The words 'Free Speech & Truth' were plastered over X and 'Censorship & Propaganda' over the other apps. Musk is utilizing memes in a vapid attempt to connect with younger audiences and establish himself as the only tech CEO dedicated to free speech and the truth. Facebook's impression management is subtler yet still noticeable throughout company promos and Mark Zuckerberg himself. On the rebranded website Meta, the Facebook tab finds a sentence that goes as follows. "Facebook helps you connect with friends, family and communities of people who share your interests" (Meta). Consistent marketing toward individuals to connect and share interests appears common across social media. It's undoubtedly impression management, but that doesn't necessarily make it malicious. We are all constantly managing our impressions, and those adjustments of hair,

makeup, and clothing are not considered malintent, so why is social media different? Social media doesn't get the same pass as humans because its impression management is not a simple added flare for an increased chance of job prospects. Social media has disguised itself as a wolf in sheep's clothing, with the power to influence our minds, disconnect us from reality, and entrench us into addictive tendencies that are slowly ripping apart the interdependence of society. Farganis describes the reasons behind disguised power, "Power of any kind must be clothed in effective means of displaying it and will have different effects depending upon how it is dramatized" (Farganis^{7th},2014:309). It would have been ineffective for Mark Zuckerberg to describe Facebook as the girl-rating, drug-dealing nexus of connection for college campuses, so he didn't. He marketed it as connecting everyone, specifically based on interests, to other similar people.

What is the result of this impression management? The taking over of free time, a co-opting of leisure to produce a product for the bourgeoisie - data. In a study titled "Internet Addiction Prevalence and Quality of (Real) Life: A Meta-Analysis of 31 Nations Across Seven World Regions," it was found that roughly 210 million users are addicted, by the scientific definition, to the Internet. It must be mentioned that I could not access the original article and found the information through an article that cited the previous one; that article was titled "Life Satisfaction: A Key to Managing Internet & Social Media Addiction." However, addiction is the furthest extent on a spectrum of social media usage. A third of all U.S. adults claim they use TikTok, and nearly half of U.S. adults claim they use Instagram (Gottfried, 2024). Finally, another study in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that screen time has nearly doubled to 7.7 hours/day compared to just 3.8 hours/day before the COVID-19

pandemic (Nagata et al., 2021). Social corporations have done a spectacular job at managing impressions, causing widespread addiction among users. As social media corporations manage impressions, the population of social media apps goes up, and users become further entrenched in their usage of social media.

The Labor of Scrolling

Scrolling on social media isn't necessarily a new concept. We have always scrolled to get to the next item; the verb itself comes from the action of unraveling paper to reveal a message. However, new-age scrolling is different. It produces something behind that screen, the product of which we are so unaware of and separated from that we aren't even considered laborers in this process. Before the process is understood, one might question whether scrolling is even labor. Marx defines labor-power early on in *Capital* "By labour-power or capacity for labour is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description" (Marx, 1867). Factory workers got to at least see their products getting shipped out. These days, scrollers aren't even fully aware that their data is being sold. Scrolling is the act of labor, whether it's TikTok, Instagram reels, or YouTube shorts, that produces data, which is turned around and sold to advertisers; said advertisements are then directed at us. For perhaps the first time in human history, laborers have become entirely unaware that they are laboring. The intensity of labor depends on one's usage of social media or screen time.

Scrolling labor, then, can be considered labor power. However, that doesn't constitute it as the pre-modern labor Marx thought so highly of. Ritzer writes, "Labor is thus at the same time (1) the objectification of our purpose, (2) the establishment of an essential relation

between human need and the material objects of our need, and (3) the transformation of our human nature” (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013:52). Objectification for Marx was idealizing a final product in one’s imagination before acting it out, there is no final product to be analyzed under scrolling-labor because we could go forever. There is no relation between human needs and material objects of scrolling labor. The labor requires no material need apart from a phone and an internet connection. For Marx, pre-modern labor changed our needs, our consciousness, and our human nature (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013:52). Under capitalism, Marx asserted, our labor did not transform us. Instead, it alienated us from our humanity, other workers, the product, and the process of production. Contrasted with scrolling labor, which alienates us from our own free time, our genuine desires, and from each other.

Next, we must prove that scrolling labor can fit in the category of alienation. Marx did not intend for alienation to be applied broadly, so scrolling may not fit neatly. Ritzer writes of alienated labor, “Instead we labor, in accordance with the purpose of the capitalist who hires and pays us” (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013:53). We have yet to be paid for our work. Yet, we are certainly in accordance with the purpose of the capitalists. Tech billionaires who invented social media want nothing more than for us to continue using social media. Society is continuing down a path of complacency regarding the use of our time, we scroll even in leisure hours. Furthermore, there is no objectivation in scrolling labor; we see no end goal in it, and there is also no purpose in it. As opposed to Labor with a capital L, alienated labor has no “expression of our purpose” (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013:53). Objectively, a word scarcely used by academics for good reason, there is no expression of humanity’s purpose in scrolling, nothing phenomenal or experientially unique occurs. Besides the slow destruction of our eyes. If we consider the fact

that scrolling labor can be considered labor-power yet not Marx's pre-modern labor, then it must fall under the category of alienated labor, for that is the only category left.

Scrolling into Suicide

Finally, we come to the alienation that scrolling labor causes. The first aspect, free time, can be showcased using the aforementioned screen time, statistics that stated the average screen time during COVID was 7.7 hours/day. Within a year, they would spend 2810 hours on their phone; within 10 years, that person would have spent 3 years of it on their phone. Marx wouldn't be able to conceive the reality we exist in. We spend nearly the same number of working hours at a job as we do scrolling; mind you, many people's daily screen time exceeds 8 hours. When the time that was previously spent conversating, pondering, writing, reading, and enriching one's self is replaced by a toxic feed designed to get you to consume, the effects reveal themselves quickly. Individual desires are morphed; most scrollers have their basic needs satisfied, food, water, and shelter, and so new needs are fashioned by the content one consumes. Short-term trends indicate a new product that you 'NEED' to be a part of the trends. Stanley cups are a prime example. After a woman's car caught on fire, the Stanley was the only salvageable thing; this event created a spark that led to a Stanley Cup craze. Restockings at Target were met by hordes of rushing customers, all desiring a Stanley for the amorphous elevation of status it provides. Furthermore, one's ability to satisfy one's needs has only increased with technology like Uber Eats and Doordash. Leading to an effect where a food video can activate that consumerist tick to go and spend money on delivering food. We've essentially become babies in a crib, where every video is a new item to be dangled in front of us in hopes of coughing up some cash. A scroll later, our caretaker grabs a new product to dangle, hoping

for us to grab at it with a like or comment. When we are alienated from our free time, we are alienated from one another, for free time is often chosen to be spent socializing with others. Then, the independent variable is alienation from free time, and the dependent variable is being alienated from one another. One reason is the quasi-connection that social media provides. As we scroll, we see other humans, we hear other humans, and we can even comment in hopes somebody might see our little squeak of an opinion in the vast sea of content that is social media. However, the reality is, that there is no connection, and no pixelated individual can replace the sensory experience of interaction. A video is recorded, edited, glossed over, re-recorded, scrutinized, re-written, edited again, recorded the final time, and posted. There's practice, intentionality, and a damn script that goes into it. When we interact, we see live reactions, smells, and sights, and there is a unique conversational give and take. A pause in between thoughts says something. We lose this vital aspect of conversation in social media, and yet it is often still considered a type of interaction. For alienation from free time and from genuine desires, the independent variable is whether or not one scrolls on social media. Screen time affects the intensity. If, say, 12 hours a day were spent online, that person is most likely more alienated from genuine desire, others, and their own time.

Scrolling labor, then, is certainly not the species-being-driven labor that Marx praised; rather, it is a unique type of alienated labor Marx couldn't have accounted for. When new jobs or entire swaths of society are changed, often language follows. The existence of terminology used to describe scrolling activities or experiences reveals how common the behavior is. Social media lingo gives us key insight into what the experience of scrolling is like. To start, the term doom-scrolling was popularized in 2020 as a way to describe an intense multi-hour session of

scrolling that primarily covers negative news (Berkwit). The term is more broadly applied nowadays to scrolling sessions in general. I hear it multiple times a week as a way to describe why someone had been quiet the past 30 minutes or why my roommate had been procrastinating. The question arises: what is the doom aspect of it? Apocalyptic language is indicative of not only one's pessimism towards the present activity but their entire future. Another common one is bed rotting, a term to describe hours spent underneath the covers doing mindless activity. There are opposing sides, and one believes this is self-care. Doing nothing is an important aspect of activity in a life constantly bombarded with responsibility. However, the other side can't grasp how committing precious time to essentially meaningless activity isn't a clear sign of mental health issues. The terms doom-scrolling and bed rotting don't crop up without context, just as the word 'crop up' owes its existence to farmers. There must be an entire class of people that understand the term, which makes it easily recognizable; they must all be doing the same activity for it to be widely understood. Thus, these phrases existing in the first place showcase how widespread the behavior is. Finally, what was the argument presented? The existence of certain terms proves the existence of a class of 'workers' who are entrenched in scrolling labor, and the term's negative connotations provide further evidence of the negative experience of scrolling labor.

Marx purports the effects of alienated labor in the factory, he writes "The worker, therefore, feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless" (Marx, 1844:75). Alienated scrolling labor, however, has employed us even in our leisure time. The ease with which one can labor is the differential mark for scrolling labor. A worker gets home, sits down, and begins working once more, and they are fed a swath of

information that one could not possibly grapple with or understand in the 60 seconds provided. This leads to a disconnection from genuine rhetoric and opinion within their human community. The beauty of modernity was the spread of work; folks didn't have to farm all hours of the day or work the lord's land to make dinner. We are essentially cubicle workers. Our phones hold an infinite stack of videos which we may stamp our approval on with a like or comment. The only product produced is data, meant to be utilized on us through advertisers.

Keeping us Clicking

Now, there is an aspect that has gone relatively undiscussed. That is, why would people continue scrolling? What is motivating them to continuously pick up their phones and utilize these apps? The threat of disconnection is that motivation.

Durkheim discussed four types of suicide within society. Anomic suicide was dependent on a weak collective. The group wasn't regulating an individual's activity. Durkheim asserted that this normally occurred after a societal disruption. Ritzer writes, "Either type of disruption [positive or negative] renders the collective temporarily incapable of exercising its authority over individuals" (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013:95). The effect of disruption is a releasing of "moods of rootlessness and normlessness" (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013:95).

Now, one might question what caused the disruption. Nothing happens as one clicks onto Instagram, and that's because the 'moods of rootlessness and normlessness' haven't actually been released yet (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2013:95). In the case of social media, the perceived threat of disruption is what keeps us coming back. Users do not recognize that they aren't genuinely connecting to anything real or valuable on social media, just as many workers do not see the uselessness of their labor contributing to a stockpile of products that don't

satisfy a real need. The perceived loss of quasi-connection that might come from deleting social media is threatening. Furthermore, there are avenues of connection with people whom we are already acquainted with, and social media is not just a place filled with strangers. Users follow their friends and are in group chats with each other. However, these connections would persist without social media; messaging apps exist outside of traditional social media, like WhatsApp and the built-in Messages app on iPhones. Group chats and direct messaging were intentional additions that bolstered the threat of disconnection.

We have discussed why one doesn't leave social media. Yet, the effects of leaving social media have yet to be analyzed.

Durkheim didn't envision anomie being applied so broadly, so I would like to take a moment to prove further that it is a type of anomie. On social media, the prevailing opinion of anything is nebulous. As a scroller myself, I find it impossible to miss the breadth of opinion on social media. A video of a woman describing her uncomfortable encounter with an old man at a grocery store will have comments ranging from, 'You asked for it,' to 'I bet your clothes were skimpy,' to 'All men are dogs.' Regulation for Durkheim was the influential institutions of society like church, family, and schools; however, in the age of social media, opinions on these institutions can change with one video describing someone's trauma from the church and another intertwining macho mentality with the words of God. What I am arguing is that regulation is weaker on social media, and so when one leaves social media, they are leaving with a distorted, liquid opinion of dominant institutions. Institutions that, previously, everyone had sure-fire opinions of, even if they weren't all positive. So, as one uses social media, their regulation is lowered because of the various opinions they receive from institutions. If they then

break this connection by deleting social media, they're left unsure how to feel about institutions that previously regulated our desires and our passions. Left to their own senses and opinions, slowly, their understanding of institutions will reappear as they interact with them on their own and filter them through their own beliefs instead of receiving constantly changing opinions.

Social media corporations have utilized Goffman's impression management at the broadest level of society to coerce users into utilizing their platforms. Once on social media, they implemented short-form scrolling content marketed as connective content that everyone can interact with solely for the purpose of farming our data. We utilized Marx's concept of alienation and applied it to the effects of scrolling, which has been alienation from free time, genuine desires, and one another. Finally, the threat of disconnection from individuals and the construal of a genuine definition of regulative institutions can lead to anomic suicide.

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