

# Is there anybody out there? – Social Media as a new social fetish

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## ABSTRACT

It is often claimed that Social Media are changing the subject of social interaction, empowering people and facilitating new and interactive possibilities. The present paper, an empirically based theoretical reflection on the participative subject, follows Lacan's and Zizek's philosophical and psychoanalytical thinking by questioning the assumed interactive connotation of user profiles, attitudes and behavior through the philosophical and psychoanalytical concept of 'interpassivity'. It describes how Social Media become a new social fetish for many of the so-called 'producers', reducing the allegedly social interactions into reified and objectified relationships, 'decentering' the subject from within.

## General Terms

Human Factors.

## Keywords

Interpassivity, interactivity, user profiles, Social Media, social fetish.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of the current hypermodern world, Social Media have become a relevant social phenomenon. In a huge variety of studies, they are promoted as tools for individual and social empowerment and the growing participation of people, resulting in improvements in social capital, well-being, sociability, or democracy.

Their underlying hypothesis is that the previously rather passive Web- and Media-users become more and more 'producers', active subjects in the process of mass self-communication. But, at the same time, the users of Social Media are subjected to the influence of different cultural axioms, such as hypercapitalism, hypertecnification, hyperindividualization and hyperconsumption (10), facing a transformation of the social subject.

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Arising from this context, our research questions are the following: How do users deal with Social Media? Do they become more (inter)active Web-users or are they caught up between systemic contradictions, which they have to solve through biographic solutions (1)? Or might they even become interpassive users?

Based on a qualitative and Grounded Theory-guided analysis of several focus groups, with which we explore Web-users' Social Media practices, attitudes and motivations, we first describe different user-profiles, specifically analyzing and focusing on their interactive/interpassive dimension. Using Lacan's and Zizek's philosophical and psychoanalytical terminology, we reflect on the transformations of the social subject in the realm of the new 2.0 media.

## 2. STATE OF THE ART

### 2.1 How 'social' are Social Media?

The emergence of Social Media after the doc.com crash at the end of the 1990s can be framed into, what Lipovetsky and Serroy (10) call, the current hypermodern world, which is characterized by four main cultural axioms:

- Hypercapitalism, representing the driving force of globalization and embodied by the homo oeconomicus;
- Hypertecnification, defining the digital era, with individuals living an abstract life, cloistered in their new technologies, while they stay at home;
- Hyperindividualism, or life à la carte, centered on premises such as self-realization, subjective autonomy, hedonism, and following a narcissistic tendency; and finally,
- Hyperconsumerism, favoring comfort and convenience above any other thing, but leading to growing disorientation in the hypermodern societies.

The emergence of Social Media and the steady rise of users' adoption cannot be looked at as if it were not influenced by this junction of different cultural traits.

Due to the lack of a precise definition, Social Media can be considered as an umbrella term, which encompasses a wide array of communication mechanisms that facilitate individuals to produce, distribute, re-elaborate, share, rate and discuss digital content.

The fact that these new media are qualified as 'social' can be highly misleading, due to the diverse meanings than can be attached to this concept. In the case of Social Media, 'social' does not mean 'beneficial for society', such as is implied, for instance, in the concept of 'social innovation'. What is in fact done is imprinting the social adjective to the networked and interactive capabilities provided by 2.0 technologies. Hence, Social Media are intrinsically 'interactive', but might or might not be considered as properly 'social'. But this implicit 'social' dimension of the so-called 'Social' Media seems now to be accepted without question.

Let us consider the globalwebindex Annual Report 2011 (6) as a concrete example, which announces the beginning of a "Social Entertainment Age". It anticipates the rise of a packaged internet with packaged platform substituting browsers, the explosion of professional content on Social Media, and the "real-time social", meaning the shift from text-based content (such as forums or blogs) to micro-blogs and social networks as the forthcoming tendencies in the field of Social Media.

The growing real-time opinions and options, e.g. links, status updates, ongoing shared agenda, and the permanent reacting and interacting with live events, seem to illustrate a mainly ignored feature of Social Media. In contrast to the generally assumed aspect of user-generated content, users apparently prefer not to create their own agenda or content, but rather embrace others' entertainment agendas. "We are the Network - not the Creator" (6) seems to be one of the new slogans surrounding Social Media, confirming the prevalence of the consuming user over the creative one.

In this context, the agency of the different social participants, defined as the capacity of an agent –a user in the case of Social Media– to act in his or her world penetrated by new 2.0 media, becomes a key concept to be studied.

## 2.2 Interactivity, Interpassivity and Fetishism

### 2.2.1 Interactivity

Following this general question on agency and the specific meaning of 'Social' Media, interactivity emerges as one of its key dimensions. Usually referring to an alternating process with reciprocal relationships, it means different things in different fields: In general, it indicates a correlation between two or more agents of items in a specific field; in Sociology, it refers to the people who perceive each other and adjust their respective behavior to each other; in the context of information technology, interactivity mainly describes an aspect of the relationship between people and machines, humans and computers (8).

Interactivity is commonly associated with positive connotations. For example, O'Reilly claims that 'Social Media' is "all about harnessing collective intelligence" (13).

The example per excellence to illustrate this is Wikipedia, a collaborative encyclopedia, coming close to Britannica in terms of accuracy in its scientific entries (5) that allows users to add pages and produce and edit content. Anyone with access to the Web can, ideally, create and change content (2).

Social Media are also often credited with generating social capital, a classical sociological concept, referring to the connections within and between social networks. In contrast to human capital, which mainly points to individuals and their education, social capital relates to relationships between them (4).

From this perspective, social networks offer individuals a different and alternative range of resources, such as recognition, support, connections, or knowledge, which increase their possibilities to find jobs, intimate partners, or friends through the creation and maintenance of 'weak' ties (7).

Other studies claim that "IT has a direct positive impact on life satisfaction, even when controlling for income and other factors known to be important in determining well-being." (18) According to these results, information technologies empower people, improve their lives and enforce their sense of freedom and control producing this indirect and positive effect on their life satisfaction.

The current discussion on the role of Social Media during the Arab revolutions and claim for more democracy and freedom also associates a wide range of positive, empowering and interactive values with the allegedly mobilizing character of Social Media (12).

### 2.2.2 Interpassivity

Nevertheless, not all scholars consider information technologies and Social Media as a purely positive social phenomenon. Castells talks, for example, in the context of mass self-communication, about "electronic autism" (3) in the case of bloggers, whose majority (52% according to the Pew Institute (9)) claims that they blog mostly for themselves, without pursuing an interactive motivation.

But in addition and beyond the existing critical voices on Social Media, it seems necessary to propose a dialectically opposed concept to interactivity, allowing its contrast with the prevailing reflections.

In this context, while current media studies attribute the sense of interactivity to the subject, Žižek (21) –termining Lacan's first illustration of the concept– proposes the term interpassivity, arguing that the object is active instead of the subject, who is passive.

In this sense, interpassivity can be defined as the consensual transfer of activity or emotion onto another being or object, who consequently 'acts' in one's place.

"Interpassivity is delegated "passivity" –in the sense of delegated pleasure, or delegated consumption. Interpassive people are those who want to delegate their pleasures or their consumptions. And interpassive media are all the agents –machines, people, animals etc.– to whom interpassive people can delegate their pleasures." (15)

Typical examples used to illustrate this concept are:

- The chorus in Greek tragedy: The emotions generated by the tragedy on the spectators are expressed, articulated, experienced and lived by and through the Greek chorus. Thus, the emotional response is performed by a 'surrogated self', representing the appropriate affective response to the performance. (19)
- The canned laughter in soap operas: Another example is the canned laughter in (mainly) American soap operas. The viewer, as the interpassive subject, passes his or her enjoyment to the 'canned' laughter, which laughs in his or her place. (20)
- The symbolic and time shifted visualization of movies

through recording: The recording of movies with a VCR machine is another often mentioned example of interpassivity, as the object (the VCR) takes over their owners' activity of enjoying the movie. Programming the VCR, liberates their owners of the duty of really watching the movie. While the video assumes this active task, the owners can be considered passive (regarding the fact of watching the movie) but at the same time free to do whatever they like to do, while the machine acts as their substitute. (19)

In this sense, interpassivity can be understood as "*the substitution of a real act (like reading) by a figurative representation of it (like photocopying), [...] characteristic of ritual action. Interpassivity consists of ritual acts.*" (15). Pfaller also talks about the "*figurative representation of consumption*" (15).

Zizek puts the concept into a broader context:

*"This interpassivity is opposed to Hegel's notion of List der Vernunft (cunning of Reason), where I am active through the other: I can remain passive, sitting comfortably in the background, while the Other does it for me. [...] In the case of interpassivity, on the contrary, I am passive through the other."* (19)

### 2.2.3 Fetishism

Consequently, the object-thing which substitutes the users' activity and acts in their place takes up the role of a "signifier" or fetish (20), described by the Heglian reflective reversal: when another is sacrificed for me, I sacrifice myself through the other; when the other enjoys for me, I myself enjoy through the other.

*"You think you are active, while your true position, as it is embodied in the fetish, is passive."* (20)

Hence, this embodiment through the 'Big Other' represents a symbolic substitution, already referred to by the Marxist notion of the commodity-fetishism. The fetish implies that social relations are increasingly reduced to objects and that inherent value or power is attributed to an object.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

In order to study the interactive/interpassive connotation of Social Media users' behavior, we chose a qualitative and Grounded Theory-based approach. The methodological design of the present study included six focus groups of 5 to 9 participants each (a total of 41 participants). The participants of the different focus groups were selected according to the Grounded Theory premise of theoretical sampling, emphasizing the variety, heterogeneity, and contrasts of the sample.

These criteria were applied to the following variables: age (the participants' age ranging from 18 to 60 years), usages (heavy users with more than 1 hour of Social Media permanence per day to occasional and sporadic users), professions (unemployed, freelancers, executive managers, students, pensioners,...), and branches of industry (communication, tourism, automobile, publishing, law,...).

The focus groups were composed according to the criteria of homogeneity and heterogeneity. A specific discussion guideline was prepared and the groups were moderated by the authors, video-recorded and later transcribed.

Coding was performed regarding Grounded Theory criteria and the categories follow the paradigmatic scheme proposed by Strauss and Corbin (17).

## 4. PATTERNS OF USER PROFILES

Through this Grounded Theory based coding, four main categories emerged: *homo oeconomicus* vs. *homo gaudens*, on one side, and *homo individualis* vs. *homo socialis*, on the other side. The first distinction, the one between *homo oeconomicus* and *homo gaudens* is characterized by the difference between a pragmatic driven use of Social Media and their impulsive driven use; while the second distinction between *homo individualis* and *homo socialis* is based on the individualistic and egocentric vs. participative and collaborative use of Social Media. In the following subchapters, we will illustrate these categories and their specific characteristic of the interactive/interpassive dimension.

### 4.1.1 Homo oeconomicus

The users represented by the category *homo oeconomicus* use Social Media for a specific purpose. They are mostly driven by their life conditions, which motivate their specific Social Media uses.

For example, some of the focus group participants, who are currently unemployed, use different job seeking platforms in order to find a new job. Most of them explain how they "publish" or "send" their curriculum vitae on or to sites and Social Media and then "wait" until they receive a corresponding job offer, mainly complaining about the inefficiency of these services. Hence, while they are *interpassively* at home, performing other tasks, they expect the Other to be active for them and to accomplish their objective.

Another example of the interpassive dimension of the *homo oeconomicus* is the well-known RSS feed, subscribed to by most professional Social Media users. The fact of receiving the news feed already makes the users feel as if they had already read the information, producing an interpassive and anticipated satisfaction, while in reality it is the RSS-fetish which performs the selecting and reading of the news. Similar services, such as Evernote or others, fulfill a similar task, comparable to the more antiquated copy machine. Accumulating and storing virtual or real copies of information generally produces satisfaction in the interpassive users, substituting their active reading with the interpassive reading of Social Media.

*Homo oeconomicus* in their version as *homo utilitatis* look for the most comfortable and easy way of doing and achieving things. They opt for the Social Media, which offer them the most practical and easygoing way of achieving their goals, if possible delegating their activities to them, such as finding a job, finding the cheapest airplane ticket or the best offer in town. According to this user profile, Social Media facilitate their lives, with the result that most users become interpassive agents.

But not all sub-categories of the *homo oeconomicus* are interpassive. For example, the *homo habitus* adapt Social Media to their already existing habits, in order to facilitate their leisure activities. Without entering into an interpassive mode, they, e.g., continue loving books and do not delegate their reading to Social Media, but they might adopt a new gadget or platform in order to gain better or cheaper access to books or their electronic version. In this sense, the *homo habitus* can be mainly considered resistant to interpassivity.

Similarly, *homo resistensis*, another sub-category of the homo oeconomicus, 'resist' the temptations of Social Media, because they simply do not see the necessity of adopting Social Media into their lives. In this sense, they are neither interpassive nor interactive.

Common to all the homini oeconomici is that they all use (or do not use) Social Media based on pragmatic and rational motives and attitudes, adopting and performing only in some aspects an interpassive dimension.

#### 4.1.2 *Homo gaudens*

In contrast to the homo oeconomicus, *homo gaudens* represents the users driven by impulsive motives. In this category, similar to the previous one, we also find interactive and interpassive dimensions.

The *homo consumensis* is the main protagonist of this category and one of the most prevailing profiles among Social Media users, motivated by the consumption of goods, entertainment, games, etc. Posting a status update on your wall makes you a consumer of your 'friends' reaction. Without having to do anything more, 'Facebook does the job for you', while you can interpassively wait or perform other tasks. Hence, the posting and sharing of photographs, videos, etc. delegates the consumption and memorization of these contents to others, while the author of the posts is liberated of these tasks.

The *homo pathologensis* describe the extreme case of this impulsive behavior, characterized by pathological dependency on Social Media, externalizing their lives toward the Other –the fetish– which obtains the total power over them.

But apart from these interpassive user types, other sub-categories of the homo gaudens do not follow this pattern. The *homo romanticus*, for example, are characterized by the fact that they miss the 'old way of doing things', insisting and preferring the use of all of their senses to experience the world. They do not want to delegate their pleasure to the Other, but enjoy themselves.

In contrast to these two first categories with both interactive and interpassive dimensions, the following two profiles are characterized by two distinctive interpassive traits.

#### 4.1.3 *Homo socialis*

The *homo socialis*, whose main motivation is the engagement in common and shared activities with others, use Social Media as a commodity. Pressing the 'I like'-button or posting a status update, they feel like communicating with their friends, while in fact it is Facebook performing this task on their behalf, while they remain interpassive.

In this sense, they are not only taking and sharing photographs of their lives, but delegating the watching, communicating and memorizing of their lives, first to their photo camera and then to Facebook, Flickr or other Social Media platforms. Hence, they are not watching interactively but interpassively through the camera and not memorizing interactively but interpassively, thanks to Social Media.

Facebook's 'causes' ([www.causes.org](http://www.causes.org)) is another example of users who depose their beliefs on others. Causes is an on-line fundraising platform for Facebook-users, benefitting registered non-profit organizations. According to the homepage, "*Causes uses Facebook Connect to access its users' social graph and has*

*over 25 million registered users worldwide (Causes, n.d.)", allowing them to create a network of followers around their cause, distribute information and collect funds.*

By clicking the 'I like'-button or joining a causes-group, the users feel like engaging in a social activity. Similarly, watching the Arab revolutions through Twitter makes the Social Media users believe they are taking part in a social revolution, while they sit interpassively at home. Others performing, communicating on their behalf, and risking their 'real' lives.

#### 4.1.4 *Homo individualis*

In contrast to the homo socialis, who depose their beliefs on Others, the *homo individualis* are interpassive through Others.

According to the focus group participants, one of the central motivations of joining and participating in Social Network Sites and especially Facebook seems to be "gossiping", which means taking part secretly in activities of others. They enjoy the 'suffering' and entertainment of others, looking through the keyhole, offered by Facebook. In this sense, the Social Media users do not have their own experiences, but perform a pseudo social behavior, participating interpassively in the lives of hundreds, thousands or millions of other users.

Initiatives like the Twitter account @trawom, standing for 'travelling without moving' is an initiative, which "*started in Bonn/Germany and is supposed to travel the world by being handed over from person to person*". All followers can interpassively travel around the world without leaving their homes, consuming, enjoying and suffering the experiences of others.

The profile pictures are another form of being interpassive through others. By uploading a "Facebook photograph" on one's profile, the users are watched by others interpassively, without having to make themselves presentable, as mentioned by one of the focus group participants:

*"Nobody is as ugly as in their passport photograph, and nobody as pretty as in their Facebook profile photograph."*

Once the photograph is taken and posted, it works –thanks to the Social Media– on its own.

## 5. THE INTERPASSIVE USER

In the context of the current 'liquid society' (1) and the culture of narcissism, hyperindividualization, and hyperconsumption, many Social Media users do not seem to engage in direct 'relations between people' but rather in 'relations between things or commodities'. Individual actions are transformed into words and meanings, which can be consumed. Hence, Social Media become the new market and social utility that "*helps you connect and share with the people in your life*" ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)). As shown by the focus group data, the users seem to be aware that most Social Media platforms mainly produce reified forms of social relations. Nevertheless, they act as if they did not know this, following a fetishist illusion and thereby transforming Social Media into their new fetish.

This happens both for the *homo socialis* as for the *homo individualis*: The first use Social Media as a commodity; they depose their belief onto Other(s). Pressing the 'I like' button makes them feel like a believer or activist, suffering or being politically active through others. The second is (inter)passive through Other(s), enjoying (or suffering) the 'entertainment' of

Other(s) through pure consumption, delegating their own enjoyment.

According to the data, *homo individualis-gaudens* seems to prevail over the other detected profiles, using Social Media mainly as a 'keyhole', 'peeking through Web-platforms' for gossiping about and spying on others. Regarding these users' practices and discourses from a Lantian perspective, most of the users can be considered to be rather passive and even interpassive actors, following Pfaller's (16) and Zizek's (21) terminology: They seem to externalize their costs and 'outsource' their enjoyment towards others, asking for their passive expectation to be satisfied. They also fear the direct contact and experience, subtly escaping from their own enjoyment. Fake realities emerge as a systemic issue.

In this sense, the 'status updates' on Social Network Sites can be compared to a Tibetan prayer wheel:

*"You write a prayer on a paper, put the rolled paper into a wheel, and turn it automatically, without thinking [...] In this way, the wheel itself is praying for me, instead of me – or, more precisely, I myself am praying through the medium of the wheel. The beauty of it is that in my psychological interior I can think about whatever I want, I can yield to the most dirty and obscene fantasies, and it does not matter because – to use a good old Stalinist expression – whatever I am thinking, objectively I am praying." (21)*

By posting emotional updates on Facebook, users externalize their feelings, as in the case of the chorus in Greek tragedy. They pass their feelings to Facebook, which actively performs these feelings, liberating the users from their emotional charge. In this sense, Facebook can be understood as a modern and Social Media form of the Tibetan prayer wheel, transmitting actively the believers' or users' feelings and petitions. But in contrast to the real one, there is no God listening to the prayer of Social Media users. That is why the interpassivity of Social Media cannot exist on its own, but needs to be balanced with its counterpart: interactivity. Without other Social Media users interactively reading, watching and answering blog posts, photographs, status updates, etc., interpassive behavior would make no sense and could not exist.

Therefore, the specific feature of Social Media is that they work as a transmitter, facilitating both interpassive and interactive behavior. In this sense, Social Media can be understood as a social fetish or 'sacré quotidien' (14), fulfilling the function of interrupting the profane everyday life, similar to religious rituals, offering a momentary escape. This together with the fact of creating fake realities and the illusion of connectedness and attention partly explain their huge success.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The recent phenomenon of Social Media is still generating more questions than answers to sociology, communication sciences, network science, web science, and many other disciplines. As shown by McLuhan and his famous sentence of "*The medium is the message*" (11), the characteristics of a medium are crucial, representing the specific circumstances which contribute to the creation of a specific environment.

The present paper aims to contribute to the better comprehension of Social Media and the social context, generated by them. Therefore, the current analysis of focus group data focuses on the participative subject, opening new lines of arguments and research

regarding relevant issues, such as privacy, trust, control, or power.

With our empirically based theoretical reflection on interactivity and interpassivity, we were able to show that Social Media due to their specific characteristics cause and require both interactive and interpassive behavior, in order to guarantee their functioning. Considering the huge amount of literature on interactivity, the current paper emphasizes more the interpassive aspects of Social Media, without forgetting that it requires the presence of both sides of the same coin.

In this sense, Social Media can be understood as a medium generating both interactivity and interpassivity, which converts them into a new social fetish and communicative commodity. They act, disguised by their 'social' name, as catalysts of the hypermodern age, promoted by the premises of capitalism and technology and strengthening the cultural axioms of individualism and consumption.

According to Zizek, the interpassive mode is characterized by the fact that "*we are active all the time to make sure that nothing will really change. The first truly critical step is to withdraw into passivity and to refuse to participate*" (19) in order to overcome interpassivity and the fake realities produced by it. The title of Pink Floyd's song "Is there anybody out there?" seems to illustrate this paradox of the so-called attention industry: although we live in the most (inter)connected, social and interactive era ever known to man, most of this attention is only experienced interpassively, creating fetishes, fake realities and the illusion of connectedness and attention.

Consequently, the –until now– undetected and unconscious duality of interactivity vs. interpassivity in Social Media seems to describe a relevant and significant variable regarding the emergence of communities, collective action, collaboration and swarm intelligence. Further research should give consideration to this specific aspect of the social and participative subject.

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