

Digital Ethics and the Existential Nature of Online Identity Through the Lens of Sartre's Existentialism

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Abstract

In everyday life, authenticity involves understanding who we are and making honest choices. However, in the digital world, this becomes more challenging, as people often feel pressured to present a flawless version of themselves. This study examines ethical concerns related to this, including privacy, honesty, and remaining faithful to one's values. The paper also highlights the responsibilities of technology companies and lawmakers in protecting users' rights and dignity online. It argues that these entities should promote ethical behaviour by creating safer, more supportive digital environments. By combining existentialist ideas with digital ethics, the paper reveals both the challenges and possibilities of being authentic in the online world.

Ultimately, it calls for greater moral responsibility in digital life and urges deeper reflection on what it means to live truthfully and ethically in the digital age. This study aims to guide individuals toward more authentic and responsible interactions in today's virtual world.

Keywords: Authenticity, Digital ethics, Existentialism, Technology

1.Introduction: Human Identity and Connection in the Digital Age

In today's world, technology is growing every day and changing the way people live, work, and connect with others. Today's world, people can't think of a day without the internet and virtual spaces. This virtual world is affecting the physical health and mental health of individuals. Now, most of the people living in this world are living with virtual spaces; this can't be separated because everything now is digitalized and everyone is living a digital life too. With the rise of digital devices, social media, and the internet, people are now spending more time in virtual spaces than ever before. For many, life in the digital world is almost as important as life in the real world. From video calls to online shopping, from chatting with friends on social media to sharing personal milestones, our lives are highly connected through digital spaces. As a result of this shift, each person now has two identities: a real identity and a digital identity. Once we enter a digital platform, we have to create an identity with our real name or another we prefer. The digital identity is often shaped very carefully, so a person can make an identity which is different from the real one. For example, he can give the date of birth incorrectly, also the gender. So, the person can fake the real identity in such ways because until now the verification or validation is not a priority in most of the digital spaces. Also, a person can show only the good and happy part of their life, because they only want to show this part for others to see. This can lead people to present a version of themselves that is edited, polished, and sometimes very different from their true selves. In this way, technology raises important questions about identity, truth, and how we connect with others questions that are deeply connected to the ideas of existentialist philosophers, who focused on what it means to be human, to be authentic, and to live meaningfully.

In today's fast-paced 5G and 6G digital life, many people feel pressured to always be available, keep up with trends, and appear successful online. Social media, in particular, plays a big role in shaping how people see themselves and others. While it helps people stay connected, it can also lead to feelings of stress, loneliness, and disconnection. Nowadays, people often feel happier when they receive more likes, comments, shares, and followers in the digital space rather than real-world wishes. Real human interactions are sometimes replaced by likes, shares, and comments, which may feel less personal and meaningful.

This shift in how we live and relate to others makes it important to study how technology affects our sense of self and our relationships. As digital life becomes more central to human experience, understanding its impact is not just interesting it is necessary. How do we stay true to ourselves in a world that often rewards image over honesty? Can we find real

connection in virtual spaces? These are questions that more and more people are asking, making this topic highly relevant for both the present and the future.

2.The Digital Shift After COVID-19: How the Pandemic Changed Human Interaction and Identity

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a huge change to the way people live, talk, and connect with each other. When lockdowns began and people had to stay at home, real-life activities and face-to-face communication quickly moved to the digital world. Work meetings, school classes, doctor visits, and family gatherings started happening online. Everything from groceries to medicines could be ordered through apps. Because of this shift, the online world became a central part of everyday life and, for many, it became the *main* way to exist and interact with others.

Before the pandemic, people saw online life as something extra side part of real life. But during and after the pandemic, this changed. People began spending more time in front of screens than with people in real life. Many became more comfortable talking through messages, video calls, or social media rather than face-to-face. Some even felt more confident and relaxed online, where they could control how they looked and what they shared. This gave rise to strong digital identities versions of ourselves we create and show online that often seemed more appealing or easier to manage than our real selves.

In this period OTT platforms were normalized, also so many OTT platforms emerged. The lifestyle is changed, not only movies are online, shopping products online, paying bills online and even ordering food through online. This change has affected people in different ways. While digital tools helped reduce feelings of loneliness during the pandemic, they also made some people more distant from real-world relationships. Many now prefer the comfort of online talks rather than open conversations in person. Over time, this can impact emotional well-being, mental health, and the ability to build real, deep relationships.

Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre once said, "*Existence precedes essence*," meaning people first exist and then define who they are through choices and actions. In today's world, especially after COVID-19, we can think of it as "*real existence precedes digital existence*." Our online identity is built from our real self, but it sometimes takes over. This shift can change how we see ourselves and how we relate to others.

This study takes an ethical look at how the rise of digital living especially after the pandemic has changed people's lives. It explores the effects on identity, relationships, and social values, and offers suggestions on how to balance our digital life with our real-world presence. The goal is to help people stay connected in meaningful ways, both online and offline.

3.Understanding Identity and Existence in the Digital Age: An Existentialist View

The phrase "*Existence precedes essence*," suggests that human beings exist first before defining who they are through their actions and choices. This existentialist view emphasizes personal responsibility, freedom, and authenticity. According to this idea, we are all responsible for creating our own identity it's not decided by society, technology, or roles we are given. In today's digital world, this belief faces many challenges. The internet and social media have changed how we see ourselves and others. Many people, especially the young, spend more time online, creating digital versions of themselves that may not show their real personality or life. Social media can create pressure to look perfect or live a certain way. This can lead to confusion about who we really are.

This brings us to a fundamental question: What is truly "real" our physical existence or our digital persona? While technology has expanded our reach, it has also blurred the line between authenticity and illusion. A striking example is the rise of technologies like deepfake, holograms, and virtual reality, which can fabricate experiences and identities beyond human recognition. This can lead to manipulation and deception, especially when individuals lack the technical knowledge to critically assess what they see and believe.

Sartre's idea of "*bad faith*" helps us understand this problem. Bad faith means lying to yourself to avoid facing the reality of your freedom and responsibility. In the digital world, people often follow trends and fake their identity to fit in. Instead of being true to themselves, they let social media or technology decide how they live. This is a form of self-deception. They may hide behind a digital mask, pretending to be someone they are not, in order to be accepted or admired. The existentialist stresses the importance of confronting reality, accepting responsibility for one's freedom, and living authentically. This means questioning the digital façade and prioritizing one's true identity over an artificial one. In the AI-driven world of cryptocurrency, deep learning, and virtual interaction, it becomes crucial to ask ethical and moral questions about the impact of technology on human agency and truth. Even if the digital images or profiles we create disappear one day, our true existence remains. So, we must ask deeper questions about the role of technology in our lives. Are we living honestly, or are we just playing roles online?

Ultimately, even if everything we create in the digital world disappears, our existence remains. From an existentialist standpoint, that existence rooted in personal experiences, choices, and consciousness is what truly matters. Authenticity must prevail above the illusions of digital identity. In the fast-growing world of AI, cryptocurrency, and virtual life, ethical and moral thinking becomes more important. We need to make sure that technology helps us grow as real people, not just as digital identities. In the end, our physical and emotional existence is what truly defines us not our profile pictures or follower counts

4. Ethical Considerations in the Digital World

In today's metamodern world, new communication and digital technologies are changing how we live, work, and interact. While these changes offer many benefits, they also bring serious ethical problems especially around privacy, security, and mental well-being. Privacy is a basic human right, but in the digital space, it is often unsafe. Many people are unaware of the risks online. Just one small mistake like sharing a one-time password (OTP) can lead to losing all their money. People now prefer doing everything online, from paying bills to shopping and even taking loans. But not all services online are safe or genuine.

A tragic case in Kerala, India (2023), clearly shows the dangers of such misuse. A family took a loan from an online lender who was not legally authorized. Once the loan period ended, the company began blackmailing them. They used morphed photos, fake, nude images of the wife created using photo-editing tools, and sent them to her relatives and friends on WhatsApp. As a result, all four members of the family died by suicide including two children. Sadly, the harassment did not stop even after the family's heartbreaking death, as close family members and friends reported still receiving these fake pictures two days after the tragedy. This case shows how dangerous digital manipulation can be when no proper ethical controls are in place. Tools like deepfake, image editing, and messaging bots are easily misused to harm others. Damage caused to a person's digital identity often leads to deep trauma, depression, loss of relationships, and, in extreme cases, loss of life.

While technology gives us great freedom and convenience, it must be used with responsibility. Ethical awareness, stronger laws, and digital education are urgently needed to protect people and their privacy in this fast-changing digital world.

5. An Ethical Framework for Digital Platforms Based on Sartrean Existentialism

In the context of increasing digital immersion, existentialist philosophy offers a powerful ethical lens through which to analyse and reform the structure of online platforms. Rooted in principles of *authenticity*, *freedom*, *responsibility*, and *mutual recognition*, existential ethics shifts the focus from external rules to internal accountability and self-awareness. This section outlines key existential principles that can guide the design and regulation of ethical digital spaces.

5.1. Authenticity and the Rejection of Bad Faith

Sartre's existentialism posits that "existence precedes essence," meaning identity is not a pre-given object but is continuously created through one's choices. Online platforms often encourage the opposite: creating a static, idealized essence (a profile) and then performing it. This is a form of *Bad Faith* (*mauvaise foi*) a flight from the authentic, fluid self. Ethical platforms must therefore:

- **Discourage the creation of a fixed, objectified self.** Instead of rewarding static profiles, platforms should prioritize features that reflect ongoing, real-world projects and actions.
- **Avoid reward systems that promote a curated essence over authentic existence.** These systems pressure users into acting in bad faith, performing an identity for others rather than creating one for themselves.
- **Challenge the performance of authenticity.** Platforms should be designed to minimize the incentive to present a calculated, "authentic" persona, which is a deeper form of self-deception.

5.2. Radical Freedom vs. Algorithmic Determinism

For Sartre, freedom is absolute and inescapable. We are "condemned to be free." Digital platforms, however, often create an illusion of choice while using manipulative designs and algorithms to guide behavior, thereby encouraging users to abdicate their freedom. To counter this, platforms must:

- **Expose and dismantle manipulative architecture.** Designs that exploit psychological weaknesses to limit free will (e.g., infinite scroll, autoplay, persuasive notifications) are fundamentally unethical as they push users toward deterministic behavior.
- **Make algorithms transparent and subordinate to user choice.** Users must be able to understand and control the forces shaping their digital reality, otherwise, they are encouraged to passively accept an algorithm's definition of their world, a clear act of bad faith.
- **Emphasize conscious choice.** Interfaces should be built around deliberate, conscious actions (opt-ins) rather than passive consumption, constantly reminding users of their agency.

5.3. Absolute Responsibility for Digital Actions

Sartre insists that total freedom is inseparable from total responsibility. In choosing for ourselves, we choose for all humanity. Anonymity and the perceived distance of online interaction can create an illusion that this responsibility is diminished. Ethical platforms must:

- **Enforce the principle that all actions have consequences.** Community standards must be rigorous, making it clear that users are fully accountable for the reality they create through their words and actions online.
- **Eliminate the fantasy of consequence-free speech.** Platforms must design systems where users cannot easily escape the responsibility for the harm they cause, moving beyond simple content deletion to mechanisms of accountability.

- **Educate users on their existential responsibility.** This involves framing moderation not as censorship, but as a necessary consequence of the fact that every online act contributes to the construction of a shared social world.

5.4. Confronting "The Look" of the Other

In Sartre's philosophy, "The Look" (*le regard*) is the moment we feel ourselves being turned into an object by another's gaze. Online, this is amplified into a constant, quantifiable state of being watched (by followers, likes, views). This intense objectification is a primary source of existential dread and inauthenticity. Ethical platforms must:

- **Minimize the objectifying gaze of the crowd.** This could mean de-emphasizing public metrics like follower counts and "like" scores that reduce a person to a quantifiable object of approval.
- **Combat dehumanization by design.** Trolling and harassment are extreme forms of objectification. Platforms have a responsibility to design systems that make it harder to treat others as mere objects for one's own use or amusement.
- **Design for subjective interaction, not object-to-object data exchange.** Encourage forms of communication that require recognizing the other person as a free, conscious subject, not just another profile or avatar.

5.5. The Project as the Source of Meaning

For Sartre, a meaningful life is not found in passive consumption but in defining oneself through a "project" a chosen, future-oriented goal that organizes one's actions. Most digital platforms are designed for reaction and consumption, not for meaningful projects. To be ethical, they should:

- **Function as tools for real-world projects.** Platforms should be designed to help users organize, collaborate on, and achieve tangible goals, thereby facilitating the creation of a self through action.
- **Move beyond a focus on "content."** The endless stream of content encourages a passive existence. Platforms should instead create spaces where users can engage in active, purpose-driven creation.
- **Introduce friction to combat mindless existence.** By creating "slow spaces" or "focus modes," platforms can interrupt the cycle of passive consumption and prompt users to engage more deliberately and consciously with their digital world, turning it from a distraction into a tool for their life's project. In today's digital world, where virtual reality and carefully edited online profiles are a big part of our lives, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism reminds us of something important: our real, physical life is the only true foundation of who we are. Sartre said, "*existence precedes essence*," meaning we are not born with a fixed identity or defined by things like social media profiles or digital avatars. We are born without a set purpose, and we create our identity through the choices we make and the actions we take in the real world. From Sartre's view, virtual reality can be a dangerous illusion. It offers a readymade identity an ideal online version of ourselves, a world that feels real but is controlled by technology. When we spend more time in the digital world and ignore real life, we fall into what Sartre calls "*bad faith*" lying to ourselves to avoid the hard truth that we are free and responsible for our lives. In virtual spaces, our mistakes can be erased, our choices feel less serious, and we can change who we are with a click. But this means we act more like objects shaped by the system, not like free individuals. Sartre believed we are "*condemned to be free*," meaning we cannot avoid the responsibility of shaping our own lives. This shaping happens in the real world, through real relationships, challenges, and actions. Online, we may get likes and comments, but they don't carry the deep impact of face-to-face connection. Real freedom and identity are built in the physical world, not the digital one. In the end, Sartre would say that living mainly in virtual reality is not truly living it's running away from the real work of becoming ourselves. Only in the real world do our choices have true meaning and help us become who we really are.

Conclusion

In today's world, we live in both the real and the digital. Our online identity is no longer just a profile it is a reflection of who we are, how we interact, and the choices we make. With this digital presence comes a deep responsibility. Online platforms are not just neutral tools; they are active spaces where people form relationships, express themselves, and face ethical and emotional challenges. Through the lens of existentialism, we see that every digital action from posting a photo to creating an online profile carries meaning. Our choices define us. As existentialist thinkers like Sartre and Beauvoir suggest, we are not only free to act, but also responsible for those actions. In the digital world, this means being aware of how we present ourselves, how we treat others, and how we protect our identity and privacy. One of the biggest challenges today is staying authentic online. With constant pressure to be perfect, popular, or entertaining, many people create online personas that don't reflect their true selves. Existentialism encourages us to resist this pressure and choose honesty and self-awareness instead. When we act with authenticity, we live more fully and connect more deeply.

As digital life continues to grow, we must engage in ethical reflection. We must ask: Am I being true to myself? Am I treating others with respect? Am I using this platform responsibly? In facing these questions, we grow not just as users of technology, but as human beings. By embracing freedom with responsibility, and expression with authenticity, we can build a digital world that is ethical, humane, and meaningful a world where technology serves people, and not the other way around.

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