

# The Instagram Effect: Instagram and Loss of Agency

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## Abstract

Throughout this paper, I analyze the deterministic aspects of Instagram and how those aspects affect agency. The meaning of Instagram is dependent on the creators of the app themselves. By placing Instagram on a spectrum, on the one hand, the reader can see that this app is a tool that can stratify the human need for social communication; on the other hand, it can see how its deterministic abilities affect both our mental and physical health. This shows through the relationships users build through the screen which are in-genuine relationships, ones that can lead to a loss of individual agency and freedom. The deterministic aspects of Instagram are further reinforced through the idea of techno-social engineering where it can be shown how social media applications can change the behaviour and feelings of their users simply through the posts they are exposed to. Lastly, the device paradigm in relation to Instagram as a deterministic tool showcases how the backgrounds and contexts of devices are becoming increasingly concealed and separated from our daily life. This results in a deterioration of genuine interactions within the physical environment and further reinforces the existence of the app that is constructed based on the creators and what they would like to accomplices. As a result, Instagram is a deterministic tool that is detrimental to our individual agency.

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## Introduction

Instagram, one of the most popular social media applications, has become increasingly prevalent and essential to our lives in an ever-increasing digitalized society. Instagram is a platform where individuals can instantaneously share photos and videos with friends, family, and even strangers across the world. It was created on July 16, 2010, by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, unbeknownst that their company would become a multi-billion dollar global phenomenon (Woods, 2013). Statistics show that roughly every second, there are 870 Instagram photos uploaded, and in 60 seconds, 49,380 photos are uploaded (Metev, 2020). Furthermore, in 2018, the average Instagram user spent an average of 53 minutes a day on the social media service (Metev, 2020). Besides from the statistics presented above, it is essential to note that Instagram has many beneficial services. Various companies pay individuals known as

influences to advertise their products for far less money than traditional advertisements. Users of Instagram can find new local businesses, news information and resources, and act as a tool for many individuals to communicate. However, Instagram also carries severe side effects for the user. According to the United Kingdom's Royal Society for Public Health, it was found that Instagram and other social media networks are associated with high levels of anxiety, depression, bullying, and a negative individual body image ("Are Instagram and Other Social Media Bad for Your Teen's Mental Health?", n.d.). Therefore, for this paper, I will argue how Instagram has become a deterministic tool that causes mental health issues and for us to lose our individual agency.

As this paper analyzes the use of Instagram through the sociology of technology, it is crucial to understand technology's historical perspective dating back to

ancient Greece. The Greeks made a clear distinction between *physis* and *poiesis*. *Physis* is often translated as nature, and the Greeks understood nature "to be that which creates itself, that which emerges from out of itself" (Feenberg, 2003, p. 2). However, there are things in our world that are dependent on another to come into being. "Poiesis is the practical activity of making in which human beings engage when they produce something. We call these created beings artifacts and include among them the products of art, craft, and social convention" (2003, p. 2). The creation of Instagram is a real-world example of *poiesis*. Furthermore, the Greeks made another distinction between existence and essence. "Existence answers the question whether something is or is not. Essence answers the question what the thing is" (p. 2). By looking at Instagram as a form of *poiesis*, the distinction between these phenomena is quite clear. Instagram first exists as an idea and comes into existence by humans. For natural things, the distinction between existence and essence is not as clear. The essence does not have a separate existence; it is the "thing and its essence that emerge together and exist together" (p. 3). Therefore, as a flower blooms along with what makes it a flower, the flower can be seen as flawless, however, Instagram being a human-made entity where humans determine its existence can have more than one meaning, more than one interpretation, and most importantly, more than one use.

### **An Instrument or a Determiner?**

Throughout the field of the sociology of technology, various theories help deepen our understanding of the effects of technology in society. However, being situated in the western world, one characterized as an increasingly digitalized post-modern society, technologies such as Instagram are difficult to situate as strictly one theory or another. Therefore, to understand technology's effects on people and society, it is essential to view the theories as a spectrum. As the thesis of this paper is to argue how Instagram is a determinative tool, this paper will focus on the social media platform's deterministic aspects. However, some attention will also be attributed to Instagram being an instrumental tool—beginning with the instrumentalist perspective as it is the most common and simplistic. According to this view, "technology is a tool or instrument of the human species through which we satisfy our needs" (p. 6). As stated above, Instagram acts as a communication tool, photo

sharing and many other features that benefit individuals in their everyday lives. However, Instagram is also a deterministic tool, and if placed on a spectrum, it would fall far closer to the determinism side than the instrumental side. Determinists believe that "technology is not humanly controlled, but that on the contrary it controls humans, that is, it shapes society to the requirements of efficiency and progress" (p. 6).

### **The Invisible Effect**

While more and more younger people are consuming content on Instagram, it is clear that more individuals are being affected by its deterministic aspects. Roger Scruton (2010) explains that through the use of the screen, our relationships with others are not authentic or genuine as juxtaposed to face-to-face relationships. Scruton further explains through Hegel's theory that humans fulfill ourselves through our free actions and the consciousness that these actions bring our worth (Scruton, 2010, p. 53). Nevertheless, the more Instagram is seen as a deterministic tool, and the more individuals consume and are affected by it, the less we as a society will be fulfilled. From a deterministic perspective, Instagram is a tool that controls human behaviour, from unachievable aesthetics, body types, false advertising, and negative influencing; it affects an individual's mental health in severe and detrimental ways. This leads Instagram to act as a way of prohibiting individual agency, something that Scruton and Hegel touch upon as freedom. Individual agency is defined as an individual's choices and the ability to influence one's life conditions and chances. On the other hand, freedom involves an active engagement with the world, one that cannot be achieved through the screen (2010, p. 53).

Scruton also uses Marx to explain further how technology hinders self-realization. There is an essential contrast between true freedom from genuine relationships and the hidden enslavement that comes with relationships to objects (p. 53). When individuals, especially youth, consistently view the "perfect body" or unrealistic lifestyles which are more or less unattainable for the average consumer, they may become so entrenched within this digital universe. This results in the Instagram consumer completely changing their behaviour, losing their agency to mimic the lifestyles they consume on the social media app. This consumption not only causes adverse psychological and physical

effects but also drastically determines our behaviour the more it is consumed.

### **Techno-social Engineering**

Throughout this paper, we have seen the effects Instagram has on individuals and society being a deterministic tool. However, there has yet to be a discussion on how it operates as a deterministic tool. This can be done through the phenomena of techno-social engineering, a constitutional problem that lacks research and discourse. Techno-social engineering involves designing and using technological and social tools to construct, influence, manipulate, or otherwise determine human beings (Frischmann, 2016, p. 538). Throughout the digitalized world, "techno-social engineering of humans is inevitable and, in the abstract, value-neutral. There are 'good' and 'bad' applications, examples, and consequences, and the difficulty society faces is often in the evaluation" (2016, p. 540). The notion that our minds must function as a complex high-speed computer is built into social media platform's foundations. The more content that we consume, "the more links we click and pages we view—the more opportunities [Instagram] and other companies gain to collect information about us and to feed us advertisements" and other content to change our behaviours (Carr, 2008).

Brett Frischmann, a Professor of Law and Director of Intellectual Property and Information Law Program, Cardozo Law School, explains an experiment conducted by Facebook and Cornell University which perfectly describes how social media platforms such as Instagram are deterministic. On June 17, 2014, the Proceeding of the National Academies of Science (PNAS) published an article titled *Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion Through Social Networks* (Frischmann, 2016, p. 541). The article demonstrated that emotional states could be transferred to others by emotional contagion through social media posts. Unknowingly to Facebook users, Facebook deliberately reduced their exposure to their friend's positive/negative posts (2016, p. 541). The experiment results found that people exposed to more positive posts tended to post more positive posts and the same phenomena occurred to those exposed to negative posts (p. 541). It becomes notable through this study that given how many users use social media applications such as Instagram, and how

essential it has become in our everyday lives, even the most subtle effects to our exposure have detrimental consequences, not only changing our mood but also our individual agency to be able to choose what we want to post.

### **The Instagram Paradigm**

The device paradigm, a theory developed by the philosopher Albert Borgmann, proposes the existence of a pattern intrinsically linked to modern technology that tends to disengage us physically and socially from activities and objects that matter deeply to individuals and communities (Aporta & Higgs, 2005, p. 731). This results in a deterioration of engagement with the surrounding social and physical environments. At the heart of Borgmann's theory is an epistemic commitment to three kinds of knowledge: scientific, testimonial, and paradigmatic. He argues that scientific knowledge, otherwise known as deductive and inductive reasoning, has transcended the other two (2005, p. 741). However, through the analysis of Instagram, the issue we as a society faces concerns testimonial knowledge. This is the knowledge that typically moves us to act. It is pushed to the margins, and the knowledge of patterns or algorithms has become increasingly elusive. Therefore, as Instagram continues to expand its reach and influence on younger generations, we become less equipped to understand the character and implications of algorithms which expose us to the deterministic aspects of the social media platform at the very time that we need such insights the most knowing the consequences it brings.

Borgmann further differentiates technology between focal things and devices. "Focal things and practices are inseparable from their context. 'The experience of a thing is always and also a bodily and social engagement with the thing's world'" (p. 741). A wood-burning stove, for instance, furnishes a home more than providing mere warmth. It assigned to the different family members tasks that defined their place in the household (p. 741). Furthermore, it provided the entire family with a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons. This is simply something Instagram cannot do, while instrumentalists will argue that Instagram is a tool that can bring people together by sharing photos. However, as stated earlier, through the mediation of screens, there is no opportunity to use the platform to engage with the world authentically.

Instagram as a paradigm exists since the machinery, as Borgmann describes, or in our case, the deterministic algorithms that allow Instagram to exist it requires no demands on our skill, strength, or attention (p. 741). As it is less demanding, the less it makes its presence felt. In the progress of technology, a device's machinery has, therefore, a tendency to become concealed or to shrink. However, what is present and visible is what the device provides: a commodity (p. 741). The central point about devices is that they offer a mere commodity that is separate from the machinery. This paradigm's tendency is for commodities to become more and more available as the deterministic algorithms become more and more concealed.

### Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have analyzed the deterministic aspects of Instagram and how those aspects affect individuals and societies' agency. Being a human-made creation means that its existence and essence are separate, and the meaning of its very existence depends on the creators themselves. By placing Instagram on a spectrum, we can see that it can be a tool to satisfy human needs, primarily through global communication. However, the consistent use of Instagram is far more deterministic. The relationships that are formed and maintained through the screen have proven to be in-genuine. Furthermore, the content users are exposed to continues to affect our behaviour and cause a loss of freedom and individual agency.

This leads to the idea of techno-social engineering where it can be shown that through algorithmic manipulation, the users of social media platforms such as Instagram can lose their individual agency simply by the posts they are exposed to and unconsciously post content related to what they see themselves, further reinforcing the deterministic aspects of Instagram. Lastly, the device paradigm showcases how devices' backgrounds and contexts are increasingly concealed and separated from the daily experience of life, which results in a deterioration of genuine interactions within the physical environment. The promise of technologies such as Instagram consists in liberating us from labour; in the process, however, the means are increasingly separated from the ends, and full engagement with the world becomes compromised, deterministic, and detrimental to our agency.

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