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Social Media Influencers Shaping Social Reality : A Study of Jean Baudrillard's Perspective

المؤثرون على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي وتشكيل الواقع الاجتماعي: دراسة لوجهة نظر جان بودريار

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Hania Rezig & Souad Oulddjaballah- Mohamed Boudiaf University of M'sila

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HANIA REZIG & SOUAD OULDDJABALLAH
MOHAMED BOUDIAF UNIVERSITY OF M'SILA

Introduction

The media landscape during the era of globalization has undergone a profound transformation due to the technological revolution that unfolded in the early 1990s, coinciding with the advent of the Internet. This revolution ushered in a fundamental shift in the realm of communication. Individuals suddenly gained an unprecedented ability to interact and communicate, dismantling barriers between nations and cultures and effectively turning the world into a global village, as famously phrased by Marshall McLuhan. This technological convergence paved the way for new human interaction spaces, more commonly recognized as social networking sites. These networks experienced rapid proliferation during the first decade of the current century, with prominent examples including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube.

The emergence of social media has significantly impacted how we communicate, leading to a series of shifts in our communication methods. These online platforms have empowered every person to actively engage by creating personal profiles, sharing their own content, and exchanging ideas and viewpoints. This transformation has fundamentally altered the dynamic between audiences and the media, ushering in a new era of mass communication. A unique group of individuals has arisen in this digital landscape, often known as social media influencers. These individuals harness social networks' power to produce content to shape the thoughts, trends, and behaviors of a wide-ranging audience.

The widespread nature of influencers has resulted in a fundamental shift in media authority, which was once prevalent in traditional media. It has empowered all participants in the communication process to create content or messages directed at a vast audience without any genuine affiliation with a media institution. Among the most prevalent types of influencers are those who

focus on presenting and documenting details of their lives and experiences, portraying their lifestyles positively by selectively choosing specific scenes and presenting them as a social construct they promote through continuous sharing of images. These images shatter the conventional communication mold, becoming laden with symbols, connotations, and meanings that imbue them with the power to influence individuals and persuade them of the reality they perceive through the mental process of constructing the truth. This contributes to replacing social constructs with a simulated one characterized by self-replication, wherein meaning becomes absent due to the evaporation of the connection between the signifier and the signified. Thus, constructs are drained of their substance and significance.

Due to the increasing significance of social networking platforms as a major avenue for intellectual expression, individuals are constantly exposed to a plethora of falsehoods and camouflage, often without their awareness. Over time, these falsehoods gradually gain acceptance as truths, primarily because of the disconnect from reality and the heavy reliance on these platforms for shaping their perceptions of the world. To delve into the formation of these constructs, we must draw upon the profound and radical critique presented by the renowned French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, a prominent figure in postmodern philosophy. Baudrillard's criticism is directed towards the media's role in constructing and presenting events to the public as alternative narratives and meanings. He attributes this transformation in media to the explosive and far-reaching advancements in information technology, which have shifted the focus from transmitting events to manufacturing and fabricating them.

The emergence and increasing number of influencers have influenced how their followers perceive reality. Many of the templates and stereotypical images they present do not reflect reality but are mere representations that oscillate between realism and virtuality. They work to blur the distinction between simulation and reality. Influencer culture relies on making what they present appear realistic, which is readily accepted by the recipient without criticism or contemplation. Therefore, understanding the transformations that have occurred in individuals' social lives requires exposure to technological changes and their role in shaping public awareness and constructing a reality lacking objective value due to the media frenzy that has affected the post-modern era. Thus, the roles assigned to social networks as an extension of traditional media largely support the vision presented by Baudrillard regarding the death of reality and the ascent of deception.

1. Study Approach

This subject falls under the purview of theoretical research, delving into a critical analysis of the influencer phenomenon across digital platforms. This phenomenon has evolved into a formidable challenge, demanding a profound grasp of its dimensions, configurations, and potential impacts on audiences. Our foundation for this exploration rests upon the critical paradigm stemming from the Frankfurt School's theories. Established in 1923 by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Weber, this school was characterized by its emphasis on dissecting social systems, delineating the constituent elements of social direction, and identifying the intricate interplay between the social, economic, and ideological aspects. Additionally, it laid bare the structure of the influential social system, one that exerts its influence on individual behavior amidst psychological crises and the ever-present threat of machinery's dominion over individuals within society (Saray, 2018, p. 409).

The critical model strives to scrutinize reality and uncover the truth by starting with the assumption that the current societal condition is shaped by the minority who hold power. Truth does not exist before criticism ; instead, it emerges as a product of the critical examination itself. To achieve truth, criticism must initially dismantle illusions and deceptive facades. The critical approach aligns with postmodern theories, spanning various domains such as social, philosophical, cultural analysis, and political matters (Saray, 2018, p. 409-410). In a broader context, the critical methodology in social sciences is described as an analytical process with the potential to reveal the genuine structure of the material world. Its goal is to assist individuals in transforming their circumstances or creating a better world by unveiling hidden realities (Lawrence, 2014, p. 07).

2. Theoretical Foundation of the Study

2.1. Radical Thought and the Thesis of Reality's Death

This research is rooted in the sociological theory of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. He stands as one of the foremost postmodern thinkers, often associated with post-Marxism. Baudrillard's scholarly pursuits revolved around the analysis of media discourse across various mediums. He offered a radical critique of media and its profound influence on the audience. His work gradually led to the idea of the obliteration of reality, primarily propelled by the power of simulation, with television and cinema at the forefront. Baudrillard penned the famous essay titled "The Gulf War Did Not

Take Place” in 1991, wherein he underscored the tremendous influence of visual media, particularly television, in the fabrication and control of events. He viewed this war as a media war, characterized by a series of simulated and fictitious events manipulated under the sway of the unipolar system. These events shaped meaning for the audience, rendering them captives of the ceaseless media barrage through television screens and computers.

As a contemporary thinker alongside figures like Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Gilles Deleuze, Baudrillard engaged in discourse with the emerging field of structuralism, with a particular emphasis on semiotics—the study of signs and symbols. Baudrillard attributes the vanishing of reality to the absence of a meaningful connection between signifiers and their signified concepts. This phenomenon is a consequence of the heightened influence of the media, which has effectively transformed all aspects of social life and the world into images presented by the media.

What the media conveys is not a faithful representation of actual reality, nor is it a simple reflection of it. Instead, it consists of images generated by the media itself, derived from other images (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 17). The reality presented by the media is not the unaltered and direct reality ; rather, it is an alternative reality that has been carefully curated to appear more authentic than the real world it supposedly represents. Baudrillard terms this hyperreality, where the manufactured version of reality becomes more genuine than the original. He describes simulacra as the creation of models that lack a fixed origin and don't refer to a tangible reality (Mustafa, 2016, p. 392).

In his thesis, Baudrillard builds upon the notion that media conveys messages and images that challenge the very essence of reality. This, in turn, engenders a sort of turmoil concerning the meanings and interpretations that the receiving audience might ascribe to actual reality. The constant interplay between the real and the simulated over an extended period contributes to a fusion of the two, culminating in the creation of a novel composite entity. This composite entity operates to drain the reality of its significance. Consequently, this construct does not conceal reality but rather strips it of its authenticity by severing the link between the original frame of reference and its tangible reality. Thus, the power of symbols usurps the framework once constituted by or for reality, rendering reality itself as the symbol. This self-referential symbol no longer maintains any external connections ; it fashions the world, and it is the world (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 27).

Media, since its inception in its conventional form, has been presenting facts that extend beyond the confines of actual reality. Its aim is to captivate the audience and persuade them of the truth of what is being presented. This instills in them a deep-seated illusion that proves challenging to dispel. It is akin to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where individuals within the cave perceive nothing of the world but the shadows projected on the walls. They are convinced that what they perceive and hear is the absolute truth. However, in reality, these are mere figments of the imagination and constructed images that serve as a compelling example of the reality mediated to us by the media. This aligns with Baudrillard's assertion that the truth individuals believe to be manifest through these mediums is, in fact, a fabricated and distorted truth driven by specific agendas.

Baudrillard used Nietzsche's critique of the concept of truth and expanded upon it, associating it with the role played by images through contemporary media in shaping reality. Truth has evolved into a term belonging to the past, no longer attainable. Baudrillard attributes this transformation to the colossal technological advancements that have become substantial barriers to comprehending reality and its actualities. Modern technology has fundamentally altered the world's nature, provoking renewed inquiries about it (Emrani, 2018, pp. 213–214). In this context, he contends that social existence has metamorphosed into an image presented by the media. It does not merely represent reality or an image thereof but rather an image of another image, generated by it. This implies that the significance conveyed by the media, in other words, reality's meaning, does not trace its origins to anything external ; it is self-referential. Thus, the world transmutes into a mere image relayed from one image to another, comprising a series of synthetic and unrelated processes or images detached from any specific origin in reality (Emrani, 2018, p. 239).

Baudrillard raises recurrent inquiries concerning what postmodernity has termed the metaphysics of reality, given the consequences of technological and informational progress that have contributed to the erasure of reality and the advocacy of its antithesis through virtual reality. This virtual reality features a rapid temporal cadence that surpasses human capabilities to keep pace. It succeeds in supplanting our consciousness and perceptual faculties. Consequently, it implies the voluntary relinquishment of humanity's cognitive tools (Al-Sayyid, 2018, p. 289). We no longer place faith in what our natural senses convey but instead heavily rely on what is presented to us through television screens, cinema, computers, and smartphones. These mediums

have acquired a presence and allure that render them more credible than reality itself. In this formulation, it becomes evident that truth generates itself and harmonizes with the simulation, preceding any other original truth.

2.2. Hyperreality in the Digital Age

The story by Jorge Luis Borges, used by Baudrillard as an introduction to his work “Simulacra and Simulation,” perfectly illustrates our contemporary reality. Baudrillard considers it a tangible representation of simulation and hyperreality. The narrative revolves around the creation of a map commissioned by an emperor, designed to faithfully reproduce his empire. This map, covering the entire territory, eventually replaced the original. Thus, in this context, the simulated, here the map, does not conceal the real ; on the contrary, the real conceals the absence of intrinsic reality. What we perceive as real is merely simulacra. The boundaries between land and map, original and copy, icon and simulacrum have blurred. Moreover, the map precedes the land ; it has supplanted the original. As the empire collapses, the “land,” the original, disintegrates, just like some fortresses once erected in desolate landscapes. The map follows the course of the land. Baudrillard considers postmodern or postindustrial societies as a living embodiment of this narrative, to the point where they seem to have reached its zenith. According to Baudrillard, the map has ceased to be an abstraction, a multiplier, an alternative, or a reflection of the land. It has evolved into a modeling tool for a reality devoid of origin or identity, thus becoming hyperreality (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 46).

Baudrillard emphasizes that one should not assume that reality retains its authenticity when illusions are eliminated. This implies that reality lacks objective existence. As the virtual expands, the real world becomes insignificant, and naked truth disappears (Nassima, 2018, p. 78). He delves deeper into the concept of hyperreality within the context of contemporary technological advances, where information technology has contributed to blurring the boundaries between reality and simulacra. This is particularly evident in the massive productivity and media flow generated by the Internet and the virtual world, immersing individuals in a virtual environment, distancing them from real experiences.

Baudrillard does not view the virtual world as mere imagination ; he sees it as an authentic reality coexisting with the material world. Its effects are palpable in people’s lives, and it has become an undeniable reality, especially with the infiltration of information technology into all aspects of

human life. Our world is increasingly dominated by digital technologies and globalization, aiming to create a unified world where boundaries blur and identities vanish, due to a frenzied race toward technological progress. He expresses this by stating :

“The Internet makes me think, and the virtual space makes me reflect ; a version of me disappears along the networks, a place I will never find again” (Baudrillard, 2013, p. 26).

The profound transformations of information structures have given rise to social media platforms, seen as one of the clearest manifestations of hyperreality, as Baudrillard predicted in the 1980s. These platforms allow individuals to interact by exchanging messages, images, videos, texts, and commenting in various ways. They have become a dominant form of media, deeply immersing users in their virtual constructions. They facilitate the creation and consumption of content that blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion, diverting users from their reality and increasing their attachment to the digital world. This supports the idea that these platforms promote detachment rather than connection, gradually leading to a partial disengagement from the real world, up to a complete separation, as is the case for many, and not just a few (Ali, 2014, pp. 233-234).

The proliferation of these networks requires a reevaluation of the given world, deconstructing it to replace it with an artificially constructed world in all its aspects, where nothing natural will remain. This is a grand technological project aimed at abolishing the natural world in all its forms. Everything natural will be eliminated in the name of this symbolic rule of impossible exchange (Baudrillard, 2013, p. 24). The Frankfurt School warned against this through a social critique of societies heavily reliant on modern media and communication technologies. Their critique was not limited to the media itself but aimed at the uses of these technologies and their effects on societies and individuals, as they have the potential to become tools of distortion of truth and concealment of reality.

Virtuality is not merely an imitation or simulation of reality ; it signifies the very deconstruction of reality, liberating it from its former aura as the ultimate reference for verifying truth in various domains. Henceforth, reality no longer serves as the ultimate reference point to confirm the authenticity of issues ; rather, the virtual domain becomes a new source of truth. The concept of reality as a reference principle, raw material, or specific event has diminished due to the sudden intrusion of the virtual world. We find ourselves living in a post-reality world, a technological space domain, virtual

reality, and an infinite realm governed by computers and the Internet. It is a world filled with simulated images that resemble the original, but go beyond mere imitation ; they excel and diverge from it, much like Plato's allegorical cave filled with shadows and counterfeit replicas (Emrani, 2018, p. 90).

Reality has undergone a transformation, primarily due to the profound impact of new media, particularly social media platforms. Once all content has been erased, these media, in themselves, become revolutionary and disruptive utility values. This leads us to a perspective reminiscent of McLuhan's maxim : "the medium is the message," pushed to its extreme. If we dare say it, this formulation implies not only the end of the message but also the end of the medium itself. It ceases to exist in the literal sense and becomes an intermediary power between one reality and another, not concerning content or form, but rather in terms of projection (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 152). Today, social networks gain their value not only as means but also as messages simultaneously. According to McLuhan, the convergence of traditional media with modern technology has allowed them to transcend their role as mere communication tools. In contemporary critical thought, the medium, according to Baudrillard's hyperreality concept, can be seen as exercising the greatest influence. It is not about the content conveyed through this medium ; rather, the modern world is represented to individuals and understood based on the medium they use. Describing the world as "the digital world" or "the virtual world" accurately reflects its existence and reality.

The format of the message embodies the role of the medium as one of the aspects of the power controlled by new technologies in society. Modern media no longer merely transmit events according to their predefined roles. They have become the architects of events, imparting significance through methods and techniques that transfer reality. "Discussing this issue leads us directly to draw from Martin Heidegger's reflections in his book 'Being and Time,' and his exploration of the relationship between humans and technology. Technology is not simply something technical ; we do not understand our connection to the essence of technology unless we limit it to representation, fascination, and practice" (Hay, 2010).

Baudrillard has been influenced by Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction, prompting a reevaluation of the culture of realism, representation, and the role of humanity in contemporary societies. He observed that the core representing actual reality has been dismantled by the technological wave and replaced by a virtual reality, with social networks as

one of its main pillars. Individuals' interactions with social media as a new media experience give them a false impression of authentic communication and participation in the real world. This arises from the unique characteristics and attributes they possess, where reality exists, but in a simulated digital dimension. This contributes to the creation of a hyperreality reflecting these characteristics, as everything around us, in terms of media and means, refers to reality, and not to reality itself.

Human communication is no longer merely a social interaction ; it has become a construction of false memories, thus reinforcing the disconnection from tangible reality. As Baudrillard emphasizes, in such a reality, everything is transformed into image, and each image loses its connection with the origin, limiting itself to its mere existence as an image. This phenomenon of losing authentic reality and immersing into a virtual world has led to forms of life where individuals lose themselves in digital interactions, questioning the very nature of reality and their place within it.

Thus, we face a fundamental challenge : understanding how to navigate this hyperreal world, where simulations and digital representations overshadow our lived experiences. The question remains : how can we preserve our humanity in the face of this tide of simulacra and hyperrealities ? The answer to this question is crucial for our future as we seek to restore an authentic connection with the world around us.

3. Influencers on Social Media between Portraying and Fabricating Reality

The shift of power from traditional media to social media sites has led to a profound transformation in the production and distribution of information. The emergence of modern technologies has given rise to a new communication paradigm in which everyone acts as both a sender and receiver of media messages. New media has empowered users to partake in content creation and sharing at an unprecedented pace. Thanks to these technologies, various new communication phenomena have emerged, with one of the most notable being the ascent of digital influencers. These individuals have adeptly constructed extensive followings and wield significant sway in areas such as fashion, beauty, nutrition, travel, lifestyle, and others.

Preceding the exploration of the influencer concept, it is crucial to differentiate that celebrities, encompassing fashion models, singers, and actors, do not fall under the category of 'social influencers.' They have acquired their fame through their artistic talents, making them distinct from

influencers. Influencers are regular individuals who share their life experiences, whether through words, visuals, or videos, on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Their genuineness, impact, and individuality resonate with audiences who actively follow them (Brittany, 2018, p. 08).

The term 'influencers' also encompasses users who have gained recognition on social media platforms. This suggests that these individuals have a community of followers extending beyond their personal connections. Their acknowledgment arises from content creation and self-presentation techniques. The notion of influence draws inspiration from the concept of personal influence, first introduced in 1955 by Katz, Lazarsfeld, and Roper (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019, p. 15). Notably, in the era of traditional media, the term 'influence' was associated with opinion leaders, intellectuals, and others who shaped individuals' views and opinions. However, with technological advancements, the meaning of influence transitioned from a trait to signify a profession linked with fame and a specific lifestyle. Individuals monetize their lives by documenting them, portraying them through images and videos on social media.

The phenomenon of influencers has gained prominence more than ever in the past decade. Through this perspective, influencers can be regarded as a social force capable of reshaping social reality. In digital domains, they have found a platform for self-promotion and projecting a fictitious and unrealistic lifestyle, which may not correspond with actual social realities. The quest for entertainment, fame, recognition, and self-esteem has become an essential requirement in a virtual society that has emerged as an alternative to the real community.

The interaction between social media users, deeply immersed in the virtual world, and the content delivered by influencers, characterized by their extensive presence through images and videos, has led to distortions in the perceptual framework of reality. It blurs the lines between the real and the virtual to the extent that it disrupts the concept of truth. Followers have fallen into the trap of simulation due to the separation of symbols from their meanings and humans from their authentic experiences. Consequently, the ability to distinguish between the real and the imagined fades because the criteria for evaluating the ideal or the negative have vanished. Thus, the logic of simulation, detached from the logic of facts or rational arrangements, prevails. The term 'simulation' stands as one of the most critical concepts of hyperreality requiring scrutiny and interpretation (Al-Sayyid, 2018, p. 289).

In Baudrillard's discussion on simulation, he posits that to dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has, whereas to simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. However, this distinction becomes more intricate because simulation differs from mere pretense. For instance, someone who fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms. Thus, pretending or dissimulating does not fundamentally alter the reality principle. Instead, simulation raises questions about distinguishing the genuine from the counterfeit and the boundaries between reality and imagination (Baudrillard J., 2008, p. 48). Within this context, Baudrillard delves into the media phenomenon and its relationship with the disappearance of reality. He examines how a simulated model is crafted for the recipient and how it presents an alternative reality stripped of its original meaning. This phenomenon has led to the obliteration of reality due to repetition and the proliferation of media replicas. Social dimensions have been compressed into a media-encrypted image, replicating an image of another without substantiating the genuine original reference. To provide further clarity, Baudrillard suggests that when a symbol becomes self-sufficient and serves as its own reference, what it signifies transcends the boundaries of reality. Consequently, reality vanishes, giving rise to what exists beyond reality (Hidash, 2020, p. 145).

In actuality, people do not divulge all the intricacies of their daily existence. Natural life unfolds at varying paces and is not devoid of drawbacks. Nonetheless, these practices are integral to the endeavors of influencers. Consequently, the central challenge lies in constructing an imagined reality that appears genuine through which they present a joyful life free of complications, effectively publishing a daily routine that diverges from authentic reality (Seif, 2023).

The actions of social media influencers occasionally encompass the masking of reality with the intention of captivating an audience and amassing a substantial following. They embrace the guise of pretense rather than concealment. Their content doesn't hinge on the principle of concealment, in which one asserts an inherent lack of ownership. Instead, they promote the notion of possessing items, whether they are material such as clothing, cars, products, and money, or immaterial like happiness, prosperity, and perfection. Here, their primary point of reference is fabrication and delusion, leading to the creation of an alternate reality devoid of authentic significance. The fluidity, accompanying hyperrealism, has given rise to a composite individual

submerged in a realm of artifice, making individuals appear estranged from their genuine reality and identity.

Umberto Eco, in his writings on hyperreality, highlighted how people tend to gravitate toward reshaping reality to obtain things that are superior, more stimulating, aesthetically pleasing, or alluring compared to what exists in actuality. Meanwhile, social critic Daniel Borstin cautioned against the risks associated with the proliferation of virtual reality, which creates an illusory sense of transcending everyday life and existence (Emrani, 2018, p. 233). Influencers promote an alternate reality that doesn't mirror the real world but rather presents it as a substance they convey to their audience. Through this representation, they epitomize the synthetic social reality that substitutes genuine experiences for counterfeit ones. Today, influencers assert themselves as a social mechanism, embodying a form of collective influence over individuals' minds within the digital virtual sphere, where social life unfolds in all its intricacies.

The spread of influencer culture, where individuals make their lifestyle the foundation of the content they present, has led followers to aspire to replicate the lifestyles offered to them through social platforms. The influence goes beyond mere observation, as it has become increasingly challenging to differentiate between real life and the performative life, with its various connotations that infiltrate the minds of individuals. This blurring of lines aims to reconstruct their comprehension of the world around them. Consequently, their perception of reality is no longer solely shaped by their interactions with their social surroundings but also by their interactions within the virtual environment, constructing a fabricated mental model of society.

Gustave Le Bon argues that when people congregate in a crowd, they become incapable of observation and rationality because they follow not their own intellects but those who provoke them. The intellectual worth of individuals in the crowd becomes inconsequential. Influencers exert a comparable sway over their followers, resembling Le Bon's depiction of an isolated individual ensnared by a magnetic hypnotism that renders the conscious self-subdued and nullifies the desire for comprehension and discrimination. In this state, followers, as a segment of the crowd, become impotent in forming an independent opinion beyond the ideas imparted or insinuated by others – in this instance, the influencers. These ideas subsequently mold their inclinations and their perception of reality (Ali, 2014, p. 45).

In the contemporary era, we are ensconced in a realm saturated with digital simulation, where the generation of the unreal prevails over the reflection of reality. The process has been inverted, begetting paradoxical situations and counterfeit models that eventually acquire the hues of everyday reality. The rise of influencer culture, whereby influencers make their lifestyle the focal point of their content, has blurred the boundary between authentic life and the idealized life they project via digital platforms. Followers grapple with distinguishing genuine life from simulated life, culminating in a reconfiguration of their understanding of the world around them. This makes followers more susceptible to the influencers' sway and the shaping of their reality (Baudrillard J., 2008, p. 199).

The transformation in the functions of media further exacerbates this situation. While media used to serve as a mirror reflecting an accurate representation of the world tethered to truth, the advent of social media platforms has reshaped this role. Now, reality itself is a product of this technological evolution, present in its entirety. However, the collapse of this reality can be attributed to the relentless production of signs, symbols, and social meanings within the virtual world. In this realm, influencers have emerged as essential social actors. Within this context, media discourse, as a text, serves as nothing more than an individual journey where authors bring forth words, while readers bring meaning (Umberto, 1992, p. 32).

In their unique spaces, influencers effectively function as stages upon which they perform specific roles from their daily lives. Implicitly, they encourage their followers to adopt the portrayals and perceptions they present of themselves. On one side of this equation, influencers can become fully immersed in their roles, genuinely convinced that the reality they project is the true reality. When their audience likewise embraces this perception, any doubts about the authenticity of what is presented evaporate (Goffman, 2021, p. 35). To gain a deeper understanding of their role, one can approach it from a pre-performance standpoint. Influencers adapt their behaviors, fine-tune their personas in front of the camera, and then subject the content intended for presentation to extensive editing and directing processes, effectively transforming their reality into a meticulously curated scene for filming. Within this context, they assume the roles of actors embodying predetermined characters. Consequently, they reveal specific, tangible facets of their social reality that may exist outside of it but are closer to the truth. Depending on how the influencer crafts their message, they shape at least a portion of their followers' perception of reality. The art of meaning-making

is intricately tied to the audience, which interprets and constructs its own perceptions of the surrounding reality. This prompts us to question who is the true architect of reality : the influencers who lead their followers into a realm beyond the existing reality, or the followers who succumb to what Eco refers to as the “intentional fallacy”—the inherent potential for error in interpreting meaning based on the sender’s intentions, often related to shaping the meaning of icons or messages (Eco, 1992, p. 13).

4. The Impact through Visuals and Symbolic Manipulation of Reality

Jean Baudrillard displayed significant interest in images, offering an intricate analysis of their roles in pursuit of grasping their essence and the underlying values they bear. He regarded images as symbols endowed with a potency akin to language, a means through which power seeks to influence the minds of individuals within society. Prominent thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze, and Roland Barthes influenced his ideas. Many of their works revolved around unraveling the intricate dimensions inherent in the concept of symbols. Baudrillard’s analytical approach rested on the principles of semiotics, aiming to dissect images into smaller visual communicative units distinguished by their wealth of connotations, thus unveiling their explicit and concealed intentions.

Baudrillard argued that contemporary culture had become enamored with a new and alluring form of imagery due to its widespread proliferation. This image had risen to become a significant conduit of knowledge, resulting in the vanishing and obscuring of actual reality. Reality gradually receded and diminished, retreating behind a world comprised of images, eventually fading into nonexistence. Conversely, the ascendancy of images, once perceived as representations of the tangible world, metamorphosed society into one immersed in a domain of non-original images. This space continually expanded and stretched until it occupied the very same domain formerly inhabited by reality. The distinction between the new and old realities is not one of nature but rather of degree. In other words, the new reality possesses allure and fascination that the old reality lacked. Consequently, it doesn’t merely present itself as an alternative reality but as a hyperreal version of the old reality itself (Emrani, 2018, p. 238).

Media, through the medium of imagery, undertakes the construction of the social, political, and economic reality perceived by its audience. Here, “reality” encompasses the segment of the image presented to us, encapsulating

diverse facets of everyday life. At first glance, this may appear as a natural and truthful portrayal of reality. However, through daily exposure to these contents and their minutiae, a distinct impression emerges. It is the small fragment of the image that is initially presented that forms the foundation for the remainder of the image in the minds of the audience (Nassima, 2018, p. 78). In this context, Pierre Bourdieu contended that television, originally intended as a tool for documenting events, has transformed into an instrument for fabricating reality. We are increasingly transitioning into realms where social existence is delineated and expounded upon by television. Television evolves into the authoritative gateway for engagement and involvement in life, as well as within the sphere of social and political existence (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 54).

Social media platforms, as an extension of traditional media, serve as potent instruments in shaping public opinion, constructing perceptions, and fabricating reality. They possess distinct attributes that incentivize users to share moments from their lives, transforming these moments into consumable content for the public within a novel framework of social life. This occurs through the intensive presentation of images, which, due to their high-level discourse and significant connection to reality, construct an alternative reality independently. In modern virtual societies, life itself is portrayed as an accumulation of spectacles, where everything experienced directly becomes transformed into a representation. The spectacle is not just a collection of images but also a social dynamic among individuals mediated by these images (Debord, 2002, p. 10).

Contemporary influencers heavily rely on imagery with a strong emphasis on social idealism. These images are meticulously edited, focusing on aesthetics and intricately processed details to amplify their realism. These images transport followers from their actual reality into a theatrical one. In his analysis of the image in consumer society, Baudrillard likened it to a shop window that displays the social reality offered through communication technologies. The appearance of an object signifies its existence. To see is to believe. Reality has now evolved to become performative, resembling a window display. It belongs neither inside the store nor outside it, neither to the private domain (the shop) nor the public domain (the street). It occupies a space in-between where the public and private converge. Expanding Baudrillard's analysis, images presented by influencers become not just a window display but also a more hyperreal version of actual reality (Emrani, 2018, p. 259).

Today, the image has assumed a prominent role as the primary means of communication between individuals, the world around them, and others. Consequently, the human experience, mediated through images, shapes one's view of the world and influences their behavior and presence within it. Thus, the external world takes its form within the human mind through this medium (Emrani, 2018, p. 209). If individuals construct most of their perceptions of reality through continuous exposure to images embedded in the content of influencers who dominate digital platforms, creating a direct and persistent confrontation with the screen, the result will be that most of these perceptions of reality are accepted and, therefore, they influence and contribute to the social construction of reality. To fulfill its role more effectively, the image should conceal any signs of manipulation and imitation because effective simulation occurs when recipients believe that the reality presented through those images is a genuine reflection of real life. This helps convey an honest and clear message to the audience, making them feel they are interacting with an authentic reality, not just fabricated images.

For instance, the “selfie” offers a variety of scenes from daily life that do not aim to make things visible but instead create conditions for vision. The human eye no longer serves as the window to our perception of reality ; it is the camera's eye that reimagines reality through the image (Goudar, 2019, p. 183). People have transitioned into living a simulated life, with the primary focus no longer on representing actual reality through screens but on disseminating virtual images that reshape and control reality to align with influencers' objectives and followers' needs. This shift in the creative process has rendered actual reality less significant. There is no longer an emphasis on conveying genuine reality through screens ; instead, the focus lies on disseminating virtual images in ways that allow influencers to reshape and govern reality to suit their goals and their followers' needs. This creates a dynamic where the audience becomes passive, as their thought processes are distorted, and they are compelled to accept a particular version of reality amidst an overwhelming accumulation of imagery. In this context, Debord quotes Feuerbach : “But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... illusion only is sacred, truth profane” (Debord, 2002, p. 04).

Debord's assessment provides an accurate depiction of contemporary societies where living spectacles prevail. With technology's advancement and the widespread use of digital platforms, everyone now leads a virtual

life. Consequently, the image is not merely a reflection of reality but a performative representation presented through pre-structured patterns aimed at influencing users' awareness and perceptions. The power of the image in this era should be acknowledged as the creator of events, causing individuals to live in a state of internal disintegration, where the influence of multiplicity and life's staging significantly affects their thinking. This may lead to a prolonged mental distortion (Hidash, 2020, p. 142).

Roland Barthes expands on Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, asserting that what distinguishes an image is its perfection and meticulous artistry. Consequently, it presents a complete, skillfully designed reality, appearing more objective and neutral than actual reality. Objectivity and neutrality, in this context, imply that the image does not rely on symbols and codes that require interpretation, as seen in oil paintings, for instance. This attribute enhances the image's ability to deceive and falsify (Emrani, 2018, p. 233).

Baudrillard's thinking, along with that of others interested in the image, underscores the diversity of opinions and perspectives regarding its role in shaping our daily perceptions and experiences. Today, the world is witnessing a sweeping proliferation of images, which have become a fundamental component of contemporary culture. The image has emerged as a product of technological advancements, with a strong impact on societies. Images hold immense power, utilized by influencers through digital platforms characterized by a dense visual display. The objective is to control the cultural and perceptual aspects of the audience by manipulating the subconscious mind to incline towards believing what the image portrays.

5. Influencers and the Rise of Consumer Society

In his critical examination of consumption, Baudrillard, like many contemporary cultural theorists, draws on Marxist philosophy to explore the alienation and estrangement experienced by individuals within capitalist societies. He posits that these societies generate artificial needs through the expansion of mass culture and market growth. Consumption, in this context, transcends mere necessity ; it becomes a relationship where a commodity's value extends beyond its material worth to include social-symbolic significance. Baudrillard argues that consumption emerges as the defining characteristic of Western societies, serving as the universal response upon which the entire cultural system relies. Thus, consumption is framed not as a means of satisfaction but as a tool for differentiation. This commodification

reflects a reality that has eroded, replaced by signs and symbols devoid of authenticity (Al-Sayyid, 2018, p. 276).

The rise of a consumption culture can be traced to the massive industrialization that has swept across the globe over the past century. This culture represents a form of material culture accompanying globalization and technological advancements, fundamentally altering the relationship between individuals and commodities. As a result, personal value becomes tied to the possessions one acquires. This new consumer landscape is characterized by precision and employs advertising techniques to direct individuals' interests toward specific goods and services. Commodities are imbued with symbols and meanings, enhancing their allure and realism to exert influence on consumers.

With the increasing prevalence of social media and the declining influence of traditional media, companies have shifted their advertising strategies to digital platforms, particularly leveraging influencers with expansive audiences. This strategy has facilitated the penetration of products into diverse consumer demographics through targeted advertising campaigns. The social and psychological impact of influencers on their followers encourages the purchase of products that may not fulfill genuine needs. This behavior stems from a desire to assimilate into the lifestyles presented on these platforms. Advertisers exploit this dynamic, fostering increased interaction between influencers and their followers regarding their products. Consequently, this consumer influence can lead to patterns of consumption driven not by necessity but by specific psychological and social factors. The relationship between commodities and their value (signifier and signified) acquires a new symbolic dimension, diverging from the original practical purposes of the goods (Peter, 2019, p. 322). Objects become the primary determinants of purchasing behavior ; for example, the coveted car transforms from a mere mode of transport into a status symbol, altering its function and the consumer's relationship with it (Emrani, 2018, p. 258).

Influencers exert a profound impact on their followers, transcending mere thoughts and beliefs to shape perceptions of objects and daily life. They craft a superficial reality that aligns with capitalist principles, constructing a consumer society that prioritizes appearances, superficiality, and the pursuit of happiness through consumption and entertainment. Baudrillard noted that modern media icons actively shape society through their symbols, influencing social values and norms (Mustfa, 2022).

Baudrillard further asserts that consumption has detached from its original meaning, evolving into a symbol of an individual's social standing. As a result, consumption shifts from the acquisition of material goods to the consumption of the symbols associated with those goods. Consumer society, according to Baudrillard, prioritizes the symbolic function of commodities over their practical utility. The emblem or sign a product bears becomes a key indicator of social and class status, regardless of the product's intrinsic quality (Emrani, 2018, p. 262).

Followers who rely on influencers for guidance are inclined to purchase non-essential items, motivated by the unique attributes these products confer upon their identities and social standings. Such purchases often align individuals with specific social groups or elevate them within a social class. Consumer behavior is no longer dictated by logical reasoning ; it has transformed into a social endeavor. Humans, as inherently social beings, continually compare themselves with others (Salama, 2022). The increasing dependence on influencers distorts perceptions of trends and norms, as seen in the rise of "trend" culture. This phenomenon pressures followers to consume products without critically assessing their choices. Consumer societies have infiltrated all aspects of life, with audiences becoming deeply immersed in virtual worlds. The emergence of influencers and their curated lifestyles has set the benchmark for what is deemed socially acceptable.

In this context, consumption has evolved into a defining aspect of identity, shifting from its traditional significance to characterizing individuality within consumer culture. Individuals distinguish themselves socially based on the abundance of consumer choices available (Zygmunt, 2016, p. 146). Followers mimic influencers' preferences, affirming their identities and social memberships through purchasing behavior. This creates a social compact, compelling individuals to conform to group norms on platforms like YouTube and Instagram ; failure to do so risks social exclusion (Bessafa, 2022, p. 99). In virtual societies, consumption transcends individual choice, embedding itself in the psyche and persuading individuals that their consumption patterns define their existence. This results in a population of passive consumers, a concept Herbert Marcuse termed the "one-dimensional man." Consumer culture confines individuals to a limited sphere, stripping away aspirations for change or liberation. Although technology offers the means for well-being and happiness, mediated through advertising, it creates artificial desires that detract from genuine fulfillment.

We are confronted with a virtual entity—whether real or imaginary—that is intertwined with the values of Western modernity and shaped by the dynamics of the capitalist market. This entity upholds materialistic consumer values, reinforces idealized images, and influences the emotional responses of its followers. Consequently, we must reconsider influence as manipulation, eroding authentic human experiences in favor of the virtual and consumptive (Seif, 2023). Baudrillard offers a prescient perspective on the authority of consumption in capitalist societies, encapsulated in his notion, “I consume, thus I exist.” This concept explores the transformative shifts in contemporary societies catalyzed by the digital revolution, which profoundly affect human existence. In this framework, consumption emerges as a pivotal factor in asserting an individual’s presence in modern society.

Conclusion

Baudrillard’s theory regarding the “death of reality” resonates deeply in today’s societies, increasingly influenced by new media technologies, especially social media platforms. These platforms serve as contemporary arenas for “hyperreality,” where original realities are replicated in a digital domain that distorts truth with deception and fabrication. This replication generates replicas that lack authenticity and exist solely as duplicates devoid of substantial reference. The pervasive use of these platforms has facilitated the rise of influencers, who quickly propagate a distorted social reality characterized by opulence, idealism, and happiness. Their communication strategies rely on visual manipulation, altering followers’ perceptions of social existence and creating deceptive impressions of reality consumed daily through influencer content. This often transcends reality to enhance their digital personas, seek recognition, and achieve fame.

The consequences for audiences are significant ; they become increasingly detached from their authentic realities and senses of self. It is no longer about documenting life but rather a lucrative industry generating millions of dollars, evolving into a distinct ideology that fosters consumer-driven societies, prioritizing superficiality and surface-level appearances over authenticity, ultimately producing a highly distorted version of reality.

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Abstract

This research paper aims to provide an extensive theoretical examination of the phenomenon of social media influencers and their role in distorting social reality from Jean Baudrillard's media perspective. This analysis predates the current prevalence of digital platforms and employs a critical paradigm to explore the theoretical underpinnings and associated concepts of this research topic. Consequently, it seeks to grasp the critical and analytical aspects linked to the influencer phenomenon, which has triggered fundamental shifts in communication methodologies. These influencers now represent a potent media force actively engaged in shaping and constructing the audience's perception of reality by presenting images that not only fail to mirror the original reality but also fabricate and counterfeit it. The concept of simulated reality is intricately intertwined with the culture of consumerism, fostering a shallow society driven more by wants than necessities. This transformation has led individuals to detach from their genuine reality and identity as they immerse themselves in a new lifestyle dictated by the authority of influencers, where the conscious human self gradually dissipates as individuals increasingly conform to a novel way of life shaped by the influence of these digital figures.

Keywords

Influencers, Digital Platforms, Hyperreality, Social Reality, Consumerism, Jean Baudrillard

مستخلص

تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تقديم تحليل نظري شامل ومعمق لإشكالية المؤثرين عبر المنصات الرقمية ودورهم في تشويه الواقع الاجتماعي من منظور جان بودريار. وتعتمد هذه الدراسة على البرادغيم النقدي الذي يساعد في تفحص الأسس النظرية والمفاهيم المرتبطة بموضوع البحث، وبالتالي فهم الجوانب النقدية والتحليلية المرتبطة بظاهرة المؤثرين الذين تسبب ظهورهم في تغييرات جوهرية على مستوى أساليب الاتصال حيث أصبحوا يمثلون قوة إعلامية تسهم في تشكيل وبناء واقع المتابعين من خلال عرض صور لا تعكس الواقع الأصلي، بل تقوم بتزييفه. ويرتبط الواقع المصطنع بثقافة الاستهلاك التي ولدت

مجتمعًا سطحيًا يقوم على مبدأ الرغبة بدلاً من مبدأ الحاجة. مما يجعل الأفراد مغتربين عن واقعهم وذواتهم نتيجة اندماجهم في نمط حياة جديد تحكمه سلطة المؤثرين ضمن فضاء رقمي افتراضي تتلاشى فيه الذات الإنسانية الواعية.

كلمات مفتاحية

المؤثرون، المنصات الرقمية، فوق الواقعية، الواقع الاجتماعي، الاستهلاكية، جان بودريار

Résumé

Ce document de recherche fournit une analyse théorique approfondie de la problématique des influenceurs actifs sur les plateformes numériques et de leur rôle dans la distorsion de la réalité sociale, du point de vue de Jean Baudrillard. Cette analyse, qui précède la puissance actuelle des réseaux sociaux, s'appuie sur le paradigme critique, permettant d'examiner les principes théoriques et les concepts liés au sujet de recherche, afin de mieux comprendre les aspects critiques et analytiques associés au phénomène des influenceurs, qui ont provoqué des changements radicaux dans les moyens de communication.

En effet, ces influenceurs sont devenus une force médiatique qui contribue à la construction et à la création de la réalité de leur public en exposant des images qui ne représentent pas la réalité originale, mais qui la déforment et l'embellissent. Cela s'explique par la dépendance croissante à l'image, influençant ainsi la perception de la vie sociale réelle chez les individus. Cette réalité virtuelle est liée à la culture de la consommation, qui a engendré une société superficielle adoptant le principe du désir plutôt que celui du besoin. Cela a conduit les individus à être aliénés de leur propre réalité et de leur identité, en raison de leur intégration dans un nouveau style de vie régi par l'autorité des influenceurs dans un espace numérique virtuel où la conscience humaine disparaît.

Mots-clés

Influenceurs, plateformes numériques, hyperréalité, constructions sociales, consumérisme, Jean Baudrillard