Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Technology

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Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at
https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0421#resources

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8. Nothing in Practice: Entanglements of Sartre's Nothingness and Social Media Practice

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Introduction

Artists and designers could be considered the most likely to profit from image-based social media such as Instagram.[1] An attempt towards a phenomenology of the artist-social media relationship, however, reveals that the way in which 'we within the creative industries' relate to this technology is at best deeply ambiguous. Web 2.0 offers new opportunities for self-expression, interaction, and thus for potentially far-reaching self-promotion. Yet, artists rarely describe this medium as a straightforward helpful tool but rather as a Janus-faced technology—often referred to as a 'necessary evil' (e.g., Cheong, 2023). As creative professionals become financially more successful, they might be able to outsource the 'necessary evil'—online marketing and certain parts of the social media practice. However, even those highest in ranking ideally must regularly produce *content* showing insights into their personal lives with claims of presenting their true, 'authentic' selves, or at least well-curated personas that appear that way (consider the paradoxicalphenomenon of the plandid).[2] So how

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1   With the general term 'social media' or 'social network sites', I refer to the medium generally. However, this chapter only considers image-based and image sharing social media—mostly used within the creative industries—excluding, e.g., text-based social media or search engines such as Google, often also considered to be a variation of the social media technology.

2   The term *plandid* denotes a 'planned candid' photo—an image that appears to be

do artists and designers experience social media in practice and how can philosophers (of technology) deal with the aforementioned 'evils' without falling into dystopian one-dimensionality?

The main problem addressed in this chapter is how to describe specific phenomena observable in social media practice, that I consider overlooked within the school of thought known as *postphenomenology* and the related field of *mediation theory.* These underdiscussed phenomena that I call 'absence phenomena', however, can be made explicit through the work of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and his concept of *nothingness* (1993). *Absence phenomena* are not exclusive to the experience of artists and designers; yet they are frequently expressed within artistic works that I can rely on for my arguments. In this exploration, I draw from two well-known artistic examples within popular culture; Cindy Sherman's 'Instagram selfies' (Russeth, 2017) and comedian and singer Bo Burnham's account of the 'human-content relation' in his song titled 'Content' (2021). Designers and artists use and experience social media in many versatile ways. Therefore, when using postphenomenology and the concept of multistability,[3] it is necessary to clarify that the use of the collective pronoun 'we' to describe a hypothetical coherent group of creative professionals is a strategic choice. This choice is intended to highlight the relevance of Sartre's nothingness and related absence phenomena as collectively significant, while acknowledging that these phenomena are not experienced uniformly by everyone. Such a multistable reading of nothingness and social media brings forth new questions on the human-social media relationship. In this chapter, I seek to build on existing postphenomenological work (e.g., Wiltse, 2017) towards a more holistic view of social media as a technology tinkering with existential issues and core human principles, as expounded by Sartre. I discuss a modestly small part of the practice—the experience of setting up a new profile and sharing content on two platforms typically used within creative communities: Instagram and TikTok. As mentioned, contrary to a simple instrumentalist view, most artists acknowledge social media's ambiguity and fear that their work would not be able to

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spontaneous but is planned down to the smallest detail.
3   Postphenomenologists describe variations of possible use cases (actual or hypothetical) as multistability. Technology is always multistable (can be used in many ways).

stand a chance without the 'aggressive' self-expression and promotion that social media offers to facilitate. What many creatives experience can already be identified as one of the most obvious 'evils'—the lack of choice that creative professionals seem to have. Phenomenologically, social media non-use (absence) equals non-existence - not a choice or at least not a good one if an artist aims to take her work and thus herself seriously. Aware of contemporary digital power relations, many within the creative industries thus stoically embrace or at least accept the fact that social media must be wrestled with in one way or another. Many put aside nostalgia towards 'authentic choice', accepting that a profile breeding social media has become the dominant contemporary way to produce identity (cf. Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2021).

In the following, I seek to show why the existential potency of social media and in some cases the 'necessarily evil' stabilities can be better understood within American Philosopher Don Ihde's postphenomenology, in dialogue with Sartre's concept of nothingness Consequently, I argue that social media practice cannot be conceptualized only as an *actuality* within an *in-use paradigm*, which is central to postphenomenology (e.g., Ihde, 1990; 2002; 2009; 2012; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015; Wellner, 2016; Kudina, 2021). The versatile corpus of postphenomenology offers insightful details on how specific technologies transform experience, how they shape human reality and perception of the *lifeworld* and the *self* within (co-constitution). However, postphenomenology does not seriously consider technological practice entangled with Sartre's nothingness—as *perceived absences* come into consciousness even before the evaluations of hypothetical usefulness. A careful phenomenology shows that the artist-social media relationship already begins before moments of evaluation, before and after use-cases occur.[4] In other words, to understand social media more holistically, postphenomenology should consider the dialectic between *use* and *non-use*, between actuality and *potentiality* of the technology (Kiran, 2012). Sartre's existential phenomenology offers useful vocabulary to better describe such tensions of being *present* on a social media platform OR

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4   (Post)phenomenologist recall concepts such as technological 'affordances' (compare De Boer, 2021) to deal with questions of evaluating general usefulness (versus use), yet the problem of absence (and nothingness) is not adequately addressed within postphenomenology.

being *absent*—what and when to share and when not to, when to be or not to be online. This digital version of Sartrean dialectic, per my hypothesis, weighs heavily on how people interpret the world as well as their and other's personal identities (I call this sense-making). To fill this analytical gap, I propose to (re)integrate the concept of nothingness into postphenomenology through reminding readers of Sartre's vocabulary and Ihde's early work (e.g., Ihde, 1973; 1986; 1990). The subproblem that follows is how Sartre's main concept of nothingness can be framed conceptually within Ihde's relational ontology and related mediation theory (Verbeek, 2016; Kudina, 2020; 2021). On these grounds, I suggest determined negations (see section 4) within Ihde's threefold formula, *human—technology—world*, to represent the experience of absence and nothingness that Sartre's existential phenomenology famously lays bare. This chapter argues that the convergence of Sartre's existential project with postphenomenology offers analytical tools to better understand the experience of social media practice as typically done by artists and designers. While I consider postphenomenology as best suited for my task at hand—to be able to discuss fragments of social media practice—I push the boundaries of postphenomenology with an attempt to coin the term *absence relations* based on Ihde's analytical method expanding his *background relations.* With the forestallment of the notion of 'perceived absence'—the nuance of Sartre's nothingness I consider most useful and programmatic for this exploration—I discuss the phenomenology of artist-social media relations in some of their existential meanings. Absence relations then are in entanglement[5] with Sartre's nothingness as well as with Ihde's technological practice that is *self-making* through technologies. I therefore propose Sartre's project as potentially contributing to philosophy of technology (Siegler, 2022) beyond the connection to social media I make here.[6] I argue that Sartre's nothingness

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5   I use the word 'entanglement' to describe co-dependence.
6   Sartre never developed a philosophy targeted specifically towards technology, but he builds on Heidegger and uses numerous examples especially in his later works. Marcel Siegler (2022) points out that only through reading Sartre's early as well as later works such as *Critique of Dialectical Reason* does this insight unfold. Siegler, however, does not understand postphenomenology as compatible with Sartre's views on technologies. Sartre, in his understanding, frames human consciousness as the trigger for technological developments which Ihde, in his understanding, does not: 'Sartre escapes the technomorphic conception of subjectivity that can be found in postphenomenology/ANT. By considering human existence as a

finds amplifications online, while social media in return offers a banal caricature and reductive answer to existential circumstances of the artist (human) condition. Thus, in my interpretation of Ihde and Sartre, social media reveals some of its necessarily evils as not far from the trivial or the banal (Arendt, 1964).

1. Bracketing the Shock

When relying on words such as 'evil' to describe certain human-technology relations, and, more specifically, artist-social media relations, it is unavoidable to recognize that while the number and variations of social media sites rapidly grow, increasingly accurate research has been able to unfold the ambiguous, in some cases problematic, impacts of these technologies (trade-offs). In postphenomenological language, social media networks are not neutral—they inevitably change perception, the human, and thus the world. The so-called 'toxic' impacts of this technology, however, might have recently come as a 'shock' to some.[7] Over the past decade, sociologists, psychologists, Silicon Valley insiders, educators, and others have begun investigating empirically the causal nexus, identifying types of technological 'shocks' that are linked, for instance, to mental health decline amongst teenagers (e.g., Heidt, 2019; Turkle, 2011; Lanier, 2018; Zuboff, 2019; Haugen, 2023). Linked problematic behaviours or habits are often blamed on some form of digital addiction. Some empirical correlations have been found with social media use but cannot be clearly identified as causations. At this stage, civil society, researchers, and philosophers only can hold suspicions towards these connections. Growing movements known, for example, as digital detoxing[8] are taking these suspicions seriously, trying to find ways to individually and collectively keep people away from digital 'evils'. These

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primarily instrumentalizing endeavor, it is human subjectivity and intentionality that constitutes what is technology, not the other way around' (Siegler, 2022, p. 23).

7   Compare the discussion on 'the shock of technology'—technologies 'shock' when disrupting our routines, exposing our entanglements with them (Lemmens et al., 2022).

8   Digital detoxing movements are on the rise (Halpert, 2022), as well as so-called neo-Luddite communities (Vadukul, 2022) trying to keep their peers away from the smartphone and specifically from social media.

phenomena have provoked new research fields (Altmaier et al., 2024) and new postphenomenological questions (Kurz, forthcoming).[9]

One important puzzle Ihde poses is how to find the adequate analytical nuance between a doomsday dystopian verdict[10] and an overoptimistic hype of a technology. One pressing question to answer then for postphenomenologists is how not to fall into reactionary moves yet adequately acknowledge the philosophical steps necessary to more holistically describe social media and what people (and, increasingly, artists and designers) are experiencing.

Having mentioned what is bracketed, I shall not discuss straightforward social media trade-offs, nor will I represent counter positions of likewise versatile advantages and concrete gains that social media platforms provide (specifically for artists and designers). Beyond the research mentioned, both positions are well observable through everyday experiences, in schools, in private lives, or in professional contexts. Postphenomenological inquiries are usually more agnostic, not preoccupied with the 'either or'—these technologies good for humankind *or* harmful in essence. This exploration is rather interested in working towards details of the 'how?'—how is social media both? Why is this technology so effective in tinkering with and manipulating core human principles? With postphenomenology in dialogue with Sartre, the question becomes: how does *mediation of nothingness* occur?

2. Sartre's Nothingness

French philosopher Sartre's concept of nothingness—in French: *le néant*, as theorized in *Being and Nothingness* (1993)—most importantly must be defined as his umbrella term holding many nuances. Sartre's overall aim in his treatise is to phenomenologically show that the human experience of the self and others emerges in consciousness entangled with nothingness. This nothingness reveals itself in different forms—both as a source of vulnerability and as the freedom to 'make' the self. Sartre recognizes pre-reflective ways that we ascribe meaning to the world and to (self-)identity - I call this *sense-making.* Most reductively put,

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9   Compare the so-called new research field of 'disconnection studies' (Altmaier et al., 2024).

10   Ihde finds this within the work of classical phenomenologists such as Heidegger.

consciousness for Sartre is entangled with the experience of *negations*[11] or potential *nihilations* within human interpretations of the lifeworld as well as the self. This is to show that perception of nothingness is most urgent to the human condition (that perhaps eastern philosophers have understood better than the continental kind). The human then most fundamentally experiences herself as 'lacking', inevitably linked to the awareness of nothingness as perceived negations within. Sartre's consciousness is haunted by the possibility of its very nihilation.[12] These vulnerabilities are neither concrete nor imaginary, they are flickering in-between and are the sources of core human judgments and motivations, as well as desires and emotions. Nothingness is inseparably entangled with Sartre's other subordinate concepts composing his existential phenomenology. The question explored in this chapter is how to acknowledge Sartre's flickering nothingness within Ihde's analytical methods and within the context of social media use as typically practiced by artists. All variations and nuances of Sartre's nothingness connect to the ways in which an individual directs herself towards the world and others. Thus, Sartre's consciousness is not only aware of the positive and that which is *present* but is co-shaped by what is *absent*. For my line of arguments, it will be relevant to keep this in mind to differentiate between nothingness as an overarching concept and subordinate nuances of negations such as 'perceived absences' that I further use within Ihde's formula (section 4) to make explicit the ways in which nothingness can be concretely experienced on social media.

The human condition according to Sartre is a dynamic interplay between being (the positive) and nothingness (the nihilation). Sense-making of the world is, for Sartre, the perception of nothingness—a dialogue between what 'is' and what 'is not' and is thus entangled with what 'could be' (potentiality). Sartre is very clear in pointing out that the awareness of one's identity is the experience of the lack of such a thing. Contrary to an object, like a chair—which in-itself is perceived as holding intrinsic meaning—Sartre's human does not stand *in-itself*. The human is always directed towards the future and

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11   Sartre relies on Hegelian negations to address his nuances and variations of nothingness.
12   Nihilation can mean non-being or death, but also the impossibility to make the authentic self. It can also mean negation more generally.

thus acts *for-itself*. Humans are motivated by nothingness to try to fill the void or the lack they find within self-identity. Sartre calls this the *condemnation to be free*. This freedom and its void orient the individual in the world, indicating what actions (including technological and societal) can and must be taken. Thus, the concept of nothingness is tied closely to human freedom as a responsibility towards the self and the world. Sartre famously declares that humans are not born with predetermined meanings or 'essences'. Instead, individuals create their own essence through their choices and actions. This freedom of having to choose and make the self is accompanied by anxiety over the responsibility of creating meaning in a seemingly absurd world. Because human consciousness is always transcending itself, it is reaching towards potentialities (experienced as endless on social media). The awareness of nothingness is crucial in sense-making, pointing to bodily needs as well as emotional desires. Perception of nothingness likewise motivates technological action for-itself. Sartre's nothingness most famously culminates into absolute responsibility towards the making of the self—that is, thriving for an *authentic self*. For the purposes of this text, I need not further discuss Sartre's notion of *authenticity*, but it is important to keep in mind that the concept is one of his most central lifelong projects that he considers tied to the perception of self-identity that is worth striving toward.

A growing body of literature proposes that Sartre's existential philosophy can shed light on core principles of the human condition immersed in contingency and uncertainty amplified by social media technologies (e.g., Lopato, 2015; Qi et al., 2018; Jose, 2019; Cheong, 2023). Marc Cheong, for example, argues in this context 'that harm to existential well-being is a persistent, but often under-discussed threat, where existentialist concepts are pivotal in unpacking our relationship with social media' (Cheong, 2023, p. 2).

Once the concept of nothingness is established as useful to explicate the dialectics of human sense-making and the forming of self-identity, it becomes clear that it is independent of or prior to any concrete human-technology relation. The role of nothingness on social media, then, leads to the next question of how it tinkers with existential well-being and self-identity.

3. Identity and Social Media: The Relevance of Nothingness for Postphenomenology

The brisk expansion of Web 2.0 social media platforms increasingly enables artist-generated content to be shared and interacted with online instantly. Over time, this content potentially (if cared for well enough) becomes an online artist's identity. Intricately connected to and embedded within another complex technology of the smartphone, these platforms such as Instagram (frequently used within the art world) record and archive user's photographs, video clips, and short texts, composing a toolkit of what I refer to as identity- or profile-technologies.[13] Currently, most popular platforms use networks (based on friendships or followers) to build connections and allow for interactions.[14] Curated and visually 'embellished', searchable self-archives build new forms of online communities. These advancements have profoundly changed existential circumstances and how people today understand human connection and self-identity and how artists understand themselves and the world. It is safe to say that today, the quest for identity and related performances and *presentations of the self* (Goffman, 1959) are deeply involved with the virtual world and online profile productions. Identity already in its analogue forms could not be reduced to simple solvable steps nor fully understood from one totalizing perspective, as Sartre illustrates in his versatile attempts to demonstrate the existential conundrum and the complexities of his pursuit of identity (being toward authenticity). Sartre's phenomenology thus stands valuable without any need for acknowledgment of the role of technologies to better understand human sense-making as the quest for identity and the meaningful. Yet the connection between identity and social media is self-evident and becomes explicit as soon as artists and designers begin building their online profiles; the link to Sartre's nothingness follows.

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13 Cf. Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2021). They coin the term 'profilicity' to emphasize the role of profile technologies in identity production.

14 Lopato (2015) differentiates between *static* and *dynamic* features of social media. According to him, *static social media* does not allow for person-to-person communication that face-to-face communication or communication via messaging services, such as email, would allow. Dynamic social media, on the other hand, has a symmetrical structure allowing person to person communication.

Contemporary debates around identity can be protracted. The term is used in many ways. It can be put in political contexts to express rivalries of recognition, rights, or inclusion of certain people or groups. The concept of identity more fundamentally references a personal understanding of the self or selfhood (Ricœur, 1992). Identity then implies sameness as well as difference and the felt connections between the individual person and some wider collective or group (Taylor, 2015). For Sartre, self-identity is a quest toward the authentic self that must make its own essence. Sartre's missing human essence (or the lack within identity) shows that identity must be framed as a 'wicked problem', impossible to be solved and difficult to define or break down into solvable steps. In naming three prominent thinkers, who come to a similarly intricate conclusion, it becomes clear that tinkering with identity inevitably means tinkering with violence. In my interpretation, this shows that the quest for identity reaches into the most fundamental human principles and perhaps into those of the most primitive kind. Francis Fukuyama (2019), for instance, regards the quest for identity as an intersubjective, highly political, and therefore sensitive struggle because it is human dignity, the recognition of self-worth, and meaning that people are searching for. Amartya Sen (2020) stands not far from Fukuyama. He rejects a static interpretation of identity, arguing against reducing identity to a single fixed or locked dimension. He advocates for 'complicating' identity instead of viewing it as a caricatured one-way strategy. According to Sen, identity must go beyond simplistic, singular categorizations to allow for societal well-being. He promotes an inclusive and pluralistic approach. Sen emphasizes the multifaceted nature of human identity, which includes various affiliations and attributes, such as social, political, and economic dimensions. Sen encourages a nuanced understanding that is necessary to avoid violence tied up in rigid, fixed, or blown-up, out-of-proportion identities. A few decades earlier, Marshall McLuhan (1977) put it more bluntly—according to him, the lack of identity always leads to violence.[15]

To return to my specific case of the artist and social media practice

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15 McLuhan understands violence in a broad sense—for him, even a sports game can be considered violent.

within creative communities, the second 'evil' of social media (after the apparent lack of choice mentioned in the introduction) can be identified as another lack of choice and the simplistic rigidity in which profile building can happen, namely, *only* through posting content. This seems like a paradox, as on the other hand social media allows for unprecedented possibilities to express the self. Posting' as the only method to build online identities reveals itself as fixed and rigid or at least one-dimensional, which Sen rejects.

It is relevant to point out that social media for artists is not just another marketing tool for their businesses but is often inevitably tied to their personal identities. This connection can be understood through Sartre's exploration of authenticity, which is often associated with an artistic life. Claims of authenticity make profiles (that is, social media content infused with personal/insider information on one's life) more interesting and useful for self-promotion than previously used brands: 'Profiles reflect a much livelier and more interactive type of identity than traditional brands' (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2021, p. 29).

It would go beyond the scope of this text to further discuss Sartre's authenticity in relation to the artist, but perhaps I can establish that social media disrupts or 'shocks' (Lemmens et al., 2022) identity as the quest for authenticity (the original/honest self).[16] With the rise of social media as *the* 'identity technology' for artists, the discussion on authenticity is back on the table. Historically, it can be argued that people have developed different ways of aiming to 'solve' the wicked problem of identity—the trendy one being (digital) profile building. While the 'profile phenomenon' is not new, it has found major amplification through new media such that other forms of identity concepts like 'sincerity' or—as already mentioned—'authenticity' are weakened, perhaps to the point of irrelevance (cf. Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2021). This view that technologies amplify or weaken certain ways in which people perceive reality is not only compatible with postphenomenology but one of its central points. Social media is therefore not a neutral tool—it changes (co-shapes) the artist and how they make sense of the world.

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16   We explicitly see this, for instance, with apps such as 'BeReal' claiming that 'regular' social media do not allow for authenticity.

To circle back to my guiding question of why postphenomenology should care about Sartre's nothingness, I make the case that any account of social media that does not acknowledge Sartrean dialectic will fail to describe our relationship with this technology's role in identity building. Central, namely, are moments when assessment of the technology happens before and after the social media use-case, when usefulness (potentiality) of the technology is evaluated—whether to post content or not to post on social media. Whether to be online or not to be, and which platforms to use in the first place?

To think with Sartre and Ihde simultaneously, it becomes useful to keep in mind Sartre's *action for-itself* alongside Ihde's *leaving of the nurturing garden* to conceptualize technologies as human action facing nothingness. Later in Sartre's work, the preoccupation with nothingness turns towards *scarcity* of material and social forces[17]—in Sartre's understanding, scarcity is the very motivation for (personal, technological, and societal) action and making (Siegler, 2022). Similarly, for Ihde, making, and therefore the making of technologies, pushes back to counter 'harsh conditions' of the natural environment when leaving the garden (Ihde, 1990, pp. 11–20).

The bridge from the existential- to the postphenomenological thus is not a difficult one, as Don Ihde himself experienced existentialism as a philosophical as well as a popular movement, and he comments on and critiques existentialism on different occasions (e.g., Ihde, 1967). Ihde in his essay titled *Existentialism Today* acknowledges with Sartre that '[…] man is a negation; he is NOT identical with himself'—'MAN IS A PROBLEM TO HIMSELF' (Ihde, 1967, pp. 25–26).

As an artist, I dare to take on the risks of discussing empirical traces of negations and nothingness as a phenomenologically detectable experience, arriving at something like an *empirical transcendental* case study of social media practice. The challenge is to not drift into the 'trivial', nor the 'hardcore metaphysical' (Priest, 2017). [18] Thus, I admit to the limitations or perhaps the problems of the methodology.

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17 Culminating in his interest in and closeness to Marxism.
18 The analytic philosopher Priest (2017) refers to the inquiry into the question of nothingness as 'hardcore metaphysics'—this is his conclusion after a mereological analysis.

4. Nothingness as Absence: Introducing Absence Relations

Human desires and needs and what 'a good life' means are increasingly mediated by social media. But why does this technology have such a nauseating and potent effect on human fragility, core human emotions, and sense-making? To better understand the artist-social media relationship, postphenomenologists need to be able to deal with both concrete use (stabilities) as well as social media phenomena that I identify as linked to the experience of absence (perhaps well described as instabilities)—such unintended or purposeful non-use of certain available social networks—during which the hypothetical evaluation (assessment) of the usefulness of the technology happens in the first place. Another form of absence appears when, for instance, individuals are 'socially absent' from the dinner table while scrolling social media or other online sites.

Visual or image-based social media platforms are preferred by those within the creative industries for obvious reasons. With this specific situatedness, I express that social media can be used in many versatile ways. Even though this analysis will remain close to basic use habits such as setting up a profile, it is important to acknowledge *multistability*, i.e., different possible use variations across different cultures, industries, and, most likely, generations and even individuals.

With Sartre, however, the question of multistability and possible use-cases expands into the problem of how to conceptualize not only use but also technological non-use of social media. Thinking along my own experiences using two concrete platforms—Instagram and TikTok—and two well-known artistic examples exploring these apps reveals the manifold nuances of how artists deal with nothingness, and how non-use is just another form of potentiality or perhaps even another form of technology that needs to be dealt with.

After clarifying the necessary vocabulary, I can now propose to think with Sartre's nothingness and the concept of identity in dialogue with Ihde's postphenomenology through introducing the concept of *absence relation*. My wording has already forestalled the 'variation' of Sartre's nothingness (discussed in section 2) which I consider the most useful and programmatic for the next step. One way or one nuance

of how to experience nothingness, according to Sartre, is what he describes as absence—that is, an 'absence perceived' (Sorensen, 2022, pp. 289–308). This is the sub-concept I borrow for an entry into Ihde's relational ontology and material hermeneutics. To be able to illustrate the entanglements of Sartre's absence, his related ideas as well as the umbrella term nothingness must be kept in mind.

Phenomenology as proposed by Husserl is the study of structures of consciousness. Sartre sets out to study the problem of consciousness as the pre-reflective consciousness of consciousness. Sartre names the most obvious form of experiencing this nothingness as experiencing absence. Roy Sorensen in his recent book *Nothing. A Philosophical History* briefly discusses Sartre's concept. He notes that 'absences are always particular absences whereas presences can be general' (Sorensen, 2022, pp. 289–308). In this sense, absence always appears in relation to presence and thus within the limits of human *expectations*.

With Sartre in mind, I now can turn to Don Ihde's basic threefold formula (e.g., 2009):

human—technology—world

This phenomenological skeleton, according to Ihde, allows for an entry into descriptive attempts to deal with the relationships people can have to specific technologies and the mediated world. But how to acknowledge nothingness in this equation? The reasons for my next move to propose *determined negations* have perhaps become obvious. These negations are staged as follows:

a) (~~Human~~ → Technology)—World

b) Human → (~~Technology~~)—World

c) Human → (Technology—~~World~~)

This conceptual step can be backed up by Ihde's early work and his own dealings with nothingness. Ihde provides, especially in his early, pre-postphenomenology, insights into his views on nothingness as a concept that, in the human mind, becomes a significant force driving intentionality and action. Consequently, I conclude, an agent within technological practice. For example, in his early book *Sense and Significance* (1973), Ihde discusses the experience of sound and silence: he calls it the 'Heideggerian Model':

> The horizon of sound is silence, but at the same time it is the 'absence' which is never attained. Silence is the unspoken background for sound. (Ihde, 1973, p. 67)

> Silence is nothingness, but nothingness is sheer possibility. (Ihde, 1973, p. 68)

I propose an analytical tool to deal with phenomena that Ihde acknowledges here and I connect to social media practice. I consider my *absence relation* a variation or sub-concept of Ihde's *background relation.* This version of Ihde's human-technology relation needs to be conceptualized holistically in the context of his other relations. Ihde (1990, chapter 5) proposes analytic tools to phenomenologically describe what he calls human-technology relations. He identifies four types of relationships people might have to their technologies: *embodiment* (e.g., wearing glasses), *hermeneutic* (e.g., interpreting the world through an instrument, such as a thermostat), *alterity* (e.g., interacting with an ATM machine), and *background relation.*[19] Background relation is perhaps the one that the least attention has been paid to. One reason for this might be that this type of relation is not a straightforward use case. A technology in the background is one that is not used actively but might be running unnoticed—like an AC system or a refrigerator. Background technologies are usually only noticed when something is wrong, for instance when there is a breakdown or malfunction.

With Sartre, I hope to deepen the understanding of this background context, in which technologies 'do' something even when they are not actively in use, not yet in use, or no longer in use. What I call absence relations thus seeks to expand the vocabulary and perhaps the possible research program of postphenomenology.

The concrete example of encountering a new, potentially helpful social media app for the first time (the discovery) initially strikes the artist with her own very absence. 'I am not (yet) on this platform'. The first encounter is an in-the-face visualization of the absence of one's own face ~~(human)~~. This type of absence that I call the *absence-avatar*, has a distinct and well-known icon—most platforms such as Instagram or Facebook provide an 'empty' profile image with a simplistic illustration of a generic head

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19 Ihde's four relations have been added to by other philosophers—e.g., 'cyborg relations' added by Peter-Paul Verbeek.

in shades of grey or light blue that might be stylistically male or female, depending on the name and gender assigned in the first instance. This generic head is increasingly becoming a more playful illustration (e.g., on TikTok or Reddit). The absence-avatar is a placeholder until the profile is considered complete. A second step human absence phenomenon would be the discovery of an expected person to not be on the platform. 'Pierre' might not be on TikTok (human).[20]

> So that what is offered to intuition is a flickering of nothingness; it is nothingness of the ground, the nihilation of which summons and demands the appearance of the figure—the nothingness which slips as a nothing to the surface of the ground. It serves as a foundation for judgment; 'Pierre is not there'. (Sorensen, 2022, p. 293; Sartre, 1992, p. 41)

Likewise, the absence of any connections in general appears. Social media companies, consciously or not, immediately play into this void by making suggestions on how to fill this nothingness. Admittedly it is a rather simple move to represent nothingness and absence through a determined negation in Ihde's formula. Yet, in my interpretation, it can achieve more than we might think at first. It allows for a discussion of Sartrean nothingness and Kiran's potentialities (2012), and allows me to go beyond the in-use paradigm unfolding a framework to describe non-use as a relation. While staying loyal to Ihde's main analytic system and materialism, the dialectic laid bare then helps to show the evaluation of usefulness (versus use) of a technology more holistically describing how co-constitution occurs. Thus, I argue that this move towards the a), b), and c) of absence relations (as mentioned, a subset of the background relation) helps to decode what *non-use* is.[21]

Ihde's relations entangled with Sartre's nothingness help to describe important fragments of the social media experience and how the mediation of nothingness can occur in our relationships to technologies. In a), as already discussed, the 'I' or the human is crossed out within Ihde's model: a) (Human→ Technology)—World. This aims to illustrate the hermeneutic digital landscape in which artists are trying

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20   Compare Sartre's description of his friend Pierre not showing up at a café in Paris (1992, p. 41).
21   Elsewhere, I have argued that the absence relation is likewise helpful to describe the aforementioned *digital detoxing* phenomena when a technology is purposefully put aside—related apps are designed to achieve non-use—e.g., 'Digitox' (2018), 'Digital Detox' (2019), 'Freedom' (2019), 'AppBlock' (2020), 'Forest' (2021).

to make sense of the situated self that is nowhere to be found on TikTok. Yet, it is more complicated than just one negation. What appears next is what I call *co-absence*.[22] If I decided not to be on this platform, all the others are excluded from my possible *lifeworld.* Another form of absence relation appears when not the human, but the technology is absent—for instance when a phone is *lost*: b) Human → (Technology)—World. The third variation based on Ihde's model is the absence of world: c) Human → (Technology—World). My prime example for c), a *world-absence* phenomenon, would be noise-cancelling headphones.[23]

Staying close to Ihde and his pragmatism allows for this concreteness of absence to more holistically illustrate the experience of social media practice likewise explored within my two examples from contemporary art (see next sections). This concreteness of absence on the other hand contains the risk of displaying the *self-evident* and the *trivial*. Which eventually becomes the concluding point of my exercise—to expose *triviality and* the *banal* (Arendt, 1964) within the way that social media 'makes' identity. This brings up a possible discussion—if we consider Sen's call for a more complex view of identity, social media, when analyzed using Sartre and Ihde, turns out to be a simplistic and *caricatured* answer to the search for meaning (of the self). Social media then are quite obviously playing into human vulnerability and existential anguish faced with nothingness (consider the seemingly innocent triviality of the absence-avatar).

5. Nothingness in Action: Staring at Nothing

'Why does everyone stare at their phones?' My three-year-old daughter asked while travelling on the F train from Queens to Manhattan in New York a few years back.For Sartre, nothingness culminates in absolute responsibility towards the making of the authentic self. Nothingness is the manifold experience of freedom and potentiality in practice. Sartre's nothingness finds digital amplifications through new media culminating into new ways of dealing with the responsibility and the *condemnation to be*

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22   The term *co-absence* was suggested by Marc Ries in a personal discussion in 2020.
23   Further postphenomenological questions follow. For instance: can nothingness or absence be embodied? Can nothingness also 'appear' within alterity or hermeneutic relations?

free. Freedom online on social media is experienced as a growing *multi(in)stability* (Redström & Wiltse, 2015) of the technology and the self—the technology, as well as the artist, are always in flux. The artist on Instagram is someone who is never 'enough', always directed towards sharing into a 'higher' version (high profile) of the self that is potentially located in the future or perhaps on other platforms. But how is this different from life in general? The short answer is that it is not, yet with Ihde we can argue that nothingness and the experience of the 'never enough' artist, are amplified (through the ubiquity of the technology always allowing the potential to be 'higher profile' and to share more).

In this section, I turn to the social media practice of the so-called 'selfie'. The social media *self-portrait*[24] becomes an unavoidable, often enjoyable playground for artists exploring the *potentiality of being* and *freedom*. An example of such an exploration on Instagram is the work of the artist and photographer Cindy Sherman. Sherman is one of the best-known contemporary artists experimenting with social media and identity performance. Her technologically mediated variations of possible concepts of the self embrace existential inquiries into interchangeable virtual forms of identity. Sherman questions society and technology as accomplices in producing her *identity-obscuring* variations. Her photographs and numerous experimental self-portraits (she would herself not refer to them as such) were well known before Instagram, *selfies*, or *plandids* (candid photographs that were planned) were a thing.[25]

Fig. 8.1 Instagram post by Cindy Sherman. Photo by Cindy Sherman (2020), public Instagram account, https://www.instagram.com/cindysherman/

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24 By 'social media self-portrait', I refer not only to the famous 'selfie' but to the representation of the self more broadly, which might entail images or texts beyond the image of one's face and body.
25 See A. Russeth (2017, November 6). Facetime with Cindy Sherman: The artist on her 'Selfie' project for *W*, and what's behind her celebrated Instagram. *W Magazine,*

Sherman criticizes social media practices of the masses and questions Instagram aesthetics. In a New York Times article, Blake Gopnik (2016) discusses Sherman's process:

> Ms. Sherman expresses contempt for the superficialities of social media. 'It seems so vulgar to me'- her new images of old-time film stars also hint at our digitized present.[26]

Sherman, in her contemporary work, embraces heavy layers of digital filters to place herself (or the characters she develops from her own image) into different backgrounds and imaginary social environments. She uses apps such as 'Facetune', 'Perfect363', and 'YouCam Makeup' to heavily manipulate her portraits. As she illustrates through her photographs behind the screen, her multiplied presence is a default in cyberspace unfolding of the status-quo of radical freedom to *become* whatever and whoever one might be. Sherman's exaggeration of herself asks existential questions concerned with the potentialities of human existence being *for-itself*. For Sherman, existence is a contingent state. Existence *precedes* her *essence,* always in the process of becoming an object, always *for-itself*, showing us the dialectics of the *for-itself* and *in-itself* that is *being-for-others*. Sherman does not accept *existential nothingness*, she embraces it.

Reimagining Sartre's existential dilemma shaped by social media and through the lens of postphenomenology comes with the risk of discovering 'the trivial' or, with Sherman, 'the vulgar' within this seemingly innocent, fun, and easy technology, finally offering a solution on how to fill the *existential void* of *non-being*.

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https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/cindy-sherman-instagram-selfie

26 Sherman's description of Facebook's and Instagram's 'vulgarity' perhaps provides an accurate analysis, considering the origins of Facebook's beta site FaceMash, developed to compare the pictures of different Harvard students' faces to allow users to rate them according to attractiveness. See, e.g., A. Horton (2018, April 11). Channeling "The Social Network", lawmaker grills Zuckerberg on his notorious beginnings. *The Washington Post,* https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/04/11/channeling-the-social-network-lawmaker-grills-zuckerberg-on-his-notorious-beginnings/. Also consider Sean Parker in 2017 admitting to knowing what social media would do to the human psyche: Sean Parker (2017, November 11). Facebook exploits human vulnerability [Video]. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7jar4KgKxs

> But non-being is not the opposite of being; it is its contradiction. This
> implies that logically nothingness is subsequent to being since it is being,
> first posited, then denied. (Sartre, 1992, p. 47)

As my daughter well observed at a young age, social media and related
identity play, embedded into the technology of the smartphone, is an
embodied technology. The smartphone is always close to the body, like
shoes, glasses, or a hat. People on the F train stared at their phones,
motivated by their suspicions of nothingness being close to their bodies,
lurking somewhere.

6. Artist-Content Relations

Once a social media profile is set up, Sartre's possible nihilations appear
as a void to be filled with possibilities—sharing content can begin. Once
artists commit to a social media profile, they are condemned to continue
to be 'free'. They must sustain that very profile over time (preferably
in consistent aesthetic language), sharing content repeatedly, ideally,
and as—some recommend—several times a day, with no long breaks
in-between. Now locked into the duty to not miss posting, they can
turn to apps to help schedule content, to calculate the 'best' times for
posting. Artists also may set up several accounts they have to 'care'
for or, better, 'share' for, to avoid confusing aesthetics in case their
different projects compete visually or conceptually. A coherent (to the
online mass, understandable) identity is the goal. Many feel guilty,
formulating apology notes when they happen to miss posting for a
while—with several active profiles, this easily can happen. Comedian,
musician, and insightful phenomenologist Bo Burnham explores this
experience in his song 'Content', from the 2021 Netflix special titled
Inside.[27] He provides an accurate and humorous phenomenology of the
'human—content—world' relationship. In his lyrics 'I'm sorry I was
gone, but look I made you some content!', Burnham apologizes for his
online *absence* and makes it up with offering freshly produced content.
His absence demands an apology and the 'filling in' of the void with

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27   See 'Content'—Bo Burnham song video, from 'Inside', new special on Netflix.
      YouTube, June 16, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQvrap19Eng

'sparkling' content. The content of the content is only secondary.[28] When not sharing for a longer period, such notes of apologies are not unusual. Additionally, sometimes an explanation might be offered to justify the absence, always presented next to new visual content.[29] Burnham shows how *mediation of nothingness* can play out—how being absent/offline for too long leads to emotions of *neglect* and *guilt* and the need to apologize or at least explain the absence to the online crowd.

A colleague and friend who owns a concept store in Germany describes a similar relationship to content. She never feels she has done enough sharing, never enough 'social media content work'. There is always more that potentially could be done to care for her online project closely entangled with her private life. Content, potentially, could always and everywhere be produced. Like a fragile child, her online store profile is always in need of attention, with lots of potential if only 'shared for' well enough. Her conclusion: self-care means self-share with fragility lurking in every act of *missing content.*

> And what is fragility if not a certain probability of non-being for a given being under determined circumstances. A being is fragile if it carries in its being a definite possibility of non-being. (Sartre, 1992, p. 40)

The logical conclusion of this type of absence relation—people who experience guilt when 'not sharing enough' or 'not producing enough content', coupled with ubiquitous digital technologies allowing one to always share—is self-evident: a whole generation has been accused of 'oversharing' and 'narcissism' (Chokshi, 2019).

Concluding Note

In this paper, I reflected on French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of nothingness in his treatise *Being and Nothingness*, and his sub-concept *absence*—that is *perceived absence*—in dialogue with

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28 German Philosopher Markus Gabriel (2022) in a lecture at the IWP (Institut für Schweizer Wirtschaftspolitik, 4 August 2022, defines social media as nothing but 'post-modernism' without content (my translation from the German) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CRzqkpePaY).

29 Burnham in a different song also explores *boredom*, another variation of nothingness and the second self-evident motivation for content production and consumption.

American philosopher Don Ihde's relational ontology. The aim was to phenomenologically describe fragments of social media practice (using Instagram and TikTok), as typically done and experienced by artists and designers, that I found overlooked within the school of thought known as postphenomenology and related mediation theory. To better dialectically map out the workings of image-based social media as a 'necessary evil' for those within the creative industries, I suggested considering the notion of *mediation of nothingness* within the artist-social media relationship. With Sartre, I made the case for determined negations within Ihde's threefold model of human—technology—world, to integrate what I have described as *absence phenomena.* I used the example of the *absence-avatar* to show the banal or trivial workings of how social media plays into Sartre's nothingness. With the convergence of Sartre's nothingness and Ihde's early work I could expand on Ihde's *background relation* adding three variations, a), b), c), of *absence relations.* Widening the analytical repertoire of postphenomenology allows for a better understanding of identity as a wicked problem entangled with Sartre's nothingness that I see amplified through image-based social media. Absence relations open up a framework to discuss under-examined existential issues within postphenomenology, such as *actuality* in relation to *potentiality*, questions on *use* versus *non-use.* Sartre's project and vocabulary became helpful for developing a more holistic understanding of social media practice (within the creative industries). What there is to be gained from the convergence of Sartre's dialectics and Ihde's pragmatism is a philosophical space to discuss human-technology relations beyond the in-use paradigm that postphenomenology has famously excelled in.

Finally, I put my absence relations to work, showing two well-known artistic examples—artist and photographer Cindy Sherman's Instagram selfies and comedian Bo Burnham's human-content phenomenology performed in his song 'Content'. The artist-social media relationship illustrates that artists are skilled in exploring and coping with the *multi(in)stability of nothingness* through identity play, humour, and irony. Artists thus often skilfully embrace nothingness questioning the depth of the fragility of 'human wholeness' (sanity). Yet a careful phenomenology of the social media-artist relation that has not given up on the human subject will also recognize that this also shows that humanity has embraced a rigid or one-dimensional method of *making*

the artist through content. I conclude that to stay relevant in addressing pressing contemporary technological issues around, human (digital) well-being tied to social media, postphenomenology must reintegrate existential questions into its corpus. In this first step of analyzing absence relations, I remain agnostic in evaluating social media normatively in relation to the artist; however; I observe and conclude that artists and designers often consciously embrace a technology preoccupied with answering to a caricatured version of Sartre's existential 'conundrum'. The idea of *condemnation* and the *absolute freedom* to make the self is no longer met with a nostalgia for higher states of authenticity (that historically tends to be attributed to the artist) but rather with working toward a *higher profile*. Nostalgia for Sartre's authentic self is replaced by sharing content to literally 'face' nothingness.

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