



Jean-Paul Sartre at la Putain Respectueuse, Théâtre Antoine, Paris, November 1946. (Photo: Roger Viot/Getty Images)

In Search of the Authentic Self

BY SAM WOOLFE

Online vs IRL personas, filters, anonymous comment sections, deep fakes, tribes, cultures, movements... is it still possible to live a truly authentic life? And, more importantly, was it ever?

To what extent does the internet create a split between an online persona, and who we are deep down? Does communicating differently online really mean we are sacrificing our 'authentic selves'? To answer these questions, we first have to define 'authenticity'. In online spaces, trends, performativity, profile curation, and filters flourish – and so we need clarity about what it means to be authentic to see if, or to what extent, digital culture is driving inauthenticity.

One philosopher who focused much of his attention on authenticity was Jean-Paul Sartre. He argued that we are not born with a predetermined essence. Freedom, for Sartre, was what leads us to become authentic (or not). This means choosing who we become.

We are authentic when we acknowledge that we are responsible for our choices, not outside forces. Sartre said, "We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us." In this way, we are authentic when we refuse outside definitions of who we are, as well as other outside pressures and influences.

Sartre also emphasized that being authentic is not the same as being happy: "It is not a matter of being happy or sad, but of being real." Elsewhere, he opined, "Better to be unhappy than to be happy by imitation." Indeed, embracing one's values and path in life – being genuine to oneself – matters more, Sartre thought, than being happy or accepted by others.

In addition, he famously stated, "If you seek authenticity for authenticity's sake, you are no longer authentic." We can sum up this paradox as follows: as soon as you pursue 'authenticity' as an object of desire – i.e. 'I want to be an authentic person' – your authenticity automatically dissolves. We do not become our authentic selves, then, by becoming obsessed with being authentic or idealizing some 'true self'. Our authenticity or essence is an ongoing process, affected by every choice we make; it is not a fixed goal we reach, where we become 'fully authentic'.

In the field of psychology, some models of authenticity align with aspects of Sartre's philosophy. For example, according to psychologists Michael Kernis and Brian Goldman's Authenticity Inventory model, key aspects of authenticity include self-awareness, accepting uncomfortable truths about ourselves, consistent action (aligning our behavior with our understanding of ourselves), and

authenticity being something dynamic rather than a permanent achievement.

There has always been a tension between culture and authenticity. A culture is defined by shared norms, values, and practices. However, being part of a culture doesn't mean you can't be authentic; it just means there are always outside forces that could encourage us to act according to cultural values and expectations rather than freely chosen ones. For example, living in an extroverted society can make it harder for introverts to be themselves.

We might think that the evolution of culture has helped us become more authentic as people, but this isn't necessarily the case. Consider the countercultural hippie movement that emerged in the 1960s. Yes, it was counter to mainstream culture at the time – but it was still, nonetheless, a culture in and of itself. As much as the movement celebrated individual freedom, it also promoted certain values, goals, and practices that one could inauthentically subscribe to. And this applies to any other subculture.

Subcultures, which proliferated in the 20th century, have given many people the freedom to express who they truly are. On the other hand, subcultures can themselves lead to a 'hive mind', in which people sacrifice self-honesty for acceptance by others. The dynamic tension between culture and authenticity arises again in the case of digital culture, and in an even more pronounced way. This is because it is much easier for people to act differently online, since we have screens and images separating us from actual people in front of us. And we have so much choice in terms of how we present ourselves to others.

There are many trends we might think are making people more inauthentic: filters, how we present ourselves on dating apps, the highlights reel on social media (only showing the best aspects of ourselves and our lives), and even the rise of plastic surgery reflecting the 'ideal' body image and face filters we see on Instagram and TikTok. Online trends can also affect the way we express ourselves, the jokes we make, the content or people we choose to like or dislike – in ways that differ from how we act in the world.

But perhaps these distinct online choices aren't really a sign of inauthenticity. We could have authentic online selves and authentic IRL selves. The medium in which

we live – online vs real life – may influence what we choose to do, but this doesn't necessarily mean we aren't being true to ourselves. On the other hand, it is hard to distinguish the 'free' choices we make online from the pressures of social media, such as beauty standards and fashion trends, as well as social media algorithms that shape what we think, believe, say, value, and care about. Moreover, algorithms don't just show us what we want to see or what we're interested in; they also show us the most contentious, shocking, and polarizing content, so that our attention is captured. Can we genuinely choose who we are and what we like, given these powerful influences?

Curated content and images did exist before social media – we already had biased media outlets and photoshopped images – but the threat to our authenticity wasn't the same. Social media has encouraged us to be chronically online, and the online pressures we encounter there are different to real-life ones. We see not just news, but also fake news; we see not just photoshopped images, but also deep-fake videos; we don't just see people making certain comments and blog posts for social acceptance, we see them using AI to write comments and blog posts for them.

To be true to yourself in this age of online inauthenticity, it may feel like you need to disengage entirely from social media. But that's not necessarily the case. We may decide to use social media platforms less dictated by algorithms, for example Bluesky instead of X, spend less time on image-heavy apps, limit our social media use in general, make conscious choices about the content we consume or how we interact with others, and reflect on whether the online presentation of ourselves feels aligned with our personality.

It's also important to recognize that being more expressive online than in real life doesn't necessarily mean you're being inauthentic. Neurodivergence or introversion may make text-based communication feel more comfortable, especially as it gives you time to process information during interactions. Because of this, being more authentic as a person may also involve understanding that differences between online and IRL behavior are actually reflections of authenticity, rather than fakery. In this way, a better understanding of how we feel when we use the Internet can be part of our path to self-discovery.