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Being and becoming in the culture of immediacy

An existential-ethical approach

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Abstract

In this article we employ an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach to explore online immediacy from an existential-ethical perspective. While existing literature already accounts for the socio-cultural and psychological impact of constant connectivity, we venture to reveal its underlying existential-ethical implications. Our findings show the often contradictory ways in which young adults cope with the allure of immediate-aesthetic experiences on the one hand, and the challenge of authentic self-development on the other. Ultimately, we advocate for a transformative shift in which online practices are brought in alignment (are relativized) with an existential-ethical view of life. Drawing on Kierkegaard's existential philosophy of the self, this article underscores the need to transcend the superficiality of immediacy to foster an authentic journey of being and becoming a self in a social environment that is increasingly mediated by online media technologies.

Key words:

Immediacy, self, IPA, media culture, existential ethics, Kierkegaard, reflection

Introduction

There is no question that the constancy of online immediacy engenders a sense of ambivalence in Western societies ([Hassan, 2009](#); [Kitchin, 2023](#); [Lagerkvist, 2017](#); [Lee and Cook, 2015](#); [Moe and Madsen, 2021](#); [Tomlinson, 2007](#)). Much of this originates in the disparity between the everyday nature of a life of ubiquitous connectivity, on one side, and what we ideally desire as a good and genuine life, on the other. A lot is being

said and written about the harm of constant sociality and the expectations of immediacy in our everyday activities and interactions ([Manzerolle, 2014](#); [Zuboff, 2019](#)). Although this literature pays attention to people's ambivalent relationship with being constantly online, it is mainly concerned with questions about well-being, happiness, quality of life, satisfaction, autonomy, and control ([Büchi, 2024](#); [Vanden Abeele, 2021](#)). The question remains whether the reduction of connected immediacy to its psychological implications does not obscure the 'deeper existential associations' ([Tomlinson, 2007](#): 4) at the heart of this issue. In this article, we explore an existential-philosophical approach to immediacy and argue with a growing number of authors ([Hongladarom, 2011](#); [Lagerkvist, 2017, 2019](#)) that the ambivalence evoked by constant connected immediacy concerns in the first place an existential problem: How can the human self be understood in a social environment that is deeply mediated by digital technologies?

The point of this article is decidedly not to claim that all activities of everyday life in a culture of immediacy are guided by existential-ethical concerns. Nor that activities merely guided by mundane or pragmatic concerns are problematic in themselves. Moreover, when it comes to one's activities of everyday life, it is important to distinguish between commitments 'that serve as the basic values in light of which one makes the choices one does in pursuing one's life in both the short and long terms' and commitments that are themselves 'neither in need of further justification nor open to critical assessment or re-evaluation' ([Petrik et al., 2014](#): 281). However, since every opportunity or concern human beings may have in their dealings with media and technology is ultimately embedded in the more basic existential concern that one exists and therefore needs to make sense of one's existence, it is important to gain a better understanding of what these existential opportunities and concerns mean. Following a growing interest in existential approaches to the culture of constant connectivity (e.g. [Lagerkvist, 2017](#)), we deploy a Kierkegaardian framework to approach this issue.

Although Kierkegaard's conceptual framework has been applied in analysing the role of digital media in our everyday existence ([Bauwens et al., 2019](#); [Bennett, 2021](#); [Lagerkvist, 2017](#); [Stokes, 2020](#)), his views on the meaning of immediacy have rarely been used as an explicit starting point in empirical research. Starting from his existential analysis of immediacy, the specific objective of this article is to understand how today's young adults, typically seen as exponents of the always-on culture of immediacy, align their experiences of instant online availability with selfhood as a lifelong existential striving. Put differently, we aim to question what the experience of immediacy in everyday life means on an existential-ethical level. By using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), we explore which existential questions and reflections come to the surface when young adults aged 18–33 years are invited to reflect upon their relationship with their smartphone, as this device appears to be emblematic of a hyperconnected lifestyle. We argue that among young adults, a mode of existence in

which the self is absolutely immersed in a constant flux of immediate communication and connection is often felt as light and futile if not today then surely for the life they envision. The very lightness and effortlessness of the practices that come with immediacy (Tomlinson, 2007) may be convenient and enjoyable, but they also produce complexities with which young adults grapple. Through our conversations, we discovered that the possibility of constant smartphone connectivity is appealing, but that it can also present challenges for their ongoing self-development. Our data indicate that an all-too-total immersion in such experiences tends to distract from the continual willingness and striving of oneself to choose and actualise oneself throughout the concrete and vast givenness of the connected world in which one lives. It is precisely in these experienced patterns of connected life that the importance of being and becoming a self emerges.

The experience of immediacy

Interest in the concept of immediacy is surging within the social sciences, exploring how the perpetual availability of online media reshapes our perception of time and temporality (Kitchin, 2023), our self-conception in relation to others, and our understanding of presence and absence. The literature highlights these themes as crucial for grasping the meaning of immediacy. Since digital connectivity ought to be understood as belonging to the contemporary human condition (Lagerkvist, 2019), they can be considered existential themes as well.

The first theme, the experience and perception of time, has arguably garnered the most attention to date. Tomlinson's (2007) book *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*, for example, is based on the observation that insofar as our modern technological culture of speed places ever more emphasis on proximity and instantaneity in communication and transaction, we are effectively living in a culture of immediacy. This culture is driven by the consumptive patterns and 'cultural assumptions and expectations of effortlessness, ubiquity and endless delivery in a fast-paced, technologically-replete and telemediated world [...]' (Tomlinson, 2007: 158). Much of the empirical research investigating this theme is socio-culturally oriented and examines the temporal dimension of immediacy through a phenomenological lens. Researchers are particularly interested in how 'realtimeness' takes on meaning in concrete and lived experiences of online platforms, such as social media (Coleman, 2020). The cultural logics of immediacy, it is argued, valorizes continuous connection and productivity (Barassi and Zamponi, 2020), as well as freshness and novelty (Lupinacci, 2020), commoditizes our moment-to-moment ability to connect to the network (Greenfield, 2017) and cultivates a particular sense of being in the moment in terms of instantaneity and simultaneity (Lupinacci, 2024).

As to relationality, connected immediacy shapes the way we relate to ourselves, others and the world around us. This folds in with the third theme, namely, the constancy of

our being digitally connected and the simultaneity of our being digitally co-present with others. Among others, Hartmut Rosa's work offers a sustained sociologically grounded critique of the aggressively imposed instrumentalization of human relationality, which he argues is a consequence of our accelerating technological growth and progress. Instead, [Rosa \(2020\)](#) advocates for 'resonance', a profoundly receptive and mutually transformative form of relationality.

To discern the unease, vulnerabilities and insecurities that arise from these changing perceptions of time, presence and relationality, psychologically oriented literature often provides more insights into how people are struggling and coping with the demand for speedy updates and connections, such as work-life conflicts, stress, exhaustion produced by 'after-hours work connectivity' ([Chen and Castarella, 2019](#): 78), depression, various types of anxiety (e.g. fear of missing out) and compulsive behaviour (e.g. doom-scrolling) associated with hyperconnected immediacy ([Keles et al., 2020](#); [Roberts and David, 2020](#)).

What both the socio-cultural and psychological approaches have in common is that they theorize immediacy as an experiential category. But they rarely explicitly address the existential question of what it means and why it matters to be a human being in a culture of immediacy. Since this raises important questions as to what life under immediacy is really like and how it should be appropriated into our personal existential-ethical development, we look to the intersection of media studies, existential philosophy and philosophy of technology. Within this interdisciplinary field marked out as 'existential media studies' ([Lagerkvist, 2017](#)), there have been ample studies that touch on the topic of immediacy in these existential terms. [Kember and Zylinska \(2012\)](#) is one notable example. These authors reframe immediacy from a Heideggerian perspective in relation to the authentic experience of being mediated. [Lagerkvist \(2017\)](#) herself offers a similar existential-philosophical perspective on constant connectivity in 'our digitally enforced lifeworld' as 'an existential and ambivalent terrain' (p. 1), which touches upon existential thinkers such as Heidegger, Jaspers and Kierkegaard. [Coeckelbergh \(2023\)](#) has recently confirmed that the way we relate to time and life time today is primarily shaped in the context of a technologically synchronized society of immediacy. The latter, he claims, calls for a reevaluation of our conception of the good life, the common good and what he aptly calls the 'good times' ([Coeckelbergh, 2023](#): 8, 11, 14).

All these authors explicitly stress the impact of immediacy for the construction of the self and for our ways of living together in a digital age. Therefore, to progress the discussion beyond the psychological and socio-cultural effects of immediacy, we join this growing field of existential media studies, which critically examines the ambivalence of immediacy from an existential-philosophical standpoint.

As such, we develop a dual philosophical definition of immediacy. First, immediacy refers to the direct and seemingly unmediated way in which something presents itself to our affective and cognitive perception of the world. A notable phenomenon of contemporary life is the expectation and demand for this sense of immediacy in our technologically mediated actions and experiences. Paradoxically, then, for something to present itself instantly and simultaneously (direct and seemingly unmediated) to us, we rely on the technological mediation of our lifeworld. To better understand this ambiguous reality, we align our media-theoretical definition with a second, existential-philosophical definition of immediacy, which is anthropological and ethical in nature. While Heidegger is often referred to in this line of research for his analysis and critique of a purely technological understanding of existence, we turn to Kierkegaard instead.

Immediacy as an existential category: Kierkegaard's view on the self

As the founding father of existential thinking in Western thought, Kierkegaard is first in line when discussing existential-ethical perspectives in the development of personhood. What makes him especially relevant for our purposes is the central positioning of the notion of immediacy in his writings. Notably, he approaches immediacy as an existential category by which the self can be defined. We will argue that immediacy conceived as an existential dimension of life can be interlaced with the phenomenological description of immediacy typically found in the field of contemporary digital media studies. While Kierkegaard lived at the dawn of the age of mass media, his existential thought offers a diagnosis to help us understand the paradoxes within modern culture, as it insists on the necessity of addressing the question of existence qualified by different and often conflicting views on the meaning and possibility of human freedom ([Bennett, 2021](#); [Fox-Muraton, 2020](#); [Thorbjornsson and Verstryng, 2015](#)). As such, Kierkegaard has inspired critical constructive ways to think about media culture and its impact on the authentic possibilities of individual selfhood ([Black, 2020](#); [Stokes, 2020](#)).

As much as we cannot do justice to the depth of Kierkegaard's philosophy in just a few lines, we might say his thought revolves around the question of what it means to be and become a human being or 'self'. Taking his existential philosophy of selfhood as a point of departure, then, our notion of the self is conceptually construed as a self-relation. In *Sickness Unto Death*, [Kierkegaard \(1980 \[1849\]\)](#) has the self defined as a relation that dialectically 'relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another' (pp. 13–14). Self-relationality implies self-consciousness, a structural form of self-reflexivity and self-development. In turn, this reflexivity takes on an ethical meaning, since, in being conscious of oneself as a self, one must choose to develop oneself in virtue of one's ethical considerations ([Kierkegaard, 1992 \[1846\]](#): 133, 151). But the more a self becomes involved with its own development, the more the contradictions of its existence are revealed. Kierkegaard points out that these contradictions are grounded in

a dialectical structure inherent to human existence itself. Each human being is composed of opposite yet dialectically related qualities such as body and soul, possibility and actuality, freedom and necessity, finitude and infinity. But on this immediate level, the self is not as yet a self. To become a self, it must relate itself to its constitutive and limiting elements. In other words, the self must determine itself by becoming conscious of both the necessities and possibilities that present themselves in the immediate interplay between its oppositional elements. The task of becoming a self contains the choice to reflect and actualize the possibilities that makes one free in view of factual necessities that cannot be controlled. The tension between the constituting elements of the self to which the self relates, then, arises precisely from the fact that a self-synthesis can develop in different – even opposing – directions. These are the directions one can take on the stages of life's way. We focus on two such directions: the aesthetic and the ethical.

The aesthetic self

Kierkegaard did not directly discuss immediacy in terms of instantaneity and simultaneity as it is perceived in our usage of contemporary digital information and communication technologies. However, immediacy in the latter sense, defined as the technologically mediated perception of direct and unmediated access to and interaction with reality ([Peters et al., 2020](#)), is similar to the notion of 'aesthetic immediacy' in Kierkegaard, which, at least from the perspective of the existence spheres of life, also pertains to direct sensory experience. What conceptually unites these descriptions of immediacy is that they are both related to a state of being that is directly bound up with sensuous experience.

Since Kierkegaard considered immediacy an aesthetic term, the aesthetic sphere can also be called the sphere of immediacy. In line with its Greek etymology ('aisthesis'), the aesthetic pertains to whatever is pleasing to the senses. Hence, an aesthetic existence is a life determined by the sensuous and motivated by the constant pursuit of pleasure. In short, '[t]he person who lives in and by and from and for the esthetic that is in him, that person lives esthetically' ([Kierkegaard, 1987 \[1843\]](#): 161). This deceptively simple statement means, first, that immediacy involves one's concrete dependence on social and natural facticity, and second, that life is concentrated in the moment. What matters for the aesthete is whatever experience stimulates enjoyment in the present moment, however interesting or trivial it may be. Here, a first link with technologies of immediacy comes to the fore. As [Bennett \(2021\)](#) argues, '[t]he "immediacy" of social media technologies [...] facilitates the publication of constant streams of Kierkegaardian "immediacy", the triviality of everyday life' (p. 89). Consider as an example the Stories feature on Instagram, which allows users to share snapshots of their day, condensed into 10-second videos that disappear from their timeline after only 24 hours. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, yet informed by empirical research ([Baughan et al.,](#)

[2022](#); [Lupinacci, 2020](#)), this continuous flow of Stories, the endless succession of momentary and arbitrary experiences, dovetails with an aesthetic life view that excludes the self's temporal differentiation from the past and the future and instead promotes a multitude of possible experiences that are either immediately consumed or merely entertaining in aesthetic reflection or imagination.

For Kierkegaard, the crux of an aesthetic life is that it is a life of despair driven by fear and anxiety. He points out that there is no stability and consistency whatsoever in living one's life according to the spontaneous and momentary whims of the immediate. Nor, for that matter, is there any stability and consistency in a reflective aesthetic life view. To live aesthetically is to be completely absorbed in one's own immediate lifeworld to the extent that the contradictions of one's own existence are resolved, not by choosing to actualise oneself and therefore deal with these contradictions in self-reflection and self-actualization, but by conceiving of them as a set of imaginary possibilities. In aesthetic imagination, everything is possible, but none of these possibilities are or can be actualized.

The ethical self

Unlike the aesthetic, the ethical life view involves the concrete task of becoming a self. In the broadest terms, this means for [Kierkegaard \(1987 \[1843\]: 256\)](#) impelling you to commit yourself unconditionally to the actualization of your chosen possibilities. [Kierkegaard \(1992 \[1846\]: 407\)](#) insists that the ideal self that human beings ought to realize in existence is found nowhere else but in relation to themselves. If immediacy is conceived as a condition proper to selfhood, defined by its natural and social facticity, reflection is immediacy's dialectical counterpart in which the self actively relates to itself. Crucially, this dialectical process of personal development is open-ended and shaped in relation to the other, understood as a criterion outside the self to which the self as a self-relation relates. While in an aesthetic life view, we stick to the possibilities and limitations of our existence, using the transformative power of these possibilities and limitations for the sake of our own pleasure, an ethical life view involves confronting and evaluating them to integrate them into a self-development in which otherness takes part ([Kierkegaard, 1987 \[1843\]: 260–261](#)). Instead of looking for distractions and enjoyment outside the self, in outward change, an ethical view of life wants to bring about qualitative change and inward transformation by taking into account a universal dimension in the self, namely, the other. In a wider perspective, it was Kierkegaard's conviction that this otherness surpasses any immanent, that is, worldly character. Unlike Kantian ethics, where the moral law is grounded in reason and a corresponding act of human will, Kierkegaard contends that ethical normativity is ultimately rooted in an authority that originates 'from elsewhere', that is, God. Consequently, an ethical self has yet to undergo another transformative shift in order to become an ethical-religious self. While this religious 'leap' is crucial for any

understanding of Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, it introduces problems that threaten to undermine – if not annihilate – all finite and actual meaningfulness ([Verstrynge, 2019](#)). A thorough discussion of the problematic aspects of Kierkegaard's religious stance is not just impossible within the confines of this article, but above all, its primary goal is to anchor our existential understanding of the culture of immediacy in a non-dogmatic, that is, purely existential-ethical experience and discourse. We thereby leave aside any discussion on what an 'authentic self' might mean within the Dane's ethico-religious framework.

For Kierkegaard, reflection can only be decisive regarding actuality once it culminates in a self-transformative choice, and a choice can only be self-transformative if there is passion involved in it. Ethical passion and reflection are distinguished from the immediate passions and reflection in the aesthetic sphere. While the purpose of the aesthetic life is to attain moments of satisfaction by pursuing sensuously or intellectually pleasurable passions, the ethical life is concerned with passions that provide a sense of purpose, continuity and direction to our lives. It is these passions that are to determine our choices if life is to take on ethical meaning. However, while they are enduring, they are never fixed or final. Passion (pathos) implies development over time, and therefore, a persistent sense of responsibility (ethos) to choose a direction in how to pursue this passion.

Taking concrete existence as the starting point for his philosophy, Kierkegaard reiterates that to live ethically does not mean that the aesthetic is completely discarded, since 'what makes any stage the "next" one in relation to some other stage is [...] the value judgment that makes one stage the proper sphere for relativizing the other' ([Westphal, 1996](#): 25). In other words, the self is a dialectical balancing act between the aesthetic and the ethical, 'esthetic enough for his life to have esthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, dialectical enough [...] to master it' ([Kierkegaard, 1992 \[1846\]](#): 294). In the ethical sphere of existence, then, the self still has a foothold in immediacy, but it is distinguished from the aesthetic sphere of existence by the self's relation to immediacy.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis

Following the IPA approach, which is methodologically grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography ([Eatough and Smith, 2017](#); [Smith et al., 2022](#)), we were concerned with the detailed examination of personal experiences with online immediacy. IPA can be considered a 'phenomenology of practice' that informs an existential-philosophical reflection on the relation between being and the lived experience of the 'prereflective dimensions of human existence: life as we live it' ([Van Manen, 2016](#): 39). Hence, the philosophical underpinning of IPA aligns perfectly with the appeal of Kierkegaard's existential ethics 'to learn ourselves anew, to reacquaint ourselves with ourselves' ([Fox-Muraton, 2020](#): 4). The interviews we conducted were

thus set up as an invitation to introspection, understood as the reflection of inwardness, mood and emotion.

The data were collected over the course of 2021 and 2022 through a mix of video call and face-to-face interviews with 19 young adults from the Flemish and Brussels Capital Region of Belgium. In line with IPA's commitment to idiographic method, it is argued that a smaller sample size from 1 to a maximum of 30, with the norm being towards the lower end, allows a more detailed and case-by-case approach ([Eatough and Smith, 2017](#); [Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014](#)). To meet the selection criteria, all participants had to use a smartphone and at least four different apps or Internet services daily, as well as identify with statements such as 'I wake up and go to sleep with my smartphone' or 'I expect to use my smartphone in all circumstances and at any time'. We are aware that smartphones and apps can be used differently in various context-dependent ways and that some participants are more tech-savvy than others. With our research, we aimed to examine the lived experiences of immediate media use. These experiences do not so much arise from the nature of the device, but rather emerge device-agnostically within the context of use ([de Boer, 2023](#)).

In keeping the sample size small and homogeneous and interviewing participants in-depth/two times, we aimed to retain IPA's idiographic emphasis while being attentive to the social situatedness of the participants ([Eatough and Smith, 2017](#)). As [Table 1](#) in the [Appendix](#) shows, all but one participant (Bas) had a higher educational background. All participants had reached the age of 18, the youngest being 18 and the oldest 33 at the time of interview; 13 persons identified as women and 6 as men; 13 of them had finished their studies between 2014 and 2019 and were white-collar workers in the non-manufacturing sector. The other participants were students in higher education; one was still a high-school student but not a minor. To recruit the participants, we applied the snowball method, called on the network of friends and acquaintances of the authors of this article and the network of one student with a migrant background who also conducted a number of interviews. This method inevitably introduced homogeneity into the sampling, as the lifestyles and views featured in this study are usually found among young middle-class professionals, typically showing more concern about digital (dis)connection ([Moe and Madsen, 2021](#)). While this may cause a degree of bias regarding the diversity of the results in general, small homogeneous samples are commonly preferred for in-depth analyses of individual experiences. Working through our own networks and referrals emerged as an effective method for participant recruitment, as we were looking for participants genuinely inclined towards extensive conversation about their 'digital enforced lifeworld' ([Lagerkvist, 2017](#)). All participants gave fully informed consent. The interviews lasted 85 minutes on average.

To obtain detailed descriptions of online immediacy as lived experience, participants were encouraged to engage in self-reflection, understood as self-perception, self-

understanding and self-evaluation. This is consistent with our Kierkegaardian-inspired philosophical approach to focus on the concrete, in the hopes of explaining what it means for someone who is existing to be situated in that existence and come to terms with it ([Kierkegaard, 1992 \[1846\]](#): 204–213). In IPA, topics and questions are not directive, as they should naturally lead (funnel) the participant from a descriptive to an interpretative narrative level ([Smith et al., 2022](#)). Three interrelated topics were discussed. The most important topic was related to the experience of online immediacy to gain an insight into the various personal motivations and expectations of constant connectivity and availability. The topic also probed to what extent participants are aware of their ‘immediate’ media use, how they experience and interpret it and how they reflect on it, with an emphasis on how these factors evolve over time. The second topic homed in on the participant’s specific perception of time, acceleration and speed and the pace of time-based practices and expectations as they are shaped in a technological culture of immediacy. Finally, the situated role and meaning of online media in the participant’s life was discussed, in terms of life views and life choices, as well as in terms of self and selfhood, sociality and personal identity.

Although IPA is concerned with fine-grained analyses of personal lived experiences of individual participants, it also strives for an analytical generalization ([Eatough and Smith, 2017](#)). In analysing the data, IPA starts out from the unique experiences and sensemaking processes of persons as socio-historically situated, contingent and bounded ([Eatough and Smith, 2017](#)). We then tried to comprehend empirical patterns in relation to central Kierkegaardian categories (so-called category zooming); that is, to go into depth with the details and complexities of these existential categories.

This translated into the following operative procedure for data analysis, based on the study by [Eatough and Smith \(2017\)](#). We first coded all interview transcripts in an open and inductive way to grasp the texture and qualities of the particular and unique experience of immediacy as lived by the individual participant. IPA is careful with imposing theoretical concepts in this stage of data analysis as it aims to understand the experiences from the perspective of the person speaking, while maintaining their integrity. This stage resulted in ideographic descriptions and interpretations of each research participant. Then, we moved to a more comparative analysis of the material, looking for patterns of convergence (such as shared experiences, common beliefs, typical practices and so on) and divergence (such as unique ideas, atypical feelings, unusual actions and so on). In this stage, we introduced a top-down interpretation of the data and brought Kierkegaard’s thought about immediacy into the data analysis. This generated another interpretative layer in which the hermeneutics of empathy (understanding and imagining what it is like to be the participant) made room for a hermeneutics of suspicion (being critical of how the participant makes sense of their experiences). All three authors of this article were involved in this process at different times, enabling a dialogical approach to the overall data analysis.

Coping with immediacy

As expected, all participants tend to welcome the convenience offered by online connectivity, such as achieving informational and communicational needs more quickly and effortlessly. It is simply easier to stay in touch via WhatsApp and efficient to conduct one's professional life on LinkedIn or Slack. However, this instrumental evaluation of technology-driven immediacy soon proves untenable, as almost all participants at some point run into a feeling of dissatisfaction or disparity between the vision of how they want to live their lives and the reality of how the technology-driven need to remain in the loop of information and communication flows shapes their striving. Even though immediate media use, such as getting caught up in checking messages or scrolling through social media, is often actively and deliberately sought out, it is also typically experienced as a compulsive distraction that causes more important concerns and obligations to be neglected. This distraction is seen as a disruption of life associated with a sense of absence from reality, 'a loss of oneself', as the participants themselves describe it. As soon as participants are immersed in smartphone-mediated activities to the extent that it starts to determine their lives, they become worried that they are aimlessly consuming their time (not only their 'productive' time, but their actual, finite 'lifetime' as well). Infinite scrolling ([Lupinacci, 2020](#)), for example, is experienced as a constant transition from one event to another, but without any real engagement in this activity ([Marek, 2023](#)). Participants agree that it is easy to lose oneself in the act of scrolling because this activity is tied to the expectation that at any time, something new can happen and therefore to the aesthetically motivated hope of more satisfying and exciting experiences.

Especially the older participants bring up this struggle regularly, expressing deep-felt concerns about their immediate media use and how it affects their experience of temporality in an existential sense. This ambiguity between aesthetic immediacy directed at the pursuit of immediate goals and desires and a critical reflection on issues that go beyond such goals and desires is evident in the way Bart (M, 26) characterizes his smartphone as 'a tool'. But when pressed on the instrumental nature of his smartphone use, Bart starts to imagine a turning point where 'the pendulum swings, or where [the smartphone] takes over too much, that it becomes an end in itself and no longer a means to make something else possible'. While he is aware that his smartphone use is at risk of becoming an unbridled and unwarranted end in itself, he continues to use it because his need for it in the immediate moment is more pressing than its more significant implications in the long run. Only when he starts to reflect on the ambiguity of his immediate smartphone use, Bart starts to dread an existence in which he is made a 'victim' to his smartphone-mediated needs:

[...] I don't want to, yes, and I do use the word victim, I don't want to be a victim of very complex and very well thought out software [...] Er, and that's again that ambiguity of I

recognise that it has a lot of capabilities, but to use those capabilities in such a way that they are valuable and not, not distracting, not overburdening or not burdensome *tout court*. That's a, that's a, yes, that's a quest [...] and so I don't think I can print out some kind of manual for myself now and then stick to that for 20 years, then that immediacy forces you to keep rewriting your own manual over and over again. (Bart, M, 26)

He resolves this ambiguity through the pragmatic recognition that

I am just a human being, really, with limited time and resources. And that I have to choose. I can read up on certain things, I can make certain choices, but there are just too many choices, [...] you just have to be pragmatic. (Bart, M, 26)

The realization that one is a human being with 'limited time and resources' is an important and profound existential insight that arises from the participants' reflexive confrontation with their own immediate media use in relation to that of others. Much of the frustration and uneasiness voiced by the participants stems directly from the self-reflective insight that they must make the most out of the limited time they have. Or, in existential terms, what they want to be and what they might make of themselves is part of a basic existential striving that somehow confronts them with the realization that choices will have to be made. In other words, every moment in their finite existence offers the freedom of choice in which the possibility of the self can be actualized, and it is this freedom that is qualified by temporality and finitude. As soon as they lose themselves in, for example, scrolling, this is perceived as a loss of valuable time. Helena (F, 31) puts it rather aptly:

This is confronting [...] That I realise how much I use that thing. But irritating as in, well, uh, yeah, it distracts you and your time goes by. My time flies when I'm holding that thing [her smartphone]. All the while I don't know what I'm doing – it zooms, zones me out of the world, so to speak. And then, before you know it, you've just lost half an hour, really. So, I find that irritating, that it takes away my real sense of time, yes.

At the root of Helena's craving for distraction lies a lingering sense of purposelessness waiting to be filled. She also gives a good example of infinite reflection (aesthetic reflection) when she feels trapped in an infinity of possibilities on a real estate app (which she then continues to reflect on) without actually translating those possibilities into making choices of engagement in her life. According to Kierkegaard, infinite reflection occurs in the reflective aesthetic person when they draw endless pleasure from their fantasy and imagination. He describes it as 'playing shuttlecock with existence' (Kierkegaard, 1987 [1843]: 294) or playing an imaginary game with the possibilities and ideal images of existence without ever making a choice to turn these possibilities into an actual engagement. For Kierkegaard, the latter is precisely what is decisive in the difference between aesthetic and ethical attitudes to life: Not so much that reflection is present but that a passionate choice emerges from that reflection that

has an actual and transformative impact on (the inner development of) the self. Kierkegaard does not suggest that individuals should act solely based on their understanding, but he emphasizes that personal growth occurs through the dialectical interaction between ethical and aesthetic attitudes. Helena acknowledges this in the interview, recognizing the ambivalent nature of her experiences while noting that this recognition does not mean she abandons her inclination towards them.

A similar sentiment is expressed by others, who often find themselves wandering into an automatic and endless 'loop' of online distraction. The social media carousel does fill in the 'dead moments' in their life in a way that offers some satisfaction in the moment itself but afterwards leaves them with the sense that the consummation of their momentary informational and communicational desires has not fulfilled them, let alone that it has contributed something substantial to their life. Tom (M, 32) is aware of a visceral, almost instinctive 'urge' to respond immediately to messages. Like most other participants, Tom finds this urge hard to resist, and when he does succumb to or indulges in it, he experiences an uncomfortably aching feeling of powerlessness or guilt, respectively. This feeling stems from a discrepancy between the (ethical) ideal that he 'wants to assume in [his] daily life' to 'live more in the moment, detached from that phone', and the way he sometimes feels compelled to use it.

Striving for 'authenticity'

The urge towards instantaneity and constant availability is not perceived as problematic among the participants. Immediacy only becomes an obstacle when they find themselves completely absorbed in their technologically mediated practices and experiences to the extent that these activities diminish their awareness of self and others and distract them from processes demanding sustained reflection and attention. Both Els (F, 27) and Ada (F, 29) refer to the difficulty of aligning the pressures of immediacy with the actuality of being an existing human being. They go on to mention some specific and irreducible aspects of being human that are not immediately rewarding, such as digging through ethical or deeply emotional issues, considering important life choices and taking time to experience the world and to interact with others. All participants are looking for a balance between an existence that focuses on aspects of being human that require time and attention 'here and now' and an existence where attention to the 'here and now' is creamed off by online media. As Els (F, 27) and Lucas (M, 32) illustrate, the experience of a walk in the forest or a conversation in a café is different with a smartphone in hand. Els feels less conscious of her presence in the moment when she experiences the forest through the lens of her smartphone (as she feels she is expected to share snapshots with significant others elsewhere), and Lucas feels more disconnected when he is distracted by message notifications (a distraction from the fact that he should be paying attention to the friend that is actually sitting in front of him).

The Western modern – and often criticized – discourse of authenticity, ‘the search for the true self’, is a recurring theme in this juggling act. Take, for example, Sarah (F, 29). Consistency between idealistic principles and reality is very important to her. This consistency also carries through to the online space, specifically in the way she behaves and presents herself on social platforms. This, to her, is a matter of ‘staying yourself as much as possible’ and ‘being close to yourself and then I think you make the best decisions, too’ (Sarah, F, 29). She wants to pursue those patterns of life that are true for her, which makes her feel that she remains true to herself. When it comes to honesty and authenticity online, for instance, she oscillates between her deep-seated fear of being excluded and misunderstood, and her ethical belief that people should always act authentically so as not to harm others. Precisely because she feels it is important not to ‘pretend to be different, nor to contradict myself or lie to myself’, she will relate to others in this way. This confrontation between her personal ethical principles and ideals and their actualization through personal decisions exposes her to the personal risk that she will indeed be excluded.

For Tom (M, 32) ‘authenticity’ is a matter of loyalty to his personal convictions, of being, in his words, ‘ideologically’ consistent. Having a lucid vision of his life right now and his future life, with articulated preferences and desires, his commitment to his personal self-development as an ethical striving does not only show in his professional aspirations (as a teacher, he wants to feel ideologically comfortable in the job he is doing) but also in his online activities. He clarifies that he wants to align his social media use with this goal by securing a continuity between his online and offline life and strives to use the smartphone (which he says takes up too much time in his life, since he ‘lives online more than he wants to’) relative to commitments he feels are more important in life.

It is important to point out that the sort of ‘growth’ implied in the developmental process of selfhood, including self-consciousness and the responsibility to actualize the self’s potentiality, is not necessarily reflected in the biological age of the participants. More than their age, participants emphasize the importance of (future) pivotal life events in their self-development. For most older participants, for example, their transition to professional life also translated into a more reflective relationship to their technology use.

Although the majority of the students do not articulate a stated vision of life and indicate that, at the moment, they are rather ‘living from day to day’ (Kato, F, 21), to be young does not do away with concrete ideals. There is at least an intimation of an ethical attitude in the form of an awareness of their free choice to actualize their future self. It proves to be a part of the process of coming of age that one existentially determines oneself by meeting the demands of one’s indeterminate (possible) future in terms of decision, choice and responsibility. For example, for Fatima (F, 22) and Fleur (F,

20), time horizons appear less distant and nebulous, and they reflectively contrast the lightness and unconcern of their current youthful student life with a more responsible, tempered use of immediacy-driven media at a later, more mature stage of life. Fatima emphasizes how her life vision has evolved, and that she wants to align her own ideas and ideals with her life path towards the future. She has not only reflected on but also chosen a future ideal image of herself in relation to, among other things, the possibility of motherhood. In this respect, her media use plays a rather significant role, as her attitude towards media and technology no longer corresponds to the disposition she used to have.

[M]y mindset has changed especially with time. The idea I created of how I want to be as a person, further in my life and even as a parent later. I already think so far, like, I want to be that kind of parent so I do have to have certain, uh, actions and prevalent habits that will come out positively when I get older so I can exercise them on my children. I grew up with technology [...], but [...] I have then so, so pushed myself away from it so to speak. Just purely because of my own ideologies, say, that I have my own ideas of, I want to be this way and I want to be that way and I have to work towards that, and social media is one of the most important things.

A little further on, she seems to nuance this outlook on life again, emphasizing the importance of immediacy in her life, a life lived 'from day to day'. As she explains herself, she used to get lost in the many ideal possibilities she put forward, which 'can be interesting and fun for a while' (the purely aesthetic) but is certainly not something that she would want to 'lose' herself in or 'strive more to become that ideal and completely lose your own persona to it'. That is why she lives more purposefully now, that is, there is more of a direction to her life, phrased in terms such as discipline, ideology and vision [of the future]. On the other hand, she has also overcome many 'stumbling blocks' in her pursuit of the ideal future, or in Kierkegaardian terms, in the realization of possibilities and the movement from sheer ideality to actuality and specific engagement. However, she does not want to become blinded by her vision of life in the sense that she also feels she must accept her life 'in the now' or the immediate. As far as the latter is concerned, she also wants to strive for a more 'conscious' life, a life that can be lived more 'qualitatively', *with* and without the smartphone, such as to maintain *more* meaningful communication with friends, real engagement and conscious participation in face-to-face moments.

In contrast, the only life view Kato (F, 21) really has at the moment is 'just to be happy and everyone around me too', with a focus on 'friends, family, things that interest me like music, or concerts or travelling'. While she expresses the ambition to 'be a better person for myself but also for the people around me', she does not set herself any concrete goals to this effect, as these could lead to disappointment. In sustaining happiness in the moment, the online media environment allows her to gain a 'larger

view of what is possible' and to 'just have more information' about potential changes to her vision of life, with which she 'does not want to achieve anything specifically'. Since Kato merely explores possibilities, her vision of herself remains a reflective rendition of herself in potentiality. Yet her ambiguity and uncertainty about the future encourages her to explore the world through the smartphone at her fingertips, providing a meaningful testing ground for the possibilities life has to offer. Kato hardly problematises her smartphone use, nor does she relate it to life-defining moments. But she does navigate the digital world in search of meaning or, as she calls it, a 'wider perspective on the world'. Precisely through her pursuit of such a perspective, Kato demonstrates that she 'navigates within the limits and among interruptions through the torrents of our digital existence', seeking 'meaning and existential security' while remaining a 'struggling, suffering and relating human being' ([Lagerkvist, 2017](#): 1, 6).

Turning reflection into passionate action

For Kierkegaard, an ethical attitude to life not only involves being reflexive but also making choices and committing to them. Based on the interviews, this is probably the aspect of existential striving where the complexities of immediacy-driven activities play out most strongly. For example, Mark (M, 27) regrets what he experiences as the immediate pull of digital media technologies distracting him from his commitments. He points out the contrast between an aesthetic and an ethical attitude to life, as he compares the 'pleasure after consuming [...] the pleasure in me scattering myself in those external impulses' with the conscious question 'what do I want in this life [...] what do I really want?' and the insight that he 'doesn't achieve much by being on it [the smartphone]'. Bart (M, 26), too, explicitly mentions feeling shame and disappointment with himself once he 'escapes' the pleasurable 'stimuli' offered by instant messaging apps or while scrolling through his social media 'wall'. From the moment he steps out of his flow of immediate stimuli, he realizes that he does not even know or remember exactly 'what you do there, or what you take away from it, what it has taught you'.

Although immediate media use is mostly experienced as driven by immediate 'passions', in the sense of emotions, wants, loves, hopes, fears and so on, some participants point out how they consciously use social media and the existential opportunities it provides to pursue a passion and to receive truly meaningful experiences in return. Els (F, 27), a passionate, non-professional musician, for example, questions the 'meaning' of social media and a social media profile, and how this affects her artistic self-expression and creative satisfaction. Although she uses social media to share music as a goal in itself and finds great pleasure in reaching and touching people, she makes it clear that 'social media shouldn't be a yardstick', suggesting that resisting the temptation to achieve fame quickly (i.e. the commercial goal that lies outside the activity in itself) is 'what makes you happy'.

Rachid (M, 20) can serve as another, albeit very different, example of a person 'driven by his passions' (mainly videography and fashion design), in which social media plays a central role. Rather than contrasting social media with his artistic passion, this film school student's aim is to master social media for his creative projects. With an articulated vision of life focused on his future plans, Rachid is dedicated to use social media frequently and intensively, as to learn how to handle the affordances of social media communication. Just like with Els, there is a clear link between reflection and passion. Rachid also develops a qualitative reflection on his online activities, recognizing that the amount of 'likes and followers' is relative, bringing only a short-term happiness to his life that justifies only a relative or conditional relation to it, in contrast to that which brings him true happiness in the longer term; that is, that to which he relates more absolutely and unconditionally, namely, his passion of living a creative life in a supportive relation to others who share a similar vision and identity. Precisely because he relativizes the immediacy of the technological culture in which he shapes his life by developing a reflexive relation to it, this culture is not a danger but an ally in his personal existential pursuits.

Conclusion

Our study examined how young adults encounter existential questions in their experiences with online immediacy. With its emphasis on subjective experience as the position from which the self, in a lifelong process of reflection and action, comes to appropriate and grasp reality in relation to itself and to others, we have put forward Kierkegaard's existential philosophy as a heuristic instrument to interpret how young adults reflect on what it means to lead a good and genuine life. Today, this involves grappling with the constant presence of online immediacy. Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample of participants, including only highly educated young adults, many of whom working in sectors where self-development is actively encouraged, the empirical findings in this study add to the growing interest in how online immediacy interacts with people's view and quality of life. Contrary to the assumption that early adopters and tech-savvy professionals feel unequivocally content, confident and comfortable in the culture of connectivity – happily engaging in such activities as sharing, playing and self-promotion – we have found that they also express deep-seated and all-too human anxieties and vulnerabilities about their existence under such a cultural condition.

The dialectic between an aesthetic and ethical life view proved a particularly powerful theoretic optic to understand why these young adults simultaneously embrace and oppose the practices of online immediacy. We found examples of often complicated scenarios of immediate media use, which produce the ambiguous conditions in which the self is transformed. While the advantages and pleasures of speedy access to information, communication and entertainment are highlighted, these same

advantages and pleasures can also become a time-consuming obstacle to be resisted. Existentially, this felt ambivalence can be illustrated by the tension between possibility and actuality. For some, technology use is a bridge towards actual engagement in life, while for others, it offers only a seemingly endless aesthetic experience of life's possibilities. As to the latter, our data do not reveal a clear-cut dichotomy. Instead, there is an ambiguity in media usage that is contingent on the criteria young people employ to evaluate whether immediacy is perceived as an existential-ethical opportunity or concern. We remained impartial to the evaluation of these opportunities and concerns, but our conversations made empirically apparent that being absolutely immersed in online immediacy is difficult to reconcile with any passionate choice or lasting engagement. The crucial point is that this evaluation first requires reflection, which is precisely the opposite of immediacy. From an instrumental perspective, the immediate nature of the participants' media use undoubtedly contributes to a more efficient and convenient life. An immediate lifestyle also offers opportunities to fill in their lifetime with moments of pleasure and happiness, which corresponds with the immediate-aesthetic in Kierkegaard. However, from the moment participants are invited to contemplate the constancy of online immediacy in life, existential-ethical concerns quickly take the upper hand.

While technologically mediated experiences of immediacy can be meaningful, participants strongly questioned the aesthetic appeal of these experiences upon conscious reflection. Arguably, the fact that we teased out this existential-ethical sensitivity, prompting them to reflect on and engage with the more challenging facets of their immediate aesthetic experiences, might have contributed to this. Participants found meaning in the immediate operation of online platforms, but only if the practices and experiences related to this immediate temporality could be integrated into the procedural, ongoing and long-term temporality of their self-development. Under this qualification, participants no longer relate absolutely to the constancy of online immediacy in terms of relative pleasure and significance in life, but rather adopt a relativized attitude towards it.

Our findings seem to suggest that a technologically mediated existence absolutely qualified by immediacy is disrupted as soon as reflection is introduced. Disruption is not the end stage, as Kierkegaard would argue, but rather intrinsic to the dialectic of existence, in which one can return to a relativized immediate-aesthetic mode of technologically mediated existence qualified by ethical self-reflection. The ability of the participants to contemplate online immediacy in a relational way (*vis-à-vis* their own life and life with others) is precisely what enables them to navigate a technologically mediated culture of immediacy under existential-ethical criteria of long-term fulfilment and meaningfulness. Instantaneity and proximity in communication and consumption provide many advantages and pleasures for the self and its interactions with others. However, these advantages and pleasures are only existentially viable when put into an

existential-ethical perspective, that is, when they are appropriated in relation to the vision of life that the self passionately chooses to pursue.

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Karl Verstryngge (PhD) is a professor at the Vrije Univeristeit Brussels, where he lectures on ethics and applied ethics. His publications are mainly in the domain of existential philosophy and on existential-ethical themes.

Appendix

Name	Demographic information	Typical application use
Helena	1989, Female Mental healthcare professional,	Dating, E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and

Name	Demographic information	Typical application use
	freelance artist and designer Higher university education	location-sharing, ID app, Online banking app, Public transportation app
Ada	1991, Female Psychiatrist Higher university education	Dating, E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location-sharing
Els	1994, Female TV production support staff; part-time self-employed model and musician; higher non-university education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location-sharing
Mark	1994, male project supervisor; higher university education	Dating, E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location-sharing
Nora	2000, Female University student, bachelor of Communication Sciences Higher secondary education	Dating, E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location-sharing, Games, News
Bart	1995, Male University education support staff member Higher university education	Dating, E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location-sharing, News
Natasja	1992, Female Social worker Higher university education	E-mail, Communication, Self-tracking and location-sharing
Tom	1988, Male Teacher and study track counselor (adult education) Higher university education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location-sharing
Kato	1999, Female College student in tourism Higher secondary education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location-sharing, Games, News

Name	Demographic information	Typical application use
Fleur	2000, Female University student in law Higher secondary education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, News
Bas	2003, Male Last year student in high school Lower secondary education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location- sharing, Games
Rachid	2000, Male College student in audiovisual arts Higher secondary education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming
Fatima	1999, Female University student in commercial engineering Higher secondary education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming
Rosa	1988, Female Marketing and communication officer at a non-profit organization Higher university education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location- sharing, Games, News
Clara	1991, Female Self-employed copywriter Higher university education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location- sharing, News, ID app, Online banking app, Accounting apps
Sarah	1991, Female Communication officer at a college Higher university education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location- sharing, News
Valerie	1992, Female High school teacher Higher university education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location- sharing, News, Dating
Francesca	1990, Female Employed in mental healthcare Higher university education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location- sharing, News, Online banking, Language learning apps

Name	Demographic information	Typical application use
Lucas	1990, Male Sales representative (area manager) Higher university education	E-mail, Communication, Social networks, Streaming, Self-tracking and location-sharing, News

All names used are pseudonyms. Sociodemographic information includes year of birth, gender identification, occupation and highest education degree awarded.