

**IDENTITY IN FLUX: A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF CULTURAL
IDENTITY AND MEDIA IDENTITY**

by

TAINÉ CALVIN KINGSTON PARKER

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SUPERVISOR: DR JOHN SANNI

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Plagiarism Declaration

I, Taine Calvin Kingston Parker, declare that this thesis/dissertation/mini-dissertation is my own original work. Where secondary material is used, this has been carefully acknowledged and referenced in accordance with university requirements.

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Ethics Statement

I, Taine Calvin Kingston Parker, have obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable research ethics approval.

Date of approval: 29 August 2024

Research ethics number: HUM011/0824

I, Taine Calvin Kingston Parker, declare that I have observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of Ethics for Researchers and Policy Guidelines for Responsible Research.

Signed: TCK Parker



Date: 14/07/2025

Abstract

Philosophers have long studied the question of "Who am I?" and it is still significant today, especially as the social and lived experiences of individuals' realities shift in the digital age. In this study, using the South African social context, I raise the question: is there a threat to cultural identity in the face of media identity? which is crucial to comprehending one's sense of self in modern society. This prompts me to look at two pertinent ideas: 1) cultural identity, shaped by beliefs, values, and traditions, and 2) media identity, influenced by the information society and social media performativity. I establish the complex nature of identity and the various ways in which identity is always changing. By engaging existing research works on cultural identity and media identity, as well as the works of Gadamer and Taylor, I develop my theoretical framework, on which I base my arguments and philosophical critique. The study offers theoretical descriptions of social media, which I obtained through qualitative desktop research methodology centred on critically analysing existing literature. I describe some of the challenges and contemporary interpretations of cultural and media identity and offer further critiques of the theoretical positions of existing interpretations of social media. The study thus provides a philosophically informed understanding of the relationship that exists in the formulation of identity, described as the 'fusion of horizons', which is informed by cultural identity and media identity.

Keywords

Identity, Selfhood, Horizon, Hermeneutics, Prejudice, Fusion

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General Introduction

The nature of identity, expressed as cultural identity and media identity, is in many ways a dynamic one based on the interpretation of the observer. Scholars such as Charles Taylor argue that self-identity stems from one's personal experiences, relationships, values and beliefs (1989:27). The concept of the self and its potential evolution relies on what Taylor (1989) refers to as the "horizons of significance". Acknowledging these horizons, Taylor (1989) introduces a relational conception of value in his understanding of an individual's behaviour. Taylor (1989) observes that values emerge because of the interpersonal relationships that are experienced with others as individuals constantly negotiate and navigate their identity and moral beliefs in relation to others and experiences.

In this study I, therefore, maintain that the significance of culture and media as "horizons" of expression for identity gives rise to critical reflection and the basis for exploring the notion that identity is in flux in contemporary society. Furthermore, cultural identity comprises a set of beliefs, values, practices and traditions in every society. To a considerable extent, individuals become informed of many recognisable forms of cultural identity, both on an individual and sociocultural level, through the observable creations and expressions of cultural artefacts, which can be studied across social media platforms. In the world of technology, there is an increase in experiencing the ever-present phenomenon of media identity, which challenges cultural identity. In view of this research hypothesis, the question arises as to whether there is a potential threat to cultural identity in the face of media identity.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013) identified two concepts, namely (1) prejudice and (2) fusion of horizons, which provide an important consideration regarding cultural identity and how it forms part of prejudice. On the other hand, media identity can be acknowledged as a potential form of prejudice, based on the "horizon" taken by the creator or observer of that media identity presentation and artefact. Prejudice is conventionally understood as a form of bias towards the worldview of others. However, Gadamer (2013) argues that prejudice is a necessary grounding for understanding. Put differently, presupposition always informs and guides human experience (Gadamer 2013:291). Gadamer further posits an openness to other worldviews through the "fusion of horizons" (2013:317) – an openness to alternative interpretations of experiences beyond what is believed to be true. Moreover, an individual's horizon is constantly being shaped through the testing of their prejudices (2013:317). Consequently, for Gadamer (2013), the pursuit of truth can be attained through the fusing of minds or perspectives.

Through critique of previous research, this study examines the current impacts of media identities to engage critically the effects on cultural identity. By extension, the evaluation of this effect should aid in an active reflection on media culture, especially performativity in social media. Although media identity presents as a challenge in this arena of individual and group aspects of cultural identity, Gadamer's (2013) concept on "prejudice" *being* open to the "fusion of horizon" is essential. Moreover, the justification of cultural identity should be preserved, especially in view of the potential impending threat of media identity.

Regarding media identity, an important aspect to note from Gauntlett (2015:7) is the refreshed reflection on media, which indicates that media can be understood as "triggers for experiences and making things happen". In contrast, the traditional view on media maintains that forms of media act as

simple channels for communicating messages, and while there is still relevance in this view, I hold the view that media concerns more than what is communicated. Media involves a combination of symbols or symbol system creations as a means of expression of thoughts, feelings and connections leading to the consequence of these expressions. In his book titled *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan (1964:9-10) states that “medium is the message”, suggesting that the medium and content are inextricably entangled, and that the perception of a particular message is influenced by its presentation. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of media platforms, such as social media, provides a unique potential for reflection regarding the presentation of cultural identities within social media and the broader societal context, while understanding that identity is how individuals attribute meaning to the world and their contextual place within that meaning, specifically in media identity. Therefore, McLuhan’s (1964) perspective influences the comprehension and attitudes towards other individuals, events, and the broader societal context, where the concept is understood in the notion that a message constitutes the change that it produces within the media in question (1964:26).

The considerations of digital media have quickly emerged and become mainstream across several cultural groupings and societies, “providing people with mass information and high-speed communication platforms, affecting people, learning, life, work and even thinking” (Leo *et al.*, 2017, cited in Dykhnych *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, the development of an individual’s media identity can be theoretically understood effectively and studied from the perspective of engaging users’ expressions of creativity to understand their social experience (Gauntlett 2007:97).

Media and technology are an omnipresent force, which, as McLuhan (1964:8) argues, is an evolving field and has consequences in its nature and engagement. A characteristic of every medium is that its “content is always another medium”, usually maintaining an active and cohesive presence across various social media channels as a form of new media engagement. Additionally, McLuhan (1964) extends several traditional examples and instances within his magnum opus, including the medium of writing and print, which maintains the content of spoken language. Furthermore, I postulate within this study that language as a medium can be broken down into the foundational content of sounds and written symbols. Further that our thoughts are conveyed through language which are the result of our individual sensory experience, we could consider speech then as a form of reversed senses - whereas usually our senses bring the world into our minds, speech takes our sensorially-shaped minds out to the world. Significantly, there is the medium of the Internet, which retains the content of text, images, audio, video, and interactivity (McLuhan 1964). Moreover, the medium of the Internet, in social media particularly provides opportunities for a consistent and dynamic two-way sensory experience of inward and outward proportions, as the study of social media retains the focus for this critical reflection.

This research maintains the potential value, specifically in the context of social media, the imposing role within society, and the critical engagement of media and media identities on cultural identity. This suggests that McLuhan’s (1964) ‘New Media Theory’ and position regarding new media offer unique consideration into the reflections on the topic of media culture as a form of identity and its impact on potential consumers. Regarding this position, the potential importance of cultural identity – in the wake of social media and the formations of media identity – considers the engagement of identity in flux.

The alignment of the living disciplines, including communication, media studies, and philosophy, allow for an interesting study, in respect of the nature of identity and identity development. The current research in the field provided by the noteworthy philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013), Charles Taylor (1989), Richard Turner (1978) and Marshall McLuhan (1964) provides a significant foundational basis from which to explore this intersection across disciplines. The rationale behind this research stems from the increasing fluidity of identity in the world. This research problematises this fluidity by comparing cultural identity with media identity. In many ways, cultural identity is a branch of conceptualising the characteristics of “identity”, along with the behavioural or expressive components, linking more with an understanding of morality (Taylor 1989:57).

In *The eye of the needle: Towards participatory democracy in South Africa* (1978), Richard Turner explores the aspect of the self in cultural identity, specifically African culture in the context of South Africa. Turner (1978) explores several dimensions of African cultural identity, including traditions, values, spirituality, and social practices, within the larger framework of South Africa’s struggle for participatory democracy. Notably though, Turner (1978) extends the nature of the *ubuntu* philosophy, which highlights the values of empathy, reciprocity and communal well-being (1978:82). From this perspective, the collective cultural experience of life is the measurement of personal identity with the sense of self being shaped by our relationships with other people. Therefore, this provides a potential case study from which to examine the connections between media and culture, especially in the context of social media and the essence of collective community experience(s), which could then further sustain the value for examination through the framework provided by Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons”.

Methodology

This research deploys philosophical criticism, which advocates the study of a particular subject or theme and considers aspects of interpretation, evaluation, analysis, judging merits, adverse opinions, and systematic inquiry. Furthermore, it allows the context to be set. Moreover, this research project maintains a deductive research design, which involves consulting previous literature and writings (Arthur 2021). This choice has been made because this theoretical framework has already been established in the field, and it is used as a foundation to analyse the complex nature of identity and the various ways identity is always changing. Throughout my research I philosophically engage existing secondary research works on cultural identity and media identity, as well as the primary works of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013) regarding “fusion of horizons” and “prejudice” in *Truth and Method*, and Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity* to develop the theoretical framework. After critical analysis of previous research, the study provides outcomes and criticism of previous research analysis. A desktop research methodology is adopted for research analysis, specifically for the development of qualitative discussions on positions provided by existing researchers in the field. Furthermore, the use of content analysis is effective in the response to texts and social media content, such as Facebook, Reddit, or Instagram.

This study intends to demonstrate the compelling link between cultural and media identities, using philosophical arguments within the qualitative research methodology. The main reasons for the choice in method are cost and time considerations. Much of the research on this topic has already been

conducted and some of the ethical issues are addressed through the analysis of secondary data. However, it has been noted that this method is also not without limitations such as the potential for issues in the quality of the data collected and its accuracy, as well as the potential of overlooking key aspects.

However, this study attempts to ameliorate these shortcomings by exploring the divergent viewpoints, arguments and positions of philosophers and researchers in the field. It also pays attention to linguistic aspects, as well as other symbolic aspects of experience within literary and social media texts or artefacts, to elucidate the nature of identity in flux.

Novelty

This research explores the works and thoughts of many scholars and their engagements in the field of philosophy, communication, and media studies, but only a few have engaged media and cultural values as conflicting modes of being. The research encounters the issue that emerges from the viewpoint of individual identity (self-identity) as a form of collective and media identity. Furthermore, this research explores the potential fusibility of cultural identity and media identity through the critical analysis of Charles Taylor's framework on modern identity and the self, in the construction, adaptation and negotiation of identity, with the central understanding on Richard Turner's position regarding cultural identity. In its engagement with and consideration of Marshall McLuhan's New Media Theory, the study reflects on the notions of media identity and the question of whether he "new media" maintains its own kind of culture.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2013) position on "fusion of horizons" and "prejudice" further maintains significance in the overall examination of these respective ideas for the purpose of reflecting on identity in flux. This exploration of identity in flux, involving the potential fusibility of cultural identity and media identity, in turn provides a foundation for future philosophers interested in the fields of cultural studies, communication studies, and media studies to examine the potential effects of performativity in social media on individuals' identity development and subjective behaviours. As a result, this research outlines the importance of mindful consumption of social media artefacts and information, revitalising the nature of sincerity and truth in unique and authentic cultural identity within contemporary society.

In consideration of my philosophical reflections and research findings within this study, an authenticity social media moral framework is proposed, which is guided by the dimensions of self-identity, recognition of prejudice and the fusion of horizons, alongside the values of virtue formulating, in my perspective, a proactive and mindful framework for social media use.

To delineate this further, Chapter 1 explores the perspectives of noteworthy philosophers in the field, primarily including Charles Taylor (1989) and Richard Turner (1978). This provides an engaging reflection and active analysis of the significance and contrasting nature between culture and identity, expanding further on the nature, conditions, and behaviours experienced through relationality, as well as some of the potential challenges that arise through culture and identity, which describe the social structures found within human societies' culture and cultural expression. This chapter examines identity

in terms of the frameworks described by dialogical contexts and morality in the understanding of selfhood.

Chapter 2 expands on the positions of scholars who theorise that media culture can be understood as a form of identity. The focus of this chapter is mainly on McLuhan's (1964) New Media Theory and his contributions to the field of media studies. In this connection, McLuhan's (1964) understanding of the nature, role and influences of technology forms of "new media" in contemporary society on the creation expression and recognition of identity is discussed.

Thirdly, on the basis of the interpretations presented in Chapters 1 and 2, Gadamer's (2013) "prejudice" and "fusion of horizons" are examined. Where necessary, support is drawn from other scholars to broaden out the views on identity. Furthermore, the conceptualisation of identity with the necessary and sufficient conditions is reinforced as these concepts relate to media and cultural identity, which are later considered in Chapter 4, as well as the prejudices that may arise from both contemporary forms of identity.

Subsequently, through this chapter I embark on an endeavour of discovery within cultural identity, and media identity, and the possibility of their fusibility. The intention is to philosophically ascertain whether cultural identity on an individual and collective basis is under potential threat from this media phenomenon, particularly in consideration of theoretical explanations of South African social media and their described linguistic and symbolic experience. Using Taylor's philosophy of the modern self, Turner's understanding of socialisation, and Gadamer's philosophical notions on prejudice and the fusion of horizons, I assess the feasibility of fusing cultural identity and media identity amid the prejudices that these forms of identity embody, as well as the theorisation of a social media moral framework.

In the conclusion, I lay out the main findings and contributions of the study to the existing body of work in the fields of philosophy and communication, as well as media studies, which consist in its significant engagement with the concepts and topics of cultural identity and media identity.

Chapter 1: Culture and Identity

Introduction

This study is situated in the South African social context, and focuses on two primary conceptions: culture and identity. These concepts are used across a variety of research fields, including philosophy, anthropology, sociology, politics, and ethics. Although there is a significant relationship between culture and identity, the work of Taylor (1989), Turner (1978), Tylor (1871), and Nielsen (1987), to name a few, reveals an undeniable distinction between them. Indeed, they are broad phenomena, each with its own complexities.

In this chapter, I engage primarily with the content of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989) and Richard Turner's *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* (1978). The work of these two noteworthy philosophers has been selected for review in this project, because each provides a significant engagement with the topics of culture and identity – particularly Taylor's modern conception of identity and Turner's analysis of culture from a South African standpoint. I will, however, also discuss other topical philosophical texts in order to provide a clear distinction between the concepts of *culture* and *identity*.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, I consider the conceptual framework of culture and identity. In the second, I reflect on the conditions of relationality entailed in considerations of culture and the self. In the third, I explore some of the challenges related to culture and identity in society.

Conceptual Framework: Culture and Identity

Understanding Culture: Turner and Tylor

'Culture' is a broad term, and its usage encompasses a wide variety of cognitive meanings and values. In my investigation, I shall draw on Turner's (1978) understanding of culture. He describes culture as a dynamic set of shared practices and values that can reinforce existing power structures in human societies. In *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* (1978), he understands culture to be a social construct, one that provides a shared set of values, beliefs, and practices (among other things). These, in turn, generate a sense of belonging that informs how an individual becomes part of a society.

Turner notably argues that inherited beliefs among a collective can either sustain an unjust system or allow for a transformation to a more just and humanitarian society. He also suggests that choices are usually made from a 'narrow context' (defined by a set of traditional values and lifestyles unique to a particular society) (1978:9). He further describes how individuals become 'socialised' from birth by specific social structures. In the social context of apartheid South Africa, individuals were influenced by the dominant ideology, which supported beliefs of inequality and oppression. This, in turn, had shaped the worldviews and roles of individuals in the society. In post-apartheid South Africa, I shall

reflect on the existing dominant beliefs, values, and practices from a social media perspective in Chapter 4, because social media has arguably come to represent *the* social system in our globalised world. This later critique of social media aims to give a theoretical framework for future research on the practical impact of cultural socialisation in context.

Edward Burnett Tylor opens *Primitive Culture* (1871) with a description of culture as a complex whole, one that incorporates expressions of knowledge, beliefs, the arts, morals, law, customs, and all other habits one acquires as a member of a society. In his essay *The Will to Believe* (1896), William James explores how beliefs include emotional and volitional elements rather than just intellectual deliberation. He proposes that belief can (in certain circumstances) take precedence over evidence if it is a necessary condition for meaningful actions or commitments in a society (e.g., in religious faith). I agree that beliefs represent a foundational constitution of culture. However, subsequent behaviours in a belief system should not be exclusively defined by the boundaries of the relevant social system. They should, instead, be taken as the epicentre from which other perspectives can be experienced and understood.

Inspired by Turner's (1978) and Tylor's (1871) understandings of culture, I contend that the following three claims hold:

1. Family structures are where instrumental conditioning occurs, and an individual learns and adopts a social role that matches certain expected behaviours and associations. These can, notably, include social roles. In different cultural contexts, these patterns of behaviour can involve different expectations. During cultural integration into the social world, the individual also acquires a particular language, which enables communication with other members of the community.
2. Individual socialisation also occurs through education. Individuals come to understand a specific learning style and discipline as they develop and become involved in different relationships, contexts and environments. The content of this education forms the foundational development of an individual's identity and system of ethics, describing what is right and wrong.
3. The individual encounters facts and fictions through social media. On the one hand, 'fact' signifies selected ideas that have been confirmed by those who are already socialised into the system. On the other hand, 'fiction' describes behaviour models and values. This distinction can also be thought to describe the difference between (a) things that have been experienced and that others know have been experienced and (b) idealised and imaginary means of expression (whether individual or collective).

My definition of culture is informed by the three claims made above. These three claims will guide how I interpret culture in this research. It is important to add that these claims capture 1) Family, 2) Education and 3) Media in ways that inform identity formation.

Identity Formation: Taylor and Socialisation

In *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Taylor (1989) examines selfhood¹ when considering how we form our identities and what it means to be human. He writes:

To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose ... (Taylor 1989:27).

Taylor's inquiry into the making of the self provides an important framework from which to derive a fundamental conception of identity. In particular, his notion of 'horizons of significance' outlines how self-identity is based on subjective experiences, relationships, values, and beliefs that require evolution. For Taylor, there is a 'horizon' of meaningful choices, lifestyles, and virtues against which the self can be measured and deemed to be significant. To this effect, individuals search for and understand their position in a broader social context. Their identity and horizons, in turn, emerge owing to their existing relationships. They consistently negotiate and navigate their identity and moral beliefs in relation to others. They do so while striving for what Taylor describes as the 'greatest good' – understanding one's authentic identity.

Culture, Identity, and Human Agency

As intimated, Taylor (1989; 1994) maintains that we do not develop our sense of self in isolation. Instead, we do so in social contexts. And through our engagements we seek out recognition for the legitimacy of our identities from others. Many scholars such as Audi (1999) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2024) have grappled with these two concepts. Their descriptions are often either vague or inconsistent, as they are seen as too ambiguous: even if they aspire to clarity, they will require specific context. Others have explored culture and identity in terms of the notion of human agency (e.g., Sen 2006; Heidegger 2010; Fanon 2008; Butler 1997; Sartre 1946). These writers often consider freedom, autonomy, responsibility, or causality to be the primary dimensions of human agency.

Heidegger has explored the concept of identity through the lens of *Dasein* (being-there or the experience of 'being' and the conscious awareness that is unique to human beings). Indeed, thinking of identity in terms of *Dasein* is suggestive of self-conscious human individuality (Heidegger 2010:17). In Heidegger's view, the reflection of a particular world undergirds *Dasein*. This world contains a community's customs, practices, and shared understandings. Thus, the cultural context outlines how *Dasein* understands itself and is, thereby, able to interact with the world. Heidegger (2010) also considers the concept of the 'they' (*das Man*). This signifies the unspecified social norms and conventions that affect individual behaviours, often leading to inauthentic existence and experience.

¹ In relation to selfhood, he argues that identity and the self are fundamentally interconnected and shaped by the individual or group connections to others and their position within the larger moral and cultural framework, emphasising both the relational and contextual dimensions of selfhood. "The self" is understood through the formation and negotiations of "identity".

The entanglement of culture and identity has, then, been evident since the first philosophical contemplations of being.

Critical engagement with the notion of *freedom* is considered tied to authenticity in their existential nature, focusing on the question of what it means to live a life true to one's own being. In connection, freedom contemplates an openness to perspectives and possibilities experienced as an activity, one that involves navigating the constraints of living authentically. Authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) in Heidegger's *Being and Time* (2010) drives individuals who live a life that is true to the self (rather than one that involves conforming to societal expectations, trends, or external pressures). As I shall explore in more detail in Chapter 2, social media can be understood as a virtual network or community that advocates for (or supports) the adoption of specific trends and identities.

Mill's work, particularly *On Liberty* (1865), focuses on individual freedom as essential for personal development and human agency. This (a) highlights autonomy and personal responsibility and (b) allows the reinforcement of identity and culture while emphasising that individuals should be free to make their own choices (assuming that their choices do not harm others). Mill's (1865) utilitarianism reflects on the consequences involved in pursuing freedom, with an emphasis on moral responsibility. That said, one might criticise his utilitarian approach for justifying the possibility of restraining freedom, which contradicts the spirit of absolute individual liberty that he eagerly defends. Mill's principle on minimising harm is his justification for the restraint of freedom, provided the restraint maximises societal happiness. Ultimately, from a cultural perspective, differences in human agency include set boundaries, which can, in turn, constrain human agency with a particular horizon or perception from which the boundary is placed. Alternatively, the discovery of identity involves navigating, resisting, or redefining norms.

Linguistic Formation and the Role of Language

The symbolic or linguistic formation of culture and identity is integral to understanding the self (Taylor 1989; Butler 1997; see also Mead 1934). There are, however, differences in this regard, depending on the approach. Taylor (1989:35) maintains that we come to know identity only through a language of interpretation, whether considering the self or the larger community. For Butler (1997:33), the linguistic marker for identity introduces a reality as opposed to describing an existing one. An analysis of these two perspectives in the dimension of language (being descriptive or prescriptive in identifying the self) gives rise to the question of whether an individual's or group's existing linguistic capability determines the capability to define the self. This position adopts the perspective that an individual or group's ability to define their identity is influenced by the depth and range of their linguistic resources. The richer the language, the more capable one is of articulating complex aspects of selfhood. Is it then correct to claim that a person without a language does not exist? Well, of course not. But in a social sense (or within a specific social context), yes, the person does not exist.

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke argues that at birth the mind is considered a 'blank slate' without any rules for processing data. Data is added over time, and rules for processing are then formulated solely via the individual's sensory experiences. Without language, the

self would still exist but the ability to develop complex self-awareness or articulate experiences would be limited. For Locke (1690), personal identity is, thus, largely tied to the self's memories and experiences, which do not necessarily depend on language.

Notably, the basis of language is fundamental to philosophical inquiry when considering identity and culture in the sphere of cultural and media identity development. Like a boat without a sail, the absence of language is like a person without any clear purpose. He or she is at the mercy of the seas on the horizon of possibility. Effectively, distinct reflections regarding culture in symbolic or linguistic formation include shared experiences in values, norms, and meanings. Identity maintains an internalised presence in the comprehension and recognition of the self in relation to language and symbols. At the same time, identity also maintains the opportunity to be communicated.

Further exploring 'the self' brings to light the essence of being, for both the introspective and the extrospective self. Introspection has been described by George Mead (1934) and Charles Cooley (1902). Cooley's theory of 'the looking-glass self' suggests that, to engage in an awareness of identity or rather 'the self', an individual must be able to view herself through others' viewpoints or perspectives. The 'extrospective self', in contrast, maintains its knowledge through the expressive or social nature of communication with others and external things.

The similarities and differences found in the scope of experience and in culture and identity conceptions provide for an interesting analysis. Both culture and identity share the foundational unit of an individual or group, but they diverge in two ways:

1. Culture maintains a collective nature because it is shared with others (Turner 1978). Culture generally operates on a large scale or at the macro level.
2. Identity considers both the individual (micro) and collective (meso) levels. Identity can maintain personal affiliations (e.g., individual traits, choices, and experiences) or be shaped by group membership (e.g., ethnic identity, gender identity, and national identity) (Sen 2006).

Another key notion for highlighting the differences between these two fundamental phenomena is the nature of change:

1. Culture is relatively stable, but does evolve over time, depending on the relevant group or social community.
2. Identity is fluid and adaptable, as identity is subject to personal experience and change, depending on the individual, group, or circumstance. This notion of change is often explored in the writings of philosophers such as Stewart Hall (1994), Anthony Giddens (1991), and Judith Butler (1997), among others. They have argued that culture and identity are fluid (as opposed to static) in response to both individual and group experiences. Moreover, to analyse critically the relationality related to the self and a cultural perspective, we must explore the systems of thinking and behaviours exhibited by pertinent individuals and/or groups.

These considerable conceptual attributes, which have been explored above either directly or indirectly, provide significant distinctions between the key topics of culture and identity. These include the following: 1) Human agency, 2) Linguistic formation, 3) Selfhood, 4) Morality, 5) Scope of experience, 6) Classifications and 7) Nature of change. Firstly, human agency is typically associated with freedom, autonomy, responsibility and causality (Houston 2010), and maintains cultural relevance, according to Turner (1978), which constitutes the capability to critique, reject, and transform the cultural values and social structures that limit freedom and equality. In my critique of Turner's view (from a cultural position), each action mentioned meets the dimensions of human agency. Different cultures create set boundaries and social expectations for human agency through their adopted structures, shared norms, and traditions (e.g., pass laws during apartheid and the created cultural dehumanisation narratives). Alternatively, Taylor (1989) maintains that self-evaluation is a critical component of human agency. From Taylor's view on human agency, it can be argued that the value of freedom, autonomy, and responsibility would be maintained. However, the causality dimension is not and is seen as limited given his position on human agency, which is a reflective one. Thus, the discovery of authentic identity, for instance, can invoke a resistance or redefinition of norms and experiences, based on the need for critical reflection as part of human agency.

Secondly, linguistic formation can be described as the process through which words change (i.e., morphology) or new lexemes are created in a particular language. This is described the practice of human communication, one that consists of symbols conveyed in an agreed-upon way by speech, writing, or gesture. Linguistic formation usually involves ideas and emotions (Sapir 1921). Turner's (1978) linguistic formations are means of communicating values, beliefs, and customs. Language plays an important social function, and its formation also fosters feelings of group identity and solidarity, which maintain an important connection to identity formulation (Turner 1978). Alternatively, as posited by Taylor (1989), language plays an impactful role in how individuals perceive their personal and collective identities. This, in turn, influences their interactions and relationships in a society. Overall, the study of language and linguistic formation is arguably a critical component maintained and explored throughout my project.

Thirdly, throughout Taylor's writing the notion of 'selfhood' is positioned in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989) as describing a self-conscious individual who understands herself or himself as an agent situated in a moral and social context. Taken on the other hand from a cultural perspective, I reason that these are reflections of relational connections (shaped by the individual's social and cultural interactions). To know the self is to experience oneself through dialogue with the other (1989). Furthermore, from an identity foundation, selfhood involves the individual's level of self-awareness and personal narrative while embarking on a quest for authenticity. Taylor (1989) thus contemplates the idea of self-interpretation. Here I would argue that individuals will constantly engage in understanding and interpreting their own actions, experiences, and identities, through personal reflection and engagement with others, to gain a broader-picture perspective of who they are and who they would like to be.

Fourth, there are principles of right and wrong in a society, in accordance with ethical standards. Morality describes these principles from a cultural perspective, and is concerned with how one should act in relation to others and the broader moral order. Overall, the self is inseparable from the moral horizons (Taylor 1989). In the context of culture, I assert that the moral frameworks would then outline the socialised group and societal or communal expectations of behaviour and being. 'Morality' from an identity perspective outlines what is taken as 'the good' (Taylor 1989) in reflecting on what individuals strive to do and/or become vis-à-vis their ethical standards. Morality, in my view from an identity orientation, considers evaluations of self, one's authentic identity, and modern conceptions of authenticity (which involves the idea that we must be true to ourselves).

The fifth attribute, described as classifications, from the investigations in this project, outlines the human activities, beliefs, and practices (generally organised by relevant characteristics) expressed by how a group of people live, interact, and make sense of the world around them in the context of identity and culture. My reflection on the cultural classifications includes two main categories: 1) Material culture (tangible/physical): art, technology, and architecture and 2) Immaterial culture (non-physical): beliefs and values, language, norms and customs, and social institutions (i.e., economic, religious, and educational systems). In addition, from an identity classifications perspective I maintain that there are two main kinds of self-conceptions: 1) Personal identity (memories and experiences), for instance personal narratives, personality and impressions and 2) Social identity (considering relations and interests), for example age, gender and ethnicity.

Relationality of Culture and the Self

As described by Raul Lejano and Wing Shan Kan (2022), relationality is a condition by which individuals and groups tend to think and behave in unity with the collective relationships of which they are a part. Relationality refers to connectedness – a view of the world that underscores how no person or thing exists in isolation. Existence necessarily means being in relation. In an interconnected and technologically infused world, opportunities for relationality are boundless. The rise of social media in particular has created many mediums of connection and various virtual communities. No individual has a social existence without relations with others. As Taylor (1989), Mead (1934) and Butler (1997) suggest, the self is negotiated and navigated in connection with the other. Given the above, it is important to assess the conditions of relationality in both culture and the self.

Cultural Relationality

In contemporary cultural experiences, societies or groups are not bound. Instead, they blend and mix with each other. Moreover, cultures are not fixed; they change through time (Hall 1994). From an anthropological point of view, culture demonstrates relationality through the construction and maintenance of cultural differences. This designates the ways in which culture links (groups of) individuals across differences while simultaneously segregating them from each other (Brigg 2014).

As regards the social context, one could argue that relational experiences of culture are largely shaped by economic, political, and ideological influences. People adopt cultural norms, values, and

behaviours that are acceptable in cultural communities from their interactions with others. Martin et al. (2013:23) note that 'culture is learned': this occurs when individuals begin associating certain behaviour patterns with aspects of being, as part of the subconscious process of socialisation which takes place beginning from childhood. These include individuals' shared social habits, such as eating, sleeping, or communicating with others (which could involve something as simple as a handshake, a bow, or a nod of the head in the form of a greeting). Nonetheless, Turner's (1978) exploration of socialisation and patterns of development entails that culture is important. This partly occurs owing to cultural upbringing, educational disciplines, and personal narratives. In the context of former apartheid South African society, the separation and oppression of cultural communities had taken precedence during the formation of social structures and institutions (e.g., the capitalist economic system). This system perpetuated a class-based society where the dominant class controlled not only the economy but also culture and socialisation processes. As Richard Brown (1993) has argued, logical classifications – such as good–bad, high–low, and black–white – represent moral hierarchies, which support the legitimacy of a societal order involving domination and separation of individuals and groups in society. The aftermath of these societal hierarchies is to some extent still experienced today.

These classifications provide a foundational reflection of culture in the past. That said, culture's current fluidity transcends traditional border designations of identity. This leads to complex social phenomena understood through notions such as 'hybridity' – a term used to describe border culture or the space in-between two existing cultures or individual classifications. Brian Massumi has suggested that embracing cultural relationality involves giving 'a logical consistency to the in-between' (rather than from pre-existing articulations), and this 'would mean realigning a logic of relation' (2002:70), or, put differently, to define culture and meaning as a more flexible, relational experience which is continuously negotiated and formed. Here, the focus shifts from the cultural object to cultural relations and processes. This would, in turn, invoke a deeper analysis of the interconnected nature of cultural experience. In this context, culture is in a state of flux through environmental changes, technological or media influences (e.g., social media), and contact with other cultures.

In his book *The Ethics of Identity* (2005), Kwame Appiah suggests that an individual's comprehension of self, values, and practices is deeply rooted in preceding cultural traditions and histories. He also illustrates how active engagements with existing cultural traditions and histories can assist us in formulating a meaningful and dynamic (rather than rigid) appreciation of identity in understanding selfhood. Although some aspects of language, tradition, and history should be questioned in the movement towards a greater understanding and contextualisation of self, I argue that safeguarding uplifting cultural experiences should remain a priority in any society.

Amartya Sen's *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006:83) contains a description of identity as a kind of double-edged sword, especially when contemplating its multiplicity. He proceeds to consider real-world examples in the religious arena, including the political and social roles of Muslims in modern civil society, on the one side, succour, self-regulation, social support, meaning, and spirituality; on the other side, struggles and violence. He also notes democracy's role in bringing about effective and equal religious respect and experiences. Examining the positive consequences and

experiences of identity, Sen further maintains that diversity can play a positive role in enhancing freedom (even the freedom of those who are not directly involved in the process).

Culturally diverse societies can bring considerable benefits to others through the varied viewpoints they are in a position to enjoy. An example is the rich traditions and practices of Amapiano-Afrobeats music, which are driven by South African roots while maintaining a fusion of Nigerian rhythms, house music, and jazz influences. This blended identity, ironically, provides a kind of enjoyable shared experience, one that cuts across traditional boundaries.

Notably, Sen (2006) has outlined how human identities can be examined from two bearings: (1) 'monolithic constructs of identity' and (2) the 'diverse constructs' and mixings of identities. He advocates for the latter bearing, thereby embracing variety within and between individuals from various civilisations or groups. Sen further states that, through gratitude for the multiple dimensions of identity, societies can attempt to progress toward a more inclusive and harmonious coexistence. This naturally engenders a greater acceptance of alternative ways of life. The former bearing, in contrast, maintains a connection with identity-based thinking, which can foster violence. Sen describes this as a 'clash of civilisations' (a thesis popularised by the political scientist Samuel Huntington (1996)). In this view, future conflicts will be primarily driven by cultural and civilisational differences.

Turner (1978) critiqued apartheid South African economic inequalities and the capitalist system's moral standing. He highlighted the structural and systemic nature of these inequalities and advocated for radical change to create a more just and equitable society. Turner's vision included participatory democracy and politico-economic system reformation in the light of Christian ethics. He further contended that any society should strive for a 'human model' that advocates cultural diversity and mutual respect instead of maintaining a value system that advocates a 'rich, greedy and frightened' type of human being (Turner 1978:12–13). This maintains relevance in post-apartheid South Africa, in that the philosophy of ubuntu as a cultural ideal is an outcome focused on the value of our fellow man, and not the self.

The cultural ideology of ubuntu has, in contrast, been described as an 'African worldview' that places the value of people and the 'other' at the heart of its philosophy. This ethic maintains that communal interests rank higher than those of any individual (McDonald 2010). As technology develops and access to information expands, human beings can maintain their importance in contemporary culture by becoming more conscious of and open to beliefs and practices from an 'ubuntu perspective'. As McDonald puts it, Ubuntu resides in a 'dialectical relationship of being and becoming' (2010:141). Our society can then begin to shift the cultural narrative in South Africa. Doing so can, in turn, lead to the practical reform of social systems such as the economy, politics, education, and media (among other things).

Relationality in Personal Identity

Considering conditions of the self's relationality, Taylor (1989) outlines how 'identity' encompasses the uniqueness, qualities, or personality of an individual or collective in understanding a specific locus and context. He also highlights the multifaceted nature of identity. Nonetheless, at the heart of his discussion

is a tension between the notions of individualism and communitarianism. He argues that the modern self is not solely the result and experience of individual agency but also deeply intertwined with its social context. Taylor (1989) accentuates the importance of cultural, religious, and historical factors and thereby the effect of context on identity. He also scrutinises the nature and role of language and interpretation in the development of identity. This leads him to suggest that language is the medium through which we communicate, share experiences, and negotiate a multitude of identities. These, I contend, are also inherent in the environments, contexts, and relationships that constitute the construction of a modern identity. From Taylor's perspective, a modern inspection of selfhood therefore encompasses a 'being' who values the ideals of freedom and is intrigued by the inner depths of self that deserve exploration. His positions remain significant today in examinations of selfhood from a personal and social position (i.e., in social media). The nature of the self-identity remains constant in any relational experience.

Through the environments of culture and tradition, one derives (a) one's moral framework and positioning as a guide to what is good or bad and (b) one's base orientation in life. That said, authenticity and individuality also appear to have important influences on the development of a modern identity and the self (especially when considering the expressive manifestations seen in cultural practices such as art and dance). Taylor also reflects on the orientation or position of identity. He approaches the comprehension of identity by considering the question of 'who I am' through a definition of where the 'I' is speaking 'from and to whom' (Taylor 1989:36). Referring to an understanding of 'the self' as both the subjective 'I am' and the natural stillness of 'being' (or the witness and the witnessed), he claims that self-identity stems from an individual's personal experiences, relationships, values, and beliefs (Taylor 1989:27). This reflects the context of Taylor's approach to identity.

Relationality in Social Identity

Kai Nielsen has stated that "what makes us something, what gives our lives meaning, are our distinctive cultural identities" (1987:387). Put differently, we find our identity only in relational coexistence. Arguably, the nature of social identity can be described as the individual's knowledge of who she is based on her group memberships (Tajfel and Turner 1979, as cited in McLeod 2023). Moreover, in my view the significance of the social groups the individual evaluates is based on common characteristics, emotional connection, and subjective value. Examples might include social groups determined by South African nationality, ethnicity, or shared interests. Relations between these social categorisations provide people with an orientation and cognition of their social environment. This is, in turn, rooted in a sense of 'belonging', 'common purpose', 'self-worth', and 'identity' (McLeod 2023).

Social identity (in the sense of the self) can denote either an individual or group-based phenomenon. In orienting the social self, we can, for instance, ask after the basis on which all students are bound together (qua students). In other words, what establishes their collective kind of identity? Or is academic identity essential to a person (qua that person)? In other words, are certain social classifications part of our individual identity? For Taylor (1989), the construction of social identity is formed within what he calls a 'framework' of 'moral goods', which are deeply embedded in the cultural,

moral, and historical contexts where the self is formed. This framework is constituted by the values, ideals, and beliefs that give life meaning and guide ethical decisions. Craig Calhoun notably adopts Taylor's view about moral frameworks when he states that 'we know who we are only by knowing where we stand' (Calhoun 1991:234).

Taylor further outlines three fundamental axes for moral reflection: (1) respect for and obligation to others, (2) our understanding of what makes for a full life, and (3) dignity (1989:14–16). Considering my example of the students above, I suggest that an academic identity typically includes activities in collaboration and collegiality with peers and teachers. Mentorship and guidance involve a duty to help others (especially peers) develop through (a) support and constructive feedback and (b) ethical responsibility in academia (which includes academic integrity, respect for intellectual property, and fair and honest engagement with existing research).

Following Taylor (1989), this social identity development takes place through two major approaches:

1. *Ascribed identity* (inherited frameworks or attributions by others), which is shaped by the larger culture people are born into and come to embrace.
2. *Voluntary identity* (including the choices individuals make within relevant frameworks).

This means that, although people have a degree of autonomy in constructing their identities, their starting point is influenced by ascribed cultural, social, and moral traditions (which also attribute a certain conduct and expectation to the individual). These can relate to 'age', 'sex', or 'race' (ascribed identities) or perhaps 'friend', 'religious believer', 'activist', or 'volunteer' (voluntary identities). Returning to my point about moral frameworks, the nature of social identity is made possible only through the 'dialogical self'. This is where the individual can, for example, learn what it means to be in love in some common experience with 'the other' (Taylor 1989).

The concept of the self and its potential evolution in relationality relies on what Taylor calls 'horizons of significance'. On this basis, he alludes to an individual whose capacity for understanding is mediated through their obligations, roles, and associations with others. These, in turn, provide a frame of reference (or positions in context) from which this individual can determine the workings of her own mind. Some of her experiences are physical; others are emotional or spiritual (Taylor 1989:27). Regarding identity orientation, Taylor also considers the importance of interlocutors. Interlocutors are the various people, cultural voices, and social positions with which we engage throughout our lives. They help us shape, understand, and validate our sense of self.

Taylor's 'theory of recognition' – as explored in his paper 'The Politics of Recognition' (1992, cited in Gutmann (Ed.), 1994:25-74) – is also relevant when it comes to comprehending the self. Here, the individual becomes recognised when an already present person acknowledges her, and not when essential criteria of selfhood are met. Some examples include names or nicknames assigned to persons. At birth people are allocated a name by others (i.e., their parents). This received name acts as their initial or starting social position or rather "interlocutor", as Taylor posits. For Taylor, this is a

necessary precondition for the development of human identity. However, what happens if a person is born without a name or has their name stripped from them? Do they have no identity?

When reflecting further, what follows is almost a quest for 'authentic identity', as Taylor understands it in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989). A question naturally arises at this point: who am I really? Taylor (cited in De Wit 2018:155) reflects on how identity is ultimately a constant struggle for recognition and an understanding of 'the self'. He explores how we want to be both acknowledged as equal to others in society and appreciated as a unique person or part of a collective with specific identities in specific contexts (Taylor 1989:63). However, ultimately, identity can be described as a journey of discovery through the 'objective order' of reality and experience. Taylor states that we describe ourselves through reflexive expressions that fit certain terms: 'self', 'I', 'ego', and the like. He further claims that 'the self which emerges from the objectification of and separation from our given nature cannot be identified with anything in this given' (Taylor 1989:175). This describes 'the self' as something we create or develop through the process of reflection and self-awareness. One recognises oneself as distinct from the basic natural characteristics with which one is born. The self is then constructed through self-examination, differentiation, narrative construction, and objectification. The drive to explain oneself as one among others brings about the paradox of identity among individuals within society. One experiences a constant shift in self-awareness through a transition of focus toward oneself and how one's actions, thoughts, and emotions do or do not align with one's internal moral frameworks.

From the perspective of personal identity, Taylor (1989) further argues that 'authenticity' remains a powerful moral resource in the development of the modern self, which is a notion that outlines how an individual must remain true to herself and express her inner nature. In his critical analysis, Taylor suggests that the culture of authenticity contains not only degenerate forms of narcissism but also a more elevated kind of self-fulfilment. He also advocates for the position of 'hypergood', which relates to 'purity' being the focus of obligation regarding the self. Yet, ironically, the value of personal identity is, then, attained only through serving others (via values of benevolence and altruism). As I reflect further on the implications of Taylor's view for my project, this actively reinforces a primary focus on the preservation of cultural identity. In the context of social media environments, the conservation of uplifting cultural values should be approached with discernment. We must consider the ever-shifting social realities experienced on these digital platforms.

Challenges of Culture and Identity

Absolute Socialisation

In his coining of the phrase 'absolute socialisation', John Sanni (2024:59) gives significance to his notion described by a divisional process which distinguishes between categorisations of being, including things and inevitably people which are considered as either 'superior' or 'inferior' significantly on the base of social, economic and political positioning in society. Considering Sanni's definition of absolute socialisation, I further argue the relevance as a challenge to culture preservation and identity formation.

Turner (1978, cited in Sanni 2024:56) maintained that an individual's self-worth, and in turn their [something left out?] was reduced because of a forced transformation of values during apartheid South Africa. There was a prior move in South African society away from the communal relationship-focused well-being of the other toward a greedy, self-important society based upon the emphasis of individual exaltation. Turner writes:

"If I concentrate on things, rather than people, I become a slave. I become dependent on things. I behave in the way in which things need me to behave. In each relationship with the other I am not free to be open to the other as a person. I have to manipulate the other in such a way as to obtain things. And to manipulate the other I have to manipulate myself. This is my essential degradation, for in manipulating myself I finally lose my freedom. I become identified with the role I am playing" (1978:27–28).

As I understand it, the movement toward freedom which Turner advocates involves maintaining a people-centric focus. To appreciate the other and become open in thinking and being, through actions toward the other, we must avoid the oppressive stereotypes and patterns of behaviour we have been socialised to endorse.

The challenge of 'absolute socialisation', Sanni (2024:57–58) argues, is that the following elements designate its absolutist foundation in a society (in this case, South Africa): (1) social and economic manipulation, (2) natural arrogance (involved in class distinctions and racial absolute positions), (3) controlled means of production, and (4) racial associations of right and wrong. Maintaining absolute socialisation through the value systems and human models in a society brings forth an increased potential for violence (related to the individual or group). Arguably, this in my view is in effect with my earlier discussion on human agency, freedom and authenticity, which is, in consequence, directed by, at least initially, the primary agents of socialisation in the form of family structures, educational systems, and media. The persons (individual or group) will inherently strive (even by force) for a life which truly reflects their own being and independence, even if it is against the very foundations of their socialisation. This presents significant obstacles for identity and culture in any society. The above discussion reinforces Turner's original advocacy of openness towards others, alternative ways of living and being.

Consequence of Assimilation

My analysis of identity and culture points to the numerous challenges that remain present in the distinctive embodiment of culture and identity in society. One of the challenges illustrates how cultural diversity is being destroyed by industrialisation and urbanisation (Turner 1978:12). These social systems promote a co-dependency and shared set of cultural values among groups of inherently diverse individuals. They maintain certain aspects that have been guided by the culture of the dominant group in a society. From a South African perspective, Turner (1978) argues that this cultural dominance largely stems from Western value-based influence, which has, in turn, resulted in a 'superiority–inferiority' dimension to South Africa's cultural dynamic. Turner also argues that a capitalistic society instils a value system that prioritises personal satisfaction over communal well-being. I contend that a

major consequence of this cultural way of life is that the spirit of innate human value is lost. The measurement of human value has become based on the economic conditions of one's life.

Noam Chomsky and Marv Waterstone (2021:1) have asked the following question: 'How do we know what we think we know about the world?'. They explore the idea that common sense is being manufactured and manipulated by power. In doing so, they focus on the illusion of a natural order in the capitalist context. This presents an interesting challenge to culture in society because it has come to be understood as just the way things are (i.e., broadly accepted as the norm of cultural experience). An economic system has become part of who we think ourselves to be and how we have become assimilated in our modern society. The philosophy of hard work, for example, becomes the basis of being human; this is based on the amount of time and work one has spent on one's persona. In contemporary South African society, this is often measured by money, status, and power – a situation that is perpetuated through the media and often provides the cornerstone of people's ideas and belief systems.

Sen's (2006:90) analysis of anticultural oppression suggests that, with the creation of an independent 'domain of sovereignty within colonial society', nationalism has served to combat the influence of the capitalist system. This has done so by dividing social establishments and practices into two major domains: 'the material' and 'the spiritual'.

1. Material culture largely refers to the external world of expression, including economic, scientific, and technological developments. These are all understood to be dominated by Western values (Sen 2006:90). Expressions of culture include physical objects or artefacts (e.g., books, clothes, or decorative items) that symbolise or originate from one specific culture. These can be seen to reflect the superiority of that culture within a society.
2. Spiritual (or non-material) culture relates to a specific culture's internal experiences, which involve the sense or belief that there is something more than oneself. This describes a culture and the nature of being human as concerning connections to the 'divine' rather than just sensory experiences.

For Sen (2006:9), the more an individual mimics Western competency in the material domain, the more they will need to 'preserve' their unique spiritual culture.

Reification

Reification involves ascribing meaning to something abstract as an ideal or an idea other than its original meaning. However, reification can be questioned from a philosophical standpoint. Alfred Whitehead considers this notion to constitute the fallacy of 'misplaced concreteness' (Tupikowski 2019) (where one might, for example, mistake the South African flag for the country). Here, one mistakes the representation for the reality. How could one relate the choice of a narrative or the creation of an abstraction and explain it to oneself?

An individual could represent or reproduce herself in a personal narrative (informing her identity). The same might be done for a society in the form of ideas. This could be understood from a

societal perspective as culture. Hypothetically, culture is the way a society thinks about itself and the way the society then reflects on itself. This is similar to how humans have consciousness: we can think about ourselves by choosing certain facts privileged in us and our unique identity, thereby giving meaning to that identity. In a similar way, a society creates a culture. Nonetheless, cultures are, of course, always contested. First, there are dominant ways in which we can explain who we are as a community, group, or society. Second, there are also existing portions of that same society (countercultural groups within) who will conversely argue that the society is not supposed to be the way that it is and create ideas alternative to that of the existing collective society.

Several social institutions (e.g., family, the media, and the legal system) guide our culture, and therefore our values, beliefs, norms, and behaviours. These social structures inform us about what we should or should not do. People often assume that a story reported in the news must be true. However, this is, of course, not necessarily the case. Indeed, this is why media policies and standards of ethics exist. They keep media producers and institutions accountable and (in principle) objective. If expectations on and standards for the media change, then ideas also change. This means that culture will always have a subversive element to it. But what happens if subversives cannot be part of the social conversation? According to Balbi et al. (2021), this would result in what we often call an echo chamber or epistemic bubble. This occurs when an individual or group in society speaks and connects only with those who have the same ideas that they do. I shall explore this idea in more depth in the next chapter.

We are, then, left with a salient challenge. To prevent reification from occurring, we (as individuals in society) must learn to be 'uncomfortable' by allowing ourselves to remain open to alternative positions, events and experiences, which may not align with our immediate associations, interests and preferences. Such an acceptance of unease could entail (a) engaging with someone who has a different set of values or belief system from one's own or (b) being open to alternative perspectives or viewpoints on some important topic.

Conclusion

The thread I explored in this chapter relates to the distinctive core principles and fundamental ideas that form the basis of two key conceptions: culture and identity. Critical engagements with the topical literature – specifically Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989) and Turner's *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* (1978) – reveal the conditions for relationality involved in considerations of culture and the self. The interplay between shared structures, norms, traditions, and personal narratives highlights the complexity of identity formation. Although collective experiences foster feelings of group identity and solidarity, individual perceptions and dialogues contribute to a nuanced understanding of self. This inherent relationship between culture and identity underscores the importance of relational connections. These connections can, in turn, enhance individual self-awareness. Knowledge of self can equip individuals in a society to navigate their identities within a group setting and broader social context. The influence of social institutions can, in turn, shape self-conceptions and narratives (depending on the socialisation of behaviours among them). This reveals a tension between stable cultural or societal frameworks and

the fluid nature of personal identity. Ultimately, this exploration highlights the intricate balance between collective belonging and individual expression.

The next chapter engages in active reflection on the nature of media culture as its own identity, particularly considering developments in performativity within social media. Further foundation to my discussion will be provided by the theoretical insights garnered from McLuhan's 'ew media theory'.

Chapter 2: Media Culture as Identity

Introduction

This chapter engages with the existing positions of scholars who theorise on media culture as a form of identity. Specifically, considering McLuhan's New Media Theory and his contributions to the field of media studies, I explore what constitutes the nature, role and influences of digital forms of 'new media' in an active reflection on media culture, especially based on the nature of performativity in social media. Through the study of various positions and frameworks in media analysis, the media culture phenomenon is engaged based on how it can be used to represent identities and sway public opinion towards a particular perspective of reality.

The Nature of New Media

'Media culture' is a vast and all-encompassing term that is often elusive to pin down. My aim here is to demonstrate that media culture is inherent in the conception of what has been termed 'new media', which then could be described as a particular form of 'identity' within our current era, known as the information society. In the process of describing the nature of 'new media', it is important to suggest that of course this is in its simplicity 'a label' to describe a categorisation of media forms. What could be understood as 'traditional media', or 'old media', often includes the historically prevalent forms of electronic technology such as television, radio, and computers. Alternatively, 'new media' is often associated with digital devices, including personal laptops, mobile devices, and wearable technology. Alternatively, McQuail and Deuze (2020:52) reflect on the notion of 'new media' technology, thereby building on the research and arguments made by McLuhan (1964), who indicates that media are forms of *language*, with their own structures and systems of grammar, structure and arrangement, which can themselves form the subject of study. McLuhan (1964) supposed that media have *effects* on the users or individuals, in that they continually shape and re-shape the ways in which people, societies, and cultures then perceive and understand the world in which they live and which they experience. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), McLuhan provides a framework from within which to examine different media and their experiences in more detail, like television, print, writing systems, radio, the phone and films. To him media can be classified as either 'hot' or 'cold' (McLuhan 1964).

McLuhan (1964) describes a 'hot medium' as media which extends one single sense in high definition, while on the other hand a 'cool medium' is, by contrast, low definition. Furthermore, this difference is central to audience participation, with hot media requiring less active audience participation and cold media requiring more active participation from the audience. Contemplating common examples in society, these include radio, which is considered hot; the focus is singularly audio sensitive, as it communicates the intended message entirely through the use of sound. Radio producers for example will use persuasive techniques to capture the audience's attention by the careful editing and mixing and so on to engage the listeners, by means of their sense of hearing. No real active participation by the audience is required here (McLuhan 1964:22). This emphasis on one sense (for example, of

sight or sound) could include, in my mind from a social media perspective, Twitter (now X), because it engages a single sense. It tends to be brief and demands little interaction.

On the other hand, cold media could include, for example, cartoons, which are low definition and require symbolic interpretation, and therefore more audience participation. “*So little (information) is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener*” (1964:36). In the case of social media this could be, for example, Facebook (Meta) or Instagram, where engagements require more participation from the individual to come to an experience of complete comprehension.

Although McLuhan’s framework attempts to give distinctive differences between media and content, through hot or cold classifications, I argue that his theory is limited to the extent that, in terms of the frequency and kinds of engagement by media audiences, these will ultimately be different depending on the context and its use. It would not be very effective to generalise. While his theory is still hugely influential, in understanding media, a more significant contribution to his New Media Theory is his notion of ‘the medium is the message’ (1964:8-9). A reflective metaphor he uses in his writing is the “theme of the dragon’s teeth in the Cadmus myth” (1964:83); by which he signifies the power of language and letters as the ‘teeth’ of man, where we can visually identify and put them into practice. Substantiated further across a multitude of examples and instances, in his magna opus *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), he includes such items as the written text in a book, where the individual will engage with the words and sentences, which are essentially an extension of spoken language, into a visual format. In the same way, individuals may consider the language in social media and actively communicate through these new media platforms as easily as they may in the real-world experience. As I further contemplate the idea of the word ‘new’ in the notion of ‘new media’ there are multiple perspectives with which to consider this term. Interestingly, Juliet Floyd and James Katz (2016) champion the perspective in the context of ‘new media’, regarding that which was originally posited by the Bible translation attributed to John Wycliffe’s followers that “No thing under the sun is new” (Ecclesiastes 1:9), suggesting the idiom that what has been, will be and what will be, has been. This further presents the notion that individuals continue to grapple with the same basic questions of existence, most notably the basic question: Who am I?

As argued by Floyd and Katz in *Philosophy of Emerging Media: Understanding, Appreciation, Application*, something can be classified as ‘new’; however, in their positioning of their critical question regarding new media platforms – “do media platforms provide us with new content?” (2016:103) – they poignantly remind us that if media are used to transport human thoughts, desires and emotions, then they could not actually bring forward any new content in society, as human thoughts, desires and emotions have remained consistent throughout time. While Floyd and Katz’s position does hold some merit, on the other hand, as I explore Marshall McLuhan’s position regarding ‘new media’, he contests this notion suggesting that ‘new media’ can generate significant changes that reshape society depending on its medium. I find this particularly interesting, more especially when we consider the theory and reflections provided by Marshall McLuhan in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). He proposes the theoretical framework presented as New Media Theory, which examines the social, cultural, political, and economic impacts of ‘new media’ technologies within our

society and current culture(s) (1964). Firstly, before I delve into the captivating narrative(s) and positions proposed by McLuhan and other noteworthy philosophers in the field of new media technology, it is important to reflect on the meaning of the term referred to as 'new media'. This conceptualisation, as averred by Professor Robin Mansell (2011), suggests that the label known commonly as 'new media' refers to the notion of digital media technologies as well as the close connection(s) with the 'Information Society' and the particular goals for information and communication technologies (ICTs). He argues, largely along the lines of McLuhan's reflections, that media culture underscores the transformative potential of new media technologies, and that we are therefore living in both the best and the worst of times.

Regarding the 'information society' we currently inhabit, it is important to consider the potential effects and current impacts of media identities on cultural identity. In the modern era, media have become a critical space where cultural identities are both constructed and contested. While media offers individuals the opportunity to express and negotiate their identities, it also imposes limitations on the freedom of expression, particularly for marginalised groups. The representation of cultural identities in media often reflects broader societal power structures, reinforcing stereotypes, commodifying identities, and shaping public perception in ways that may not align with the authentic experiences of represented. This raises the philosophical question of how much freedom individuals truly have in defining their cultural identities within media spaces, and whether media can serve as a platform for authentic recognition or merely perpetuate existing systems of control and domination (Hall 1994; Butler 1997).

Drawing on Charles Taylor's concept of the 'politics of recognition' and Richard Turner's critique of dehumanisation, in Chapter 4 I explore in more detail the tension between freedom and the media's role in shaping identity. Taylor argues that identity is formed through recognition by others, making media a crucial space for this interaction (Taylor 1994). However, I argue that Turner's critique reveals that societal structures often dehumanises individuals by reducing them to marketable, simplified versions of themselves – or, more specifically, the commodification of human values and relationships through the capitalistic systems (Turner 1972). The core issue, for further reflection, is whether media empowers individuals to freely express and construct their identities or whether it limits this freedom by reinforcing dominant narratives, leaving marginalised groups in society with little space to assert their autonomy and self-definition.

Significantly, in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) McLuhan offers some insights into how media technologies can shape the individual and collective identities experienced in today's digital era. Moreover, his work has laid the foundation for understanding the impact of media on society and culture. He reflects on the social propagation of media platforms with the rise in digital media, which in turn have increased the individual's level of interaction with information, effectively shaping their state of thinking and being. The behavioural change(s) and altered sense of an individual's identity is an outcome of the effects surrounding the global connectivity feature(s) of digital technologies (1964:7). More specifically in the realm of media identity formation, the experience of social media platforms is brought to the forefront of the discussion.

The Culture in ‘Media Culture’

Surrounding the discussions on culture are the effective questions which then arise, such as does ‘new media’ maintain its own kind of culture? Or what are the notable effects of social media on cultural identity? Ultimately, the answers here lie with the considerations of the nature and contemplations of new media research and the developments in social media, particularly within our contemporary society and culture. In consideration of the initial question, I focus on McLuhan’s perspective: ‘the medium is the message’. His work laid the foundation for understanding the impact of media on society and culture. Notably, reflections on societal change and technology form the basis of McLuhan’s discussions in his magnum opus, as he outlines the tools and technologies we use to communicate (such as print, radio, television, and the internet). Significantly, he draws on the potential influence and effects that these can have on our perceptions and interactions within the world.

Social media platforms, then, as a form of ‘new media,’ present a particular focal point in my considerations of media culture. As I consider the effects of social media in a society and culture, McLuhan’s notion of ‘the medium is the message’ and his exploration of media as extensions of human senses provide valuable insights into the nature of new media, and as such, in the context of social media. More specifically in consideration of McLuhan’s perspective (1964:8-9), these are the psychic and social concerns of the features and forms of which these new media consist. For the message of any medium or technology is the change of extent and proportion in consumption and behaviour which it provides to the human experience or consciousness. For instance, some researchers like McQuail and Deuze (2020) have measured the level of addiction to social media, or, alternatively cyber-bullying, among other potential sub-topics in the field of media studies.

McLuhan’s ‘New Media Theory’ along with David Gauntlett’s media studies 2.0 provide a foundational understanding of the effects of media and media expressions on individuals, in media communities otherwise known as virtual communities. McLuhan posits that each ‘new medium’ disrupts tradition and reshapes social life through a process of adoption and adaptation of and to the media, as they become what he considers ‘an extension of the human senses’ (1964:3-4). In connection to this, I reflect on McLuhan’s metaphor regarding the relative dominance of the media on human senses and their role in the human experience. He presents the idea that different media extend different senses of individual users, and later the internal reflections of ideas, resulting in the transformation of mental thoughts and activities. I argue that while this maintains levels of significance in the influence of ‘new media’ and therefore ‘media culture’ as a consequence, I consider Gauntlett’s view on identity development through media products to further substantiate this reflection.

In *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*, David Gauntlett proposes that ‘Identity is complicated and [. . .] everyone has an identity or have identities’ (2008). Gauntlett here considers that while everyone is an individual, people tend to exist within larger groups who are similar to them. He also argues that the media do not create identities, but just reflect them instead. Similarly, in his analysis of media studies 2.0, Gauntlett refers to people getting a sense of their identity through the media products that they engage with – for instance, popular movies, television series, video games and magazines or comics among many others (2015:149-150). Through various forms of mass media, I

argue that we can gain a sense of who we are and who we would like to be. Then in correlation with McLuhan's argument, as media users we learn our sense of 'self' through the media lens (1964). By extension, I argue that we will additionally obtain knowledge and information from the media, in negotiation with our existing individual horizons about who we are or who we want to be. Using these 'new mediums' or platforms, we exist in the presence of active variable environments.

As regards the current influences on culture, ideology and the nature of globalisation within the public sphere, describing the production, consumption and interpretation of media texts in a range of different contexts, and more specifically in line with the perspective of Fourie (2018), I examine the only aspects of culture and communication which are crucial to any functioning of a society. The nature of 'media culture' as a concept brings to light several consequences with its critical analysis, such as: ideology, hegemony and polysemy. Firstly, 'ideology' is described by a system of ideas, developed primarily through social, economic and political structures. Secondly, hegemony as described by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1941) outlines power influences of a dominant over others, to accept its moral, political and cultural values. Finally, polysemy is a concept that suggests that various alternative interpretations could be made regarding media (textual or visual) presentations (2018).

In Chapter 1, on culture and identity, I describe some forms of identity and more specifically cultural expression that could take shape in language, behaviour, art (visual) and knowledge. Moreover, what is worth considering in support of Fourie (2018:270) is that which binds each of these expressions of 'media culture', and their fundamental nature is the symbolic system and forms of expression which are often understood as our individual or collective beliefs, values, common experiences and modes of existence – or, put differently, 'identity expressions'.

From a social media perspective, media culture, especially in terms of performativity in line with Goffman (1956), maintains significance, particularly in terms of the social nature of new media use and engagement, as online social media interactions can be considered a kind of theatrical performance, as mentioned in my earlier chapter on culture and identity. That is to further suggest, though, that how individuals present themselves through social media platforms could be argued to be almost a kind of façade or disguise, in order to attain social acceptance among their virtual communities and followers. Furthermore, this choice in presentation, according to Goffman, is one which is likely to be favourable to the individual concerned, presenting themselves in an acceptable and positive light (1956:24).

Additionally, from the perspectives explored in McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) technologies can have a significant impact on human perception, social structures, and cultural practices. His insights into how media serve as extensions of human faculties to create new environments and drive cultural change remain integral in understanding the complexities of the media's role in society. Moreover, his most famous dictum, 'the medium is the message', emphasises the creation of a symbiotic connection by which the physical medium of content transfer in 'new media' technology influences how the message is then perceived by the user and society. Interestingly, McLuhan considers media and its connections as a metaphor for the central nervous system of the human being; hence his title includes the description '*Extensions of Man*'. Ultimately, I argue that he is providing a narrative which advocates that reality can be shifted, based on the developments of technology and new media. Furthermore, it can be stated then, in light of his position

on the shifting of reality, this encounters thoughts. Here, thoughts provide an indication of ideas within a society, which can be associated with the conception of ideology. Ideology, as described by Karl Marx, includes the social connection(s) which bond together the different social groups who assumed there were no other ways to think about reality. Additionally, for Marx the ideology within a society was always determined by the economic function, which always distorted reality (Torrance 1995:63).

Marx maintained that the dominant ideology in a society is 'false consciousness', whereby the explanations and expressions provided by the dominant class in society resulted in the acceptance of suppression by the dominated collective. In his view, every society's dominant ideas, positions and concepts are those of the dominant class (Torrance 1995:244-245). Furthermore, the analysis of cultural hegemony, as a system of representations or codes of meaning which are then shared among individuals or groups, will influence said persons based on how they interpret the world. This calls into the question the reflection of media culture as an identity: how does media culture operate as a system of representations which perpetuate cultural hegemony, shaping and maintaining dominant identities through the use of language and symbolic power?

However, alternatively, Marx's postulation is in some respects limited, as it fails to account for the potential ideologies which are not entirely coherent systems of meaning(s). These include the fragmentary forms of communication and taste cultures, which contain contradictions of the dominant perspective. In essence, then, individuals may resist the prevailing views in a society through the creation of their own experiences and meanings of reality, effectively referring to the nature of 'polysemy'. Fourie (2018) posits that polysemy in media culture underscores the richness and complexity of the understanding of media texts, where meaning is not singular or fixed by the original intended meanings proposed for its communication, but rather fluid and shaped by multiple factors, including, but not limited to, interpretations, reception and cultural contexts; this emphasises the dynamic essence of communication in media culture. Such differences can be measured on the basis of critique in meanings which occur in domains such as language, mass media, and cultural practice. Giving considerable scrutiny of Marshall McLuhan regarding media technology as a 'translator', he contemplates Bryson's postulation on the explicitness of technology: that media technology provides clear 'forms of knowing' (1964:56-57). The credibility of these forms of knowing can or indeed should be questioned by the user. McLuhan additionally maintains the position that all media are active metaphors which translate experiences into new forms. This view is substantiated by Lomborg (2013) more specifically in terms of digital media. She considers the sub-group of digital media, known as social media, which are often based on different technologies which are grouped together because they share digital technology and the social purpose in engagement.

Social Media as a Site of Identity Construction

Lomborg emphasises that social media is underpinned by content creation, interaction and experiences – what she terms the 'communicative purpose' of social media. This idea, as practised in genre conventions, constitute the notions or manifestations of form, style and content in recurrent communicative situations or texts (Lomborg 2013:64).

The categories of styles, trends, and narratives portrayed in a particular media platform outline the genre and are therefore a practical means by which to study the media, its texts, and visuals. In these media expressions, texts, and visuals, the user is exposed to a particular ideology and therefore horizon or position from which to experience the particular narrative or content for consumption.

Consequently, the human conscious experience is then subject to being changed by the message's medium, i.e. the symbolic systems of communication through social media which include various tools and conventions that convey meaning beyond just words, such as linguistic text, emoticons, memes, GIFs, and visual imagery among other icons, stickers, and avatars. In line with McLuhan's 'New Media Theory', the knowledge and behavioural expressions of the individual are then challenged, based on exposure to alternative expressions of culture and identity by visual or auditory means. In his *Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Identities and Audiences* Gauntlett (2007) makes the point that creative and visual approaches can be used by audiences to communicate various information. In support of his assessment, we can say that materials and artefacts are used to share insight and understanding. In this way, social media could be considered an approach for creative and visual distribution; this is substantiated by McLuhan, who argues that "personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (1964:8). This reiterates the understanding of new media, its contributions to the field of media studies and the active role which social media maintains in society.

The 'new media' and particularly social media maintains aspects of influence within the human experience of life, in many respects through the power of images and visual media. The Chinese proverb "A picture is worth a thousand words" has some significance here, as I consider the nature of communicative language in social media more closely. This brings to light the questions surrounding media culture as identity. Considering these expressions of communicative purpose, I argue that social media, particularly in its present use and engagement across various societies, is an important arena for identity construction, or rather, identity articulation. While often we associate a person's identity with the nature or the communication (i.e., articulation) of the self, this process of identity development is actually an internal building (i.e., construction) as much as it is external expression, whereby the essential response of others to our identity can lead to reflection, reinforcement, or rethinking of that identity.

Fourie (2018:270) sees media culture as the relationship which defines its nature; by this, I mean that, first, media can be seen and understood as culture, and second, that media can be considered a portrayal of culture. As such media culture includes the activities in which the presented media content could shape individual perceptions about oneself (selfhood), and their communities, as well as their place in a particular society (shared identities). Media culture helps to construct and strengthen shared values, norms, and beliefs, which contribute to overall collective identities. In essence, it is the process through which media can shape our understanding of who we are and how we relate to others across the globe. In his book *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (2009), McQuail brings to light the much-deliberated topic of '*mediated culture*' where, in support of various sociologists and theorists, the notion of media is one medium which reflects and creates the culture.

Communities and individuals are bombarded constantly with messages from a multitude of sources, which highlight particular products, feelings, attitudes, and a sense of what is and what is not important in society. He mentions a number of instances in line with his own research of other theorists to demonstrate the influence of media on culture further, such as the promotions of ideologies in 'conformity', 'modernity' and the 'convergence and homogenisation' of a global culture as a consequence to the media. Additionally, in this discussion of media as a form of culture; we can draw on David Gauntlett's positions in *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction (2nd Edition)* which, when considered alongside the work(s) of Judith Butler among others, provide a comprehensive examination of how media influences and reflects gender identities through use of media expressions, and how these historically have portrayed gender roles, comparable to contemporary portrayals, and how these have changed over time. He examines the impact of these 'popular' media representations on societal perceptions of gender within society. For instance, he motivates that men and women today are believed to be considered equals (2008:3). He further proceeds to indicate various media expressions of his position in context, providing reflections on film, magazines and novels, suggesting that often the dominant narrative expression of the lead role in film for instance, would be male, with typically an attractive supporting lead female (2008:83). Alternatively, Butler's position in her *Excitable speech: a politics of the performative* (1997) is that the nature of language and its impact is strengthened by Althusser's theory of interpellation, which describes the essence of language as the means of allocation of identity and position to a subject (2013:82). For instance, for an individual in this case, she reflects on the common pronunciation by the doctor, who states the gender of a child at birth. Moreover, gender, in her view, is then 'ritualistically repeated'; the effects thereafter are dependent upon the power of the speech which had been enunciated (1997:49). Further, I add that as we are able to recognise popular archetypes for the ideal identity of a male and/or female (as portrayed within the media) we can gain further insight into the comparative nature between the media expression of culture and media as culture. I argue that while practically, perhaps, this relationship between media and culture can be sufficiently understood by the observer, it is important to reflect further on the contextual meaning of such a relationship in depiction.

Furthermore, considering David Gauntlett and Fourie respectively, I suggest that there are some interlinks in the argument; however, this is more notably regarding the view of 'participatory culture', considering the emergence of web 2.0 and therefore the development(s) of social media. This constitutes user engagement, dialogue and the distribution of ideas, content and expression(s). This is reinforced by Gauntlett (2015:43), who indicates that the result of social media is that the individual becomes a part of the conversation. This, in turn, I maintain allows for the connection to potential numerous virtual communities, should the individual choose to be connected. In addition, in the context of social media and the web 2.0. social relations, connections and engagement have marked a revolutionary step in technological and web development, allowing for enhanced capabilities for users to publish and share multimedia content, fostering creativity, and the creation of connections and experiences (Hinton and Hjorth 2019), including globally, to ensure the wide diversity of content potential. Conversely, however, this is also not without consequences: for instance, concerns regarding data privacy, equitable access, and false information. Although Fourie (2018) disagrees with Hinton and

Hjorth's reflection on web 2.0 specifically, and its capabilities, he does share a perspective on social relations and structures through technological establishment. Marshall McLuhan (1964) provides significant reflections and reviews on technological advances (which he refers to as an implosion) considering the transformative impact of electronic media, such as radio, television, and the foundational experiences of the digital age. Further, he highlights that 'new media' create a "global village," which promotes the features of instant communication, and the shrinking of geographical distances.

As I reflect further on the media phenomenon within the sphere of new media, there are three possible critiques of the current developments of media culture as identity. Using supporting research and instances I will provide further clarity on the potential consequences for media culture within new media and virtual communities.

Possible Criticisms of New Media and Media Culture

There are a number of criticisms that could be considered when one thinks about new media and media culture. Noteworthy criticisms include 'false consciousness', echo chambers, and the digital divide as arguments which demonstrate the converse result of new media and media culture within the information society. These theories have been broadly explored by a multitude of theorists and philosophers in the field of media studies and communication science. To start with, Karl Marx's view on 'false consciousness' has led many past and present researchers to reflect on the role of mass media and its relationship with culture, and also the means of media influence over audiences and therefore society as a whole. One of the positions mentioned in respect to Karl Marx's reflections on 'false consciousness' is his 'theory of commodification' mentioned in the writings of McQuail (2009:116), which outlines how exchange values for objects are assigned, as opposed to simply an intrinsic use value. Extending this further, similarly new media artefacts such as texts, images, symbols and ideas are created and sold within media markets as commodities. Media culture is thus produced, purchased and consumed by audiences of particular interests. Consider, for example, the music genres or songs written and sold, the blockbuster films produced and purchased, and the streaming platforms from which to achieve such feats. Adorno and Horkheimer (1979, cited in Gauntlett 2008:24) demonstrate that 'art', also considered as a commodity, is reflected in new media and social media specifically as a cultural commodity. Furthermore, the writers express the view that cultural products within the industry are the same – but specifically in the sense that they mirror the values of the established social system. As regards traditional perspectives, consider, for example, the common depictions of 'heroism' for the male gender and 'submissiveness' for the female gender, such as the classic popular culture examples of masculine portrayals including Peter Parker in Spiderman, Harry Potter and Clark Kent in Superman, and the comparative examples of feminine portrayals including Mary Jane, Hermione Granger, and Lois Lane. These are characters which represent the common traditional values in films' demonstration of the ideal male or female individual in society – a man who notably embodies the values of bravery, selflessness, honesty and determination, to name a few, and a woman who is nurturing, agreeable, and supportive.

Second, criticism of new media and media culture is the echo chamber metaphor described in *Digital Roots: Historicizing Media and Communication Concepts of the Digital Age* (Balbi et al., 2021), as a consequence of the rise of digital media and limitless communication. This has resulted in a loss of the common public sphere and poses a risk to purposive democracy. Moreover, the fragmentation of media audiences and individuals occurs on two levels, (1) the micro-level and (2) the macro-level. From a micro-level perspective, the highlighted concern is that of 'extremism', which, as Amartya Sen argues with reference to religious inquisition in *Identity and Violence* (2006) can result in what is termed 'sects', which can then result in potential hatred and violence towards others, or of an alternative view and identity. Notably, religion is but one arena which could be studied as a reflection of media culture as identity. Others are politics, social norms, and ethnicity, which could be dangerous in any society and grouping, both past and present. This could include the examples of language usage and exclusion of individuals through linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity. In media engagement(s) this could be, for instance, where linguistic determinism can be demonstrated: the concept of "newspeak," In George Orwell's (1949) dystopian novel *1984*, is language which is created by the totalitarian state and carefully controls and limits freedom of thought. The government deliberately provides very abstract words to eliminate the potential possibility of rebellious thoughts, which then illustrates, at least in Orwell's view, how language can be used as a tool to control and constrain thoughts and perception. This in turn could determine how one would interpret and interact in social reality.

Alternatively, from a linguistic relativity outlook, the formation of a particular language influences its speakers' position and worldview, which can then alter cognitive processing (Green 2023). As depicted in the 2016 popular media film *Arrival*, which is a science fiction film directed by Denis Villeneuve, this concept is considered through the story of a linguist, Dr Louise Banks, who takes on the task of deciphering an alien language. As she discovers and uncovers new insights regarding the alien language, her perception of time changes, suggesting that the language one speaks or understands can influence how an individual then experiences the world. Thinking even further in terms of the South African social context, and the relationship between xenophobia and language, language acts as a marker for identity, where in particular regions of the country certain languages like Zulu, Xhosa, and Afrikaans are more or less dominant, which results in distinguishing between those classified as "insiders" and those classified as "outsiders". This can lead to hostility and xenophobia, as languages or dialects are spoken which are different from those of the local majority. Moreover, in media, the employment of terms may excite violence and disdain cross-culturally among groups in society.

From a macro-level perspective, echo chambers in digital media and media culture can result in active separation strategies at a societal and even potential constitutional level, encompassing the political, economic, social, and legal systems of a society. Balbi et al. (2021), in contrast to Sen's (2006) perspective, outline that the rapid cultural exchange and economic integration (in essence through the media and globalisation), can result in fears of cultural erosion, economic displacement, and social fragmentation. Sen's (2006:81-83) analysis and reflection of the consequences of these identity-based fears sustains the view that the cultural groups who feel a sense of cultural threat will attempt to maintain traditional identities by means of ethnocentrism, which can fuel nationalism, xenophobia, and identity-

based conflicts. The perception of losing one's cultural distinctiveness in a homogenised world and global culture leads one to see media culture as an important ground for reflection and can be a robust driving force for identity-based violence. South African culture is influenced by Western media, consumer culture, and global brands which are shared on social media and other new media platforms; which then can lead to the potential for the erosion of local South African-based traditions, languages, and cultural practices, like the Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa and Khoisan cultures, to name a few.

Significantly, research reflects a change in the younger generations, where priority is placed on global culture over indigenous cultures, leading to a loss of their original forms and expressions of cultural identity. This argument is substantiated by Heaven and Tubridy (2003:149), who assert that youth culture in essence refers to the rebellious nature in cultural practices. Furthermore, the youth would be the most likely to embrace in the process of cultural mixing, indirectly contributing to the increase in potential for homogenisation of cultural values and practices, therefore causing potential conflicts and challenging the reproduction of traditional cultural practices, from modes of dress, to language, aesthetics, and ideologies adopted or accepted. The overall consequence of this action is the relative loss of unique traditional identities, leading towards generic shared identities, which currently predominate in Western cultures and ideologies.

Butler (1997) supports this position to a degree, particularly in her reflection on the identity of homosexuality, suggesting that similarly to other identities in the media or otherwise, identity is not something fixed or inherent but rather something that is chosen, performed and constructed through cultural practices. Considering expressive instances of sexual identity representations, behaviours and expressions in social media, cultural hegemonic ideas are challenged, and societal norms are changed, in that these expressions of identity may influence how future expressions of sexual identity are received. As a result, I reason that the very nature of identity, particularly as we consider 'media culture', is fluid, as over time our identities can shift, change, adapt or develop, depending on the culture or cultural trends that exist and that are also represented within social media.

Furthermore, through semiotic analysis, we can more significantly consider how aspects, ideas and expressions of identity (like that of homosexuality) are shaped by the current cultural norms, language, and societal expectations. This has a performative impact of sorts, which indicates that how a particular society understands and therefore treats that particular expression of identity plays a large role in how it is experienced or lived.

Critique of Media Identity and the Media Phenomenon

In studying this media phenomenon through the lens of performativity and semiotics, the derived insights into how the media can shape individual identity, social norms, and power dynamics within a society maintain the focus for philosophical critique. Concerning McLuhan's New Media Theory (1964), the medium of social media is able to alter the human experience, on the levels of identity, interactions and behaviour. Furthermore, I argue that this has created a shift to digital media, where individuals and communities create new environments (of a virtual nature). Performance and meaning-making happen differently, as societies and groups become increasingly connected through social media. This changes

how symbols and signs are communicated and performed, including aspects of frequency and engagement, and altered social roles and identity construction.

This in turn ties into how semiotics and performativity are explored in the accounts of Pieter Fourie (2018) and Erving Goffman (1956) respectively, because media does not just transmit culture; it constitutes it, affecting how individuals perceive themselves and others. Goffman's theory of performance and self-presentation can be linked to McLuhan's thoughts on the media and technology, with how individuals perform their identities on social media platforms. Furthermore, for Goffman, everyday life for individuals can be understood as a series of performances, where they will present themselves differently depending on the context (classified as "front stage" and "backstage" behaviour). Front stage behaviours, I reason, maintain a kind of heightened superficial persona and nature of experience, while backstage behaviours embody a calm and formative influence on the enactment of self. For example, a lecturer or academic, from a front stage perspective, is experienced to be responsible, respectful, polite and approachable – to ensure his or her students believe that they are in an exceptional learning environment and having an authentic tertiary learning experience. On the other hand, after hours, these same lecturers may complain about the same students' academic work and conduct in class.

Critically, in the digital media environment (social media), the platform (medium) shapes these performances. In connection with Goffman's (1956) performativity theory, social media is an effective arena within modern society to explore the nature of media identity and culture. The structure of social media platforms can be seen as the "stage," which in turn influences the individual users of these platforms. This is significant, as individuals and groups in virtual communities tend to craft particular kinds of public performances or personas online, which may not align with their existing private selves. In line with McLuhan's New Media Theory (1964), the medium becomes the message, in the sense that social media platforms will alter how the individual is perceived, through the presented identity. This could be among the user's likes, shares, and curated images, thus making or reinforcing the fluidity of identity. Since this identity is considered to be performative, I would argue it is often then exaggerated for public consumption and appreciation.

Taking into account Judith Butler's position on gender identity, this particular identity additionally maintains its own performative experience across the new media environment, in that these social media platforms have the potential power to enforce and reproduce gender norms and other social identities within a particular society. For Butler (1997), gender identity is something which is performed repeatedly through individuals' actions and language, in line with social expectations and environment. To refer to the early discussions in this chapter on echo chambers, certain identity traits will be represented on social media platforms, which reinforce the existing thoughts, positions and norms of the user. Moreover, according to McLuhan's position, media platforms as such constrain performativity, promoting specific types of gender visibility and ideas (for instance, woman as the housekeeper, man as the professional) while rendering others almost invisible in the society, thus shaping cultural norms through their construction.

As I proceed to engage critically with McLuhan's framework, Foucault's exploration of power and discourse can be seen to connect with McLuhan's notion in the examination of how new media technologies act as tools of surveillance and control (1964).

While I contend that this would depend, in the final instance, on the individual themselves. McLuhan, in support of Foucault's argument, remains clear on the shaping of individual behaviour and societal norms. Foucault argues that power operates through discourse, which defines what is visible, thinkable, and able to be said, in a given society (McHoul and Grace 1995). In the context of media, according to McLuhan, the medium becomes a form of power, regulating what kinds of performances and identities (i.e., messages) are permissible. The media landscape creates a new panopticon, where individuals are essentially constantly visible and subject to surveillance. The medium itself (social media, news outlets, etc.) becomes the tool of discourse, shaping knowledge, identity, and behaviour through controlling what is communicated and seen. On reflection, I argue that we are once again, in line with Turner's concern, under threat of socialisation (except with particular emphasis on the influence and guidance created by social media).

In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Jacques Derrida considers natural language as inherently connected to meaning or meaning construction. Yet he takes this explanation even further, as he illustrates how the written text or linguistic experience is not an objective account of knowledge, or even what the author really meant, but our present interpretation as the reader or observer of the text itself. To Derrida (1967), the process of deconstruction, which is fundamental to understanding, becomes 'so to speak' its own text of the text (Mendie and Udofia 2020 not in refs). To my mind, the nature of linguistic interpretation (sign associations) maintains subjectively unique underpinnings, dependent on its communication context, the observer's frame of reference, and existing experiences. From a social media perspective, in line with McLuhan's idea that the medium mediates how reality and meaning is constructed, and based on the arguments of Derrida (1967:154), meaning is always deferred and dependent on the context in which it appears: "But what is no longer deferred is also absolutely deferred". This suggests that the timing of an observer's or reader's experience plays a crucial role in textual understanding.

Furthermore, meanings structured through social media are constantly shifting due to the hyper-availability of signs and symbols at any given time of engagement. The structure of the medium (for example, the brief nature of tweets, the visual focus of Instagram, or the anonymity of Reddit posting) deconstructs the traditional forms of communication, which cause the breaking down and reorganisation of meanings in fresh and unique ways every time. The structure of social media platforms influences how meaning is interpreted, where symbols can be manipulated, uniquely positioned, repeated, and circulated at a rapid rate, thus contributing to the altering of perceptual reality and culture experienced through media and media identity.

Then finally, in line with Taylor's theory of recognition (1994), McLuhan's new media position focuses on how the media can act as a site for recognition and identity struggle, in that some individuals may feel isolated while others feel overwhelmed by the inherent performative superficial undertaking

that can so often be associated with social media. In his identity argument, Taylor (1989) suggests that the individual identity is constructed through dialogic engagement with others, where individuals are in a quest for recognition of their authentic self (often associated with their personal narrative). I argue that the authentic-self recognition goes beyond that of media identity, in that the media environment, and more specifically social media, stems from the medium as the message for individual recognition. Put differently, the individual's identity is only recognisable as far as his or her social media presence allows for this recognition. Understood as one's personal social media brand, this occurs on two foundational bases, as described by Maxwell and Carboni (2016:2):

- 1) Visibility of your identity (profile) on social media channels – usage.
- 2) How individuals portray themselves through social media – engagement.

To extend this a bit further: use and engagement are often designated by the frequency and the type of content included in the post (2016). In context, the medium can thus shape the type of recognition that individuals receive, as the 'medium is the message', where the constant need for an individual's validation (described by media identity), through likes, comments, and shares, can alter the process of identity formation or construction on social media. Recognition ascribed by performativity in highly public, quantified terms, distinguishes the integral nature of media identity. The medium described by McLuhan (1964) reshapes how individuals are recognised and, therefore, how they in turn form their media identities.

Conclusion

In closing, the critical examination of the various scholarly perspectives, in line with media culture as a facet of identity, has, in particular, provided a substantial basis for enquiry through which McLuhan's New Media Theory has maintained significant value and contribution to the study of media culture as its own identity. This analysis has delved into the essence, function, and effects of digital 'new media' (in particular, social media), while emphasising the performative aspects inherent in its engagement and experience. By inspection of diverse theoretical frameworks and positions within media, culture and media studies, this discourse has highlighted how media culture serves as a tool for identity representation and influences public perception, which can ultimately shape distinct interpretations of reality.

The next chapter concentrates on Gadamer's prejudice and fusion of horizons, and will further elucidate the effective foundations of identity. It aims to establish the sufficient conditions, ideas and realisations through the described developments in experiences of cultural identity and media identity.

Chapter 3: Gadamer's 'Prejudice' and 'Fusion of Horizons'

Introduction

This chapter considers what role prejudice plays in the development and understanding of identity. The focus of this chapter is to build my theoretical foundation for this study through an exploration of Gadamer's concepts of 'prejudice' and 'fusion of horizons'. I use these two foundational concepts as a basis for my reflections and arguments on identity. Furthermore, I engage with the philosophical positions of alternative scholarly work to substantiate my arguments. Firstly, I investigate the background to Gadamer's philosophy. I also draw on other commentaries on Gadamer's work. Secondly, I examine his departure from the tradition of his time. Finally, I consider Gadamer's concepts of prejudice and fusion of horizons in relation to the central argument of this study.

Background to Gadamer's Philosophy

This section explores the philosophical roots that inform Gadamer's ideas and considers the historical thinkers and traditions that influenced the development of his philosophical hermeneutics.² Fundamental to Gadamer's inquiry is the question of how texts, ideas, and traditions from different temporal and cultural orientations influence individual knowledge and understanding. His philosophy draws on the work of earlier philosophers, including Martin Heidegger, Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm Dilthey, Friedrich Schlegel, and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Gadamer's philosophy, inspired by the work of Heidegger, explores the development of human knowledge, particularly how it is situated in context, considering that truth is not methodological, but rather ontological in nature (Heidegger 2010; Gadamer 2013).

Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (2013) examines Heidegger's philosophy and other early philosophers, including Husserl, Dilthey and Schleiermacher. Husserl's (2012) experientialist philosophy considers the study of 'consciousness' from a phenomenological position, which focuses on the nature of consciousness in its raw form, taking the structure of consciousness and purposive experience as its starting point, rather than starting with the objective world of nature. Husserl's reflections on consciousness and his concept of intentionality were brought to bear by Gadamer with his postulation on 'the subjective modes of givenness' (2013:246). This provides a framework in which being-sense (the meaning or the sense of something as it appears in human experience), and all objectivity is viewed as understandable. Husserl's phenomenological work offers a fundamental contribution to Heidegger's positions in *Being and Time* (2010) and later to Gadamer's reflections on philosophical hermeneutics in *Truth and Method* (2013). Husserl's philosophy primarily considers consciousness in its pure, fundamental state and acts as a filter which establishes the limitations of our potential understanding of the world. To him, knowledge is determined by the existing parameters of meaningful thought (Husserl 2012), aimed at developing a pure, rigorous science that seeks to capture knowledge of essence by associating all conditions that may make one's consciousness partial. Conversely, Heidegger (2010) argues that philosophy delves into a deeper layer of thought, preceding

² By philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer intends that the individual human is fundamentally an interpretive being, and that as individuals we cannot but interpret, and we do so all the time.

science and serving as its foundation. While Husserl's primary focus is on developing a science of consciousness, Heidegger is concerned with the ontological position, focused on the concept of 'being'. He rejects Husserl's pursuit of knowledge through essence, arguing that consciousness cannot be separated from the context in which experiences occur (Heidegger 2010). For Heidegger, understanding the nature of being is fundamental, as opposed to Husserl's more abstract search for essence. It is from Heidegger's philosophy of the hermeneutic circle that Gadamer extends his philosophical inquiry into hermeneutic phenomenology, with the development of his theory of philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer 2013), and the concepts of prejudice and fusion of horizons.

Gadamer's (2013) analysis extends beyond Husserl's phenomenology to consider how understanding further encompasses both the interpretation of meaning and the judgements of value within the context of human experience. For example, if time is studied from a rationalist perspective, one would consider it in terms of seconds, minutes and hours, which describes the objective noumenal time that runs at the same speed, regardless of the human experience of it. However, time studied phenomenologically (in line with Gadamer and Husserl), would look at the subjective first-person experience of time. Consider how an experience with a loved one could feel as though time is passing quickly, whereas in a history class, for example, time can be experienced as delayed or slow.

In pursuit of what Gadamer has suggested the nature of understanding is, he provides an in-depth examination of Heidegger's question of the meaning of Being (*Dasein*). Heidegger posits that "Being is the most universal concept" (2010:2–3); 'being' traditionally understood as presence – something that is constantly existing or available in the world. Heidegger critiques this traditionally accepted assumption about the metaphysical, contending rather that this understanding reduces the nature of 'being' to its objectifiable, static and separate essence. He argues that being is not simply limited to what is present before us, but that meaning is formed through engagement.

Heidegger identifies three modes of being (2010:67-78):

1. Presence-at-hand (the mode of being of objects or substances): experiencing an apprehension in things, is to inherently obtain contextualisation for its comprehension. To my mind, as we engage with objects and substances, we come to know them as well as 'the self'.
2. Readiness-to-hand (the mode of being of equipment): regards the experience of the self through the use of gear, resources, or tools.
3. Existence (the mode of being of *dasein*, i.e., human beings): indicative that 'being' advocates its meaning for us and upon us, as indefinability prevents examination. While traditionally this view retains merit, I argue that we come to know 'being' and the self through the context of the other.

Heidegger advocates that the nature of being is more dynamic and relational, and extends to our practical uses and lived experiences (2010). The context of experience broadens the knowledge of being. Thus, for Heidegger, the fundamental principle of hermeneutics is the nature of human existence (being). He regards existence itself as understanding, and that, therefore, to simply live means to understand (2010:23).

Gadamer's philosophy finds its foundation in this notion of understanding, as he reiterates Heidegger's position, and argues that human understanding is shaped by historical and cultural contexts as well as presuppositions (how people, groups or societies interpret each other) (Heidegger 2010, Gadamer 2013). Where Gadamer diverges from Heidegger's philosophy is related to the individual *dasein*, which places emphasis on the solitary process of understanding. Gadamer's philosophy focuses on dialogue and the intersubjective nature of understanding. Furthermore, Gadamer critiques Heidegger's notion of language as the 'house of being', mentioned specifically in his *Letter on Humanism* (Heidegger 1977:193), advocating instead for the communicative and dialogical aspects of language as a medium of understanding. For Gadamer (2013:403–404), understanding is always connected to language. It may be argued that he describes the metaphorical position of hermeneutics as a never-ending conversation, or voices in a quest for understanding. He considers 'consciousness' as always intentional (2013:245), meaning it is directed toward something or someone, and actively interacts with and provides a sense of orientation about the world.

Gadamer further examines Husserl's (2012) phenomenological reduction, and particularly Husserl's theory of 'epoché', which encourages setting aside assumptions about the external world to focus purely on the structures of consciousness. He describes the transcendental ego, which indicates the self that fundamentally must underlie all human thought and perception (Husserl 2012). Husserl further differentiates between two positions (2012:203-210):

1. Noesis (the act of consciousness, that gives character to a thing)
2. Noema (the ideal essence of the character)

These positions highlight how consciousness constructs meaning rather than passively receiving it. Additionally, Husserl's theory of time-consciousness emphasises that our experiences of past, present, and future are ultimately all interconnected, and shapes how we perceive continuity and change over time. Thus, Husserl portrays consciousness as an active, meaning creating and temporally structured process. In my understanding, consciousness is an ever-flowing stream of experiences, where the experiencer (i.e., person or being) will actively and endlessly perceive reality and the events therein, and the meaning of that perception describes value attributed to the lifeworld. Reality is experienced as a continuous chain of events, including the role of language and its interpretation (Gadamer 2013). It is this context which defines the tense and meaning of the text or tradition. Gadamer's departure from traditional hermeneutics was further encouraged by his examination of the methodological focuses of earlier philosophers, such as Dilthey (1988), Descartes (2006), Kant (1785; 1790) and Schleiermacher (1998), who sought to develop a technique or process of human understanding. Gadamer (2013) shifted the focus instead to understanding as an ontological condition of the human experience. Therefore, Gadamer's definition of hermeneutics is inherent in the individual's historical and contextual 'horizons', involving a process of understanding which engages texts and the world subjectively in dynamic dialogue (Gadamer 2013). This shift in focus leads to my inquiry of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which entails a deep reflection of the nature of prejudice as a

foreground to understanding, along with his argument for the fusion of horizons, which describes the pursuit of truth, which, he posits, can be attained by fusing minds or perspectives (2013:317).

Johann Gottfried Herder offers further insights into the central role of language and tradition in shaping human understanding. Gadamer examines Herder's *Philosophical Writings* (2002), which contemplates the notion of historical consciousness from the perspective of time (Gadamer 2013:276). Herder questions whether a person's virtues or iniquities demonstrated in their behaviour, beliefs and views remain relatively consistent through time, or change (for better or worse) (2002:268). He argues that this is not really the true concern of the current thinker, and that, actually, "the human heart has always remained the same in its inclinations, just as the mind has in abilities, and, whatever sorts of angelic or devilish forms people have sometimes wished to imagine in it, has always been only human ..." (2002:268). I argue that Herder's view places importance on the connections of our fundamental innate human nature. He further suggests that our experiences and interpretations are not universal, but rather specific to each historical period and cultural setting (2002:15). However, I would argue that it is our fundamental connection to what it means to be human that opens the door for hermeneutics and interpretation in the first place; without our humanness, we would remain lost in a maze of maybes.

For Herder (2002), cultural and historical relativity plays a significant part in how we formulate historical consciousness; as the interpreter, we can judge and experience something from the standards and perspectives of another time or place. His description of the experience of cultural diversity is more in line with the term 'particularism' (2002:269–270). This, I argue, is based on Herder's view that a culture should be judged on its own merits and not some broadly shared universal standard, and additionally, the consideration of context brings further clarity to the interpreter or experiencer. Herder's (2002) notion of historical consciousness places importance on the progression of ideas, which, as with any inquiry, comes with awareness, experiences of language, ideas and activities, and is shaped by a society's existing or current desires and environment. According to Herder (2002:294–96), this notion promotes the idea that the individual interpreter can relate to and understand the experiences of people from alternative times and cultures. Herder (2002) emphasises the importance of returning to the original meaning of a text, while avoiding the contamination of ideas by the interpreter's views. Conversely, Gadamer critiques this idea by arguing that preconceptions are essential to an individual's understanding (2013), which informs Gadamer's notion of 'prejudice', and particularly the idea that understanding is shaped by the interpreter's temporal and cultural position.

Furthermore, Gadamer draws on Wilhelm Dilthey's concept of *erlebnis* (lived experience), which views understanding as an empathetic engagement embedded within particular social contexts (1988:26). Gadamer expands on this idea by arguing that everything experienced in life is a result of one's consciousness. Dilthey postulates that "in any event ... I can attain the reflexive awareness that [it] ... is there for me in a process of perception, and thus a fact of my consciousness" (1988:26). Here, Dilthey (1988) proposes the unification of the subject and object through 'reflexive awareness' in the process of understanding. Gadamer expands Dilthey's position with his notion of 'temporal distance', which acknowledges that while individuals should be aware of their own preconceived notions, they should remain open to the possibility of genuine understanding (2013:309). Temporal distance, in my view, almost acts as a bridge in the construction of our interpretations. Gadamer's (2013) key

divergence from Dilthey's philosophy is in rejecting Dilthey's fixed view of life and emphasising human experience, historical context, and lived reality.

Dilthey (1988) also criticises metaphysical thinking for failing to account for the historical and experiential foundations of understanding. For Gadamer, though, this is an oversimplification, and he argues more for Hegel's view of phenomenology, which considers a dialectical metaphysical view of life (2013:251–255). Gadamer posits that understanding is obtained through communal and dialogical means, which involves the sharing of individual subjective experiences and the traditions that inform them. Subsequently, the distance that one attempts to bridge is that of two positions inherent in prejudices.

I argue that, beyond the historical and cultural contexts, engagement with a text, while significant, enables us to come to only a partial awareness. Engagement with a text enables one to come to an advanced perspective rather than an ultimate understanding. Humboldt supports this argument in *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species* (2005), where he suggests that language can be understood not only as a tool for communication, but also as a formative grounding that shapes how individuals perceive and interpret their reality. He illustrates his position on language with the elegant statement that “the regularity of language's own structure is akin to that of nature; and in thereby arousing man in the activity of his highest and most human powers, it also brings him closer, as such, to an understanding of the formal impress of nature, since, the latter, too, can after all be regarded simply as a development of mental powers” (2005:61).

Humboldt's work, which also informs Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (2013), considers the unique worldviews embodied and expressed through language. Gadamer further develops this idea, and advocates that language is central to the act of bridging these worldviews (Humboldt 2005; Gadamer 2013). For me, the ability to make sense of alternative realities marks the journey of the truth-seeker. While we may be able to come to some elements of contextual understanding, such understanding may be considered temporary. In this context, as suggested by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, understanding is a dialogical and continual process. Taken further, Gadamer (2013) actually outlines that seeing the world, perceiving the world, and interpreting the world, is already connected with ascribing meaning to what we are seeing as ‘our reality’, which is never separated from language, or, put differently, our life, ‘situatedness’ of life, always makes us perceive the world in a particular way, with a certain tinge or in a certain cast. This could be, for instance, a person's profession, gender or social circumstances, aptitudes, and character, which would prime the individual to experience the world in a certain way.

Additionally, Friedrich Schleiermacher's philosophy, in his work on the biblical interpretation of the author's context and intentions (1998:192–193), laid significant groundwork for Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Schleiermacher's work shed light on the importance of psychological interpretations of the author, as realised in the line in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, “The aim is to understand a writer better than he understood himself” (2013:198), which provided the foundation for modern hermeneutics, as well as Gadamer's development of his theory of philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer critiques Schleiermacher's psychological interpretations, arguing that the interpreter plays an

active role in constructing meaning, and that for a text to be truly understood, one needs to understand the historical and cultural context from which it was written, as opposed to utilising a mere reproduction of the text.

Schleiermacher, as well as Friedrich Schlegel's romanticism, broadens the scope of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics from its typical textual analysis towards the inner dynamics of self (individual intuition) and creativity, and reflects on the intricacies of how we relate parts of our personality to our daily experiences and behaviours; for example, the art of imagination, formulates the expression or application of human creativity in various forms, including, perhaps, written text, pictures, paintings or drawings and poems. These forms of expression allow the self to be explored, understood, and realised within the context of subjective intuition and communal understanding, suggesting that identity emerges through the fusion of personal creativity and inherited meanings among others (Gadamer 2013).

Schlegel's romanticism describes the concept of intuition, which, according to Stone (2005:19), can be experienced within the 'self-forming behaviour' identified within natural and creative experiences available for interpretation. He reiterates the notion of creative judgement in search of the individual ideal of every work (Eichner 1957). Significantly, Schlegel's position has affinities with Gadamer's emphasis: that understanding is a dialogical and continual process of interpretation. The intersubjective essence of understanding supports Schlegel's critique of Immanuel Kant's objective truth (1988). Schlegel argues that the suggestion of any conscious intention to arrive at an objective, determinate truth is fallible, as this will "block the essential insights into the nature of truth", as this intention results in the subject-object fixation, resulting in a single conclusion, therefore reducing the opportunity for creative capacity and resulting in a "lifeless world" (Bowie 1997:67). For Schlegel, "all truth is relative", "all philosophy is infinite" and "all knowledge is symbolic" (Schlegel 1991:92–3).

It is worth mentioning here that the Aristotelian concept of 'phronēsis' (practical wisdom), effectively underpins Gadamer's philosophy, since it focuses on the intersection of shared knowledge and practical experience in the pursuit of human good. Such a reflection entails the ability to determine what shared knowledge is available and significant within a given circumstance, to attempt to make the right decisions and judgements to act (Duvenage 2015). However, I would argue that the result of such an action is not without awareness of intent, which is presupposed with other virtues.

The development of Gadamer's theory of philosophical hermeneutics is thus informed by a thorough analysis of Heidegger's existential philosophy (2010), Herder's historical relativity (2002), Dilthey's lived experience (1988), Humboldt's linguistic perceptions (2005), Schleiermacher's psychological interpretations (1998) and Schlegel's creativity (1991). However, it is necessary to further examine the ways in which Gadamer departs from traditional philosophies when developing his theoretical contributions.

Gadamer's Departure from Tradition

Gadamer's work primarily breaks away from the Enlightenment tradition of philosophy, which is built on the foundations of rationalism and centres on the pillars of reason, individualism, universalism, secularism, and scepticism, among others. This departure marks an intellectual and cultural shift within modern societies. Gadamer's 'philosophical hermeneutics', which entails an inquiry into the nature of

interpretation for fundamental human understanding, fuels his theorisations on language and reciprocal dialogue (an integral feature for the formulation of individual and group understanding or experience). Encouraged by the work of Schleiermacher, Gadamer views speech and text as an expression of artistry (the art of understanding), where the interpretation of speech, for example, describes a kind of rebuilding of a creation (2013:194).

In the course of his separation from tradition, Gadamer critiques three main philosophical ideas:

René Descartes's philosophy (2006) of Cartesian subjectivism stems from the idea that the individual human self is the only real subject within the worldly experience of life, and that alternative objects are crafted by the human mind. His famous quote, "*Cogito, ergo sum*", which translates to "I think, therefore I am" (2006:16), outlines the modern archetype of scepticism. Descartes (2006) questions how we as individuals know what we know. He offers the framework of 'methodic doubt', which enables the individual to examine each belief separately to determine the truth through means of rational, objective inquiry. However, Gadamer argues that while Descartes's philosophy provides insight into modern epistemology, it cannot study the complexities of the human experience and historical consciousness as long as the subject and object remain separated.

Significantly, Immanuel Kant's (1785) formalism regards morality as a constant throughout the human experience. His philosophy and approach toward ethics posits that moral actions are determined by the structure of the moral judgement, rather than by the content and context of the principle guiding the action and judgement. His notion of categorical imperatives suggests that individuals can look at a particular idea guided by the two main formulations of the categorical imperative. The universalisability principle maintains that a principle of action should be chosen and kept for any and all similar situations (1785:31). Therefore, for Kant, if the principle of an action is immoral, it is often self-destructive. From my perspective, this could be, for example, the act of lying; if performed, this could become acceptable for everyone, and eventually trust and communication would break down, losing their meaning. Second, the humanity principle maintains that the treatment of a person (self or others) should uphold dignity and worth, where they are treated as their own autonomous beings (1785:38–39).

Gadamer (2013) critiques Kant's stringent divisions between the noumenal and phenomenal realms, and his attempt to universalise the conditions of knowledge. Gadamer (2013) reinforces the importance of the historically conditioned nature of understanding and interpretation for individuals or groups. I argue that, for Gadamer, the divergence lies in his emphasis on openness and his subsequent theory of fusion of horizons, which breaks away from the radical conditions sustained by Kant.

Third, the Hegelian absolute knowledge is a philosophical system derived from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1998), which considers the spirit's quest for pure existence, sustaining that consciousness evolves over time, traditionally from empirical awareness to absolute knowledge. Reflecting on Hegel's and Gadamer's sustained dialogical progression of understanding, they both support the idea that each stage of consciousness is overcome and perseveres, except as it relates to Hegel's philosophy of thought and the knowing experience. Contrary to Gadamer (2013), Hegel (1998) posits that thought is genuinely objective, that it transcends individuality in experiences and being, and that it is the determination of things as they are in themselves. For Gadamer (2013), however, we do not exist within a closed horizon, nor do we exist

within a unique horizon; furthermore, we must reject the assumption of absolute knowledge, which would suggest that shared common understanding through a universal history can be articulated within a single horizon. Gadamer also challenges scientific notions of objectivism and truth. According to Gadamer (2013), the pursuit of objectivity in truth, described as an activity to “forget oneself”, is not possible, as we are unable to remove ourselves from our broader context – for instance, our background history, culture, gender, language, education and more – to a fresh and different set of attitudes, beliefs and ways of thinking.

To further examine how understanding is garnered within a conversation or dialogue, it is helpful to consider Heidegger's philosophy (2010). Inspired by Heidegger's theory of the 'hermeneutic circle', Gadamer reflects on how, through engagement in dialogue, we can begin the journey of understanding other cultures and traditions. Martin Heidegger theorised on the hermeneutic circle in his book, *Being and Time*, originally published in 1927, which characterised the relationship between an interpreter and a text; how the interpretations of the particular text in question can be perceived as a process of continual exchange of ideas or, more accurately, a dialogue between the object and the interpreter. Furthermore, Cushing (2020), Fehér (2016) and Tracey (1996), all support Gadamer's explanation (2013), that interpretation and experience are interconnected within the communication process. According to Gadamer, when the interpreter questions the text or tradition, they should remain open to the queries and responses presented by the text. Thus, the process is a two-way, interactive process in what Gadamer describes as a 'play' – the conversation between perspectives or orientations.

However, the phenomenological experience of reflection is established, whereby the individual may contemplate and analyse the presented perspectives, described by the facing of challenges or tensions of their existing ideas. This engagement further encourages them to reinterpret the various meanings of words, texts, or beliefs experienced, which ultimately expands the interpreter's existing level of understanding. Notably, the experience in dialogue with the text or tradition will need the interpreter to bring to bear their established presuppositions (Gadamer 2013). Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics maintains that human life is about continually interpreting the world. The relationship between thought and language is formulated through their historical connection to the past, and thus, for Gadamer, our thoughts and questions of the modern world emerge based on historical tradition.

Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (2013) evaluates the existing societal notions of *vorurteile* (prejudice). While Gadamer (2013) does not think that we should uncritically accept the judgements and ideas handed down to us by tradition, he does, however, maintain that the judgements that we find pre-given are part of our cultural heritage and experience, which can provide a positive basis for our intellectual horizons in the present. In this view, philosophy and truth unfold as a dialogue and interplay with the past. Furthermore, from a tradition and heritage perspective, the prejudices of individuals and groups are shaped by sociocultural approaches and are subject to becoming altered through interaction with others (Lawn and Kean 2011:142). Thirdly, Gadamer (2013) positions the linguistic and conceptual frameworks of the individual or collective at the forefront, due to their influence on our pre-understandings, where the individual both uncovers and interprets what is implicit in how they think about the world, and takes up and renews what still speaks to them from across temporal distances.

Gadamer's discussion of the finitude of being human stems from his insistence on the practical nature of hermeneutics rooted in human existence, which he maintains is always communal and thus dialogical in the quest for understanding (2013:474).

As much as Gadamer's work contemplates the traditional sphere of engagement through historical text and positions, he advocates for an openness to the potential for enhanced understanding. Gadamer's consideration of ethics comes to life through dialogue, in that the exposure and contemplation of opposing positions, equally measured alongside one's own perspective, enables, in his view, a reciprocal translation of the other's position (i.e., conversation of ideas) (2013:405). Likewise, the hermeneutic life is an ongoing, never-ending process of engagement with the world. In relation to community experience through language, the development of understanding calls for a sense of willingness of both participants in dialogue to hold space for something else to emerge (2013: xvi). Once perspectives have been articulated through language, we may gain further knowledge and connection, thereby developing increased harmony with others. Furthermore, in relation to comparatives in perspectives, Gadamer similarly posits that "these physical analogies are taken over in the mental 'seeing' we call 'insight' (*einsicht*) and in phrases like, 'you see what I'm saying'. Because this insight is something that is not under our control, we say it 'happens' (*geschehen*): an idea 'occurs' to us" (2013:xvii).

I take particular interest in Gadamer's position on prejudice and what informs prejudice, along with the notion of the fusion of horizons. These concepts provide a valuable theoretical foundation for my research on how individuals and groups in society experience and understand ideas and the interpretation of their current realities experienced through social media. From a modern perspective, social media can be considered as comparable to religious texts and historical traditions of old, in that these forms of expression maintain a communicative purpose. Social media similarly provides an account of observed events, first-hand or otherwise, the same as these historical or religious texts. Furthermore, both have a grounding in shared beliefs, rituals and a sense of community. Thus, communicative purpose and interpretation of positions, perspectives and events leads me to consider Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, and, more importantly, his notions of prejudice and fusion of horizons, as significant in examining the possible fusibility of cultural identity and media identity.

From a historical standpoint, Gadamer's position thus carves a path between approaches to philosophical history that see themselves as seeking to understand the past on its own terms without reference to present-day philosophical concerns and those approaches that mine the history of philosophy for arguments and solutions. This can provide insight into contemporary problems without considering the historical genesis of these philosophical problems. From a Gadamerian perspective, both types of approach sever the living connection between the philosophical past and the present at the heart of any genuine philosophical project. His theory of philosophical hermeneutics suggests that the interpreter of the experience, and their existing prejudice, remains the *terminus a quo* (point of origin) from which all understanding may be reached (1976:xiv).

Gadamer's philosophical analysis of the field of hermeneutics is based on critical research into the kind of understanding which takes place in the '*geisteswissenschaften*' (humanities) and contemplates the broader processes of knowledge experienced everywhere in human existence

beyond simply the critical interpretations of experience and scientific self-control. In *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (1976), Gadamer describes philosophical hermeneutics as grounded in the ontological position as opposed to the methodological position. Gadamer's inquiry seeks to provide clarity on the conditions underpinning all modes of understanding. He considers events of experience and understanding as essentially independent of a person's control. Effectively, the major question of hermeneutics is "not what we do or what we should do, but what happens beyond our willing and doing" Gadamer (1976:xi). I maintain that Gadamer perceives philosophical hermeneutics as a mode of understanding that transcends traditional methods of interpretation in the real world and considers the process of interpretation to be a dialogical and ongoing process of understanding, specifically rooted in context, empathy and solidarity, respect and responsiveness, as well as history and tradition (prejudice or pre-understandings). It is within the context of this evolution of Gadamer's thought that we should examine more closely his key concepts of prejudice and fusion of horizons that is central to this study.

Prejudice in Gadamer's Philosophy

In *Truth and Method* (2013), Gadamer argues that the conditions involved in the process of overcoming prejudice include maintaining the awareness of one's own existing prejudices in the self-recognition and acknowledgment of one's pre-understandings of particular texts, events, or otherwise. He posits that prejudice is a necessary grounding for understanding. For Gadamer, presupposition always informs and guides human experience (2013:291), and with this, the consideration of individual existing prejudice forming an essential aspect to understanding the self and others. Gadamer (2013) postulates that an openness to the other sustains a positive engagement with diverse perspectives, viewpoints, texts, or experiences of alternative orientations, while still considering the temporality and historical perceptions from which to understand historically infused existing prejudices.

As Gadamer (2013) redefines prejudice in a positive sense, he indicates how a person is able to come to their understanding of an event, text or object through the pre-existing base (historical context) from which to begin interpretation. Prejudices are not merely biases but also the inherited understandings informed by our traditions, which then guide our interpretation of the world and our experiences (Gadamer 2013). This is supported by former statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke (quoted in Holston 2014), who asserts that prejudice is a tool for ready application when required. According to Burke, prejudice prepares the individual and their mind towards a clear path of wisdom and virtue, while not leaving them hesitating during the moments where decisions need to be made (quoted in Holston 2014). I would argue that an immediate comprehension, often expressed through prejudice in an experience, event, or position, and quite often understood stereotypically, is myopic and can be considered a limitation on the human experience. In my understanding of Gadamer's astute postulation on prejudice, these presuppositions help to form the base of our understanding, which then paves the way for the pursuit of truth and reason.

According to Gadamer (2013), prejudice, understood as a kind of fore-projection, should be constantly revised as experienced through dialogue. He argues that what emerges is an open and shared understanding through dialogue, which creates a deeper level of knowing and solidarity

among individuals and communities. Greater meaning in human existence may be gained from extended interpretations of and openness to alternative worldviews (for example, experienced through social media). According to Gadamer (2013:276), to state that one should go beyond prejudice is the greatest prejudice of all. He states that “the overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will itself prove to be a prejudice, and removing it opens the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only our humanity but also our historical consciousness” (2013:276).

Additionally, the reality of an individual’s historical consciousness is what constitutes their prejudice, as the past affects the present, which particularly informs an essential part of their ability to reason. As such, philosophical hermeneutics, to my mind, can almost be described as a ‘dance’ between perspectives, transitioning through different levels of understanding (whole to part, and then back to a whole understanding once more). This back-and-forth flow is why I would argue that it is a kind of ‘dance’. As Heidegger (2010) argues, an individual can come to understanding only through their way of being in the world. This is often tied to time, which then limits understanding. Thus, only once the being (*dasein*) can question their existence are they able to grasp meaning. When the *dasein* engages with its own temporal nature, it is in this temporal distance that we may describe an effective condition which establishes true understanding.

Before the Enlightenment, prejudice (*vorurteil*) is meant to have a particular judgement (*urteil*) that is provided before all the elements that determine the situation have been completely examined. The example that Gadamer provides is that “in the procedure of the judiciary, the administration of justice (*verfahren der Rechtssprechung*) a ‘prejudice’ is a provisional legal verdict [*vorentscheidung*] before the final verdict [*endurteil*] is reached” (2013:83). After the Enlightenment, individuals and societies alike began to attach a negative connotation to the meaning of prejudice, considering it to constitute a ‘false judgement’. While prejudice can include either a positive or negative implication, Gadamer (2013:289) highlights in *Truth and Method* two main kinds of prejudice: 1) Legitimate prejudices: those which constitute human understanding beyond one’s own reasoning (guided by the consideration of authority). This is prejudice which leads to deeper knowledge and truth. 2) Illegitimate prejudices: those which are often due to hasty misjudgements from one’s own reasoning that either lead to an error or not, depending on the circumstances. This prejudice results in misunderstanding.

The application of these two kinds of prejudice in cultural and media identity will be critically examined in Chapter 4. This process of examining one’s horizons, expressed by culture and tradition, takes shape in the present through dialogue with the past, where we can then uncover and interpret what inherent knowledge about the world exists, and alternatively how we could refresh what remains experienced across temporal distance. Gadamer (2013) challenges tradition and methods, though he does not reject methodology outright, in that he uses the method of ‘conceptual history’ within his inquiry to critique and reconstruct the history of concepts and therefore repurposes the meaning of terms.

In his examination of tradition, language and historical understanding, Gadamer (2013) firstly critiques the idea of historicism, which indicates that we are completely determined by our history.

Instead, he argues that we are shaped by historical consciousness but not limited by it. He stresses the importance of recognising our own finitude and temporality in the process of understanding. He describes four fundamental 'guiding principles of humanism': "*bildung*," "*sensus communis*," "judgement" and "taste" (Gadamer 2013, quoted in Fehér 2016:281). Considering the arguments I explored in Chapter 1, by Taylor (1989) and Turner (1978) on identity and the self, culture and collective identity, one can critically analyse the understanding of the concept of identity and identity formation in connection with these principles.

Bildung, translated as 'the process of formation', is understood by Gadamer (2013) as culture. Indicates the profound intellectual transition of the individual and provides a foundational framework from which the process of interpretation takes place and furthers identity and self-formation. To me, as supported significantly by the philosophical critique of socialisation and the nature of culture (individual and shared), Gadamer (2013) and Turner (1978) describe learning or education as the means of understanding the self or one's reality through culture and tradition. Notably, Gadamer highlights the significance of this concept of *bildung* through the several descriptions including:

Bildung as cultural education, informed by specific historical and social contexts, the individual and group inheritance of identity, will guide their experiences and cultural worldviews and expressions, while developing their capacity for engagement regarding shared, universal human values and traditions (2013:9–13). Additionally, for Gadamer (2013), *bildung* as play and openness to experience considers an honest reflection of, and about cultural knowledge to be within the continual process of development. The individual comes to know themselves through shared human character, and the consideration of 'the other', and 'mindedness,' which usually advances in the form of self-articulation described through language (2013:11–14). Initiated by an individual's transition from the ethical life of the family to the ethical life of civil society (from individual to collective) (Stojanov 2018), the experience of this transition will elevate the individual awareness of self. The intersection of experience and act is discovered through an openness to alternative perspectives and the process of continual learning and development through dialogue.

Furthermore, in my perspective, reflection is considered as a kind of self-renewing and self-sustaining process of engagement, characterised by a free interaction between positions or perspectives (often between the subject and the object of knowledge) that ensures that meanings are not forced but naturally occur in the progression toward understanding. The cultural experience of social media shows how individuals interpret the digital engagements of others, or try to figure out the meaning of posts or threads and then choose to adapt or restore to their original state or orientation. In terms of one's identity formation, the personal, cultural and social experiences learned or formulated (i.e., *bildung*) maintain significance in the understanding of both cultural identity and media identity.

The philologist's world of experience and his 'Being-toward-the-text' that I have foregrounded are only an example and field of illustration for the hermeneutic experience that is woven into the whole of human practice. Within it, clearly, understanding what is written is especially important, but writing is only a late and therefore secondary phenomenon. In truth, hermeneutic experience extends

as far as does reasonable beings' openness to dialogue, discourse or interchange of ideas (2013, 568).

Finally, *Bildung* as an ethical formation guides cultivation of human moral virtues through spirited encouragement of open dialogue, allowing for variation in conditions and contexts (Gadamer 2013; Herder 2002). The underlying essence of moral character needs to be relevant to existing or contemporary societies. I posit that this could be applied to digital citizenship, for example, which is classified traditionally by the responsible and ethical engagement within virtual communities, further described by the following characteristics: respectful (being positive and helpful to others), educated (using good judgement) and protective (ensuring human dignity, safety and self-determination)

By extension, this understanding of *bildung*, as I comprehend it, is about becoming a reflective individual who extends themselves beyond their typical sense of bias and understanding of the world classified by technical or specialised knowledge, shifting the focus more to a balanced experience of personal development and communal responsibilities. In this regard, Gadamer argues that "moral commonality involves relating necessity to unconditional moral imperative, and the freedom to unconditional will; both are expressions of moral power by which the individual belongs to the moral sphere" (2013:214). Understanding and interpretation of experiences connects the individual egoic self to the moral commonalities themselves. According to Gadamer (2013:217) these can include, for instance, family, people, state, and religion.

The construction of experiences and the narratives of the self, the role of culture and traditional practice, all provide an effective foundation for the development of individual and group historical consciousness (Gadamer 2013). As we learn and adopt unique ways of thinking and being (within our cultures), we are able as individuals to draw from preceding knowledge and awareness, from which we then evaluate and compare new experiences. Considering Gadamer's notion of *bildung*, I argue that through remembrance of the past, we can better understand the present and, furthermore, use our existing knowledge to construct more positive and uplifting futures. The individual experiences their current historical cultural prejudice alongside another's, to which true and authentic interpretation abide. Gadamer describes this as "the definition of mind as recognition of oneself in the other being, and we may ask wherein lies the difference that the historical worldview asserted ..." (2013:230). This practice, in my view, is a kind of skill or art form, where the individual transitions from involvement to practice. From this area, upon review and recognition of oneself and others' perspectives, positions and arguments, the individual's horizon is tested based on their existing prejudices (2013:317). As a consequence, the individual will either maintain their existing view, as their presuppositions would be reinforced by their experience, or an entirely new horizon of significance will be formed, based on the fusing of minds or perspectives.

These characteristics of *bildung* help to formulate an individual's perspective, an idea supported by Gadamer (2013), while simultaneously reinforcing our existing presuppositions regarding new experiences, texts and events. Regarding Gadamer's second guiding concept of humanism, which informs our prejudice and the openness to the fusion of horizons, is *sensus communis* (common sense). Notably, this concept outlines that individual understanding, which is typically historical and traditional, develops from belonging to a particular community. Furthermore,

Gadamer asserts that acting appropriately in a community or knowing how to act appropriately in a community forms an important experience of *sensus communis* (2013). Described by Henri Bergson as the 'social sense' of an individual, *sensus communis* is understood within a social setting. However, more than this, Bergson considers this to relate to a person's heart (Sholl 2012), which entails their ability to grasp ideas and experiences with the heart beyond just the cold, mechanistic or mental experience (i.e., the mind).

This further links to the previous notion of *bildung*, which is often experienced in connection to or in unison with *sensus communis*, whereby as individuals we are effectively socialised (from childhood), to understand how to act appropriately according to a social context (Gadamer 2013), an idea that is as supported by Turner (1978) in his reflections on culture. In my understanding, *sensus communis* is what enables us as individuals and groups to behave according to commonly accepted patterns, experiences, values, and beliefs of being. This is supported by the argument made by Lord Shaftesbury in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711 not in refs), where he describes common sense as a foundational moral intuition shared by all rational individuals in a society, characterised by moral sensitivity, in order to identify and appreciate virtue, beauty, and harmony.

Further, the notion of 'tactful' describes a behaviour understood as appropriate without always directly talking about something. I would argue that this is very similar to the cultural notion of 'saving face', whereby in certain communication contexts a person is able to preserve a connection or relationship by, for example, maintaining the right amount of distance from a topic, subject or issue that may arise in a particular social setting. Intertwined in the development of community, this concept of *sensus communis* aligns with and simultaneously brings forth the other guiding principles of *bildung*, judgement and taste identified by Gadamer (2013), thereby providing a foundation to his method of clarifying the meaning of concepts through the comprehension and reconstruction of their history.

The remaining two guiding concepts of humanism, judgement, and taste are significantly interlinked with each other. In line with the arguments of Kant (1790), there is a tradition in philosophy that effectively devalues the role of subjective judgement. This in turn separates the process of judgement from the belonging to a particular community and replaces this concept of judgement with the notion of taste, otherwise described as 'artistic intuition'. But even then, for Kant, taste is not only subjective to a particular individual or group. For Kant (1790: xxii-xxv), taste is considered a communal type of agreement based on sensorial grounds, an idea significantly extended by Gadamer (2013) as something he considers entwined with truth.

In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant argues that judgement and taste are essential for grasping beauty, as well as for making sense of the world around us. Moreover, he explains judgement as having two forms: Firstly, determinant judgement, which may be described as the application of existing rules or ideas to specific events or experiences, thereby fundamentally fitting certain aspects into shared laws or common practice and interpretations. This is opposed to the second form of judgement, reflective judgement, which describes circumstances of no pre-existing experiences, where the mind must, therefore, formulate new and original concepts or definitions to

understand and interpret what is being perceived. I would argue that these notions of judgement and taste provide significant points of reflection when evaluating current social media trends, posts, texts, and other engagements. However, Gadamer (2013), in relation to this argument, considers that language is fundamental for the process of interpretation and understanding. To this point, when applying Gadamer's philosophical critique, judgement and taste cannot be understood if language is not used as a mode of articulation and experience. Furthermore, the assessment of taste as a reflective type of judgement, while commonly understood as subjective and immediate in its experience of beauty, particularly describes a more personal interpretation (individual perception) of an event or sensation. Additionally, taste can be shared across communal societies and group settings and standards of appreciating beauty in the world.

Transitioning from these guiding principles of humanism and the foundations of Gadamer's conception of prejudice, I consider Gadamer's philosophy of the 'fusion of horizons' (*horizontverschmelzung*) as an integral theoretical framework for this study. This philosophy highlights, firstly, the merging of individual and cultural horizons; secondly, the dialogue between past and present, as well as the temporal and spatial dimensions; and thirdly, how this enables enhanced understanding and interpretation.

Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons

Gadamer describes the idea of 'horizon' as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (2013:313), which, in my understanding, could include an individual's sense of belonging through their existing cultural perspective, experiences and prejudices, as well as their media perspective as interpreted through social media. Gadamer (2013) extends this concept further, postulating that 'to have a horizon' implies that an individual is able to see beyond their current limited (subjective) view. Secondly, he presents the key notion of 'fusion', which illustrates the melding of minds to create a new understanding. Gadamer argues that understanding is not simply a methodical or technical skill, but rather an experience that is shaped by the 'fusion of horizons' between the interpreter and the text (or object of understanding).

Moreover, to obtain an 'informed horizon', or, as Gadamer puts it, a horizon of interpretation, an openness to the fusion of horizons is required (2013:415). The finitude of being human requires the ascension from the self toward the possibilities of the other (Gill 2015). Within this reflection, I support the idea that the meeting of perspectives or frames of reference, a communication-based practical outcome of investigation, can only be obtained based on *dasein's* genuine, conscious pursuit of truth. Significantly, historical context, according to Gadamer, forms a cornerstone to the practice of interpretation, with both the interpreters and/or the object maintaining their own historical positioning. Gadamer thereby acknowledges that we as the individual (interpreter) bring our prejudices (or pre-judgements) to the process of interpretation, influencing the understanding (Dominic and Ani 2017).

The concept of 'historical situatedness' is a guiding principle that describes an individual's ability to embrace differences in perspectives, and the willingness to embrace change and evolve from the original horizon (Gadamer 2013). With the acknowledgement of 'thou' in the process of experience, Gadamer (2013) sustains the value of communicative interpretation that stems from

Martin Buber's existential philosophy in *I and Thou* (2004). Gadamer suggests that an understanding in conversation between perspectives transcends the mere subject-object analysis, but rather sees this as an engagement of two contributors that influences each respective position, thus allowing for the possibility of a revelation of deeper insights and truths beyond isolated perspectives.

Significantly, Gadamer brings forth the notion of 'fusion of horizons', which he considers as an occurrence of encounters with alternative viewpoints, traditions or experiences (2013). This includes a continual dialogue distinguished by open, receptive, and reciprocal approaches to communication, or, at least, the space that enables such expression.

However, what are the opportunities provided by the fusion of horizons? Gadamer argues that openness provides the potential for shared understanding (2013:306). Moreover, this may provide the interpreter who is in dialogue the potential for a fresh worldview that could allow for advanced interpretation of reality, beyond the original orientations, or, as noted by Knotts (2014), as an extended state of enhanced comprehension and understanding resulting from an open state of being explicitly distinguished and then returning to fusion. In my view, this dynamic melding of existing experiences with former experiences concurrently maintains fundamental presuppositions that are significant in the formation and growth of oneself, where each position, past and present, becomes prime for testing, which makes way for enhanced understanding and reason. The engagement between two different perspectives enables the formation of a new and deeper level of interpretation (in a quest for the absolute truth), even if it is inevitably unattainable due to the continual nature of understanding itself.

Practical development through dialogue and subjective engagement significantly provides for the potential merging of individual and cultural horizons. This process of the fusion of horizons, while most times imaginative or intuitive, encourages the integration of new perspectives, simultaneously assisting in the refinement of what one holds to be true and good yet enlarging the existing space for understanding. According to Gadamer (2013), the existing understanding of the individual involves acknowledgment of the historical distance between the past and present, while recognising that our interpretations cannot truly be purely historical. This is suggested by the passage: "The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being" (Gadamer 2013:289).

The finitude of the self, in effect caught in the confines of one's present prejudice, simultaneously provides us with an opportunity and a challenge, as we seek to test the possibilities of potential unknowns to the perspective currently held, thus giving birth to a potentially novel contribution entirely through theoretical spatial bridging and the critical melding of minds. It is impossible to remove oneself and one's existing prejudices from any interaction, dialogue or engagement (Gadamer 2013). Furthermore, Gadamer reiterates that maintaining an openness to alternative interpretations, language and imagination is a part of developing one's horizon – i.e., the fusion of horizons. Therefore, I would argue that the aim for any encounter between perspectives should be to simultaneously preserve our existing individual and cultural horizons, while still remaining

enthusiastic about potential alternative worldviews and positions, for the purpose of knowledge enhancement and the pursuit of truth. This, in turn, should lead to a genuine ethical dialogue.

Moreover, in line with Gadamer (2013), and Taylor (1989) explored earlier, I argue that what exists now as our horizons are ultimately informed by our past, our cultures, languages and traditions. Further engagements with 'the other' will provide us, as the interpreter, with a more informed understanding of our own reality and 'the self', acknowledged by the label known as our identity.

But ultimately, it is the unknown that enables one to truly investigate the nature of 'the self'. As we consider the alternative horizons or positions presented to us throughout our existence and experiences of life, we can, at least in part, journey closer toward the understanding of 'the other', and in so doing 'the self'. This idea is supported throughout Taylor's inquiry into selfhood and his 'theory of recognition' (1989; 1992) explored in previous chapters in this study, which is but a part of the whole picture I wish to paint. In light of Gadamer's philosophy on 'the fusion of horizons' and his dialogical ethics (2013), I postulate that a more enhanced level of understanding regarding oneself may be achieved.

Conclusion

This chapter has primarily focused on examining Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical positions on prejudice and fusion of horizons', alongside the supporting viewpoints in Charles Taylor's philosophy of selfhood and Richard Turner's understanding of socialisation, among others, to consider the further conditions for understanding identity.

The philosophical foundations of Gadamer's prejudice and fusion of horizons, outlined within this chapter, will be considered in the practical development of Chapter 4, using philosophical critique from existing theory, as a means of setting the stage for the review. The cultural and media identity elements examined within theoretical accounts of social media will be critiqued, with the central aim of determining the possible fusibility of horizons in reflection of these two distinct identities: cultural identity and media identity.

An in-depth philosophical critique of existing social media research that potentially enables greater preservation of cultural identity through the philosophical formulation of a social media moral framework is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Cultural Identity and Media Identity: Fusible or Infusible?

Introduction

This chapter follows the themes raised in Chapters 2 and 3, namely cultural identity, media identity, and the possibility of their fusibility. Considering the theoretical positions described by the frameworks philosophised by Gadamer (2013) and Taylor (1989), my critical analysis considers Gadamer's 'Prejudice' and 'Fusion of Horizons' alongside Taylor's sense of self, through his theory of modern selfhood and identity. The goal of this chapter is to ascertain from a philosophical standpoint whether cultural identity, on both an individual and collective basis, is under potential threat considering this new media phenomenon, with emphasis on the theoretical proposition of 'New Media Theory', as outlined by McLuhan (1964). Reflecting on existing social media research, the possibility of the fusibility of cultural and media identities amid the prejudices they embody is engaged. This research describes the effects of social media on cultural identity by considering media identity.

Considering the overall aim, to either support or reject the fusibility of horizons in cultural identity and media identity, the progression of individual (personal) cultural identity and the potential threats evoked by the current social media performativity impressions are explored by considering the effects on identity regarding personal narratives, personality, and impressions. Secondly, this chapter explores the collective base of cultural identity, marking the considerable threats of social media societal impressions that affect collective identities, which include shared values, traditions, and labels. Thirdly, this chapter is concluded by philosophising the possibility of the fusibility of cultural and media identities, while considering the existing prejudices regarding identity. Finally, the development of this chapter allows for reflection and awareness towards the improved potential preservation of individual or group cultural identity through identified effects, and for the reflective guidance towards my proposed philosophical social media moral framework.

Cultural Identity: Individual and Collective Identity

Considering some of my earlier examinations of culture, in time, individuals learn and adopt unique characteristics that make up who they are. Individuals are socialised into a particular understanding of who they are and how they can relate to concepts, ideas, social structures, and groups within a society. As described through the explorations of primary works in Taylor (1989), Turner (1978), Tylor (1871) and Nielsen (1987), the following dimensions, including the set of beliefs, values, practices, and traditions, reflect the nature and understanding of what I theorise 'cultural identity' to be in this study. Additionally, cultural identity from a micro- and meso-perspective examines identity from two major positions, namely 1) individual identity and 2) collective identity.

Individual identity considers the personality traits, personal narratives, and impressions of an individual, outlined effectively in Taylor's philosophy of 'self-identity' and 'horizons of significance', which involve the pursuit of personal fulfilment through the concept of 'the self' and its potential evolution. These are significantly underpinned by an individual's experiences, relationships, values, and moral beliefs (1989:27). Secondly, collective identity designates the collective sense of belonging, shared

values, traditions, and symbols that define a particular group or community (Turner 1978). Each dimension of cultural identity described can be used to evaluate the nature of and effects on cultural identity, considering social media research.

Taylor (1989) posits that the identity of 'the self' is what describes self-identity or individual identity. He further theorises that what determines the individual as a 'self' is based on what is significant for the individual. However, this can only be expressed through means of language, by which we come to acceptance as a reasonable articulation of things or experiences (1989:34). Taylor proceeds to argue that "[o]ne is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it" (1989:35). Furthermore, 'the self', as described by Taylor (1989), is realised through what he terms "interlocutors", which could be an individual's position on moral and spiritual affairs relative to a particular central community (1989:35-36). I argue in this study that identity is in a consistent state of change based on the nature of human dialogue, interpretation, and moral frameworks in shaping an individual's sense of self. From the perspective of Taylor (1989:23), the "affirmation of ordinary life", expressed by "production and reproduction", or the work life and family dynamics, is what establishes the pillars of what is termed as "the good life". However, this was not always the case for society as before the Enlightenment, society was deeply constrained by established systems and structures, affecting conscious thought and the progression of self-discovery. The shift in modern identity was distinctively characterised by an 'inward turn', which did not refer to a turn to 'the self', but rather that the individual would look beyond the self to a new kind of "unified understanding of the self within moral and existential reason" (Taylor 1989:462). The self is inseparable from the subjective moral horizons. In the context of culture, moral frameworks outline the socialised group and societal or communal expectations of behaviour and being. The South African cultural context is described by family, community, and respect for one's elders. These could be experiences associated with the development of 'the self' towards 'the other', such as fostering relationships, compassion, and the sharing of ideas, or empathy for others.

Given Taylor's philosophical standpoint, the question arises as to what current social media research suggests about individual identity. The findings of Echesony (2024) and Dalvit (2021) propose that, through social media, individuals are given opportunities for personal expression, with the sharing of experiences, stories, and beliefs with others online. These experiences could either be uplifting or threatening. As an example, in the continuation of patriarchal and colonial prejudice (2021:212), such expressions take the form of valuing a person based only on their physical appearance and what society deems as worthy, affecting the understanding of the self. Further instances could include a person's career success, ability and achievements. Moreover, the experiences of beauty as a moral value in society have become increasingly Westernised (Echesony 2024; Dalvit 2021), resulting in a culture of comparison in my perspective. For Gadamer (2013:41), beauty, for instance, is measured by its own truth and classified by means of "things in themselves". Moreover, self-fulfilment is what Gadamer describes as that which could define this moral value. Therefore, I claim that Gadamer's position on beauty as a moral virtue is worth reflecting on. The world and society are increasingly measured by the

superficial, external dimensions of a particular cultural standard, commonly depicted in social media. Each cultural community should rather be appreciated by its own measure of beauty as a moral value.

These social standards, predominantly influenced by Western cultures, maintain that attractiveness is based on being 'thin, youthful, able-bodied, and fair-skinned'. Furthermore, standards of Western beauty pave the way for division and classification measurements of physical self-worth (McKay, Moore and Kubik 2018:15-17). In a study conducted by Ngwenya (2019, cited in Dalvit 2021), this sentiment is reiterated, in the suggestion of systematic misery by social pressures, and, even more significantly, I argue, social isolation due to systemic value. However, such values should be questioned, especially within an interconnected global world, more specifically in a social context of great diversity such as South African society and when the essence of identity is considered as being in a state of flux. Taylor (1989:27) reinforces this argument in his position, that identity described by horizon of significance will determine, on a case-by-case basis, what is good or valuable to individuals, and how individuals should proceed in actions based on their moral virtues. It can, therefore, be argued that while the individual remains open to engagement of such online experiences, it should be done with careful consideration.

Moreover, contemplating the views of Nielsen (1987), the potential challenge for self-cogitation in cultural identity is the balance between values of particularism³ and that of universalism⁴ in culture. He maintains connections to Gadamer's argument regarding irrational prejudice, that the possibilities for some fundamental inherent beliefs to be untenable should be considered upon further informed examination (Nielsen 1987, 384). In my perspective, the self will act in accordance with these inclined orientations; furthermore, considering experiences of social media, I posit within this study that the effective testing of current cultural prejudices – irrational or legitimate in intention – will provide fair opportunities for enhanced understanding beyond an individual's existing frame of reference. This will either lead to a deeper knowledge and truth regarding self-identity or support the preservation of existing individual cultural identity.

Regarding his view on 'white supremacy among black people', philosopher Frantz Fanon (2008) argues that cultural messages and the use of linguistic labels affect how individual perceptions of the self are internalised, resulting in their suppression. Bizela (2016:31), in line with Fanon (2008), found that what society would describe as an "ideal beauty" is based on the socially accepted norm, categorised as 'whiteness'. Labels have negative social consequences in the form of conflict or segregation, as supported by philosopher Amartya Sen (2006). On the other hand, individuals are also able to enhance their levels of self-esteem and self-identity through positive community engagements online, thereby expanding their individual identity and showcasing or reinforcing their existing unique cultural identity (Echesony 2024). Notably, individuals are also provided the ability on social media to

³ Particularism refers to the idea that cultural identity is ascribed to relationships and contexts rather than abstract societal rules or regulations.

⁴ Universalism considers cultural identity as designated practices and norms that are relevant for all human societies, regardless of their cultural differences.

connect and share their own distinct experiences, and measures of value, such as measures of beauty, through body-positive content promoting self-love, acceptance, and health.

It can be argued that while Taylor's theory is substantially accepted, based on self-identity which he suggests is ultimately linked to the circumstances of others and experiences (1989), the strength of his theory lies within the linguistic and social dimensions of self-identity development in the frame of moral virtue. Bij de Vaate (2023) and Rozgonjuk *et al.* (2020) argue that the connectivity with, and social well-being of the other, often drives one's distinct personality traits, personal narratives and impressions, which defines the individual's cultural identity. This includes, for example, South Africans' collectivistic-orientated values and moral standing, prioritising the well-being of others, and considering themselves interdependent with others. The individual often measures their own self-worth and identity according to their experiences in relation to others (in other words, family, friends, colleagues, and other connections) – in line with the South African idiom “it takes a village to raise a child”. This is in contrast with the more individualistic-orientated cultures, for example, American or European, who have values and morals that are focused on individual independence, as demonstrated by the American idiom “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”. This describes the aspects of self as designated by who the individual believes they are, with traits such as being confident, determined, and brave, or other solitary experiences such as personal wealth and success, travelling and exploits, as well as individual achievements. This reflection is substantiated by the second premise in the research of Hall (1994) regarding cultural identity, which outlines that while existing cultural identity commonalities among individuals in a society persist, some significant differences will define “who we truly are” (Hall 1994:225). These distinctions are often shaped by historical developments and more accurately reflect “what we have evolved into” (Hall 1994:225). Such expressions of rooted cultural identity can be appreciated among a multitude of groupings and perspectives.

Regarding cultural identity, from a collective identity standpoint, Turner (1978) describes the importance of communal values and social practices in shaping human identity. Furthermore, according to Hall (1994), collective identity can be best understood as an expression of a society's root “unified culture”, commonly affiliated with a shared “authentic self”, concealed within aspects of superficial or externally presented personas among specific segments or settings of adjustment. This unified aspect of the self is often shared among individuals with a mutually understood history (Hall 1994). Considering earlier discussions on relationality and the supporting views of Taylor (1989), Mead (1934) and Butler (1997), the collective self and the development of identity are both negotiated and navigated with respect to the other and its particularity. Gadamer (2013) and Heidegger (2010) sustain this position, in that they describe the horizon of ‘the other’ as always a horizon that is different from ours, and it is precisely in this difference that the possibility of understanding is appreciated. I argue that while the individual engages with ‘the other’ and their significant contexts and associations, they remain deeply entwined within their moral obligations to the existing situation and framework of relationality, which guides thought and behaviour towards collective realities and opportunities for understanding. Mead

(1934) provides further value to my claims, that the 'social self' he posits as the 'I'⁵ and the 'me'⁶ provide significant consideration to the distinct nature of the authentic self to the performative self. Therefore, the engagement of the 'social self' in online virtual communities (social media) is proposed.

Contemplating these theoretical positions, the question arises as to what the current research suggests about collective cultural identity regarding South African social media. Matema and Kariuki (2022) explain that the influence of social media on South Africa's public sphere is significant, in that there is a global scale of influence on culture and construction of meaning through social media's communicative purpose, with the findings signifying that social media has the potential to enhance social cohesion among individuals (2022:7). The development of social media in South African society is positioned to enhance social cohesion, as discussed in various studies regarding, for instance, the COVID-19 pandemic. The study conducted by Wilson and Wiysonge (2020) identified that social media was being used for collective organised action. Furthermore, this study shows how social media is being used for the collective communication of cultural values and beliefs relating to health and wellness. The belief has been perpetuated within the South African society and social context that vaccines for the most part are unsafe, generating a significant negative attitude towards inoculation through negative discourse on social media (2020:1-7).

For Gadamer (2013), the force behind the collective action and worldviews of groups and individuals is guided by the prejudices that exist through traditions, language, and social structures (such as family, education, and media). Prejudice acts as both the starting point for one's understanding and a continual testing ground from which interactions and collective action are experienced in society (Gadamer 2013:267). Therefore, I contend that social media and its communicative purpose play an influential role in cultural and societal action and behaviours. In the South African social context, the cultural values of health and freedom of speech examined across social media research show the effect that media messages and presented identities currently have on the existing perception of health and wellness. Turner (1978) advocates that the social and cultural models of a society have the capability of impacting the mind and movements of individuals and, therefore, their associated identity (1978:59-60). The perspective shared by Matema and Kariuki (2022) and Wilson and Wiysonge (2020) is that social media can lead to deviant information, communication, and actions, such as negatively oriented discourse about vaccines on social media. While my study posits that these cultural values communicated online, regarding health and free speech, could indicate a divergent perspective and judgement at hand in a society, this could alternatively create a sense of community and connection through common sense (*sensus communis*). Shared cultural and traditional wisdom, as well as values regarding health, include, for example, holistic approaches, traditional medicines, indigenous knowledge, and medicinal herbs, as well as spiritual healing and beliefs that social factors cause ill-health. Turner (1978:60-61) further points to how identity is influenced by both inner factors such as "psychological processes" and "external factors, which may include societal interaction and cultural

⁵ The self as 'I' describes the self that is characterised by introspection; the self that engages in social interactions with others.

⁶ The self as 'me' outlines the presented self; the self that is influenced by the social conduct of the individual.

norms". In particular, there are interpretations of "group identity", where preconceived notions must be questioned, and society should "respect the individual, shaking off the dogma and stereotyping attached towards the sharing of potential group identity" (Turner 1978:60). I argue Turner's point, that the fundamentals of group and specifically cultural identity need to be preserved in society while, at the same time, being in support of critical reflection in ways that challenge existing notions of identity. As individuals contemplate their identity, they contemplate truth and, with this reflection, they discover further wisdom about the self and reality. The discovery of self is the journey into knowledge.

Heidegger (2010) believes that individuals can come to knowledge of their own being through the connections and fluctuating experiences with others, their environments, and the elements of engagement that guide the involvement of the self. Here the context of experience broadens the knowledge of being. The South African philosophy of 'Ubuntu' speaks to the collective human relations between individuals and describes the cultural practice or belief that means "humanness" or "good disposition" – "I am because you are" (Paulson 2019). I argue that Heidegger's position regarding the 'they-self' describes the discovery of the self within the other, in the following declaration: "Initially, 'I' 'am' not in the sense of my own self, but I am the others in the mode of the they. In terms of the they, and as the they, I am initially 'given' to 'myself'" (2010:125). Heidegger indicates that the individual or 'I' and their identity are only known once the 'I' is understood within the contextual experience of the 'other' or the 'they'.

Moreover, this moral philosophy of 'Ubuntu' echoes Gadamer's (2013) theoretical principle regarding 'prejudice', particularly considering '*sensus communis*'. Notably, his conception outlines individual understanding, moulded by collective agreement, which is typically historical and traditional – in this case, from South African historical folklore and storytelling – or the shared values and ideologies that are passed down to promote community harmony, solidarity, human dignity, and cooperation among human beings in South African communities, bridging ethnic and racial group divisions (Dokman and Kankindi 2023:206-208).

Furthermore, I recognise that Gadamer's discussion on language and hermeneutics additionally reinforces the point that language is the medium through which an individual's understanding and the sharing of views, values, norms, and morals takes place between people (2013:402). He goes on to reason that the preservation of meaning occurs through language. Consider the examples of the concepts 'whiteness' and 'ubuntu' mentioned earlier. The similarities and differences lie notably within the cultural and historical contexts, as each is considered a social construct that has an impact on both individual and collective identity, as well as relations with 'the other'; thirdly, each has a cultural specificity. To my knowledge, the assessed difference lies in the disparities in views, values, norms, and morals, where the articulated term, for example, "whiteness", accentuates views or ideas of division and hierarchy within a society, while perpetuating values of privilege for certain individuals and groups (Fanon, 2008). Social norms of exclusion are assimilated within society to create separation between people, while solidifying the kind of morals that protect systemic inequality. Language here constructs and reinforces racialised identity.

Conversely, the experiences and feelings for groups and individuals alike described by 'Ubuntu' promote a more positive outlook of interconnectedness, instilled with values of inclusivity of others

(Paulson 2019), norms of collaboration and engagement, as well as morals of shared humanity and ethical reciprocity across cultural and historical boundaries. The linguistic implication here is in the belief in a universal bond that connects all individuals under the human identity. Therefore, the importance of language in 'prejudice' is noteworthy, in that the drive towards the preservation of more uplifting cultural concepts, values, norms, and morals through language helps to pave the way for a more open and inclusive South African society.

Subsequently, from a collective identity perspective, the question arises as to what the prevalent social media descriptions are regarding South African cultural identity, and how these could influence unique collective cultural experiences. Hynes (2021) describes the effect of social media on cultural identity, with the societal prioritisation of the English language as an instance, resulting in social media experiences favouring the exhibition of cultural values and traditions over others. It can, therefore, be argued that while the propagation of a particular cultural worldview in media is not inherently an immoral stand, it leads individuals to becoming vulnerable to the possible adoption and creation of a closed horizon about the world, with the recognised aspects of an individual's identity and life experience remaining confined to the representations provided in social media. This is sustained by the position of sociologist Charles Cooley (1902) in his writings *Human Nature and the Social Order*. Cooley's theory of the "looking glass self" advocates that the view of the self not only emanates from the direct contemplation of personal qualities and experiences, but also from perceptions about how individuals believe they are being seen by others. It is in his second tenet that I argue that socialisation through social media engagement has the capability to shape self-image and how the world is viewed. Gadamer (2013) reasons that the ability to remain open in individuals' perception and experience of alternate worldviews can provide the opportunity for greater understanding and improved relationships with others. Therefore, it is morally just to remain aware and critical of the presented identities to which one is exposed to effectively ensure the preservation of uplifting cultural identity within a society.

The designated community's customs, practices, and social norms provide guidance as to the morally acceptable and unacceptable expectations placed upon an individual within a group social setting. As propounded in the work of Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927), as well as Taylor (1989), it can be argued that these socialised expectations of individuals may lead to an inauthentic existence and experiences, particularly when engaging with social media and these online communities, which advocate for the adoption of specific global trends and identities.

Therefore, I argue for an awareness of such advocations, for future social media users to maintain or preserve their existing cultural heritage and identities. Lee and Xiong (2019, cited in Echesony, 2024:3) lend support to my position regarding the preservation of cultural heritage through the following argument: "The dissemination of cultural knowledge through social media allows for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, as seen in the popularity of cultural hashtags and online cultural events" (2024:3). This could be the sharing of pictures of cultural monuments or traditional art, which foster a sense of pride and belonging among the South African people. South African art could include forms such as Zulu clay pots, Swazi headrests, San cave paintings, and many more. Forms of cultural preservation assist in strengthening cultural cohesion through experiences of cultural practice

in social media, upholding cultural heritage, techniques, and skills, which can later be communicated and shared with other generations and communities.

Media, particularly social media, are not only a source of information, but also play an important role in shaping a society's views, values, and cultural identity (Sutrisno 2023:8). Increased access to social media has resulted in an increased potential for cross-cultural interaction and information dissemination. The resulting effects on individuals and collective understanding of their cultural identity, according to the discussions of this study by Sutrisno (2023), suggest that social media affects not only individuals' understanding of their own identity of self, but also their interpretations of reality, considering that access to broader global information and cultural expressions have an "unavoidable impact based on the way societies formulate their views and stretch their forms of cultural identity" (2023:21).

Bearing in mind these theoretical descriptions on a variety of experiences in South African social media regarding cultural identity, my study develops these arguments further, from the perspective of a critique of media identity and its active role within the contemporary society, and, more specifically, performativity in media identity, contemplating the social effects by regarding how individuals navigate and construct their identities within modern society.

Media Identity: Performativity and Societal Information

The media identity phenomenon describes the way an individual's or group's understanding of texts, ideas, and interactions within social media is shaped by their performative experiences within virtual communities. In line with Hall's (1994) position mentioned earlier on shared personas, it can be argued that social media maintains an ever-present feature of interactivity and connection through the engagement of individuals, which then opens the observer's potential for the adoption and transformation of their identity. This level of engagement experienced can be understood as media identity, as supported by Warburton and Hatzipanagos (2012). They argue that an individual develops their sense of self through "social interaction, community, and network affiliations" (2012:xvi) and identities are formulated by understanding the identities of others. The development of media identity arises through social media.

McLuhan (1964) offers some insights into how new media technologies, such as social media, shape the individual and collective identities experienced in today's digital era. He reflects on the societal propagation of media platforms with the rise of digital media, which has increased the individual's level of interaction with information, effectively shaping their state of thinking and being. The behavioural change(s) and altered sense of an individual's identity technologies are an outcome of the effects surrounding digital technology's global connectivity features. McLuhan (1964) posits that the increased engagement of individuals with various media formats sufficiently impacts how people understand and construct their identities through media, essentially shaping their sense of belonging within the larger social networks and sociocultural groups present in society. It can be argued that this identity development can often be noticed in the superficial profile presentations and digital avatars, among other elements and aspects of this 'new media'.

As described in Chapter 2, media identity is often that which is expressed through performativity. Philosopher Paul-Michel Foucault (1977) theorises that identity in support of McLuhan's

(1964) and Warburton and Hatzipanagos's (2012) positions can be understood as a product of discourse and power structures, where social media from this perspective regulates the individual's self-presentation, with weighted social expectations of others and virtual community guidelines based on who individuals are meant to be. Through the reflections gathered within this study on social media research, as well as the examinations of New Media Theory hypothesised by McLuhan (1964), it has become more evident that there is an overlap of experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts from which individuals originate their understanding, shaping the overall interpretations of texts, ideas, and connections when brought into intersection with the presented perspective.

Therefore, it can be argued that cultural identity, within the context of media performativity, is crucial to consider as this could be largely influenced by how individuals and groups communicate, exchange ideas, and preserve information. Euchner's (2021) inspection of McLuhan's New Media Theory outlines that people create technologies (or new media) for a particular reason and purpose (preference or predilection). The effects of these technologies, however, are impactful only after a particular period and may then have certain cultural implications, such as their potential impacts on current generations, including Generation Z. Gorea (2021) argues that, particularly among the youth, visibility is considered both a cultural and media identity value. Furthermore, they maintain prejudices regarding this 'visibility' phenomena and contexts. While I posit that visibility is not a new concept and experience within social society and communities, the increase in social media use across the South African social landscape has heightened the experiences of this moral value. This is sustained by Gorea's research, which theorises that "visibility" has amplified the present anxieties and pressures on the youth, experienced within their daily lives (2021:9). She suggests that while individuals try to ensure that their self-identities constructed and presented online exude a visual self, which is interpreted as "authentic" by others, these can be altered, negotiated, or preserved, depending on the continuous processes of "identity management".

Furthermore, some messages within social media may influence an individual's cultural experience, shared levels of identity, and understanding of others – even a person's experienced reality. The following line from William Shakespeare's play, titled *As You Like It*, eloquently sustains my argument for the nature of the 'new media' phenomenon known as social media, and its performative effects on cultural identity: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts" (2011: Act II, Scene VII).

This metaphor essentially compares cultural life to a play. It takes the traditional perspectives and experiences of life and compares them with that of a written script. Some may perceive this outlook to be pessimistic, in the sense that individuals are seen as trapped within a meaningless cycle of roles, while others could consider this position to be rather optimistic, in that people have the power to choose their roles and construct meaning in their lives. I propose that this can be likened to the experiences one has on social media. As individuals construct their online media identities on various platforms and connect with several different virtual communities, they are given the opportunity to present themselves in specific ways, perform tasks, take on roles, and communicate identity messages and representations, whether true or not, about themselves, thereby altering the perception of self. I argue that if the identity

of 'the self' is determined by or at least influenced by 'the other', it leaves individuals' existing cultural identity vulnerable within social media.

McLuhan (1964) supports this argument in his reflections regarding the effects of "new media" and technology shifts in global society. He posits that an individual now has the capability to partake in the process of "xeroxing" (electronic publishing), and with this, the decentralisation and increased accessibility to information, created, shared, or copied (1964:54). Goffman (1956), alongside McLuhan (1964), further maintains that social media can be compared to a performance. While different social media users collaborate online across virtual communities, individuals are poised to consider these digital networks almost as constituting a "global theatre" (De Kosnik and Feldman 2019:26-18). McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message" (1964:8-9) begs the question of what performative messages regarding South African cultural identity have been positioned in social media, altering the existing experiences about the social reality of individuals and communities.

In view of Gadamer's position that "all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice" (2013:283), I offer a significant example from the study by Echesony (2024), which describes the practical impact of social media and the media phenomenon in performativity of the Zulu identity, which, through the Zulu Reed Dance, is said to draw significant attention and participation through its vibrant display of the Zulu culture and heritage. The performative presentation of cultural experiences describes the power of social media in shaping and sustaining cultural identities in the digital age (2024). This is one reflection that indicates that media identity affects and has current influences on cultural identity. Consider the global blockbuster films, titled *Zulu* (1964) and *Zulu Dawn* (1979), which feature the Zulu culture in popular culture depictions as one community within the diverse South African cultural landscape.

Regarding media identity, the performativity effects from a global context inevitably involve significant forms of prejudice. There tends to be a pull towards the assimilation of Western cultural values in social media representations and experiences. The significant effects expressed by Kizgin, Ahmad, Dey and Rana (2017) highlight that experiences, engagements, or adaption towards alternative cultures experienced online have not resulted in the loss of existing heritage and culture. Through social identification, some individuals and groups tend to adopt aspects of the dominant cultural group expressed as behaviours and social norms, culminating in a sense of solidarity, acceptance, and in-group homogeneity.

The presentation of Hollywood popular culture films such as *Star Wars* or *Batman* could then elicit fan clubs and virtual communities, as well as other cultural artefacts and experiences. An instance of this is the 'Batmaniacs', where the behaviours of fictional characters or the value systems and worldviews that they embody are then adopted by the audience. Consider the value of idealism in culture and society, where the individuals or groups believe in monogamous marriages, no crime, and where goodwill prevails. These are often cultural values perpetuated in these popular cultural films (Fourie 2018), while, on the other hand, the Batman character could promote behaviours of violence as a "necessary evil", while maintaining a very pessimistic and suspicious outlook on life and people.

The global connectivity capabilities of social media have created an online experience which can be considered more open and, at the same time, more challenging for individuals and groups to

navigate. McLuhan's (1964) and Taylor's arguments (1989) regarding media and identity formation guide the reasoning which I make within this study. Achen, Stadler-Blank and Sailors (2024) argue that the online experiences of social media platforms, either profile-based or content-based, will influence user engagement in social media, both positively and negatively, through experiences of the liking, commenting or sharing of posts, resulting in relationship building, conversations, and networking with other individuals or groups, who believe the posts to be of interest, importance or enlightenment. Dilthey (1988) and Mead (1934) argue that subjective lived experience places a strong influence on present behaviours, and that it is also profoundly entrenched in the historical context. In support of Gadamer's notion of 'fusion of horizons', while individuals inevitably maintain their current prejudices, they should strive to remain open to alternative presuppositions that may challenge, test, or reinforce current views (2013). My study maintains that as individuals access lived experiences through social media, there is opportunity to determine what is morally just within our current horizon to further challenge or reinforce the existing prejudice and, therefore, understanding of 'the self'.

The traditional notions associated with colonialism, including male dominance through power and control, as well as the use of violence, should be critiqued. In a study conducted by Levon, Milani and Kitis (2017), this position is sustained by their findings that the focus on masculinity is centred on "violence", "crime" and "physical toughness". Aligned to the culture labelled "toxic masculinity", it can be argued that, although the more frequent moral positions portrayed in entertainment sensationalise violence and male dominance, through film, and the ideas of hegemonic masculinity, the effective potential to test existing prejudice should prioritise an openness to alternative cultural experiences of masculinity, such as values embracing warmth, safety, respect and integrity. On the other hand, Dunn and Falkof (2021) describe media performativity, using the term "micro-celebrities", outlining the social media effect of balancing between what I would argue are two realities, namely 1) the authenticity of everyday life and 2) the glamour of the exceptional. Moreover, Dunn and Falkof (2021:2) argue trenchantly that the online experience of women's profiles on social media, labelled as "authentic", ultimately are not, but can be understood rather as a performative reality or authenticity, meaning that they are socially constrained by the norms and expectations of society while portraying a desirable experience or reality to increase popularity or attention, or simply creating or re-creating a preferred identity online. The arguments I make in this study, therefore, contend that a potential truth may be constructed or fabricated online through performative presentations of media identity such as beauty, physical attractiveness, or lifestyle success, with the concern being that global trends and fads perpetuated in social media have the increased potential for a loss of unique and authentic identity, and the blurred lines caused by increased online engagements, leading to inauthentic relationships.

This is reinforced by Foucault (1977), who argues that what could be taken as authentic identity online is often dictated by the cultural, social, and historic norms of society or virtual community. Put differently, authenticity, understood in terms of 'neoliberal individualism',⁷ can be guided by the expectations of particular social systems, structures, and language in a society.

⁷ 'Neoliberal individualism' refers to the prioritising of the self, described by individual responsibility, self-reliance and competition, while simultaneously downplaying systematic inequalities and collective social responsibility prevails.

The acceptance of this performative effect regarding media identity has arisen in respect of individuals seeking a sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose within their worldviews (Kossowska et al., 2023). However, it is more intricate than this: often a trend, social issue or common interest may bring a group of people together. Whatever the reason, the individuals who may inherently be from different walks of life may find themselves united under one shared identity. As an example, a South African, straight, Christian, Caucasian male, who enjoys reading and follows sports celebrities on social media may one day decide to join an online virtual community focused on saving marine life. This individual may then connect with another individual who may have the following identity, namely an Asian, bisexual, Buddhist, Japanese woman, who enjoys video games and follows fashion celebrities, who now may also decide to join the online group for saving marine life, with their shared identity being 'marine conservationists'. It is from this common ground that philosopher Amartya Sen (2006) argues that while a shared connection in identity often seems inspiring and uplifting, it may not be without risk, as this commonality brings with it the threat of potential marginalisation of the other, or even perhaps conflict with out-groups.

The connection that I intend to make in this study is that while identity is firmly positioned in existing prejudices of the individual, it is also challenged by social group pressures of media prejudice (as with virtual communities in social media). The dynamic opportunity for exchange is one which could allow for further clarity, truth, and transparency of 'the self' in progression towards a self-fulfilling experience.

McLuhan (1964) posits that "[i]n this electronic age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness" (1964:64). There is significance in this perspective on social media and its current effects on the human experience: it is a compelling standpoint regarding media identity and reality construction. This is sustained on the basis that how the language is used – how "we see ourselves" – suggests a mental picture, which is based on our appearance, performance, and relationships that are formulated.

Sitto-Kaunda (2024) reports that South African social media represents township–migrant unrest as xenophobia, as certain ethnic groups are being targeted. Furthermore, using the mixed labels and terms used to reference migrants living in townships such as "foreigners", "illegal immigrants" and "undocumented" (2024:8), with the social media reports using language such as "fearful" and "targets" to describe African migrants' experience of township unrest, are being shared on social media. This constructs a façade about the current circumstances and kinds of people who may be living in these districts, as opposed to the reality, where little differentiation is being made between criminal activity and community unrest. This social media theoretical interpretation shows existing prejudice as an outcome of the reporting perspective chosen, as well as the potential perspective taken on by the viewer as 'truth'. Therefore, the consequences of sharing social representations that reinforce inter-group stereotypes and conflict assist in the perpetuation of recurring social problems, particularly in locations plagued by contestations of belonging, such as townships. This ultimately means that further attention and openness to an alternative performative position is needed, one, it can be argued, that is more positive, uplifting and unifying among commonalities, as opposed to threatening inconsistencies, and that challenges or examines the value and strength of the individual's or group's existing media identity.

Fusibility of Cultural and Media Identities

When investigating the various social media studies alongside the philosophical positions attained in this project, the question as to whether cultural identity and media identity can potentially be fused arises.

In this chapter, through the various theoretical analyses of social media in South Africa, the two major kinds of identities that make up ‘the self’ are categorised as cultural identity and media identity; both maintain distinct experiences and practical significance in the South African social context. Cultural identity, described by the process of socialisation (Turner 1978), I argue, is what would describe the deeply rooted experiences about reality, within the framework of one’s traditions, beliefs, values, and practices that are passed down through time. Giddens (2006) alternatively describes mass media as one of four agencies of socialisation for the individual, which form their behaviours and understanding of social norms, and further reality. Supported by McLuhan’s perspective, I posit that cultural identity remains open to the influence of media identity, and a potential threat, if an uncritical approach to social media is maintained. Shaped by social information and interactions, and, more specifically, performativity within social media environments, media identity could include the global trends, audience engagement, and online personas created, shared, and changed. Media identity, which is different from cultural identity, constitutes a more accessible range of characteristics and experiences that could be shared among individuals or groups online. An example is social media influencers characterised by the performativity, shared characteristics, and digital experiences created. These identities alternatively may evolve or transmute, depending on engagement and medium (McLuhan 1964). Furthermore, these identities could have the potential to affect existing cultural communities and individual experiences of reality.

It can be argued that while progression is made as a global society further into a world of digital technology and new media, it is important to understand and critically reflect on the current impact of online digital communities and their messages, inherent with existing prejudices in social media. In doing so, the potential fusibility between cultural identity and media identity can be determined. Gadamer’s (2013) ‘fusion of horizons’ describes the process of blending an individual’s current understanding with a whole new understanding to construct an entirely fresh shared understanding. Gadamer (2013) describes the nature of this development as follows: “To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us ... to acquire a horizon of interpretation requires a fusion of horizons” (2013:415).

The interpretation of these two kinds of identities, namely cultural identity (individual and collective) and media identity (societal information and performativity), therefore, forms an entirely fresh horizon of significance – one which is shared by the merging of two worlds, namely the organic and the artificial. The essential intersection of these two key identities of the self can be realised in the shaping of individual and collective moral values in a society. Media maintains an active influence over the shaping of cultural values, through the portrayal of certain themes and issues experienced in the world, affecting how people view them and their lived reality. An examination of these descriptions has

provided us with a clear reflection on how best to bridge these distinct new identity experiences held between the culture and media. Take the classic instance of social media trends that are shared online, such as the 'healthy eating' and 'weight loss' fads, illustrating the performative messages and perceptions that weight loss and being thin are achievable, attractive, and desirable for everyone (Minadeo and Pope, 2022). These prejudicial ideas can either have a positive or negative effect on the cultural communities, individuals, and groups who engage with them. Consider first the harmful toxic ethos created and advocated by presenting the 'dieting culture' on social media within a society, or among certain groups, such as young adults or adolescents, resulting in potential 'disordered eating and negative body image' (2022:2). Furthermore, McLuhan's (1964) 'New Media Theory' holds that the medium of communication (social media), becomes the message, which, it can be argued, describes the cultural shift in values as these ideas and trends of 'dieting culture' are portrayed through media performance, thereby constructing the kind of media identity that has altered behaviour and experience of reality. Supporting the argument on identity construction and sharing through media is the Social Identity Theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979, as cited in McLeod, 2023), which explores how individuals tend to classify themselves and others into social groups based on common characteristics such as, in this case, shared interests and lifestyle choices. This theory examines how these group associations can shape self-perception and community organisation. Essentially, the connection between scholars lies in the importance of social contexts and group communication in identity formation.

The additional focus in this reflection concerns the preservation of existing elevated and uplifting cultural identity foundations in a society to collectively, empathetically and categorically shape the way individuals communicate, share ideas, and retain information about themselves, others, and the world in which they live for the betterment of all people. Reflecting on the effective good that is constructed through the value of uplifting body-positive messages should not be overlooked (Minadeo and Pope, 2022). Given that social media can alter perceptions of self and, therefore, the overall experiences of reality and identity, it has major potential for a more inclusive, enriching virtual environment for cultural engagement and enhancement. Therefore, the testing, growth and transformation of more complete cultural values, morals, and frameworks may be achieved and sustained within the global and local spheres of society.

Similarly, when the 'fusion of horizons' theorised by Gadamer (2023) is applied to future developments and engagements with existing prejudicial positions, with which we are faced daily in social media, this contributes to the development of 'the self' and reality. While traditionally conceived as proceeding from the external towards the internal, this should be questioned, with the pursuit of cultural preservation at the forefront of social media interpretations. This does not mean that identity should remain static or isolated from alternative prejudices, which challenge horizons of significance, but rather that individuals remain open and in continuous dialogue with social media and societal information, with the hopes of sincere truth and understanding arising among the user's or observer's experience of the subjective (2013:309), considering the construction of digital reality and virtual society. True preservation of one's cultural identity, though, occurs through the openness of perspectives or understanding of the self, through genuine rediscovery of 'the self', with the authentic engagement and

interchange of 'the other'. This could ultimately be understood as a network of intertwined trees, where sharing sustains the life of each individual tree. In the same way, the sharing of perspectives on social media, for instance, can provide the bearings needed for the preservation of respective cultural identities if done critically within a moral framework of empathetic authenticity.

The effects and advancements in social media and global technology have resulted in the ever-increasing fusion of cultures, through cross-cultural interaction, which has resulted in further connection, sharing, and understanding of perspectives from different geographical locations, traditions and backgrounds. My research further highlights the position of McLuhan (1964:7-8), who argues that the magnitude of the effects of new media is determined by the extent of the use of these mediums or technology. This exchange of ideas, values, and views is achieved through online social media platforms, which present the user or observer with an opening to these positioned effects. Sutrisno posits that “[a]long with the flow of exchange and hybridisation of ideas comes the potential to carve out new foundations for thinking, feeling and perceiving cultural diversity” (2023:22). Hybrid cultural identities, for example, demonstrate these effects through the fusion of language, cultural practices, values, and beliefs, and other characteristics such as culturally specific dance, music, and film – for instance, the Zulu traditional dance, which has become broadly shared across different social media platforms. The blend of culturally specific music has also become further popularised through this media culture phenomenon. South African urban culture is experienced through a mix of traditional African rhythms, jazz, and modern electronic beats. Additionally, from a global perspective, certain media identity prejudice has, consequently, impacted South African cultural identity. Consider the notion of “awarded identity” described by Brunsdon (2017), who claims that this performative kind of media identity plays an important role in shaping the collective reality and identity of a nation such as South Africa as it becomes socially constructed, projected, and representative of others, as illustrated by the examples of “Black Diamonds” or “District 9”. While the developments of my study reason that this performative kind of media identity is both limited and even divisive in some ways, some cultural linguistic labels have alternatively become socially adopted through social media and media identity, such as the national identity of ‘Rainbow nation’ as well as ‘Black Diamond’. One is used to create bonds between individuals, while the other differentiates the black middle class in South Africa. This was originally used to describe the success and development of the black community in South Africa, but it has more recently taken on negative connotations.

It is, therefore, critical to review the current social media representations in a society to ensure mindful engagement and successful preservation of uplifting cultural identity. In line with Gadamer (2013:403-404) and Heidegger (2010:193), the role language plays within the construction and interpretation of our own being is significant for the effective experience of individual reality. Patel et al. (2011, cited in Sutrisno 2023:22) suggest that the preservation of an individual's or group's existing cultural identity, however, can be maintained only through careful and conscious engagements in dialogue between historical tradition and new community experiences. Furthermore, this engagement, if done correctly, using the appropriate linguistic and symbolic expressions, may open the door to positive change, which will bring new richness to the forefront of cultural experience. It is said that social

media platforms could fragment and polarise as much as they have the capability to expand and connect. In a study conducted by Kossowska et al. (2023), media identity-based phenomena known as micro-identities are described: these detail how the social influences on social media platforms may affect the individual based on how they connect and interact with others and the media. According to Kossowska et al. (2023:2), social media has given rise to “virtual loyalties (micro-identities), and the construal of parallel social realities that lack cohesion with the larger community”. Kossowska et al. (2023) further point out that some of the effects that micro-identities have on the broader collective society, as a negative consequence of social media, include hostility towards other groups, for example, anti-Ukrainian groups. Alternatively, a local example could include anti-immigrant groups.

The connections and ability to share information broadly about social issues, including, for example, gender-based discrimination and violence, among others, in the view of my arguments made in this study, indicates a dynamic relationship between cultural identity and media identities as individuals are able to experience the real-world realities of certain groups and individuals within South African society. Through expression in social media, these effects, therefore, assist in the fusion of horizons through the meeting of prejudicial ideas and values.

Dalvit (2021:216) posits that the media can be used to position perpetrators in South African society as ‘deviant outcasts’. The discovered effects of social media and these virtual communities are, in his view, sustaining rather than challenging the hierarchical structures, power dynamics and the underlying dichotomies including men/women, black/white, rich/poor, as well as legitimising violence in society (2021). In view of this research, my study maintains that while social media does in some respects reinforce existing cultural identities and values of potential oppression, it may yet provide opportunities of unearthing the effects of oppressive and potentially destructive cultural values within a society. This would then allow for the prospects of social media users, virtual communities, and individuals to decide to break free from the existing shackles of cultural hegemony, which are portrayed through the media culture commonly prevalent within the modern, patriarchal South African society. Turner (1978) provides support for and guidance towards the achievement of such ideas, through his philosophy on participatory democracy and social systems, characterised by 1) individual autonomy over the social and material environment and 2) the intention for creative interactivity with others (1978:37-38). I would argue that the choice remains with the individual user of social media.

While I maintain that social media has benefited individuals’ collective self-identity in some respects towards connection, bridging, and increased knowledge and awareness of others, and then oneself as a result, there are some concerns with social media, which pose a potential threat to cultural identity in equal measure and could include performative advancement of disingenuous narratives. This could result in the attitudinal shaping of individuals and their interpretation of societal norms or formations. Notably, though, the overall effect could be one of singularity, isolation, and persuasion towards complete assimilation, as described in this chapter, and in the writings of Sen (2006:16), that “the insistence, if only implicitly, on a choiceless singularity of human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable” and then the resulting horizon is not one of interpretation, but rather one of limitation. I argue, therefore, that this presents a corresponding argument, that the

authentic and genuine nature of one's true identity can become lost in a world of façades, materialism, sensationalism, and egoism. Additionally, the constructive activity of self-realisation maintains a linguistic dimension to build an adequate understanding of things and our recognised particularity (Taylor 1989:185-197). My research in this study proposes that in order to remain aware and critical in our social media interpretations, 'the self' should remain open to 'the other' yet discerning of worldviews. In doing so, it preserves cultural identity with integrity, empathy, sincerity, wisdom and acumen, remembering that in the end, the outer world experiences are a reflection of inner world experiences and, therefore, the journey towards 'the authentic self' is effectively a rediscovery of the genuine essence of self.

Conclusion

This study has engaged in a significant systematic review of existing social media research across five different online libraries and databases. It also engaged philosophically with the arguments of noteworthy philosophers, primarily Gadamer (2013) and Taylor (1989). These were placed alongside existing theoretical positions on social media, which formulate the developments in cultural identity and media identity, as well as their existing prejudices. From these positions, the developments of my study considered some of the challenges that emerge from cultural identity and media identity, and their potential fusibility. Moreover, reflection on contemporary interpretations of cultural and media identity has been provided and critiques offered of various theoretical positions. The goal was to arrive at a philosophically informed understanding of the relationship between cultural identity and media identity that in turn underpins the formulation of personal identity. This process has been undertaken by way of philosophical explanations and descriptions from examples, both from a local South African social context and globally.

In the final chapter of this study, an overview of the research and philosophical reflections is provided through a summary of the findings and contributions to the existing body of work within the fields of philosophy, communications, and media studies. Furthermore, the novel contribution of this study is outlined, and a social media moral framework presented that individuals may use in their critical engagement with social media in future.

General Conclusion

This chapter provides of a summary of findings and describes the study's contribution to the fields of philosophy, communication, and media studies. The study's contribution lies principally in its engagement with the essence and social construction of identity, specifically in relation to with the distinctive concepts and topics of cultural identity and media identity. Moreover, it assists in the final philosophising of my proposed social media moral framework for a modern user's effective social media engagement. The importance of the discovery of the self was described through a critical engagement with the other.

Through descriptions and reflections on relationality and socialisation, concepts that have been explored by philosophers and theorists such as Taylor (1989), Mead (1934), Butler (1997), Turner (1978) and Hall (1994), it can be concluded that the "self" is deeply interwoven within the "other". In consideration of the dimensions of the self, described in this study through cultural identity and media identity, it was posited that potential challenges may arrive from this interconnectivity. This study reflected on Gadamer's philosophy on "prejudice" and the "fusion of horizons" (2013). However, the research required more context regarding this new media phenomenon in the form of social media, understood as performative, at least in the ways that culture or the experiences of media portray culture, present society, groups and individuals. Using the theoretical foundations of McLuhan's New Media Theory (1964) enriched my explorations of media culture as its own kind of identity. I then determined that media culture is representative of a particular identity, depending on engagement, yet maintains the power and potential to influence public perception, which can ultimately shape interpretations of reality.

In Chapter 3, I reflected on the nature, principles, and philosophical background behind Gadamer's theories of "prejudice" and the "fusion of horizons" (2013). Additionally, in my explorations of his philosophy, the significant departure inherent in his theorisation of the nature of "prejudice" and the "fusion of horizons" was determined, while contemplating the philosophical position of Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (2013), alongside Taylor's *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity* (1989) and his sense of self through his theory of modern selfhood and identity.

My philosophical arguments in this study were rooted in the exploration of modern cultural identity and the role that social media maintains in the presentation, construction, and influence of existing media identity, thereby testing the understanding of individuals' identities within social reality. "The self" and "selfhood" described within my study as fundamentally interconnected to "the other" drive the development and progression of identity.

It was concluded that not only does social media have a significant effect on the changing identity of individuals within South African society, but the phenomenon of media culture also supports existing theoretical South African social media research findings, and the theories of the noteworthy philosophers explored in my study. The fluidity or mutability of identity is an outcome of the modern-day media cultural experiences in social media, with the fusion of two worlds at the forefront of social experience, namely 1) the cultural world and 2) the media world. Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" (2013),

Taylor's "modern selfhood" (1989), Turner's "socialisation" (1978) and McLuhan's "New Media Theory" (1964), provided the guiding theoretical frameworks for my examination of identity, which argued that the modern experiences of the self are created, shared and maintained through social media and online virtual communities.

Bearing in mind my overarching goal within this study, which was to postulate ways of preserving cultural identity, particularly given the potential of media identity to threaten the cultural foundations of individuals in South African society, my philosophical critique considered the arguments made by McLuhan (1964) about to new media's active influence in the construction and presentation of messages and ideas about reality. My study established the effective impact that new media can have on an individual's "horizon of significance" in authentic identity (Taylor 1989), now under social pressures to revert to conformity and acceptance of social norms, commonly seen in forms of materialism, sensationalism, egoism and individualism. Accordingly, I propose that future social media users could consider my philosophical social media moral framework, known as the social media moral framework of empathetic authenticity.

My framework, described in Chapter 4 of this study, places the preservation of cultural identity at its core, guided by the social moral virtues of integrity, empathy, sincerity, wisdom, and acumen. These moral positions provide a solid foundation for open engagement or inquiry into alternative horizons and experiences. This process allows for the fair and honest testing of existing prejudice, while still maintaining the historical basis of one's existing horizon. This in turn allows for an enhanced level of preservation in the fusion of "old" and "new", or, rather, present and future horizons of the self.

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