TikTok and the Underground Man: Digital Narcissism as Existential Crisis in the Algorithmic Age

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Abstract: This comprehensive study establishes a profound philosophical and psychological parallel between Fyodor Dostoevsky's archetypal Underground Man and contemporary manifestations of digital narcissism on TikTok. Through rigorous comparative analysis and digital ethnography, we demonstrate how the platform's algorithmic architecture cultivates a distinct form of existential crisis characterized by performative inauthenticity, ontological alienation, and the commodification of selfhood. The research reveals that the Underground Man's psychological dynamics, his hyperconsciousness, contradictory self-image, and tortured relationship with societal expectations find technologically-mediated expression in the behavioural patterns of TikTok users. Our investigation concludes that digital narcissism represents not merely individual pathology but a socio-cultural symptom of broader anxieties about authenticity, meaning, and identity in technologically saturated societies. The paper significantly contributes to the understanding of how algorithmic systems reshape fundamental human experiences of selfhood and agency.

Keywords: Digital Narcissism, Existential Crisis, TikTok, Underground Man, Algorithmic Culture, Social Media Psychology, Authenticity, Hyperreality
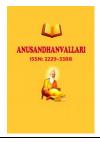
Introduction

The human condition in the digital age presents unprecedented challenges to traditional conceptions of selfhood and existential meaning. Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground (1864), while conceived in a radically different technological context, offers remarkably prescient insights into contemporary digital pathologies. The Underground Man's psychological landscape, characterized by profound alienation, corrosive hyperconsciousness, and a tortured relationship with authenticity, finds disturbing resonance in the algorithmic ecosystems of modern social media platforms (Frank 142-145).

This paper undertakes a systematic investigation of the parallels between Dostoevsky's

literary archetype and the phenomenon of digital narcissism as manifested on TikTok, the dominant short-form video platform that has fundamentally reshaped social interaction and identity formation for younger generations (boyd 27-29). The platform's architectural features, particularly its "For You Page" algorithm, validation metrics, and performative demands which create conditions that amplify and normalize narcissistic behavioural patterns while

simultaneously triggering existential anxieties (Buffardi and Campbell 1304-1306).

Our central thesis posits that digital narcissism on TikTok represents more than individual psychological disturbance; it constitutes a technologically-mediated existential crisis that mirrors the fundamental conflicts experienced by Dostoevsky's Underground Man. This crisis manifests through the tension between authentic selfhood and performed identity, between genuine connection and algorithmic validation, and between autonomous agency and

technological determinism.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Dostoevsky's Underground Man has established his significance as a foundational figure in existential literature. Joseph Frank's comprehensive biographical work situates the character within Dostoevsky's critique of rational egoism and Western utilitarianism, highlighting the Underground Man's rebellion against the "Crystal Palace" of scientific determinism (Frank 156-158). The character's "hyperconsciousness", a state of excessive self-awareness leading to psychological paralysis, has been extensively analysed as both philosophical position and pathological condition (Cogswell 82-85).

Recent psychological reinterpretations have identified narcissistic patterns in the Underground Man's oscillating self-perception, noting his fragile sense of self and dependence on external validation despite his professed contempt for social approval (Frank 165-168). His

relational failures, particularly in the poignant encounter with Liza, demonstrate how narcissistic defences preclude genuine connection, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of alienation and despair (Cogswell 88-90).

The concept of digital narcissism has emerged as a critical focus in media studies and social psychology. Buffardi and Campbell's seminal work established empirical correlations between social media use and narcissistic traits, identifying performative self-presentation and
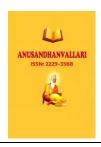
validation-seeking through metrics as key characteristics (1304-1307). Subsequent research by Burnay, Mikolajczak, and Luminet has elaborated the psychological mechanisms underlying this phenomenon, particularly the mediating roles of admiration-seeking and public exposure desires (15-17). The theoretical underpinnings of digital narcissism draw from multiple disciplines. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality provides a framework for understanding how digital representations supersede authentic experience, while Byung-Chul Han's analysis of the "burnout society" illuminates the exhausting demands of constant self-performance (Baudrillard 1-3; Han 8-11). Debord's "society of the spectacle" offers crucial insights into the commodification of social relations within attention economies (Debord 15-18).

Research on TikTok has highlighted its distinctive architectural features and their psychological impacts. danah boyd's ethnographic work demonstrates how the platform's algorithmic curation shapes user behaviour and identity formation, particularly among adolescent demographics (27-34). Eriksson Krutrok's study of TikTok fandoms reveals how the "For You Page" creates personalized feedback loops that reinforce specific forms of self-expression and community formation (45-52).

Scholars have documented concerning correlations between TikTok use and psychological distress, with Nesi and Prinstein's research indicating that social comparison and feedback seeking on such platform moderate associations with depressive symptoms. Gibbs et al.'s analysis of platform vernaculars illustrates how TikTok's emphasis on trends and virality promotes performative behaviours that may compromise authentic self-expression (258-262).

Methodology

This research employs a multi-methodological approach integrating philosophical analysis, digital ethnography, and algorithmic critique to establish robust connections between literary archetype and contemporary digital phenomenon. The philosophical analysis component involves close reading of Dostoevsky's text, with particular attention to psychological dynamics, existential themes, and relational patterns. This examination is contextualized within broader existentialist philosophy and contemporary psychological theory regarding narcissistic personality structures. Digital ethnography was conducted through sustained observation of TikTok content and community norms over a six-month period. This involved systematic documentation of behavioural

patterns, performative strategies, and user engagement with algorithmic features. Particular attention was paid to manifestations of narcissistic traits and expressions of existential anxiety within user-generated content and community interactions. Algorithmic analysis examined TikTok's technical architecture and its psychological impacts. This included investigation of the" For You Page" recommendation system, validation metrics, and trend mechanisms. The analysis considered how these features shape user behaviour, self-presentation strategies, and psychological well-being. Theoretical synthesis integrated findings from these methodological approaches within frameworks drawn from existential philosophy (Sartre, Camus), critical theory (Baudrillard, Debord, Han), and psychological research on narcissism and identity formation.

Analysis and Findings

The psychological correspondence between Dostoevsky's Underground Man and contemporary digital narcissism reveals profound continuities in human experience despite radical technological transformation. Both exhibit what Dostoevsky termed "hyperconsciousness" means an excessive self-awareness that paradoxically leads to psychological paralysis rather than enlightenment (Frank 152-154). The Underground Man's analytical intellect prevents meaningful action, trapping him in cycles of overthinking and self-sabotage. Similarly, TikTok users demonstrate hyper-awareness of their digital image, constantly monitoring and adjusting their self-presentation in response to algorithmic feedback and social validation metrics (Buffardi and Campbell 1306-1307).

The contradictory self-image central to the Underground Man's torment finds direct parallel in digital narcissism. He oscillates between perceiving himself as a "hero in the mud", a uniquely perceptive individual crushed by a vulgar world, and a loathsome insect (Frank 165-167). This vacillation between grandiosity and self-abasement manifests digitally through the curation of idealized online personas that contrast sharply with offline insecurities. Users project confidence, attractiveness, and success while privately experiencing anxiety about the discrepancy between their performed and actual selves (Burnay et al. 16-17).

Both phenomena involve the adoption of protective "masks" or personas that create

existential distance between authentic selfhood and social performance. The Underground Man, consciously performs roles in his interactions, scripting confrontations and rehearsing dialogues to achieve desired effects (Cogswell 85-87). TikTok users similarly engage in sophisticated impression management, utilizing filters, editing tools, and strategic content curation to craft idealized digital identities (Eriksson Krutrok 48-50). In both cases, the mask becomes a prison, preventing genuine connection while creating dependency on the validation it elicits.

TikTok's architectural features systematically amplify narcissistic tendencies through several interconnected mechanisms. The platform's "For You Page" algorithm creates intensely personalized content feeds that function as digital mirrors, reflecting and reinforcing users' self-centred interests and narcissistic traits (Eriksson Krutrok 45-47). Unlike traditional social media, TikTok's recommendation system learns user preferences with remarkable speed,

potentially creating feedback loops that normalize self-absorbed content consumption and production.

The platform's validation metrics comprised of likes, views, shares, and follower counts quantify social approval in ways that directly fuel narcissistic supply-seeking. These metrics become external regulators of self-esteem, creating dependency cycles where users require constant validation to maintain psychological equilibrium (Nesi and Prinstein 1430-1432). The ephemeral nature of this validation, where today's viral success offers no guarantee of tomorrow's relevance, mirrors the Underground Man's unstable sense of self-worth, perpetually threatened by potential humiliation or obscurity.

TikTok's emphasis on trends, challenges, and viral content promotes imitative performance within predefined frameworks that often prioritize attention-grabbing over authentic expression (Gibbs et al. 259-261). This dynamic

encourages users to subordinate individual creativity to algorithmic preferences, creating what Han describes as the "burnout society", a culture of exhaustive self-performance where authenticity is sacrificed to the demands of constant connectivity and visibility (Han 9-11). The platform thus becomes what Debord termed a "spectacle", a social relationship mediated by images where genuine human connection is replaced by representation (Debord 16-18).

The digital environment transforms traditional existential concerns into technologically mediated crises. The authenticity crisis experienced by the Underground Man, his shame regarding his true circumstances and complex inner life, finds contemporary expression in the digital native's anxiety about the incongruence between polished online image and offline reality (Frank 165-167). This tension is exacerbated by what Baudrillard identified as hyperreality, a condition where simulations and representations become more significant than

the reality they purport to represent (Baudrillard 1-3).

The meaning vacuum underlying the Underground Man's nihilism, his conviction that

traditional values are baseless and human existence fundamentally absurd, finds parallel in the potential meaninglessness of digital validation pursuits (Cogswell 88-90). When self-worth becomes tied to ephemeral likes and fluctuating follower counts, the stability of identity is severely compromised. The relentless pursuit of viral success can obscure more substantial sources of meaning and purpose, creating what Frankl termed the "existential vacuum" means a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness despite material comfort or social visibility.

The agency dilemma central to existential philosophy acquires new dimensions in algorithmic contexts. The Underground Man champions radical free will, famously asserting that individuals will choose to act against their own interests solely to affirm their autonomy (Frank 158-160). This contrasts sharply with the experience on TikTok, where algorithmic curation can feel profoundly deterministic, subtly shaping not only what users consume but how they present themselves to align with what is algorithmically favoured (Eriksson Krutrok 50-52). This creates fundamental tension between the human desire for authentic self-expression and the pervasive pressure to conform for digital survival and success.

Discussion

The convergence of digital narcissism and existential crisis on TikTok represents a significant transformation in how human selfhood is constituted and experienced in technological societies. Our findings suggest that this phenomenon cannot be adequately understood as either individual psychopathology or technological determinism alone, but rather emerges from the complex interaction between human psychological vulnerabilities and algorithmic architectures designed to exploit them.
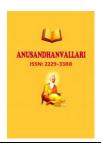
The technological mediation of narcissism distinguishes contemporary manifestations

from historical precedents. Where the Underground Man's condition resulted from individual

psychological dynamics and philosophical rebellion, digital narcissism is systematically amplified by platform designs that reward self-focused content and validation-seeking behaviours (Buffardi and Campbell 1306-1307). This represents what Zuboff terms "instrumentarian power", the use of behavioural data to modify and direct human behaviour for commercial purposes, creating what she describes as "human natural resources" for behavioural prediction and modification.

The collective dimension of digital narcissism marks another crucial distinction from the Underground Man's solitary suffering. While he experienced his crisis in isolation, digital

narcissism constitutes a mass phenomenon where millions simultaneously perform similar identity conflicts within algorithmically-structured environments (Eriksson Krutrok 52-54).

This normalization of narcissistic traits potentially reshapes social norms and relational capacities, with concerning implications for empathy, community, and democratic discourse. The commercial exploitation of existential anxiety represents perhaps the most disturbing development. Where the Underground Man's suffering had no market value, digital narcissism generates substantial economic returns through attention economies that commodify human vulnerability (Gibbs et al. 260-262). Users' existential struggles become raw material for engagement metrics, their searches for meaning and connection transformed into data points for algorithmic optimization.

Conclusion

This investigation has demonstrated that digital narcissism on TikTok constitutes a technologically mediated existential crisis with profound parallels to the condition embodied by Dostoevsky's Underground Man. The core psychological dynamics alienation, inauthentic self-presentation, and tortured validation-seeking find amplified expression in the algorithmic

ecosystems of contemporary social media. The implications extend beyond individual psychology to encompass fundamental questions about agency, authenticity, and meaning in technological societies. The challenge for digital citizens lies in cultivating stable selfhood within environments that systematically reward performative superficiality and external validation. As with the Underground Man's rebellion against the "Crystal Palace" of rational determinism, contemporary users must navigate their agency within digital systems that subtly direct desires and shape performances. Future research should explore resistance strategies and alternative platform designs that might foster more authentic digital existence. This includes investigating how users develop critical algorithmic literacy, create counter-cultural spaces within dominant platforms, and establish practices that preserve agency and authenticity. The enduring relevance of Dostoevsky's insights compels continued critical engagement with our technologically-mediated search for self, suggesting that while the "underground" has gone digital, the fundamental human struggles remain profoundly recognizable.

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