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DIGITAL CAPITALISM AND FRIENDSHIP: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper starts from an understanding of friendship as a series of gradients – a definition provided firstly by Aristotle – to observe the similarities and differences between interested friendship, disinterested friendship, and market relations. Introducing the notion of surveillance capitalism, the paper discusses the advent of social media and the implicit definition of friendship that underlies it. Social media favours the quantification and bureaucratisation of friendship, transforming it into a measure of personal achievement, i.e. widely promoting instrumental friendship. This transformation raises a number of issues related to alienation, self-exploitation, and the ability to relate to otherness.

Keywords: alienation; social media; commodification.

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1 FRIENDSHIP: A COMPLEX DEFINITION

How to define friendship? Often defining the things that seem most obvious turns out to be an extremely difficult task. It is virtually impossible to find a truly satisfactory and complete definition of friendship – indeed, depending on the type of variables and aspects considered, social sciences have provided several different definitions of it (Adams et al., 2000; Matthews, 1983). Friendship, as a significant and transversal aspect of all stages of life (Bukowski et al., 2009, p. 218), is closely linked to happiness (Argyle, 2002; Demir, 2015; Demir et al., 2007), affection (Floyd et al., 2005), identity construction (Wright, 1984), social development (Berndt, 2002) and inclusion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Friendship then implies other dimensions, such as the question of right living or the type of society we should aspire to (Fraisie, 1974, pp. 11–12). Instead of clarifying things, however, this information threatens to overwhelm our ideas.

This paper aims to analyse some of the shifts in the conception and practice of friendships related to social media. For this, a definition of friendship is required – but since it is so complex to provide a single definition that includes every aspect, a different strategy shall be followed, focusing instead on gradients of friendship. Aristotle is one of the first philosophers to establish a range of categories of friendship, a spectrum that makes it easier to cover the various aspects that would escape a more univocal definition. Hence, this paper builds on his proposal and then briefly compares it with two moments that are particularly interesting: the conception of friendship in the genesis of capitalism – thanks to a rapid excursus into the Scottish Enlightenment – and the conception of friendship during the apogee of neoliberalism – thanks to a discussion of the use of social media. From this programmatic summary it is already possible to guess some of the key elements of this paper – a perspective close to critical theory and not historiographically oriented – as well as its limitations – notably the almost exclusive focus on perspectives from the Global North.

Firstly, it should be emphasised that friendship is a central element of human life according to Aristotle, to the extent that “without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods; even rich men and those in possession of office and of dominating power are thought to need friends most of all” (Aristotle, 2009, 1155a). Indeed, the importance of friendship is such in the Aristotelian system that it is a prerequisite for achieving a fully ethical life and approaching the *εὐδαιμονία* (Aristotle, 2009, 1169b; Sherman, 1987). Significantly, the importance of friendship for a good life goes beyond Aristotle's definition of *εὐδαιμονία* and is easily justifiable in a liberal, pluralist system (Badhwar, 1993). This is significant, because it means that friendship is a constitutive part of a good life regardless of the concrete content definition of a good life. This relevance, linked to the multiplicity of aspects that can be referred to friendship, means that every historical epoch and social structure has to address the issue and propose its own way of conceiving and integrating friendship into social structures.

Friendship is not only important for individuals, but also for communities (Aristotle, 2009, 1155a; 1161a; Mitchell, 1998). With its particular way of analysing and conceptually subdividing reality (Fortenbaugh, 1975), Aristotle argues for the existence of three distinct types of friendship. They differ in the object of *philia*: in some cases it is the useful, in others the pleasant, and finally the good (Aristotle, 2009, 1155b). Both friendship for utility and friendship for pleasure are primarily oriented towards achieving what seems good for oneself – although, as the philosopher reminds us, human beings easily confuse what appears to be a good for oneself with general good (Aristotle, 2009, 1155b). Indeed, both these modes of friendship are fundamentally centred on one's own self-interest, and only accidentally in the friend's characteristics. In these cases, it is not the friend that one desires, but only some accidental characteristics that distinguish him or her at that moment: his or her usefulness or pleasantness. “Therefore those who love because of utility love because of what is good for themselves, and those who love because of pleasure do so because of what is pleasant to themselves, and not because of who the loved person is but in so far as he is useful or pleasant” (Aristotle, 2009, 1156a). This, however, seems to conflict with the very definition of friendship.

Here, then, is the paradox of friendship as Aristotle presents it: In seeking and choosing friends, we seek the good for ourselves, and apparently we only love another if and so long as he seems good for us; yet we are persuaded that we are not real friends unless we wish one another good apart from what is good for ourselves. (Pangle, 2003, p. 39)

In this sense, then, Aristotle's argument is that friendships for utility or pleasure are only partial friendships (Aristotle, 2009, 1157b; Pangle, 2003, p. 39); they mimic true friendship but fail to reproduce its essential nature, which is relational and takes into account the existence of the other as other (Aristotle, 2009, 1157a). We can call these conditional friendships: they depend on a number of factors that are not essential to the friend's personality, external or transient conditions. Hence, these friendships tend to be very fragile and context-dependent, and do not resist the passage of time. This is where we can introduce a conceptual division between instrumental friendship and disinterested friendship.

“Some friendships are valued chiefly for their usefulness. Such friendships are *instrumental* or *means* friendships. Other friendships are valued chiefly for their own sakes. Such friendships are *noninstrumental* or *end* friendship” (Kapur, 1991, p. 483). In the former, one hopes for the friend's good for one's own sake, while in the latter, the friend's good is hoped for as an end in itself. While in instrumental friendship the good sought is external – and therefore the friend is replaceable, since he or she is merely a means to an end – in disinterested friendship the end in itself is the friendship. The friend, in the latter case, is irreplaceable, since it is his or her person as such that is the end of the friendship. Since it is not replaceable, every disinterested friendship is unique, and as such cannot really be measured or compared – to establish a unit of measurement is in fact to render different realities

commensurable, to make them converge on the same plane (Schmitt, 2018), that is, to delete their uniqueness. Disinterested friendship, being deeply personal and singular, escapes the logic of measurement. This will be one of the focal points of this paper: how does making a friendship public or formalising it contribute to creating a metric of friendship and thus depersonalising it?

However, before trying to answer this question and address the contemporary context – especially with regard to neoliberalism and digital capitalism – it is important to make one last observation to show the complexity of talking about friendship. Indeed, the definitions on which we have based the theoretical framework are not without difficulties.

How precisely does friendship based on the good differ from the two defective forms that rest on utility and pleasure? If we take with utmost seriousness Aristotle's assertion that each person loves what is or seems best for himself, we will most likely understand friendships of pleasure to revolve around the pleasures of the body, friendships of utility to turn upon material advantage, and friendships of the good to provide the highest benefits to both partners, supporting them above all in moral virtue and in learning. This would mean, however, that friendships based on the good are essentially just friendships of utility with a higher good as the end. If, on the other hand, we take with utmost seriousness Aristotle's statement that the perfect friend loves and seeks to benefit his friend for the friend's own sake, we should perhaps view friendships of pleasure and utility as including all those formed for the sake of all pleasures and benefits, high and low, and virtuous friendships as fundamentally different. (Pangle, 2003, p. 52)

The difficulty of explaining how friendships for good differ from those for interest or pleasure is one of the constitutive problems in defining what friendship or, more precisely, true friendship is. This theoretical introduction to the problem of friendship has shown how it is possible – and indeed useful – to subdivide friendship into different categories. If this division allows a better understanding of the existence of different forms of relationships that are described as friendship, it has also shown the difficulty of giving a clear and univocal definition of this concept. Indeed, it is not clear how to define pure friendship: this does not reduce the validity and interest of establishing a range of gradients of friendship from the instrumental to the more disinterested, but it does impose a certain caution in the way we discuss friendship. It is on this basis, with an unresolved theoretical problem but a set of categories useful for developing concrete analyses, that the argumentative development of this paper can begin.

2 CAPITALISM, FRIENDSHIP, AND BUSINESS

The conception of friendship, as a social phenomenon, is inextricably linked to the society in which it manifests itself – and so its definition is always changing (Chambers, 2017, pp. 27–29). Indeed, it could be said that the paramount importance of friendship is an aspect of human sociality, i.e. that human beings not

only inhabit the polis (Aristotle, 2009, 1097b, 2013, 1253a), but inhabit it by seeking friendships. To talk about contemporary friendship, it is therefore essential to discuss, albeit briefly and within the limits of this paper, capitalism.

Capitalism, as a dynamic structure in which economic production is at the centre of social processes, is characterised by a certain precariousness. Economic production is in fact constantly evolving, something that transforms and revolutionises social ties (Schmitt, 1996, p. 27). This dynamism and fluidity is also characteristic of the central element for obtaining and managing power in this society: capital (Han, 2020). This means that, compared to Ancien Régime ruling group, the bourgeoisie is much more unstable and precarious in its own definition. Whereas nobility is a hereditary trait, generally acquired at birth and lasting until death, belonging to the bourgeoisie depends exclusively on the possession of capital. In order not to diminish, capital must be continuously invested and exposed to risk (Marx, 1981). As a result, the bourgeoisie is subject to a continuous existential precariousness (Cometta, 2017). Whereas the power struggle among the nobility was limited by the common security of belonging to a ruling group, the bourgeoisie does not enjoy this existential certainty and is constantly at risk of losing its capital and, with it, its status. For while not possessing executive power or large property did not prevent nobles from considering themselves superior to commoners, the loss of capital also implies a change of class and thus exclusion from the bourgeoisie. This illustrates the dynamic nature of capitalism. Such society is sustained by the logic of continuous and total competition – a dynamic that is in fact capital-centric and not anthropocentric (Napoletano & Brett, 2020, p. 39; Vasan, 2018), which is why Marx does not criticise the bourgeoisie with a moral judgement but analyses its role in a systematic way (Marx, 1981). This, of course, does not exclude instrumental alliances, but hinders the formation of ties of disinterested friendship (Grayson, 2007).

This leads us to reflect again on the division between interested and disinterested friendship and, more specifically, the separation between business/power and personal relationships in capitalist society. The genesis of capitalism is marked, in part, by the coexistence of extreme tendencies of opposite sign: some areas in which individual self-interest is the only value, while in others disinterested love is taken as an ideal. This is the case, for example, of the gender division between productive tasks – where one must compete socially to survive – and reproductive tasks – which are considered natural and the result of selfless maternal or romantic love (Fraser, 1995, 2020). It is possible that, in a system in which economic competition becomes the determining social criterion of productive tasks, in order to conceive the centrality of friendship it was necessary to idealise it and relegate it to a separate sphere. This is what was proposed, at least, by the Scottish Enlightenment. The sharp division between business and disinterested friendship was actually considered beneficial by this school of thought. Concerned with overcoming the contradictions of the Ancien Régime, in which all friendship seemed to be imbued in power manoeuvres and calculations – this is, by

the pervasiveness of the friendship of utility among the nobles and merchants –, they thought that clearly establishing the absence of friendship in the realm of work would allow the creation of a protected space, outside of business, for disinterested friendship. Scottish Enlightenment thinkers “perceive commercial society, far from ‘contaminating’ personal relations with instrumentalism, as, ‘purifying’ them by clearly distinguishing friendship from interest and founding friendship on sympathy and affection” (Silver, 1990, p. 1487). This separation of public and private has allowed the constitution of a self-reflective individual (Burkart, 2010). In its historical development, however, this relationship is problematic. “This determined the evolution of polar human traits, of public utilitarian and private *expressive* individualism” (Lambert, 2013, p. 26).

Developing a history of the concept of friendship far exceeds the scope of this paper, but these observations on the Scottish Enlightenment shows on the one hand the persistence of the tension between interested and disinterested friendship, and on the other the attempt to resolve this contradiction by denying the notion of interested friendship and clearly distinguish the public space from the private sphere, where ideal and disinterested friendship can fully manifest itself. Yet this attempt is doomed to failure. Firstly, relegating friendship to the personal sphere in a society increasingly centred on economic dynamics seems to imply that friendship is no longer a pivotal element of human life, or that society is increasingly alienating to human beings because it does not allow for the development of disinterested friendships – this second hypothesis is the one favoured by Marxists in analysing an ever less anthropocentric and increasingly capital-centric society. Secondly, this division favours the romantic idealisation of friendship as a completely pure sphere, devoid of the power struggles typical of the economic world – a sphere that can only develop in the privacy of intimacy (Rosen, 2007, p. 26). This is also problematic because as we have seen, it is not possible to unambiguously and satisfactorily define disinterested friendship. Even more so, insisting too much on the absence of conflict in disinterested friendship relationships can lead to an erasure of otherness in friendship tout court: in fact, it is easy to have no conflict where the other does not exist, and therefore cannot, with its autonomy, stand in the way of the subject's desires – but the absence of the other is something fundamentally far removed from friendship, hence an important contradiction.

The sharp distinction of friendship from market relations has led to the conceptualisation of a tension-ridden duality, expressed for instance in the Habermasian thesis of the colonisation of lifeworld by market forces (Habermas, 1984; Jütten, 2011). From this perspective, instrumental friendship would be a symptom of the colonisation of the world of human relations by the market system. However, by amplifying the conceptual distinction between the two poles, this approach risks oversimplifying and idealising the lifeworld in opposition to the market, turning it into a non-historical ideal free of power relations (Fraser, 2014, p. 547; Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018). Again, this overly-marked division between a sphere of conflict between distinct individualities and a sphere of pure harmony tends to

contradictory results and fails to sufficiently explain various nuances of interpersonal relations in contemporary society. Thus, we need to understand that the division between friendship and the market, while interesting, cannot be taken as stable or clearly and easily defined. Indeed, it should be mentioned that trust, a constitutive element of friendship, is at the same time one of the most important aspects for facilitating economic exchanges (Browne et al., 1997; Foley et al., 2014). An excessively neat division between market and friendship – especially interested friendship – is therefore difficult to justify. Again, the conceptual division between disinterested friendship and market relations is interesting and fruitful (Table 1), but it must be thought of as a gradient and not as a series of sharp, unambiguous distinctions.

Table 1. Similarities and differences between the various degrees of friendship identified so far

Disinterested friendship	Interested friendship		Interested relationship
Friendship of the good	Friendships of pleasure	Friendships of utility	Business/power relationship
Interest in the essential characteristics of the other person	Interest in the accidental characteristics of the other person		
Uniqueness of the relationship: every friendship is incomparable	Various relationships can be compared according to the type of interest and gain they allow. Some sort of friendship metrics can be established		

3 FACEBOOK, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF FRIENDSHIP

To analyse the effects of social media on friendship, it is first necessary to introduce, albeit briefly, the concept of digital capitalism. Indeed, social media develop in a context in which the recording of data becomes a central aspect of contemporary society (Ferraris & Torrenco, 2014; Floridi, 2014; Reinsel et al., 2018): this authoritarian drive predates digital technology, which can be seen more as a symptom of it (e.g. Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Chambers, 2017). This context makes mass surveillance increasingly crucial (Rule, 2002; Zuboff, 2018): digital capitalism feeds on the information it grabs for free from users, and exploits it for advertising, behaviour prediction and conditioning purposes – that is, to transform it into power (Barba del Horno, 2020). In fact, digital technologies allow the capitalist market to enter a new phase of surplus accumulation and capital

concentration (Frayssé, 2015; Fuchs, 2013, 2014; Rodríguez Prieto, 2020) precisely by extracting value from the freedom of individuals and thus transforming it into an instrument of coercion (Han, 2017b). This quest for monopoly and extreme extraction can indeed be read as the culmination of the reactionary trend that began with the advent of the neo-liberal discourse in the 1980s and a new alliance between public powers and private companies in the Global North (Fuchs, 2019; Robinson, 2018). In this context of capitalist and socio-political reconfiguration (Fraser, 2015), the transformative potential of new technologies is so often celebrated (Morozov, 2013) that they are expected to transform every aspect of our lives – including friendship. Indeed, social media aims to “transform” the way we handle interpersonal relationships on a daily basis (boyd & Ellison, 2007) – or, to put it in other terms, to exploit friendship for their economic purposes (Beer, 2008).

This being said, we can analyse some of the trends related to social media, while remaining cautious about oversimplifications, since these are diverse and very dynamic products (Edison Research, 2021; Lambert, 2013). The median amount of friendships in Facebook is between 100 (Ugander et al., 2011, p. 3) and 300 (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 880), but only 25 per cent of these are described as “actual friends” (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 880), underlining the difference between what is considered online and offline friendship. This adds a layer to our representation of friendship gradients: indeed, online and offline friendship seem to possess distinct characteristics. There are at least two noteworthy aspects here: firstly, what is referred to as friendship by some social media is a bond that can refer to different types of relationships (Miller, 2017) – indeed, different social media focus on distinct types of interaction: e.g. LinkedIn or Academia focusing on professional relationships, while Tinder and Grindr on romantic or erotic encounters – and, secondly, the very structure of the digital medium significantly change interpersonal interactions. Online friendship makes it possible to maintain a number of relationships that would have been abandoned in offline life – e.g. due to an excessively large geographical distance between the people involved, thanks to what has been termed ambient co-presence (Madianou, 2016) – but also create new, unexpected connections that would be difficult to reconcile with offline life (e.g. McDonald, 2019). Reconnecting with old friends and maintaining long distance friendships – and other types of relations – are the relevant ideas here (Joinson, 2008). This brings us to the second fundamental aspect related to social media: the central role of interaction. The idea being that a friendship can only be sustained through as much constant interaction between friends as possible, maintaining friendships that would have disappeared in the offline world requires an increased amount of interaction, e.g. “through activities such as funny comments, ‘likes’ and tags” (Niland et al., 2015, p. 134). As can be guessed, there are two elements at play here: on the users' side, a certain quantification of friendship management and, on the structural level, the underlying incorporation of this management into a market logic following the dynamics of digital capitalism – this is, the integration into this market of a genuine online affective labour, in a further act of appropriation of non-

socially recognised labour (see for instance Johanssen, 2018; Kiarina Kordela, 2023; Oksala, 2016; Zhongxuan, 2016).

Social media does not only involve a quantitative increase in interactions. Many works through the creation of a profile, that is, a series of self-descriptive activities – such as posting one’s photo, inventing one’s username, writing a biography. This kind of social media can be understood as a tool for self-construction and self-presentation – often in a public rather than private setting (Blatterer, 2010) –, allowing the individual to shape himself as a profile – indeed, the transition between the identity construction of the modern subject and the contemporary one of the profile is a theme raised by some psychoanalysts (Benasayag & Del Rey, 2015). This is significant for several reasons. Firstly, this relates to the apparent immateriality of the online world as opposed to the offline world. The immaterial is a ground of aspirations, of limitlessness (e.g. Hackl et al., 2022; a clear example of the solutionist perspective criticised by Morozov, 2013; but also the possibility of experiencing relationships that would be impossible in an offline setting, as presented in McDonald, 2019) – to put it in Aristotelian terms, of potentiality rather than act. Constructing an online identity therefore allows greater freedom of choice, the possibility of combining both characteristics one possesses and aspirational elements, e.g. liking a fashion house while not possessing any of its clothes (Wallace et al., 2012) – but also the possibility of transforming oneself completely or hiding one’s identity (D. Fisher, 2019; Zakhary et al., 2017). This suggests the important mix of material, symbolic and imaginative elements in the process of virtual identity self-construction (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). This connects with a second key element: visibility.

Visibility is a fundamental part of the online experience, especially social media – indeed, even those who want to hide their offline identity still try, with their online profile, to be seen. Being seen through different eyes, as a distinct persona, is one of the great promises of political, symbolic and emotional liberation that the online world offers (Miller et al., 2016; Moore, 2018). It is no coincidence that the sense most stimulated by these spaces is sight.

The boundary, response, privacy and identity work enacted by young adults in interaction with Facebook can be viewed as negotiations and resistances to a system that reinforces their friendship practices but also positions them as individual highly visible self-performing consumers (Niland et al., 2015, p. 135).

Facebook is a space for “social searching”, i.e. analysing the profiles of people known offline (Lampe et al., 2006) and “participatory surveillance” (Albrechtshlund, 2008): in the social media universe invisibility is a punishment, while visibility a reward (Bucher, 2012). More precisely, it seems that a user surveys 2.5 times more people than the amount of contacts he or she actively interacts with (Marlow, 2009). This is especially true in couples: social networks are used as a means of maintaining the relationship but also as a tool for surveillance of the partner (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). “Importantly, this data does not suggest that Facebook creates bad

relationships. Rather, Facebook intensifies dispositions which already exist” (Lambert, 2013, p. 15; see also Haythornthwaite, 2005). How do these two elements, namely immateriality and visibility, influence the development of friendships on social media? In order to understand this, it is necessary to better explain the mechanisms of online profile construction, friendship relationships do indeed have an important impact on one's online representation.

For the presentation of the self that is sought to be robust, the material posted by one's contacts must also be consistent with this narrative, generating coherence and thus credibility (Walther et al., 2008). This means that the behaviour of others can be disruptive to one's own identity project – even more: the behaviour of others on social platforms can also affect people who do not have an online profile: a person not registered on Instagram can still be tagged in hundreds of photos, and thus unknowingly have a social profile (Miller, 2017) – and must therefore be managed and “tamed”, that is, that the constitutive otherness of one's friends reveals itself as a potential threat (Binder et al., 2012). A study on MySpace seems to confirm this issue. As young people build their online identity, they claim to know how to avoid unpleasant situations or inappropriate communication. According to the author, “ironically, it is the intrusive actions of friends, rather than strangers, that pose a problem” (Mallan, 2009, p. 63). Studies of groups of young adults using Facebook also confirm that there is a particular sensitivity to protecting the reputation of one's friends: “friendship protection was also used when friends filtered photos to protect each other's privacy within a wider audience” (Niland et al., 2015, p. 134). The constant pressure to perform well, to be visible and get lots of likes is such that some Instagram users, especially young women, decide to use different profiles, some more public in which they have to obey the logic of visibility and performance, others more private, *fnsta*, in which they only connect with friends and acquaintances from offline life, in what can be called a safe space where they can behave in a more spontaneous and less studied manner (S. Ross, 2019).

This shows an important shift in the governance of friendship. As friendship also develops in the public space of the web – an open space in which one wants to build one's public identity – it needs to be managed more carefully. “It is apparent that friendships can no longer be left to ‘go on’ according to their own rhythms. Friends are ranked and shuffled, their comments and images tagged, untagged, copied, and removed. Friendships are bureaucratised, while the labour of intimacy is intensified” (Lambert, 2013, p. 14). This process follows implicit rules that differ according to the intensity of the friendship (Bryant & Marmo, 2012). The construction of a public profile, of an online persona, is a socially mediated act (S. Ross, 2019). Thus, with the identity construction of the profile and the advent of social media, friendship becomes an aspect that requires constant public relations work, in which the rules of behaviour are no longer understood solely with respect to the friend but also and especially with respect to the public of other users who observe the friendship.

4 FINAL REMARKS

Social media manifest a transformation of certain aspects of friendship in line with broader social values of neoliberalism. In particular, they favour the quantification of a number of parameters. One of the most important aspects is that of interactions. Being friends, in a cross-social media perspective, implies interacting, and interacting often. The tendency to favour a quantitative approach to interaction, for instance by emphasising the date of the last interaction or the frequency of interactions – as in the semi-private safe spaces of WhatsApp and Snapchat – or by focusing on certain interaction tools – such as comment, like or retweet in Facebook, Instagram, Twitter – enforces a perspective that is less capable of differentiating various types and modes of friendship. This is significant for several reasons. Firstly, this promotes a vision in which *more is better* – something that is true for the mining of user data, but is arguably less true with regard to interpersonal relations. The loss of nuances to define different types of friendship makes its quantification a seemingly inevitable trend. Indeed, “friendship on these sites focuses a great deal on collecting, managing and ranking the people you know” (Rosen, 2007, p. 27). The message that seems implicit in social media is that friendship is a measure of popularity or personal success. Interestingly, the term “network” in social network refers to a term from the professional world, mainly related to the aspirations of those who want to build a career through their contacts (Rosen, 2007, p. 19). In this sense, social media seem to take the narrative of individual flourishing and development typical of capitalism and apply it to the world of personal relationships. Secondly, in an environment that fosters a competition for visibility, each profile struggles to stand out. The narrative supporting one's own profile must therefore become performative for the wider public, which entails a number of problems related to self-objectification and self-commodification (Berberick, 2010; Fardouly et al., 2018; Sheldon et al., 2019). In this very intense struggle for social-virtual recognition (Han, 2017a), friends play an important role, as they can become facilitators or obstacles to personal success. Thus, instead of being primarily based on spontaneity, friendship in social media calls for particular precautions – what has been called the bureaucratisation of friendship through metrics such as likes and shares. This, in turn, seem to be founded on the precept of instrumental friendship – as a type of friendship that is easier to quantify and therefore more suitable for inclusion in a metric.

To conclude, the generalisation of the instrumental friendship model, which seem implicit in the conception of friendship on social media as a measure of visibility and personal success, indicate a step towards the transformation of friendship from an end in itself to a means, something redolent of the notion of alienation (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 39). This transformation of friendship, its bureaucratisation, risks leading to the blurring of the ultimate goal of pure friendship, and, from a broader perspective, that of the good life that accompanies it. These changes are extremely complex and ramified, and it is obviously impossible

to attribute them directly or solely to the social media phenomenon – which itself is extremely plural. However, by adopting an analysis that places these technological phenomena within a more general societal shift towards surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2018) and neoliberalism, it is possible to notice some general trends – namely that of depersonalisation and commodification (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018).

This paper has raised some of the key issues in the transformation of the conception of friendship through digital capitalism. In order to better understand the matter, it would be appropriate for this transformation to be conceptualised and framed in the empirical studies that attempt to address the issue of friendship on social media. In particular, it will be important for these studies to emphasise the type and characteristics of friendship underlying social media because, as we have seen, this concept is complex and polysemic.

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