

## CHAPTER 3

# Neoliberal Impression Management

### 3.1 Introduction

‘Image is everything,’ says tennis star Andre Agassi, tipping down his sunglasses. A celebrity tennis player on a very successful television commercial for Canon cameras, Agassi’s words ring with a layered truth perfectly suited to the spectacular capitalism of the early 1990s. Presumably Canon was not hoping to enlist him to give a critique of late capitalism, where he could imply a message like ‘there is no longer any experienced reality unmediated by the spectacle’ or ‘now media images have consumed reality’. The intention appears to be for him to be giving semi-autobiographical advice, a vague message that indicates that how we portray ourselves to others determines our success in life, whether we are ‘winners’, as Donald Trump likes to say. In other words, it is a broad invocation to be hyper-concerned with how others view us, and a suggestion that tending diligently to this will result in one’s rise in status, power, wealth and luxury. The commercial opens with Agassi donning a snazzy white-on-black suit in front of a background of lit up Las Vegas streets, and a gritty-voiceover asks us ‘what is the image of a rebel?’. As a sweaty Agassi pounds tennis balls and removes his shirt, the voice answers the question for us: ‘these are the images of a rebel’. The ‘rebel’ in this case is a world-renowned tennis champion.

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#### How to cite this book chapter:

Morelock, J. and Narita, F. Z. 2021. *The Society of the Selfie: Social Media and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy*. London: University of Westminster Press. Pp. 37–55. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book59.c>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

The commercial portrays the image of an individualist, a rebel against conformity. Agassi is daring – unpredictable and efficient in his skilful movements, competitive, successful and tough. But all those athletic skills were well-known by any informed spectator of the world of sports in the 1990s. There is something more: framed by the night-time neon Las Vegas lights or cruising along in his hot car, he is also unmistakably cool. He expresses the hedonism and the *jouissance* of a successful life that pervaded globalized capitalism via screens and slogans. This is the perfect image of ‘cool capitalism’ (McGuigan 2009), where life turns seductively tasteful: the rebel is not a Latin American guerrilla; he is a *winner* that promotes the best image of himself, on his own and untamed by routine. He is the entrepreneur of his own life. He plays hard in the arid landscape, poses in front of the city lights, relaxes in the pool and drives off into the sun. Wherever he appears, he is ‘the best version of himself’: he deals with creativity and flexibility. The implication is that rugged individualism has led him to fame and riches. It is a story of success in neoliberal terms, honouring skilful impression management as the all-important key. This was before the days of social media, and clearly the ideology of self-marketing as a strategy of living a good life was prevalent enough already. The vision is clear enough through the focus on individuality and self-fulfilment, the association of who you are with what you buy, the need for ‘success’, and so on.

One of the main characters in Kurt Vonnegut’s book *Breakfast of Champions* is Dwayne Hoover, a very successful car salesman who is suicidal and losing his grip on reality. In the 1999 film rendition of the story, the duality of Dwayne Hoover – played by Bruce Willis – is especially glaring. He is a celebrity in his town, advertisements carrying his smiling face ludicrously common on television and in public spaces. People love him and want to be like him, and some even obsess over him in paranoid or delusional ways. This Dwayne Hoover, the one in the advertisements, the wealthy, smiling, trustworthy car salesman whose image is in everyone’s eyes and whose name is on everyone’s lips, is what we would call Dwayne Hoover’s *spectacular self*. Of course, this spectacular version of Dwayne Hoover is only a shell of him, and a distorted one at that. Dwayne Hoover the *person* is actually a psychological and emotional disaster.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote *Breakfast of Champions* in the early 1970s. The principles of personal branding and media saturation were obviously present back then, as a general tactic in the new consumer oriented, spectacular capitalism. In Dwayne Hoover’s case, outside of his presentation of self in everyday life, he has advertising, and especially television advertising, to increase his presence and keep selling his brand even during his off hours. Today, Dwayne Hoover would be all over the internet, tweeting about cars and trustworthiness, posting pictures on Instagram of himself shaking hands with ‘another satisfied customer’, and so on. And indeed, he does, through so many of us. In the society of the selfie, we are all Dwayne Hoovers, or at least we will be if we want to swim rather than sink.

Users sell themselves, but generally on social media the currency is not money, at least not directly. There may be career payoffs down the line to building and curating ‘online presence’, but future career payoff is one step removed from the true immediate transaction. Users sell themselves to others in return for their attention, and their marks of approval (which may translate into more attention from others). Attention and approval, however, are also transformed.

The spectacular self is the star figure of this chapter, along with the cornerstone traits of the successful spectacular self. Essentially, the individual projects a digital rendition of the self, comprising images contoured for favourability. And this favourable virtual self-presentation, doctored through filtration, alteration and selective emphasis, is directed towards the display of personal assets and abilities. In the race to become prized commodity, spectacular selves are conduits for the particular genre of restless activity that saturates the social terrain in the society of the selfie. The basics of this situation are familiar enough to any savvy social media user and probably most disgruntled technophobes. We will begin our exposition by discussing a shift in everyday communication that underlies the world of the spectacular self – the decline of face-to-face interaction with its particular qualities and dynamics, or what we will refer to as ‘embodied co-presence’, following Erving Goffman’s terminology. We will then consult several social theorists to help illuminate this strange, extremely common trend in contemporary society in a deeper way. Specifically, we will survey three distinct theories that together overlap and express what we are getting at. These theories are Erich Fromm’s theory of the ‘marketing orientation’, Erving Goffman’s theory of ‘impression management’ and Michel Foucault’s theory of neoliberalism and human capital. Taken together, these ideas illuminate this late capitalist phenomenon that we refer to here as ‘neoliberal impression management’.

### 3.2 Decline of Embodiment and Co-Presence

In everyday life, in face-to-face interactions, positive responses from other people generally come in the form of verbal and nonverbal communication in real time. Goffman (1963a, 17) used the word ‘co-presence’ to refer to the face-to-face interactional context, where people ‘are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived’. Goffman distinguishes between ‘embodied’ and ‘disembodied’ information delivered in communication.

A frown, a spoken word, or a kick is a message that a sender conveys by means of his own *current* bodily activity, the transmission occurring only during the time that his body is present to sustain this activity. Disembodied messages, such as the ones we receive from letters and mailed

gifts [...] require that the organism do something that traps and holds information long after the organism has stopped informing. (14)

In the society of the selfie the situation is more complicated. Goffman took for granted that co-presence involved people being in embodied, organic proximity (i.e., having access to the other's immediate verbal and non-verbal signals). Decades ago, when he wrote the above quote, it may have been more possible to establish a firm division between co-presence and embodiment on one side, and their opposites on the other side. Back then, the telephone may have been one of the only partial exceptions to this division. With social media, exceptions abound. The chatroom, or chat window is without all organic bodily signals, but communication generally flows in real time, not unlike a conversation in-person or over telephone. With the capacity to record short audio clips and video clips to send over DM (direct message), an additional organic component is added, even if some of the rhythm of back-and-forth communication is distorted in the act of recording. Video chat, now having exploded in popularity due to the COVID-19 crisis, adds in a strong visual dimension, where it is even possible to simulate (or digitally facilitate) eye contact.

Recent scholars of online social interaction have reframed 'co-presence' away from Goffman's simple dichotomy, to apply to interaction in virtual spaces as well (Bulu 2012). Even the notion of 'co-location' has been used in both ways – people being together in virtual and organic spaces (Zhao and Elesh 2008). For this reason, it will be useful to distinguish between *embodied co-presence* (being together in physical space) and *disembodied co-presence* (being together in virtual space). Acknowledging the many grey areas social media provides, and that forums such as Second Life and Zoom especially complicate the distinction, it is still true that social media provides other forums where the distinction is more relevant, i.e., where there is little if any disembodied co-presence. And still, social media is unique in providing an omnipresent space of immense prominence where simply daily interaction on various – albeit not all – platforms can involve little to no co-presence. Here we are primarily concerned with the significance of social media in terms of the rise in day-to-day life of interaction with minimal co-presence, which still owes to social media, even if it does not characterize social media as a whole. The reader should take this caveat into account in this and following chapters where we will contrast embodied co-presence with the social media sites and activities that are low in disembodied co-presence. Instead of a direct interactional context, these sites – such as Facebook and Twitter – primarily involve posting and replying.

Embodied co-presence carries a fullness of experiencing another person that is very complex and extends even beyond the signals we consciously send and receive. By contrast, social media introduces a variety of metrics of social attention and approval – namely likes, replies, shares and follows – which are stripped of so much of the complexity and fullness of interaction in real time. The 'like' adopts a single symbol, for instance, and is generally displayed on a

social media post as the symbol, with a count next to it. Facebook has added complexity to this, with the ready symbols for like, love, angry, sad and laughing. Still, this is a very limited range of expression. The icons are electronically generated and highly generic. Only dim traces of the time, space and embodied co-presence of face-to-face interaction remain.

Now, with platforms like Facebook and Twitter, the alienation of the spectacular self from the organic self is crystallized in a form more powerful than ever before. People can work on projecting their carefully contoured images all day without even getting out of bed. Nothing needs to be spontaneous – users can carefully select and doctor every photo and word every witty response with great intentionality rather than spontaneity. Without the subtle signals of real-time, co-present communication, discerning between spontaneity vis-à-vis contrived and calculated expression is much more difficult, and arguably impossible. Even differentiating spontaneity from contrivance in one's own expressions can be opaque. 'Whenever one has time to write, edit, and delete, there is room for performance. The "real me" turns out to be elusive' (Turkle 2011, 180). In a sense, face-to-face communication requires less guesswork regarding how well a person's expressions are received. Nonverbal cues, and the immediate presence of other people lend more immediate data than the screen with its surfaces. In a different sense, however, face-to-face communication requires more guesswork. Online metrics are supplied on every platform to indicate the popularity of the user's words, their pictures and even just *themselves*. And other users immediately can see the counts on the user's popularity as well, so there is no need to guess – users are automatically appraised (Hearn 2010).

These are signs of a hyper-industrial culture in which the mass consumption of information dematerializes (Stiegler 1996, 160–162) and disembodies communication, turning social expressions of attention and approval into measurable abstractions. Indeed, there is an attention economy that fills social media and drives so much online activity. Advertisements, status updates and notifications provide a barrage of stimuli and invite – if not demand – the user to be constantly available (Wu 2017). In response, the user needs to invent strategies to manage their own 'attentional disposition' (Citton 2014) towards the many solicitations of engagement, collaboration, pleasure, frivolity and personal exhibition. In other words, the attention economy primes the individual to deal with an inhuman speed of virtual situations and information, forcing people to judge and evaluate social behaviours according to their virtual presentations and metrics.

### 3.3 Marketing Orientation and Impression Management

Social media was not the cause of the attention economy, but it undoubtedly propelled it forward. It dovetailed brilliantly with these cultural trends that were already in motion, providing a new powerful impetus to propel the culture

of self-branding and self-marketing at breakneck speed. Psychoanalyst and social theorist Erich Fromm noted as far back as the 1940s that in the twentieth century, people's personalities were increasingly dominated by the logic of marketing. Fromm believed that the demands of the economy and the working world forced people to take on certain characteristics in order to succeed, and that these characteristics then carried over into the rest of their lives. If a person has to spend 8 hours, 5 days a week of their waking life exercising some particular set of habits, they become more skilled in those habits, and more used to using them. Eventually they will be likely to defer to those habits in their other waking hours, in many ways, some obvious, some more subtle. What someone does in general becomes a major part of how they think and act in general. The culture of one's working life bleeds over into their private and social life.

In this way, the demands of the entire economy – imagine a virtual landscape of money, occupations, workplaces, shops, sales and purchases – are expressed in the culture of society, and in the character traits of the people who live in it. The capitalist society of the twentieth century made people into twentieth century capitalist characters. In Fromm's words, the 'market concept of value, the emphasis on exchange value rather than on use value, has led to a similar concept of value with regard to people and particularly to oneself. The character orientation which is rooted in the experience of oneself as a commodity and on one's value as exchange value I call the *marketing orientation*' (Fromm 1947, 68). People began to experience themselves as objects to be advertised and sold. Whether competing for jobs or customers, people needed to advertise what they had to offer on the market. And what they had to offer was not just skills, it was also personality. In the new 'personality market', getting people to like oneself and on that basis want to hire or do business with oneself rose to become a huge part of things. To 'make it', a person had to learn to sell themselves – their skills and their personality – to potential buyers in the economy.

Although he had a different focus and used different language, Fromm was clearly aware of the impact of the Debordian spectacle in shaping the nature of self-presentation. He published *Man for Himself* in the early post-war years, at the dawn of the mass consumer society with its spread of spectacular logic. Fromm framed images in advertisements, movies and television as more than imitations of reality, and as more than windows into it. They were channels for producing and disseminating social norms for people who were *devoted* to marketing themselves. Fromm believed that people had a deep need for a 'frame of orientation and devotion', which guides their actions with moral force. The marketing orientation is not something you put on when you go out on Friday night and take off for the rest of the weekend. It is a way that you structure your approach to living, and you feel obligated to follow it. Selling yourself well is an *ethical* pursuit, and your self-esteem is bound tightly to your success on the personality market.

The need to treat oneself as a commodity on the 'personality market' for economic success bled over into the rest of life. People of the 'marketing orientation'

would treat themselves as commodities even when ‘off the clock’. They related to other people as potential buyers and related to themselves as products to be made simplistic and appealing, social interactions as opportunities to advertise themselves, the social world as a social marketplace. In Fromm’s description of the ‘marketing orientation’ he is highlighting a deep transformation in the realm of ethics. People do not just passively play scripted roles like cogs in a social machine. They write their own roles, style their own performances. On social media, users construct their virtual identities through profiles, preferences, friends and posts. If the ‘marketing orientation’ of today turns the self into an object on display at the social media bazaar, the Debordian spectacle of today has become more participatory and reflexive, as it enlists users to strategize and concoct their images, to produce and manage their impressions.

About 10 years after Fromm wrote *Man for Himself*, in 1956, sociologist Erving Goffman wrote his most famous book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which described a similar issue to what Fromm was talking about in the ‘marketing orientation’. It was in this book that Goffman articulated ‘impression management’. It is just what it sounds like – in everyday life, when one interacts with other people, one is trying to control how other people view them. In Goffman’s theory, social interaction is a performance where one tailors what they do, say and look like in order to control the impressions others have of them.

People do this through every means available, running the full gamut of what they say and do. Most people are more aware that they are trying to manage others’ impressions of them in situations where they are particularly nervous, like job interviews or first dates. In these situations, people carefully select their clothes and mannerisms and try to look as good as they can while also fitting the part of the date or the prospective employee. They might rehearse to themselves lines they plan on saying, just as if they were their lines in a play. They might have all kinds of emotional ups and downs and butterflies, and ‘back stage’ they might even confide about these to their closest friends and family. Yet when they appear ‘front stage’, they may go to great pains to hide all of these uncomfortable or awkward thoughts and feelings, so as to always appear poised, appropriately confident (or deferential), and likable.

Ben Stiller’s movie *Meet the Parents* is all about impression management. In this case, the scenario is that Gaylord ‘Greg’ Focker is meeting the parents of his girlfriend (who he secretly wants to propose to) for the first time, in a visit to stay at their home. Greg is particularly nervous to make a good impression, because of his hopes of marrying his would-be fiancée, Pam. The situation is very stressful for him overall, and much of the comedy in the film revolves around the awkwardness of Greg, who tries to conceal his nervousness and growing frustration, at which he usually straddles the line between success and failure.

For example, at a convenience store with Pam’s father Jack, Greg uses a random magazine to try and hide the fact that he is eavesdropping on Jack’s



conversation. Jack asks Greg what he is reading about, and Greg reveals the magazine to Jack, which happens to be open to a display of a woman using breast pumps. Greg makes up a story about how he is interested in milking because he grew up on a farm. Later, over dinner with the rest of the family, Jack brings up what Greg said about growing up on a farm. Pam knows Greg never lived on a farm, so Greg says some nonsense, and then makes up a story about how he once milked a cat named Geppetto. It gets especially awkward when Jack challenges Greg with the question: 'I have nipples, Greg. Could you milk me?' Still, Greg continues to pretend that he is comfortable, casual and enjoying the conversation. Obviously though, he is uncomfortable. Greg leaves the table to get a bottle of the cheap champagne that he bought at the convenience store earlier (when he was hoping to find expensive champagne). Alone in the kitchen (back stage), we see Greg angrily wrenching at his shirt collar and mimicking Jack's question about milking. Yet Greg's agreeable demeanour returns when he comes back to the dining room (front stage).

The situation above can be used to illustrate that impression management often includes hiding how you really feel, or as Goffman called it, 'expressive responsibility' (Goffman 1956, 132). Depending on the situation, this can involve putting on a costume of attitudes to have things to say, ways to say them, and so on, which are carefully chosen. It can even involve quite a lot of rational calculation at times, in order to achieve the desired effects, to project the desired persona. Adopting etiquette that suits the occasion generally – but obviously not always – involves emotional restraint and the presentation of a pleasant and respectful demeanour. Many private topics and feelings are to be left out of the show. Of course, this is all culture-bound and varies depending on the context. Still, the point stands that overall, this is the general veneer of public social behaviour: rational restraint and self-control (137). Arlie Hochschild – a student of Goffman – has further pointed out that sometimes particular emotional displays are considered appropriate. The rational veneer is not the only veneer. Especially for women, often the expectation is to exhibit certain kinds of feelings, while not emoting at the proper level is considered a violation of what Hochschild (2012) calls 'feeling rules'. This is especially evident in many occupations traditionally held by women, such as flight attendants. In such occupations, not only are women expected to suppress frustrations they might have with difficult passengers, but they are expected to actively exude happiness and the desire to help or nurture. Part of the job is this 'emotional labour'.

Goffman (1968) identifies an implicit ethic in the 'face work' of polite social interaction where each individual is obliged to maintain a positive and *consistent* image of themselves for others. The consistency is called a 'line', while the positive image is called 'face'. The *Meet the Parents* dinner scene also shows Greg struggling to maintain a consistent 'line' in the interaction, to avoid being 'discredited' by Pam's family. This maintaining of a consistent narrative of self in order to avoid being discredited is also a central theme in Goffman's (1963b)



discussion of 'stigma', how many people will go to great lengths to make some attribute of their person undetectable to others, and how this 'passing' constitutes a rift between how other people see them, and who they 'really' are (how other people would see them if they knew about the attribute). In its basic dynamic, this divide between 'virtual' and 'actual' social identities is an intensification of the same basic logic of impression management, with its division between front stage and back stage.

Goffman's ideas are strikingly relevant to the world of social media, where, in our terms, the division between front and back stage can be mapped onto the division between the spectacular and the organic. On a site like Facebook, one's profile can be carefully curated to send across the desirable image. Selfies and other photos can be taken at just the right events and locations, with just the right facial expressions, to convey a consistent, positive 'face'. Other photographs less flattering, even if taken, can be left out, one can un-tag oneself from them, etc. This practice can contribute to the illusion that a person is frequently or even always in the featured situations, and always looking their best. Profile photos can be not just selected for the best angle, the fittest physique, the best clothes, etc., but actually doctored. With programs like Body Editor and FaceApp, waistlines can be reduced, teeth can be bleached, and facial blemishes can be erased.

Many studies have been done on impression management online (Krämer and Winter 2008; Cunningham 2013). Scholars have analysed online self-presentation strategies in a variety of virtual contexts such as personal homepages (Dominick 1999), dating sites (Ellison et al. 2006; Zytka et al. 2014) and Facebook (Hall et al. 2014; Dorethy et al. 2014), among others. Scholars have also studied the online impression management of a variety of populations, such as US athletes (Smith and Sanderson 2015), Malaysian students (Shafie et al. 2012) and UK members of parliament (Jackson and Lilleker 2011), among others. The specifics change among contexts and populations, but the nature of the activity is consistent: information is controlled, selected and projected in order to present the self in a fragmented and favourable light.

A key difference between Fromm and Goffman is that Fromm saw the marketing orientation as historically situated and tied to consumer capitalism, while Goffman talked about social life in a very general way. In Goffman's mind, some amount of impression management is inevitable because in social situations people inevitably perform, at least to some degree, like actors on a stage. It is important to remember that Goffman was writing in twentieth century America, so his observations of allegedly general human behaviour were all within that context. This does not mean he was wrong, necessarily, but it does indicate his descriptions of human behaviour in particular contexts should not be unreflectively universalized. Regardless, these views of Goffman and Fromm are not mutually exclusive. Even if we assume with Goffman that impression management is a part of public life, at least to some degree, in any society, we

can still see how the pressures of twentieth century capitalism would dovetail with the tendency and amplify it.

### 3.4 Human Capital and Neoliberalism

Good impressions can come through being associated with people who are already respected. Getting closer to high-status people can allow one to catch some of the excess status as it dribbles off them. Just having a lot of friendly connections, *in itself*, is what sociologists like Robert Putnam (2000) call 'social capital'. But when someone uses their social connections to make themselves come across as important and desirable, they are dealing with another kind of capital: *human capital*. To understand this kind of individual investment into the self, it is important to take into account a shift in contemporary societies with the rise of neoliberalism.

In the late 1970s, Foucault (2004a) lectured about a historical shift in capitalist society from 'liberalism' to 'neoliberalism'. As a catch-all word, neoliberalism refers to many different trends. In terms of economic policy, it denotes privatization, deregulation of national markets, the reduction of state presence in welfare policies since the 1980s and the managerial revolution of the 1990s (Boltanski and Chiapello 2011). It refers to a specific variety of political practices that have changed capitalism since the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s (Harvey 2005), and have changed the relationship between sovereignty and territoriality (Ong 2006). There is a very complex mosaic of governmental and economic policies to consider (Slobodian 2018), from the first experiments during the military dictatorship in Chile in the late 1970s to the conservative hegemony in Britain and the US under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, and do not forget the government of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in France in the late 1970s and the economic and managerial reforms in Latin American countries in the 1990s.

In Foucault's lectures, neoliberalism is much more than a strictly economic phenomenon. The transition to neoliberalism is a deep and wide transformation, reaching not just into economic policy, but also into culture and political thought. Foucault's story of the journey from liberalism to neoliberalism begins in the eighteenth century, when liberalism emerged within the wealthy and powerful regions of an expanding transnational colonial system. In these regions, as international markets grew, so too did domestic markets. This means that market transactions were rising in significance not just in the larger geopolitical sense. They were also a prominent part of civil society (Rosanvallon 1999, 69) and produced the individual as a political subject that could express their needs and satisfactions via utilitarian relations of profit, self-interest and efficiency. Foucault, thus, describes a new 'art of government' that was intimately tied to the market and to the power to individualize behaviours and their economic costs (Foucault 2004b). Previously, the government was tasked with holding the

market in check, for example in regulating prices by moral criteria, or restricting the circulation of labour and commodities (Foucault 2004a, 32). Instead, in the era of 'liberalism', government was held to the standard of securing the freedom of individuals to pursue their own interests in civil society and the market. Liberalism emphasized freedom from oppressive government, to allow people the autonomous, utilitarian pursuit of their individual self-interests.

Neoliberalism is something of a reversal of this. It is about a state under market surveillance, not a market under state surveillance (Foucault 2004a, 120). Under liberalism, the state secured the freedom of the market since market rationality was the limit beyond which state policy should not cross. Under neoliberalism, the market colonizes the state. Neoliberalism, thus, is not about the end of the state or public services, but rather about the expansion of market relations towards every aspect of the state and the society.

Two moments can be identified in the rise of neoliberal thought in the twentieth century. The first one is connected to a response to the general crisis of liberalism in the 1930s, with the debates within the Freiburg School, the Walter Lippman Colloquium in 1938, Austrian liberal authors (like Hayek) and the ordoliberal theses of Eucken, Röpke, Rüstow, Müller-Armack and Grossmann-Doerth. In reaction to Nazism in Germany and Keynesianism in the United States, these authors railed against strict state control and massification. In this sense, they claimed for a renewal of a set of liberal policies concerned, above all, with a juridico-political institutional apparatuses that optimizes capital accumulation within nation states (Jessop 2019). Basically, this first neoliberal theory was concerned with the political and socioeconomic preconditions of functioning markets and the optimization of state reform, subjecting state to a competitive order (Biebricher 2019).

The second – and decisive – moment for the birth of neoliberal society took place in the United States. The first writings of American neoliberalism can be traced back to the writings of Henry Calvert Simons in the 1930s, which influenced the Chicago School of economics. The quintessential event, though, was the 1964 publication of Chicago School economist Gary Becker's seminal book *Human Capital*. The basic idea of 'human capital' that Becker articulated is that people can invest time and resources into themselves that will pay off in future material profits (Foucault 2004a, 230). By building one's own marketable knowledge and abilities, a person can increase their own market value. Becker's emphasis on the investment on human capital implies the formation of the attitudes and values as the sole basis for the liberty of civil society and accumulation. For him, the 'ingredient to economic progress' (Becker 1993) counts on family and private proactivity to adapt individual skills to the needs of free market. This emphasis on private activity encompasses a notion of personal responsibility that is inseparable from a wider moral idea of family responsibility. In other words, it is a cultural sign of the privatization of welfare and state responsibilities (Cooper 2017), since the private debt obligations of family and individual with human capital are foundational to socioeconomic order.

The theory of ‘human capital’ stretches economic reasoning about profitability beyond goods and services. Economic reason is extended into the self, and people become little enterprises committed to self-valorization. This individuation through self-realization via individual investment in human capital has become part of the cultural constellation of neoliberal capitalism (Lordon 2013, 72–73). The enterprise-form extends all throughout society, going beyond even monetary concerns and becoming a new grounding for culture and human relations. Economic reasoning about supply and demand, cost and benefit, investment and profit, permeates individual consciousness and social life. Market relations colonize how people relate with family, friends and, above all, with themselves (Foucault 2004a, 247; Cooper 2020).<sup>1</sup>

As Marwick (2013a) has noted, it has become expected if not required in many industries to self-advertise over social media, to build one’s ‘online presence’, to play the human capital game. For instance, chasing human capital can be a way of relating to education. Wendy Brown (2015) showed how institutions of higher education, and the way people approach higher education, are being increasingly narrowed to focus on human capital rather than human understanding. It is evident too in the way that the liberal arts are being devalued in contrast with degrees that are more geared to job training, or STEM fields. Within the social sciences and humanities, the ‘publish or perish’ context is similarly directed, e.g., towards maximum impact factor points. Budding academics – graduate students and those on the tenure-track – seek to produce as many publications as possible in the ‘top’ journals of their fields. Journals with high impact factors are important to publish in. The graduate degree in itself is a form of building oneself up, as are – as mentioned above – conference presentations and social networks, membership in and service to professional organizations, awards, grants, and so on. On Academia.edu and ResearchGate, academia directly enters the world of online profiles and metrics of personal valorization (Duffy and Pooley 2010) of the society of the selfie.

In sum, under neoliberalism everyone becomes an entrepreneur *of themselves*, striving to maximize their *human capital*, manage their own needs and act according to calculations of risk and opportunity. In Fromm’s ‘marketing orientation’ back in 1947, everyone relates to themselves as commodities, and act like their own advertising campaign, trying to win over people to desiring them. In Foucault’s description of neoliberalism, the goal is less to advertise oneself as it is to build up the self, to maximize one’s market value; and this is called building ‘human capital’. It is not just that the self is a commodity; now the self is a commodity and a corporation all in one, dedicated to amassing as many ‘points’ as possible of various kinds. The ‘points’ will be advertised of course, that much has not changed. Advertisement is still critical. But the fever is just as much if not more geared towards self-improvement; not just to increasing interest, but to *increasing market value*. And for Foucault, this logic begins in the economy but extends all throughout our culture.

With digital media as a new primary playground for the Debordian spectacle, the cultural effects of media saturation reach further than in Debord's time. Now, the self is an active participant in the world of media images – in the sense of generating and spreading content, but also in the sense of forging and promoting a spectacular self. The self merges into the spectacle, into the realm of surfaces. Life itself is subjected to the valorization of value, human capital and personal skill. As Marwick (2013a, 14) says, 'Web 2.0 is a neoliberal technology of subjectivity that teaches users how to succeed [...] [T]he technical affordances of social media reward with higher social status the use of behaviors and self-presentation strategies that make people look'. The expansion of self-presentation and impression management echoes the pervasive effects of the market on extra-economic social relations that Fromm once denoted as the 'marketing orientation', but now, with the collapsing of public and private spheres, the selling of the self extends to a never-ceasing avocation: the exhibition of individual behaviour via digital surfaces. Neoliberal rationality is a technique of government of the self that is grounded in self-satisfaction. Yet the individualistic striving for satisfaction occurs against a taken-for-granted horizon that determines the possibilities for satisfaction at both ends – in the articulation of desire and in the objects posited to provide satiation or fulfilment. Individual needs are socially produced and constructed, based as they are on the forces and relations of commodity production and on the appearance-forms of the spectacle. And the valorization of the individual, their self-satisfaction, is sought out in the spectacular and commoditized world of personal ability, desirability, social status and consumption. In the age of neoliberalism and social media, fulfilment is promised as an individual's choice of movement, but this 'choice' is a moment within a loop that begins and ends at the spectacle. This economic regime of desire (Beistegui 2018, 64–65) promotes efficiency in production and maximizes output in terms of individual satisfaction and freedom. It captures and channels desire according to the individual's self-investment in their projected image.

Through the exhibition of the spectacular self, the logic of the competitive economic order is translated into social relations mediated by digital technologies. Psychological research has shown that people with narcissistic personality traits tend to be more active on social networking sites in terms of self-presentation behaviours and amassing large 'friend' counts than people without such traits (Buffardi and Campbell 2008; Gnambs and Appel 2018). We should not, however, reproduce stereotypes about social media, reducing all online communication to shallow narcissism. Different from the time when Debord wrote his seminal treatise of 1968, today social media is an important component of the spectacle. Yet social media is only part of the issue. The heterogeneous forms of exhibition, from colourful and baldly narcissistic tweets of social and occupational victories, to the controlled, formulaic and austere professional profiles on job hunting platforms such as LinkedIn, grow in the same

terrain: *a broad landscape of proactive individual self-promotion*. It implies a specific kind of self-entrepreneurship: the neoliberal impression management of the individual's impressions over the spectators, and the individual's responsibilities towards maintaining their own relevance, which can be measured via likes, visitors, etc. Neoliberal governance, thus, is about the conduct of individual behaviour, that is, it is about subjects. The productive individual, in this sense, manifests its freedom through the exercise of personal choice, autonomy and self-fulfilment (Miller and Rose 2008, 48–50) as normative pathways to social recognition.

According to Foucauldian theorists Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013), the society of enterprises is grounded in a new preeminent norm of efficiency. Competition, flexibility, fluidity, precarity and 'hard work' are associated values. Neoliberalism is not an ideology, per se. It is not a coherent set of principles, and it is not exclusive to right-wing or left-wing politics. Rather, it is a mode of conducting oneself according to the rationality of the market. And this is not just on the job or the job market. Each *individual* person is the *manager* of their own life, in work, play, relaxation and love. Human capital becomes a way of approaching one's friendships – all relationships serve networking purposes. Health and fitness become forms of human capital. 'Hobbies' can turn to playing fields for human capital. Collecting knowledge and objects in any genre can be geared to the purpose.

The neoliberal logic of human capital can be found in any enclave these days. Its rationality knows no boundaries, material or cybernetic. People – 'subjects' – develop within the neoliberal culture and their personalities express values of efficiency, hard work, competitiveness and flexibility in a changing, precarious job market. We are forged to function within the circuits of production and consumption, as *homo oeconomicus*. The change in everyday social behaviour is perhaps at its most stark on the internet, in users' personal branding and in our attention seeking, in their racking up of followers, likes, shares, and so on. We now turn to this hotbed of neoliberal impression management: the world of social media, the quintessence of the society of the selfie.

### 3.5 Personal Branding and Attention Seeking

On social media, many people are trying to get noticed, and in particular ways. Savvy online self-marketers know that if you care about *how* people perceive you (not just *that* they perceive you) it is not enough to say anything you want to online. Sure, there are some tried and true methods of gaining attention, such as being intentionally provocative, but this only works if one wants to build a reputation for being provocative. In the attention economy, where self-image and career prospects are bound up together and depend on online presence, it is important not just to get noticed, but also to be consistent. If a user is a doctor, popular worldly wisdom says they should post about medicine,

or about things that fit with the upper middle-class doctor stereotype, such as family vacation pictures. A musician should tweet about music, perhaps displaying how they know all about their genre's music scene, maybe posting pictures of themselves at shows or playing an instrument. Whatever one does, the script must be served. Users should build themselves up as important people in whatever fields they work in or want to work in. There is even a name for this: 'personal branding'.

The notion of branding the self became popular starting in the late 1990s (Vallas and Cummins 2015; Whitmer 2018), being first directly articulated in Peters' (1997) article 'The Brand Called You.' Yet the dynamics that characterize 'branding' were clearly described by Fromm (1947) in the middle of the twentieth century in his discussion of the 'marketing orientation.' Recent authors have identified antecedents of the trend in even earlier times (Pooley 2010; Khamis, Ang and Welling 2017). Today, there are many self-help guidebooks that teach all about personal branding – *Me 2.0* (Schawbel 2009), *Personal Branding for Dummies* (Critton 2014), and so on. For the most successful people, personal branding and online presence are one and the same. Every time they go online and make noise (and it should be very often), they will effectively portray the commodified version of themselves. In Peters' seminal article, he indicated it was important to do nothing more and nothing less than advertise and sell one's 'brand' (self) with every click and every keystroke. In his words:

When you're promoting brand You, everything you do – and everything you choose not to do – communicates the value and character of the brand. Everything from the way you handle phone conversations to the email messages you send to the way you conduct business in a meeting is part of the larger message you're sending about your brand. (Peters 1997, n.p.)

People who successfully build up massive social media followings are sometimes referred to as 'influencers'. Some of these, like Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga, really do make it to the level of true celebrities, and have a life of fame and fortune that extends well beyond their newsfeeds. Others – what Theresa Senft (2008, 2013) coined as 'micro-celebrities' in her study of 'camgirls' – amass considerable followings, but remain below the radar of many people outside of their fields, and their social media metrics and attention may not translate into financial gains. Emotional gains, maybe. But there is a downside.

Many people love to hate celebrities. And the trouble with success in building a following is that despite the many pressures that push a person to do so, in many social circles it is still a social faux pas to *want* to do so. 'Wanting attention' is often used as a discrediting indictment that is wielded at one who receives attention, from toddlers to tennis pros. It is associated with selfishness and narcissism. Back in 1947, Fromm stated:



Modern culture is pervaded by a taboo on selfishness. [...] [T]his doctrine is a flagrant contradiction to the practice of modern society, which holds the doctrine that the most powerful and legitimate drive in man is selfishness and that by following this imperative drive the individual makes his best contribution to the common good. (Fromm 1947, 119)

His statement is still pertinent and applies just as well to attention-seeking. Material and social success – intimately bound as they are – are increasingly related to if not dependent on the amassing of human capital in the form of verified, documented, quantifiable attention from others, often in the form of praise and accolades. And ‘success’ *could* mean a six-figure salary, but it often simply means getting any salary at all, rather than contract work. Even for those fully involved in the ‘gig’ or ‘platform’ economy, it is still important to consistently direct efforts to maintain a positive public image simply in order to continue to attract temporary employers who will give you short-term contracts (Vallas and Cristin 2018; Gandini and Pais 2020). For example, take care.com, an online service for independent childcare providers to find work, and for parents to find childcare. Every nanny has an avatar, with a photo (or multiple photos) and space for a short bio. They also receive star-ratings and verbal reviews from past employing parents, similar to reviews on Yelp. Attracting employers is not so different from attracting customers, especially when you relate to yourself as an entrepreneur.

We suggest that the culture and practice of neoliberal impression management *amplifies* the human potential to selfishly seek fame and admiration. Given the necessity of tending to one’s public image and garnering attention and praise, it is only natural that whatever human propensity to relish the attention and praise of others would be fed. When ‘playing the game’ is key to material, social and possibly even psychic survival (Lasch 1984), it is an adaptive strategy to learn to love the game, to internalize the game as one’s own. Marx (1962 [1867], 335) said that capitalists are compelled incessantly and inexorably by the ‘coercive laws of competition’ to upgrade their means of production and increase the rate of exploitation of workers. Human capitalists (i.e., people) are in much the same situation in relation to themselves. As Brittany Hennessy puts it in her popular guidebook *Influencer: Building your Personal Brand in the Age of Social Media*: ‘You may not love the idea that your follower count may be seen as more important than your actual skills, but you need to adapt, because those who don’t adapt won’t make it very far’ (Hennessy 2018, 8).

In their book *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Twenge and Campbell (2009) refer to the ‘fantasy principle’. They say ‘any force in society that allows an individual to present a grander image of his or her self than is actually warranted is a potential amplifier of narcissism’, and note that social media is full of it (Campbell and Twenge 2015, 361). They explain that in the United States, varieties of narcissism have been growing along with various cultural practices that support individualism and positive views of the self since at least the early 1970s, so

rising narcissism in America is not *because* of Web 2.0 so much as greatly facilitated by it. The social media landscape *systemically* lends even more fuel to a 'culture of narcissism', as Christopher Lasch (2018) famously called it.

Yet when an individual is ridiculed for seeking fame and admiration, it is likely to be on the level of a *personal failing* to live up to moral responsibilities, that the 'narcissistic' or 'shallow' person is *individually guilty* for their social and psychological transgressions. The label of 'attention-seeking' is often used to shame and discredit, in a fashion that might carry the explicit or implicit injunction to rescind attention and esteem away from the accused attention-seeker. 'They just want attention' may often carry a connotation along the lines of: 'what they are doing is disingenuous or not worthy of attention' as in the famous story 'the boy who cried wolf'. In this case, the criticism never steps outside of the neoliberal discourse. Especially when accused attention-seeker is a winner in the 'digital reputation economy' (Hearn 2010) – such as an influencer or micro-celebrity – it is plausible that part of the impetus to tear them down stems from the competitive urges of the accuser, who might not be as successful at garnering online attention and accolades. The norm against individual attention-seeking in a culture that promotes – if not demands – attention-seeking, constitutes a double-bind.

This is not to say that the accusation of 'attention-seeking' has no legitimacy. Far from it, it is simply to say that the criticizer and the criticized are subject to the same broad cultural pressures, and so *playing the game and decrying the game both occur within the cultural framework of the game*. In the society of the selfie, nobody is above the game, they just occupy different positions within it, and so relate to it with different emphases. On the one hand, attention-seeking and the tearing down of attention-seekers can both be adaptive responses to a competitive and alienated society. Research has shown, for example, that presupposing online trolls to have implicit attention-seeking motivation is a psychologically resilient response associated with less negative affect (Maltby et al. 2016). On the other hand, attention-seeking and attention-seeker discrediting both involve the placement of the attention-seeker in a kind of spotlight to have their individual value assessed. Both positions can participate in reproducing the context of competition and alienation. Just as social media amplifies neoliberal impression management it also amplifies tendencies towards public shaming and ridicule. As we will discuss later on, alienation, sadism and authoritarianism go hand in hand in the society of the selfie.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Impression management is how an individual works out on himself to project the spectacle and maintain a positive and consistent image of themselves for others. It is grounded in the social pressures for individuation in neoliberal society, with self-investment in human capital and the individual as an

entrepreneur of themselves, dealing with personal branding and attention seeking. The dovetail of impression management and neoliberal cultural landscape marks the axis of the society of the selfie.

The spectacular self is a solo creation by self-authors practicing impression management. It is an individual affair that – to be properly executed – requires people to pay a lot of attention to themselves. Yet it is also part of a broad tendency towards self-tracking and self-monitoring that is intensified with a particular flavour in ‘neoliberal culture’ (Elias and Gill 2018). We are very self-conscious – in the sense of general self-monitoring, self-analysing, self-scrutinizing and self-helping. As Anthony Giddens (2002, 37–38) insists, this *reflexivity* is a defining characteristic of life in the ‘late modern’ era. With the decline of traditional morality, the rise of transnational networks and a constant barrage of information, people are faced with lots of lifestyle options, as well as conflicting and changing opinions of various experts. They are also faced with a taken-for-granted moral prescription that they are *individually responsible* to evaluate and choose between expert opinions and lifestyle options. In Giddens’ sense, modern reflexivity comes from the expansion of ‘abstract systems.’<sup>2</sup> Socialized into this world of diffuse specialized knowledge, and with a variety of available tracking technologies for everyday personal use, people are compelled to monitor themselves and morally assume sole responsibility for their own trajectories. The self becomes an ongoing ‘reflexive project’ (Giddens 1990, 2002).

Sociologist Deborah Lupton (2016) discusses how contemporary self-tracking cultures are grounded in a new measurability and record-keeping of the self. With wearable devices like FitBit and the smartwatch, and with smartphones that are often more or less attached to their owners all day, data about an increasing amount of what people do is recorded and quantified on various electronic platforms. And these tracking devices and apps are more than just tools for self-analysis. They are also stages for the spectacular self to go on display. The rise of the ‘quantified self’ (as Lupton calls it) is also an ethos. Tracking oneself for self-improvement is a lifestyle that has a moral force behind it. In this sense, self-tracking ‘represents the apotheosis of the neoliberal entrepreneurial citizen ideal’ (Lupton 2016). Compulsive self-monitoring for self-improvement dovetails with the self-entrepreneurship that Foucault describes. The conversion of leisure time into self-improvement time fits snugly with a relentless ‘work ethic,’ and the extent of one’s private efforts can be publicly broadcast, putting on exhibit the play-by-play of one’s career achievements, exercise regimens, eating habits, travel destinations, and so on.

We will explore some political implications of this in Chapter 6. Here we mainly want to emphasize that the spectacular self is not just a fragmented, fabricated self – a limited representation of a person’s full, true self. It is also an *active* production from a hidden human atom, through activities conducted in isolation, akin to ‘the man behind the curtain’ in *The Wizard of Oz*. The internet is a place where people are literally alone together: alone in their organic

corporeal fullness typing, clicking, swiping and tapping, and together – as spectacular selves – in the virtual dimension. They are not just subjected to the alienations of Debord's spectacle, as passive witnesses or receptacles of the onslaught of images. They actively create it as they construct and project their spectacular selves.

In the next chapter, we will discuss a growing style of communication endemic to the society of the selfie, epitomized in the 'status update'. The soundbite of text is sent out to roll through so many other newsfeeds, maybe seen, maybe not. This communicative style distils a performative and alienated relationship between oneself and the world. Messages sent lack the social feedback loop of embodied co-presence, i.e., speaking to somebody in particular, watching their reaction, receiving their response, and so on. In the case of the status update, messages are not part of social 'loops', they are essentially unidirectional, and all about the speaker, words being sent out to a general, invisible audience. What we have is a competitive playground of neoliberal impression management, a bazaar of spectacular selves on display for everyone and no one at the same time. And this bazar also points to a decisive feature of the society of the selfie: the growing fragmentation of the public sphere.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It is important to understand that in Foucault's actual theories, the self – or 'subject' – is not impinged upon by society, per se. This does not mean people are free from society's impacts. The opposite is closer to the case. The Foucauldian subject is not something separate from society that engages in struggle or dialogue with it. The Foucauldian subject is not a 'core' self that can be contorted or filtered or channeled or repressed. Instead, it is produced by society; formed out of building blocks that society provides, and into a shape that society recognizes. In this way, the neoliberal subject is a new human being: *homo œconomicus*, the self who is an enterprise.
- <sup>2</sup> An abstract system is basically anything complicated and abstract that people use for guidance, be it an institution like the healthcare system or a genre of technical expertise like medical science.