Idealogy Journal Vol. 11 No. 2, 2026, pp 441-451
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24191/idealogy.v11i2.952
Section: Original Article

The Domination of Simulation in The Media World: Digital Duality and The Recursive Production of Hyperreality

Mohd Nizar Mohd Mokhtar[1], *Saiful Akram Che Cob@Ab Ghafar[2], Mohd Hafnidzam Adzmi[3]
[1,2,3]*Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Selangor Branch, Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

nizar11@uitm.edu.my[1], *saifulakram@uitm.edu.my[2], mohd013@uitm.edu.my[3]
***Corresponding author**

Received: 13 April 2026; Accepted: 30 June 2026; Published: 1 September 2026

ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper presents a critical theoretical examination of simulation as the prevailing cultural logic in contemporary digital media. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theories of simulation and hyperreality, Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle and Stuart Hall's reception theory, the paper posits that simulation has transcended mere representation to become an ontological condition that shapes digital existence. In social media environments, individuals embody a state of digital duality, acting as both viewers and performers, engaging in a recursive cycle where simulated realities are consumed, reproduced and normalised. Rather than simply considering simulation as an aesthetic stylisation, this paper conceptualises it as a self-sustaining system of signs that configures identity, authenticity, and social value. By introducing the concepts of digital duality and recursive hyperreality, this study offers a theoretical framework for understanding how contemporary media subjects both inhabit and perpetuate hyperreal cultural conditions.

Keywords: *Simulation, Hyperreality, Reception, Spectacle, Social Media*

ISSN: 2550-214X © 2026. Published for Idealogy Journal by UiTM Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-No Commercial-No Derivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

1 INTRODUCTION

The contemporary media landscape is now characterised not just by mediation but by simulation. In the digital culture we live in, life is not only represented; it is staged, circulated, reinterpreted, and reproduced in increasingly aestheticised forms. Media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook do not simply host content; they function as infrastructures that normalise simulation as part of everyday practice (Van Dijck, 2013). This infrastructural mediation supports the argument that digital media do not just reflect social reality but actively construct and organise it (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hjarvard, 2013, 2016).

Jean Baudrillard's theories of simulation and hyperreality provide a crucial framework for understanding this phenomenon. In the hyperreal order, representation does not refer to an original reality; rather, signs circulate within closed systems of reference, creating realities that shape our lived experience (Baudrillard, 1981/1994). Contemporary digital culture exemplifies this scenario, where curated "morning routines", aesthetic productivity scenes, and stylised intimacies serve not as reflections of life, but as templates of how we live. This shift makes simulation relevant not only as a media effect but also as a framework for understanding how digital subjects orient everyday conduct.

Moreover, digital media amplifies Baudrillard's concepts in a novel way; individuals are no longer passive spectators in the spectacle (Debord, 1967). They are also its producers. This paper introduces

the concept of digital duality - a structural state in which media subjects fluctuate between being viewers and performers consuming simulations while simultaneously reproducing them. Instead of viewing simulation as merely an observable phenomenon, this paper argues that it has become the organising principle of digital society itself. It suggests that hyperreality is maintained not only by technological systems, but also by ongoing cultural participation.

2 FROM SIMULATION TO CULTURAL CONDITION

Baudrillard (1981/1994) argues that simulation precedes and shapes reality, suggesting that in late modernity, signs no longer reflect the real but instead create it. In the digital age this idea becomes even more relevant. Social media feeds do not just showcase snippets of lived experiences; they circulate self-referential sign systems that actively dictate how life should look, feel, and what it should aspire to be. Carefully curated morning routines, stylised productivity scenes, aestheticised relationships, and emotionally filtered self-presentations serve less as reflections of reality and more as templates for how to perform life. In this context, everyday experiences become structured by hyperreal scripts where individuals shape their experiences in anticipation of how visible they will be.

Debord's (1967) concept of the spectacle further elucidates this transformation. Spectacle replaces direct experience with mediated representation, prioritising appearance over presence and visibility over being. However, contemporary digital culture critically extends Debord's thesis. While the spectacle once positioned individuals primarily as spectators, digital platforms now require active participation. Visibility is no longer optional; it is structurally incentivised through algorithms, engagement metrics, and platform economies (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hjarvard, 2013). To remain unseen is to risk social irrelevance. Therefore, individuals are not only viewed as spectators of the spectacle but also as active contributors to its ongoing production.

In this context, simulation evolves from a representational technique into a form of cultural logic. This transformation aligns with mediatisation theory, which suggests that media logics increasingly shape the nature of social experiences (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hjarvard, 2013). Simulation becomes an aesthetic norm, where stylisation and polish define what is considered credible. It also takes on an economic dimension, becoming embedded in the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997) that rewards simulations that are replicable and emotionally engaging. Furthermore, it serves as an identity template, providing pre-coded narratives about success, happiness, intimacy, and productivity. Additionally, simulation acts as a mechanism of social validation with metrics like likes, shares, and comments serving as measurable affirmations of worth.

In this hyperreal environment, authenticity is no longer understood as an origin grounded in genuine experience. Instead, it emerges as a performative effect - an impression of sincerity carefully crafted through stylistic choices, emotional cues, and strategic vulnerability. Authenticity is not something that is discovered, but rather staged; it is not inherent but circulated. Therefore, simulation does not distort reality from the outside; rather, it reorganises the conditions under which reality is experienced, interpreted and enacted. What results is not a loss of the real, but its reconfiguration, where simulation becomes the dominant cultural condition shaping digital existence.

3 DIGITAL DUALITY: VIEWER AS PRODUCER

If simulation has become the cultural norm of digital life, its sustainability relies on a specific type of individual; one who serves as both spectator and spectacle. The key characteristic of contemporary social media environments is not just the widespread availability of simulated content, but the blurring of the boundaries between consumption and production. Individuals no longer have fixed roles as either audience members or creators; instead, they continuously shift between these roles in an ongoing process of interpretation and performance. This phenomenon can be understood as digital duality.

Building on prosumer theory (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) and Stuart Hall's Reception Theory (1973), digital duality expands the encoding-decoding model into a recursive cultural loop (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Jenkins, 2006). Hall's framework highlights that audiences actively negotiate meaning through dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings. However, within digital platforms, decoding does not end with interpretation. Instead, interpretation often serves as a rehearsal for re-encoding. Users engage with hyperreal representations not only to comprehend them but also to internalise their aesthetic codes, emotional resonance, and narrative structures for potential reproduction. This forward-thinking approach to self-performance reflects the influence of micro-celebrity culture and self-branding practices within networked communities (Abidin, 2018, 2023; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Senft, 2008). Within this environment, credibility itself becomes part of the performative process of the content production. Empirical analyses of Malaysia's social media influencer (SMI) ecosystem demonstrate that attributes such as attractiveness, perceived expertise, and trustworthiness function as influencer essential credibility markers (Norazman et al., 2023). These credibility markers further shape how prosumers decode existing content and subsequently re-encode similar signals within their own self-presentational strategies. This dynamic is heavily reliant on how influencers and brand ambassadors establish credibility to dictate engagement and shape user intentions across the wider social media landscape (Sharuddin & Baharom, 2024).

This process generates what can be described as anticipatory performativity. While consuming content, users envision themselves as future performers within the same symbolic economy. The carefully curated morning routine is not just watched; it is analysed as a script. The aesthetic productivity vlog is not simply enjoyed; it is internalised as a template. The romanticised self-care ritual turns into a reproducible format. Thus, reception transforms into preparatory production.

Digital duality creates a recursive dynamic:

1. The subject encounters a simulation.
2. The subject negotiates its meaning.
3. The subject internalises its stylistic and narrative codes.
4. The subject reproduces a modified version.
5. The reproduction re-enters the circulation of simulation.

Through this repetition, aesthetic convergence occurs. The distinctions between original and copy fade away, echoing Baudrillard's (1981/1994) assertion that simulacra circulate without a referent. The hyperreal is sustained not only by technological systems but also by participatory mimicry embedded within platform cultures. Repetition therefore functions as the cultural mechanism through which simulation gains the appearance of normality.

Importantly, digital duality is not just behavioural; it is structural. Platform architectures are designed to facilitate a seamless transition from viewer to creator. Interfaces promote reactions, remixing, stitching, sharing, and reposting. These features institutionalise participatory convergence (Jenkins, 2006) while simultaneously embedding users within platform logics of visibility (Van Dijck, 2013). Algorithmic visibility rewards familiarity and recognisability (Bucher, 2018), subtly regulating creative variation within acceptable aesthetic boundaries. In this environment, participation becomes both an expressive act and a structural obligation.

Consequently, identity itself becomes intertwined with this duality. Individuals construct selves that are simultaneously interpretive - shaped by what they consume - and performative - shaped by what they anticipate others will consume from them. The digital subject is thus neither purely an audience nor purely an author, but a hybrid figure inhabiting a recursive loop of simulation. It is within this duality that hyperreality finds its most stable foundation.

4 THE RECURSIVE CYCLE OF SIMULATION

If digital duality explains the structural position of the contemporary media subject, then the recursive cycle of simulation elucidates how hyperreality is maintained. In social media environments, simulation does not function as isolated acts of representation; instead, it operates as a self-reinforcing cultural system. This system is upheld through iterative processes of circulation, reception, reproduction, normalisation, and amplification. Within this recursive structure, hyperreality stabilises itself as a lived condition.

The first stage of the cycle is simulation as aesthetic construction. Content creators curate fragments of everyday life - such as morning routines, productivity rituals, and relational intimacy - using stylised cinematography, selective framing, and emotional calibration. These representations do not merely document lived experiences; they reorganise them into consumable sign-forms. In Baudrillard's (1981/1994) terms, the sign no longer refers to an original lived reality but functions autonomously within a network of circulating images. Here, simulation becomes generative rather than reflective.

The second stage involves reception and negotiated interpretation. Drawing from Hall's (1973) Reception Theory, audiences decode these representations using culturally situated interpretive frameworks. However, under hyperreal conditions, the field of interpretation is already saturated with circulating codes. The dominant interpretation often aligns with aspirational acceptance, where viewers internalise simulation as a desirable norm. Negotiated readings may question its attainability, yet they still reproduce its aesthetic logic. Even oppositional readings remain entangled within the symbolic system they seek to resist. Thus, reception does not destabilise simulation; instead, it frequently lays the groundwork for its rearticulation.

The third stage is reproduction through prosumer participation. At this point, digital duality becomes operational as viewers transition into creators, recreating the aesthetic and narrative templates they have previously consumed. Importantly, reproduction seldom takes the form of direct copying; instead, it emerges as iterative variation within recognisable stylistic boundaries. This process reflects Baudrillard's (1981/1994) concept of simulacra, where the distinction between original and copy blurs. What circulates are not mere representations of life, but references to prior representations. Each act of reproduction reinforces the legitimacy of the aesthetic norm.

The fourth stage is normalisation through repetition. As similar simulations proliferate, they become cultural expectations. Daily routines begin to be structured around how they will appear on screen. Productivity is measured not only by output but also by its aesthetic appeal. Emotional expression becomes formatted into shareable vulnerability. Through repetition, simulation shifts from spectacle to baseline reality. The hyperreal does not replace the real; rather, it becomes indistinguishable from it.

The fifth stage is algorithmic amplification. Platform infrastructures play a critical role in intensifying this recursion. Algorithms favour content that aligns with proven engagement patterns, rewarding aesthetic familiarity and emotional resonance (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014; Striphas, 2015). Thus, visibility is algorithmically conditioned, subtly guiding creators toward convergence. This introduces an economic dimension to recursion: simulation is optimised for circulation within the attention economy. Engagement metrics - likes, shares, comments, and watch time - function as feedback mechanisms that influence further reproduction (Beer, 2013; Klinger & Svensson, 2024). Consequently, the cycle becomes data-informed and self-calibrating.

The five stages described together form what can be called recursive hyperreality. This is a condition in which simulations continuously reproduce themselves through participatory reinforcement and infrastructural enhancement. Unlike traditional media spectacles that present audiences as passive observers, digital recursion incorporates participants into the very systems they help sustain. This cycle operates not through coercion but through aspiration, involvement, and incentives for visibility.

Importantly, recursion leads to aesthetic convergence. As simulations become more standardised, the diversity of representation diminishes into optimised formats. However, this convergence is often obscured by the illusion of individuality. Each participant perceives their performance as a unique expression, even as it conforms to prevailing visual styles. Hyperreality thus maintains its stability not by suppressing individual agency but by directing it.

Consequently, the recursive nature of simulation reshapes our understanding of hyperreality as an ongoing process rather than just a static condition. It is not simply that reality has been replaced by simulation; rather, simulation is continuously regenerated through everyday actions of viewing, interpreting, reproducing, and optimising. In this way, the digital subject does not merely exist within hyperreality - they actively help to create it. Recursion therefore explains how hyperreality persists through ordinary participatory practices rather than through a single act of mediation.

5 HYPERREALITY AND IDENTITY RECONFIGURATION

If simulation has become the dominant cultural logic of digital media, then identity cannot remain unaffected by its recursive operations. In hyperreal environments, identity is no longer anchored solely in stable, embodied continuity. Instead, it is progressively reorganised through systems of signs, metrics, and mediated visibility. The result is a performative construct sustained within circulating symbolic economies.

Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality suggests that the distinction between the real and its representation collapses when signs cease to refer to an external referent and instead refer only to other signs (Baudrillard, 1981/1994). Applied to identity, this means that selfhood is increasingly constituted through mediated signs rather than expressed as a pre-existing essence. Curated routines and emotionally calibrated captions are not merely reflections of the self; they become part of the terrain on which the self is negotiated and stabilised. Identity is therefore no longer prior to its mediation; it is produced through mediation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Van Dijck, 2013).

In traditional sociological frameworks, identity formation has often been understood as emerging through social interaction, institutional roles, and embodied experiences. However, in digital environments structured by simulation, interaction itself becomes mediated through performative display. The self is constructed with visibility in mind. One does not simply act; one acts in ways that are potentially recordable, shareable, and optimisable. The awareness of possible spectators becomes embedded in everyday consciousness.

This leads to a subtle shift in our understanding of existence. The question evolves from merely "Who am I?" to "How am I perceived?" and increasingly to "How will this appear in algorithmic circulation?" The self becomes reflexively focused on its own image. Identity is no longer just something that is narrated; it is curated. Consequently, the nature of selfhood changes. Instead of unfolding organically over time, identity becomes episodic, structured around posts, stories, reels, and updates (Bauman, 2000). Each fragment contributes to a composite but discontinuous digital persona.

Kenneth Gergen's (1991) concept of the "saturated self" offers an important connection here (Turkle, 2011). Gergen explains that technological saturation exposes individuals to multiple and often conflicting relational demands, resulting in what he calls multiphrenia - a fragmentation of the self into various performative roles. In our hyperreal digital culture, this fragmentation becomes even more pronounced. Individuals present different versions of themselves depending on the platform (Marwick & Boyd, 2011): professional on LinkedIn, aesthetically focused on Instagram, humorous on TikTok, and reflective on YouTube. These identities are not necessarily deceptive; rather, they are optimised for their respective contexts.

However, hyperreality introduces an additional complication: the self becomes reliant on external metrics for stability. Visibility serves as confirmation of existence. Engagement metrics - such as likes,

shares, comments, and follower counts - act as quantitative proxies for social worth (Beer, 2013; Duffy, 2017). Furthermore, these metrics drive continuous self-engagement behaviours, prompting users to strategically adapt their content creation to sustain algorithmic visibility and relevance (Rosedi et al., 2024). Validation becomes data driven. The foundation of identity shifts from internal coherence to external measurability. A person's sense of self may fluctuate based on algorithmic exposure. In this context, being unnoticed carries the risk of symbolic erasure.

This reconfiguration also changes the meaning of authenticity. In pre-digital discourse, authenticity referred to being true to an inner, stable essence. However, within the context of hyperreality, authenticity transforms into an aesthetic effect (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Duffy, 2017) - a style of performance that conveys sincerity. Elements such as strategic vulnerability, candid confessions, and behind-the-scenes glimpses are not necessarily insincere actions; rather, they are formatted within well-recognised tropes of "realness." Authenticity only becomes recognisable when it aligns with circulating codes of relatability. It is not the absence of performance but rather a specific genre of performance (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Duffy, 2017).

Importantly, this does not imply that individuals are merely manipulated by media structures. Agency remains, but it is coloured by the logic of simulation. People creatively negotiate their identities, experimenting with self-presentation, exploring multiple facets of themselves, and building communities across distances. However, this experimentation takes place within structures that prioritise visibility and replicability. As a result, the space for radical difference diminishes, as algorithmic systems reward aesthetic conformity.

Hyperreality thus creates what may be described as a closed-loop identity system. Individuals consume idealised representations of life, internalise them as normative benchmarks, and adjust their own self-presentations accordingly. These adjusted selves then re-enter the realm of representation, reinforcing the very standards that shaped them. The boundary between influence and self-expression becomes blurred. The self-acts as both a product and a producer of hyperreal norms.

Moreover, the concept of time is transformed by this loop. Digital media preserve past performances, making identities historically searchable and perpetually accessible. The self accumulates as a visible timeline. However, this archive is selective, curated, and optimised. As a result, forgetting becomes challenging, and revision becomes a strategic act (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009). Identity is not only performed but also continuously editable.

On a deeper level, hyperreality questions the metaphysical notion that there is a stable core self-waiting to be expressed. Instead, identity emerges from relational and symbolic systems. In digital culture, these systems are increasingly dominated by simulation. The self becomes a node within networks of signs, influenced by ongoing feedback between visibility, reception, and reproduction.

To understand identity in the era of simulation, we must move beyond the binary of authentic versus fake. A more pressing question is how individuals navigate the recursive pressures of hyperreal participation without collapsing entirely into a metric-dependent self. Hyperreality does not eliminate subjectivity; it reorganises its conditions. This shifts analysis from judging authenticity to examining the conditions under which subjectivity is formed and maintained.

In this way, the reconfiguration of identity is not a minor consequence of digital media; it is central to the operation of simulation itself. The recursive cycle mentioned earlier does not merely circulate images; it also circulates selves. As digital duality intensifies, individuals become both architects and inhabitants of hyperreal identity structures. The circulation of identity thus becomes inseparable from the circulation of signs that sustain the hyperreal order.

6 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This paper presents three interconnected conceptual contributions that collectively place simulation at the heart of contemporary digital media culture. Instead of viewing simulation as a mere distortion of reality, this argument posits it as an essential ontological condition that shape identity, participation, and meaning making in mediated environments. These contributions are intended to extend established theories of simulation into participatory platform environments. Together, they clarify how subjects, cultural practices, and infrastructures interact in the recursive production of hyperreality.

6.1 Digital Duality: The Structural Convergence of Viewer and Producer

The first contribution of this work is the concept of digital duality. While existing scholarship on prosumers recognises the blurred line between production and consumption, digital duality goes beyond merely describing behaviour to articulate a structural condition. It suggests that the modern media subject no longer shifts between being a viewer and a creator but instead occupies both roles simultaneously. The concept therefore identifies duality as a persistent mode of participation rather than an occasional shift in user behaviour.

Digital duality is not just about having access to production tools; it is ingrained within platform architectures and shaped by cultural expectations. The subject engages with content that already anticipates potential re-creation. Consequently, reception becomes a preparatory performance, and interpretation transforms into rehearsal. This structural convergence alters media engagement into a continuous cycle of observation and staging.

By emphasising digital duality, this paper redefines audience agency. Instead of viewing audiences as empowered creators within democratised media ecosystems, it underscores how participation itself perpetuates simulation. This dynamic reflects the broader logic of presumption in digital capitalism (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The viewer is not separate from hyperreality; rather, they serve as one of its primary driving forces. In this context, digital duality enhances Baudrillard's insight by recognising the contemporary subject as both a consumer and a producer of simulacra.

6.2 Recursive Hyperreality: The Self-Amplifying Loop of Simulation

The second contribution is the theorisation of recursive hyperreality. Baudrillard (1981/1994) defined hyperreality as a condition in which simulation precedes and replaces reality. However, in digital media environments, hyperreality is not a static condition; it is dynamically regenerated through participatory cycles. These recursive dynamics parallel Luhmann's (1995) concept of self-referential systems, where systems reproduce their own operational logic.

Recursive hyperreality captures this processual aspect. It describes how simulation is continuously recreated through iterative acts of decoding, imitation, aesthetic adaptation, and algorithmic reinforcement. Each act of reproduction bolsters the legitimacy of the simulated norm, making hyperreality self-amplifying. The concept emphasises continuity, because each iteration becomes material for the next round of interpretation and reproduction.

Crucially, recursion shifts the focus from technological determinism to participatory reinforcement. While algorithms enhance visibility patterns, the cultural sustainability of hyperreality relies on everyday acts of mimicry and optimisation. Simulation circulates not because it is imposed from above, but because it is aspirationally embraced from within. This perspective retains the importance of infrastructure while locating cultural reproduction in the choices and routines of participating subjects.

This recursive logic also clarifies the aesthetic convergence across platforms. Repetition fosters recognisability; recognisability leads to engagement; engagement produces algorithmic amplification; and amplification encourages further repetition. The cycle stabilises hyperreal templates as cultural expectations. Through recursion, simulation becomes normalised as the default mode of existence.

6.3 The Cycle of Simulation Model: Integrating Baudrillard, Debord, and Hall

The third contribution is the development of the Cycle of Simulation Model, which synthesises three major theoretical traditions into a unified explanatory framework. It draws from Baudrillard's (1981/1994) claim that simulation precedes and shapes reality. From Debord (1967), it incorporates the insight that mediated visibility transforms social relations through spectacle. Hall's (1973) work is included in recognising the interpretive agency of the audience.

The Cycle of Simulation Model conceptualises hyperreality as emerging through five interconnected stages: aesthetic construction, negotiated reception, participatory reproduction, normalisation, and algorithmic amplification. Unlike linear models of media influence, this framework emphasises circularity and feedback, suggesting that hyperreality is not merely transmitted but collaboratively produced. Each stage feeds into the next while also generating feedback that reshapes future participation. The model therefore treats hyperreality as an emergent outcome of repeated interactions between subjects, cultural codes, and platform infrastructures.

This synthesis offers two theoretical clarifications. First, it resolves the tension between structural determinism (as seen in Baudrillard and Debord) and audience agency (as highlighted by Hall) by demonstrating how agency operates within recursive structures. Second, it situates hyperreality within contemporary platform infrastructures without reducing it to mere technological causation. The model simultaneously accounts for cultural practices, symbolic systems, and algorithmic economies.

Together, these contributions encourage a reorientation in how simulation is understood within digital media studies. Instead of framing simulation as an illusion, manipulation, or a deviation from authenticity, this paper argues that simulation has become the default ontological condition of mediated existence. Digital subjects do not simply encounter hyperreality; they inhabit, reproduce, and stabilise it through their everyday participation. This reorientation places participation at the centre of the theoretical explanation.

In this reframing, the critical question shifts. It is no longer about whether digital media distort reality but rather how reality is increasingly organised through recursive simulation. Understanding this shift requires recognising that the contemporary subject is not merely trapped within hyperreality but is structurally involved in its condition. The problem is therefore not external distortion alone, but the recursive organisation of lived experience through systems of simulation.

7 CONCLUSION

Simulation has evolved from being a stylistic embellishment in media representation to a structural necessity in the framework of digital culture. In today's social media environments, simulation is no longer just an optional layer for aesthetic enhancement; it serves as the foundational framework through which visibility, participation, and identity are organised. The contemporary individual does not merely experience hyperreality as an external condition; rather, they inhabit and actively sustain it through iterative participation within platform infrastructures that reward repetition, recognisability, and aesthetic optimisation. Its significance lies precisely in the way these platform conditions convert repeated acts of representation into everyday cultural expectations.

By viewing digital culture through the lenses of digital duality and recursive hyperreality, this paper redefines simulation as a dynamic, self-perpetuating system. Individuals do not passively consume

stylised representations of life; they decode, internalise, and reproduce them. Through this cyclical engagement, simulation stabilises itself as a normative horizon. Thus, hyperreality is not merely maintained by technological systems or capitalist spectacle but is also reinforced by everyday acts of interpretive mimicry and performative self-curation.

This transformation necessitates a re-evaluation of how we theorise digital media. Traditional concerns about representation - such as whether media accurately depict reality - are no longer sufficient. The more pressing issue is recognising that simulation has fundamentally reorganised the very conditions of reality itself. The boundaries between authentic and staged, lived and performed, self and image have shifted from being oppositional binaries to intertwined processes. Authenticity does not disappear; it becomes formatted. Agency does not vanish; it is channelled through algorithmically visible structures.

The implications of this transformation go beyond just aesthetic critique. As identity becomes more dependent on metrics and driven by visibility, the criteria for self-worth begin to shift towards quantifiable validation. Engagement statistics act as symbolic capital (Beer, 2013; Banet-Weiser, 2021), subtly influencing behavioural norms and emotional investments. In this environment, participation serves both expressive and disciplinary functions. Individuals enjoy creative autonomy while also aligning with platform logics that prioritise convergence. This recursive cycle does not lead to uniformity through coercion, but rather through aspiration.

However, this analysis does not portray digital subjects as passive victims of hyperreal systems. On the contrary, recognising digital duality highlights the complexity of contemporary agency. The individual is both an architect and an inhabitant of hyperreality. They creatively negotiate their identity within available symbolic frameworks, build communities across distances, and express forms of belonging that transcend geographical boundaries. Yet, these practices take place within infrastructures that continually recalibrate visibility and value through algorithmic mediation.

To truly understand digital culture, we must move beyond simple descriptions of social media trends and delve deeper into simulation as an organising principle. This requires not just looking at what is represented but also examining how representation itself structures lived experiences. Simulation should be viewed as a process - recursive, participatory, and infrastructure-amplified. The hyperreal is not a static illusion but an ongoing production.

Future theoretical work should explore this topic in several ways. First, more attention should be given to the political economy of recursive simulation, particularly how platform capitalism takes advantage of participatory reproduction. Second, interdisciplinary collaboration with psychology and digital ethics could help illuminate ways in which individuals can develop reflexive awareness in hyperreal environments. Third, further theoretical development is needed to investigate how individuals might navigate the digital landscape critically, allowing them to inhabit digital duality without becoming entirely consumed by identity structure driven by metrics.

The central argument of this paper is not that digital media distort reality, but rather that simulation has become the prevailing condition through which reality is mediated, negotiated, and experienced. In this context, individuals do not exist outside of hyperreality; they are structurally involved in its perpetuation. To responsibly theorise contemporary media culture, it is essential to acknowledge this involvement. Hyperreality persists not because it deceives, but because it is continuously enacted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We want to thank the Faculty of Art & Design, UiTM, for their support of this study.

FUNDING

This research is self-funded.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Mohd Nizar Bin Mohd Mokhtar (Conceptualization; Writing-original draft). Saiful Akram Bin Che Cob@Ab Ghafar (Co-Author, Writing-review & editing; Supervision). Mohd Hafnidzam Bin Adzmi (Writing-review & editing; Supervision).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

REFERENCES

Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Publishing.

Abidin, C. (2023). The matrix of authenticity in influencer cultures. *Cultural Science Journal, 15*(1), 14–29. https://doi.org/10.2478/csj-2023-0002

Banet-Weiser, S. (2021). Gender, social media, and the labor of authenticity. *American Quarterly, 73*(1), 141–144. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2021.0008

Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation* (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981)

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.

Beer, D. (2013). *Popular culture and new media: The politics of circulation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bucher, T. (2018). *If...then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press.

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity Press.

Debord, G. (1967). *The society of the spectacle*. Buchet-Chastel.

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.

Gergen, K. J. (1991). *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*. Basic Books.

Gillespie, T. (2014). The relevance of algorithms. In T. Gillespie, P. J. Boczkowski, & K. A. Foot (Eds.), *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society* (pp. 167–194). MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262525374.003.0009

Goldhaber, M. H. (1997). The attention economy and the Net. *First Monday, 2*(4). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v2i4.519

Hall, S. (1973). *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse*. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.

Hjarvard, S. (2013). *The mediatization of culture and society*. Routledge.

Hjarvard, S. (2016). Mediatization and the changing authority of religion. *Media, Culture & Society, 38*(1), 8–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715615412

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.

Klinger, U., & Svensson, J. (2024). Network media logic revisited: How social media have changed the logics of the campaign environment. In D. G. Lilleker, D. Jackson, B. Kalsnes, C. Mellado, F. Trevisan, & A. Veneti (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of political campaigning* (pp. 30–44). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003333326-4

Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social systems*. Stanford University Press.

Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter. *Convergence, 17*(2), 139–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856510394539

Mayer-Schönberger, V. (2009). *Delete: The virtue of forgetting in the digital age*. Princeton University Press.

Norazman, N. A. A., Abdullah, A. F., Mohd Shuib, A. S., Mohd Pahme, N. F., & Sulaiman, M. Z. (2023). Review of Malaysian social media influencers credibility. *Idealogy Journal, 8*(2), 123–130. https://doi.org/10.24191/idealogy.v8i2.511

Ritzer, G., & Jurgenson, N. (2010). Production, consumption, prosumption: The nature of capitalism in the age of the digital 'prosumer'. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 10*(1), 13–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540509354673

Rosedi, T. P. R. T., Daud, N., & Samsudin, M. R. (2024). Exploring the inner path: A comprehensive literature review on self-engagement behaviour and its impact on business-oriented social media content. *Idealogy Journal, 9*(1), 73–84. https://doi.org/10.24191/idealogy.v9i1.553

Senft, T. M. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity and community in the age of social networks*. Peter Lang.

Sharuddin, R. I., & Baharom, S. N. (2024). Brand ambassadors and online influencers on the consumer's purchase intentions in the social media landscape. *Idealogy Journal, 9*(1), 119–136. https://doi.org/10.24191/idealogy.v9i1.529

Striphas, T. (2015). Algorithmic culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 18*(4–5), 395–412. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415577392

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.

Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.