Dissertation Title:

Examining the Interplay of Modern Technology and Identity: Insights from Computer Usage

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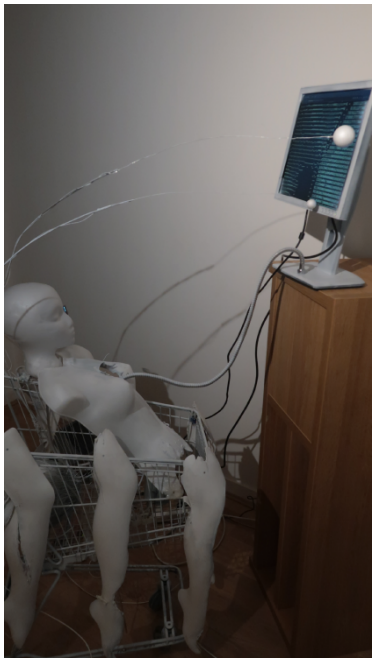


Abstract

This study, through a method of self-exploration, delves into personal experiences and emotional responses to explore how social and cultural discourse shapes individual values and identity, particularly against the backdrop of societal change and technological advancement. It specifically reveals the spiritual dilemmas of modern society, the impact of technology on human life, and how art reflects these issues, emphasizing the need to reassess the role of technology and to deeply consider issues of spiritual life and values.

Introduction

Adopting a self-exploratory approach, this research critically examines the influence of society and culture on individual values and identity, highlighting the spiritual dilemmas and the impact of technology on life amid rapid social changes and technological progress. By analyzing the impact of modernization in China on traditional values and how the internet has altered our sense of time and decision-making, the study reveals the rise of nihilism and the crises in personal spiritual life. Furthermore, the paper explores the interaction between technology and art, exemplifying how computers serve not only as tools but also as mediums for emotional and artistic expression. The need for humanity to reevaluate the role of technology is emphasized, calling for deeper contemplation on spiritual life and values.

Background

My return to China to care for my ailing grandmother prompted me to deeply reflect on my educational experience in the UK. This phase seemed like a dream, filled with idealized aspirations. However, returning to my homeland felt like a harsh awakening from this dream. Additionally, family pressures, particularly my parents' strong expectations regarding romantic relationships and civil service career choices, led to growing resentment and sorrow, sharpening familial conflicts. I also acutely realized the

severity of China's job market, widespread unemployment, and the difficulties my peers faced, causing my own unrest, anxiety, and confusion. Despite my firm belief in the value of my education, I found myself still searching for personal value and positioning. This led me to reconsider the civil service career path I had previously rejected. The intersection of different cultural backgrounds, value systems, and the pervasive influence of digital media led me to experience the ambiguity and uncertainty of morals and values. I found myself lost and indecisive between traditional and modern values. In exploring education and career paths suitable for myself, I rejected traditional values while doubting the search for "true" values, plunging me into a dilemma of internal conflict and exploration, prompting me to investigate the reasons behind my sense of nihilism.

Research

Modern Chinese Value Transformation

The rapid development of modernization in China, the disintegration of socialist ideology, the rise of the market economy, and globalization have posed severe challenges to traditional values and beliefs. Amidst this, nihilism in China emerged, characterized by the younger generation's disinterest and disbelief in traditional religions, philosophies, and moral values. Individualism and free will began to stand out in Chinese nihilism, emphasizing personal choices, independent thinking, and interests, breaking free from traditional societal and familial pressures. Nihilism in China presents complex phenomena, reflecting the societal changes and challenges in the modernization process and the confusion and exploration faced by the younger generation in seeking personal values and beliefs.

With the rapid development of industry and commerce, the value sequence of modern Chinese people has become characterized by utility, exchangeability, and practicality, leading to a one-dimensional civilization. This transformation has gradually shifted the relationship between individuals and the world to one between objects. The materialization of the world has eroded and obscured everyday life, turning places into

collections of natural objects to be developed, utilized, and transformed. Marcuse (2004, p. 35) noted, “Behind this illusory surface, the entire world of work and its leisure activities became a series of similarly managed animate and inanimate objects. In this world, human existence is merely a material, item, and raw material, utterly devoid of its own principle of movement.”

Spiritual Dilemmas in Modern Life

In modern Chinese life, the meaning of life seems lost. Goals are confined to the continuous consumption of sensory living styles. Once a goal is achieved, and sensory satisfaction is obtained, the spirit remains mired in confusion, failing to derive valuable spiritual experiences from life. Modern Chinese people often focus on immediate personal benefits, especially livelihood issues, showing indifference to abstract thoughts and spiritual aspects. The emergence of this moral dilemma is complex, but traditional Chinese morals, particularly Confucian morals, no longer provide adequate value support for modern Chinese behavior. In contemporary times, although material life has improved, escaping material scarcity, spiritual life has not truly emerged from deprivation. Instead, it has evolved into a materialized era's spiritual culture under the wave of postmodernism. Fromm (2004, p. 196) stated, “Humans live in a materialized world and are thrown into it. Human relationships are treated as relationships between objects, and individual lives, light or heavy, bear or dissolve the weight of collective life, showing the boredom, absurdity, and nihilism of individual life. Ultimately, it is the disregard for oneself, which is anti-human.”

Ervin Laszlo, a renowned systems philosopher, pointed out, “More and more people, unable to find meaning in life, are forced into psychotherapy, complaining of an inner spiritual emptiness, with a sense of complete and ultimate meaninglessness.” (Lazlo, O. 1998). This phenomenon has become more prominent in developed industrial societies, where, despite significant improvements in material living standards, spiritual life has fallen into emptiness. While enjoying the fruits of modern science and technology, people increasingly feel the disturbances, anxieties, and unease brought by science.

Technology and Spiritual Life

The internet, a typical modern technology, has profoundly affected human concepts of time. Internet time manifests as discontinuous, instant time. This time rapidly spreads various visual stimuli but gradually dilutes the significance emphasized by traditional knowledge and experience. Compared to traditional media, the internet's communication model shapes an instantaneous, dispersed, and dehistoricized view of time. This negatively impacts our decision-making, as our actions often rapidly change based on short-term, incomplete information, losing opportunities for thoughtful deliberation. This can lead us to feel confused in the chaos of information, struggling to fully understand and adapt to changes. We establish value systems through such rapid decision-making, but these values, lacking complex life experiences and deep introspection, leave us with little understanding of our anxieties and culture. We tend to equate knowledge with data, social life with social media, and spend increasingly limited time on introspection. Such values, not profoundly introspected, may become fragile and brittle when faced with life's hardships. As attention to quality of life grows, people begin to realize the importance of the health and harmony of the spiritual system. This drives a focus on individual spiritual and cultural life, seeking the existence of meaning, and the absence of the highest values in the conceptual world leads to the emergence of modern societal nihilism. Nihilism's concept of time is rooted in the everyday time of the tangible world. However, contemporary society has not only lost the tranquility of leisurely strolls but also the ease of wandering. Life is dominated by haste, busyness, restlessness, anxiety, and aimless panic. People can no longer stroll leisurely but are forced to hastily move from one event to another, from one piece of information to another, rushing from one scene to the next. Heidegger pointed out that the emptiness of existence and the acceleration of life processes form a whole. The phenomenon of time acceleration faced by contemporary people, directly related to the internet, not only leads to a faster pace of life but also causes the loss of opportunities for peaceful strolls and leisurely wandering, dominated by hurried, anxious, and unclear goals. The internet has changed our concepts of time and also our values and spiritual lives.

The Computers: Beyond a Cold Tool

In modern society, the rule of instrumental rationality leads to the problem of social alienation. This rule is not only reflected in the proliferation of technology but also in the sense of nothingness in how people perceive and use technology. People increasingly view computers as indifferent tools, overlooking their potential emotional and cultural dimensions. This notion leads to a decreased enjoyment of using computers and misunderstandings about their role in society. "Computers are a sensation, not a device." (Hwang and Rizwan, 2023, para. 1)

The advancement of technology and the development of industrial civilization have brought material wealth and enriched lives. With the widespread application of artificial intelligence, such as OpenAI's ChatGPT surpassing 1.5 billion users, technology's role in life has become increasingly prominent. "However, beneath this surface prosperity, the entire work world and its leisure activities have become a series of similarly managed living and non-living entities. In this world, human existence seems to be merely a processed material, item, and raw material, losing its own principle of movement." This has led to a decrease in our enjoyment of using computers. Constant system updates, surveillance, and restrictions on user configuration options have weakened our emotional connection to computers, pushing us towards a dystopian future of trusted computing, where users cannot run their chosen software on their devices, and all content is tracked and controlled, making computers more like devices rather than companions. The computer is a typical technology, and its development and impact in human life can be analyzed from various perspectives. One possible angle is to view the computer as a sensory system, not just a machine for performing computational tasks, but an entity closely intertwined with human behavior, social structure, and culture. Through computers, people can interact globally in real-time, sharing life, views, and information. This digital network of interpersonal relationships reflects the computer as a sensory system connecting human relationships. From this angle, we can explore the development and significance of computers in several aspects.

"Computers in the early stages of technological development were seen as merely huge

machines for executing computational tasks. 'Personal computers' differ from those large mainframe devices in that they offer individuals the opportunity to use and control computing power independently, without relying on large central computers." (Hwang and Rizwan, 2023, para. 1) Compared to traditional mainframes, personal computers are more user-friendly and personal. This early perspective may have led people to see computers as cold tools, rather than entities with emotional or cultural dimensions. "The computer is both a tool of liberation and oppression; it saves human energy, yet misdirects it. It creates an extensive framework of order and produces chaos and disorder. It serves human purposes entirely, yet it distorts and denies them." (Mumford, 1934, p. 283). When computers are defined as tools saving human energy, it means that the design and operation of computer systems can lead to results inconsistent with human values and goals. Computers save human energy and provide a framework of order, but they can also develop in the wrong direction, leading to chaos and disorder. They are described as serving human purposes entirely, but they may also distort or deny some human values. First, computers were initially seen as tools for processing information, executing tasks, and providing applications. This made people more focused on the practical functions of computers, overlooking their potential cultural and emotional aspects. The minority view of pan-experientialism further emphasizes this point, "believing that strong artificial intelligence and free-thinking computers are impossible, as machines can never match the mind." (Searle, 1980, p. 417). As computers became more widespread and gradually integrated into people's lives, this process made people more focused on the practicality of computers, overlooking more nuanced interactions with them.

The development of computers is closely related to the proliferation of the internet, which has changed the face of computing devices. Computers are no longer dispersed, local, and independent systems, but have become more globalized and interconnected. "To understand the digital realm as a space and channel for expressing emotions, we cannot merely view the internet and its applications as tools. Instead, they should be seen as places of experience and subjectivity, not just means of communication, but spaces where we live and interact." (Lasén, 2014b, p.2). The internet has transformed from a platform providing services and tools to a digital space filled with complex social

interactions and cultural expressions. However, its connection to emotions seems more ambiguous. Commercialization emphasizes the value of computers. Companies provide services and sell products through the internet, shaping the form of devices. "In the internet age, computer devices have become flatter, without too many layers. The devices meet with similar standards and specifications. Devices are more utilitarian, no longer specialized." Meanwhile, computer education focuses on technology and programming, rather than emotional experiences through computers. This makes individuals users of technology, rather than subjects. Individuals' positioning in the social structure becomes blurred, trying to find traditional, humanistic values in a technology-saturated environment. However, this exploration may lead to nihilism, as there is a contradiction between traditional values and modern technological values (Feenberg, 1999, p.3).

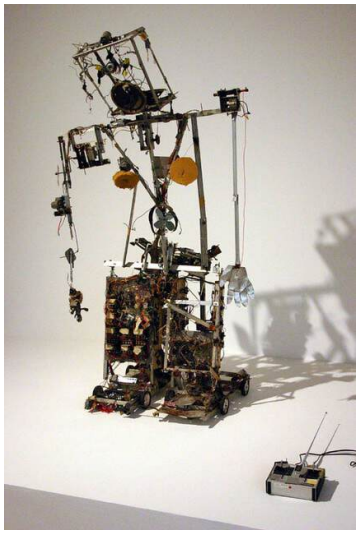
People's dependence on technology seeks to find some connection and comfort in a society of nihilism or lack of a clear sense of purpose. The popularization and emotionalization of technology may be a quest for interpersonal relationships, experiences, and individual existence, to fill the void left by traditional beliefs or value systems. In this fragmented, piecemeal reception of information, people often cannot form the depth and breadth required for a complete narrative, making it difficult to find meaning and connection in life (Turkle,2011, p.11). In this context, the computer is seen as a sensory system, as it profoundly integrates into all aspects of human life, affecting individual and social interactions and communication. The expansion of rationality and the prevalence of materialized life have obliterated human cultural nature, resulting in a spiritual crisis. The computer has transcended the category of mere mechanical devices, becoming a sensory system closely intertwined with human behavior, social structure, and culture (Marcuse, 1964, p.12). Through computers, people can interact globally in real-time, sharing life, views, and information. This digital network of interpersonal relationships reflects the computer as a sensory system connecting human relationships.

The relationship between humans and computers is not just a one-way projection but a dynamic interaction of mutual response (Radin, 1992, p. 1). In the social construction narrative, the projection and impact of computers in human life become more complex,

involving people's cognition and emotions about computers, as well as the role they play in society. This social construction narrative emphasizes that computers are not just cold tools but part of human interaction. The dynamic exchange of information forms the essence of humans and computers, shaping each other's characteristics and properties. This two-way exchange of information shapes the roles and positions of humans and computers in society. Only by awakening people's concern for their own lives and humanistic care for human destiny can we correctly assess technological rationality and overcome human one-dimensionality. We need to liberate computers from the concept of mere tools or devices and see them as richer entities with emotional communication characteristics. This perspective provides a foundation for a more detailed and in-depth consideration of the role of computers in society.

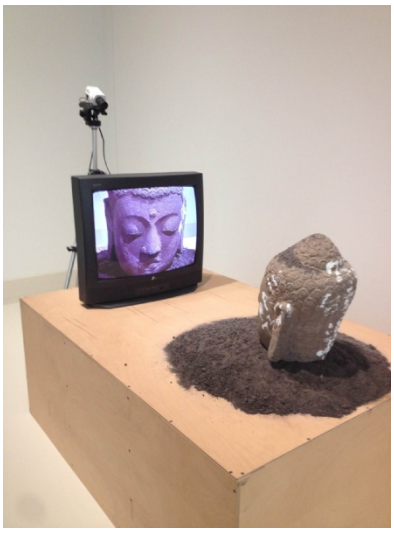
Technology and Humanity in Artworks

Nam June Paik, with his unique artistic practice, has achieved exploration and expansion in the interaction between humans and technology. This exploration reveals the multidimensionality of human-technology interaction, not limited to the physical level but also encompassing sensory, emotional, and spiritual deep communication.



Paik's work "K-456" profoundly embodies the concept of humanized technology design. Named after Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 18 in B-flat major, K.456, it presents a size

similar to a real person, but its fragile appearance is composed of metal parts and wires. The robot is equipped with motorized legs, a remote control device, a tape of John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech, and can scatter beans on command. Controlled by 20 radio channels and a remote, it can perform various actions like walking, talking, singing, dancing, and even urinating. "K-456" not only demonstrates the possibilities of technology but also deeply explores the artist's perspective on human-machine relationships and whether machines can possess human traits like emotions and autonomy. This work challenges the traditional boundaries of robots as purely functional tools, introducing artistic and emotional elements, and becoming a new form of artistic expression medium.



In "TV Buddha," created in 1974, Paik used closed-circuit television technology to enable the Buddha statue to watch its own image in real time. This setting created a unique visual loop where the Buddha is both the observer and the observed. The work ingeniously blends reality and technical virtuality, where the Buddha's self-observation seems like a deep meditation on the inner world. This aesthetical experience achieved through technology reshapes the meaning of self-awareness and meditation, offering a unique aesthetic perception dimension. In his works, Paik not only uses technology as a creative tool but also makes it a carrier of emotions and consciousness, exploring how technology can become a part of human emotions and thoughts, thus crossing the traditional boundaries between art and technology. "K-456 Robot" views technology as a sensory system, challenging and expanding our traditional understanding of technology.

These explorations not only increase our understanding of the potential of machines but also expand the boundaries of art and technology, emphasizing that technology is not just a tool for specific tasks but also a medium for perception, emotional communication, and artistic expression.

These works challenge and expand our traditional understanding of technology, emphasizing that technology is not merely a tool for accomplishing specific tasks, but also a medium for perception, emotional communication, and artistic expression. These explorations not only enhance human understanding of the potential of machines but also push the boundaries of the arts and technology fields. Through my own work, I aim to provoke critical reflection and introspection in the audience about modern society, as well as deeper contemplation of the relationship and spiritual life between humans and technology.

Project

My work, "Cyber Ant," is an art piece combining mechanical and digital elements, simulating the image of a parasitized ant, composed of fragmented body parts, with antennae continuously touching the screen. The size of this ant is comparable to a human and is made of materials like balloons, metal, shopping carts, and wire. Its legs and antennae, controlled by servo motors, are capable of certain movements. The computer screen continuously displays video content generated using ASCII code. The ant's antennae incessantly touch the screen, attempting to establish some form of connection with the computer.

The ant's body, constructed from a shopping cart, symbolizes our existence in a materialistic world dominated by consumerism. Its head, a balloon, is continuously inflated by an air pump, representing our highly developed but disconnected spiritual life. Its hands and brain, representing two significant human abilities, allow for precise manipulation of objects in the environment and the ability to think. The ant's touch

communication with the computer utilizes these abilities, seeking a closer symbiotic relationship between humans and computers. This work reflects on modern society's critique and introspection, exploring the relationship between humans and technology, and the reconstruction of the body, perception, and consciousness.

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach, deeply understanding personal experiences and emotional reactions, and critically analyzing how social and cultural discourses shape individual values and identities. Specifically, the research focuses on the spiritual distress in modern society against the backdrop of social change and technological development, the impact of technology on human life, and how art mirrors these issues. The paper references Ervin Laszlo's insights, emphasizing the increasing emptiness of spiritual life in materially affluent societies. Additionally, the fragmented perception of time in the internet era negatively impacts individual decision-making and values, leading to information chaos and unclear life goals. The paper also thoroughly explores how the proliferation and emotionalization of technology affect feelings, experiences, and individual existence, noting that computer development is not limited to tool advancement but also serves as an important medium for perception, emotional communication, and artistic expression. The article profoundly investigates the dilemmas and challenges faced by human spiritual life in modern society, emphasizes the need to reevaluate the role of computers, and through the analysis of art works, shows deep thought on these topics.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This study utilizes a self-exploration methodology, which, while unique in its approach, encounters certain limitations in scope and depth. Consequently, future research should more thoroughly investigate the influence of technology and societal shifts on individual psychology and social behavior across diverse cultural settings. A critical area of focus should be the effects of globalization and technological advancements on the mental health and social dynamics of various demographic groups, with particular emphasis on different age categories. There is also a pressing need to examine how technological and

scientific evolution shapes individual educational and career decisions, especially regarding the values and life aspirations of younger generations. A key area of analysis will involve assessing the influence of science and technology on educational systems, along with identifying strategies to cultivate skills and literacies required for future societal needs.

Furthermore, future studies must address the social and policy aspects of sustaining and enhancing human welfare in a rapidly evolving technological landscape. This includes analyzing the repercussions of technological progress on social structures and cultural diversity, as well as formulating effective governance and regulatory frameworks for technology. Additionally, an exploration of how art can be utilized to interpret and articulate the impacts of science and technology on human life is imperative, thereby broadening the interdisciplinary research between art and technology. Such exploration aims to enhance public comprehension and awareness of the ramifications of scientific and technological advancements. Through these diverse research avenues, a more holistic understanding of the influence of science and technology on modern society and individual spiritual existence can be achieved, ultimately providing insightful guidance for humanity's approach to technological progression.

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Video Link

https://youtu.be/ft7R76_Xqm0