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THE THERAPEUTIC NATURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Abstract

In social theory, the term “therapeutic culture” refers to a broader cultural phenomenon that goes together with a specific cultural climate, as well as a psychological mindset and therapeutic language. Since its invention, social media has become one of the main drivers of the therapeutic trend, because 1) social media sites are built on the individualisation of users, 2) they encourage self-reflection and the conscious management of self-representation, and 3) they normalise a globalized, uniformed, emotionally charged language and visual aesthetic. This paper aims to draw linguists’ attention to the language- and mind-forming phenomenon of the therapeutic trend by presenting the brief history of therapeutic culture from a social theoretical point of view and analysing the nature of social media.

Keywords: therapeutic turn, social media, psychologization, emotionalism

Theorising the therapeutic trend

The sociological analysis of the reality of everyday life is based on the assumption that the basis of human coexistence is a shared interpretation of the phenomena of the world around us, derived from and maintained by social interactions, mainly communication and language. The commonly shared personal realities then constitute institutions, which uphold their specific norms and serve as the basis for social expectations in the future (Hidas 2018; Arató–Balázs 2022). The three pillars of cultural knowledge are 1) the personal reality of the many, 2) the presence of relevant social institutions, and 3) their underlying norms and values (Berger–Luckmann 1966). In the following, the psychological type of cultural knowledge literature will also be organised into these three groups.

In *Towards a Sociological Understanding of Psychoanalysis*, Peter L. Berger wrote, “if Freud had not existed, he would have had to be invented” (Berger 1965: 38). And so, the social influence of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), exceeds his scientific impact when analysing contemporary culture and social relations. The overture of therapeutic culture dates back to 1909, when Freud lectured at Clark University in the United States. Because of the speaker’s charisma, his findings could easily be

intertwined and utilised by the dominant American protestant-utilitarian value system and the influential audience; the lectures had an unparalleled influence on society. Psychoanalysis gave a new impetus to the intellectual life of the U.S. and became an unavoidable social phenomenon by the late 50's (Lunbeck 2014). In 1957, *The Age of Psychology* was officially proclaimed by the psychologist-journalist Ernest Havemann. Havemann's book was the first attempt to trace the path of how psychological knowledge became part of American culture both on the surface (e.g. on the level of self-help literature and commonly used expressions) and deep down (e.g. on the structural levels of education, family, or corporate life, and in medicine). First of all, journalism could capture the personal reality of the masses and the extent of the newly-forming, consensual *social imagination* (Mills 1959) without theorising, because it grew together with popular trends and must have been a "sensational", groundbreaking novelty too. The therapeutic turn of the Fifties was accompanied by the trend that "everybody talked about their therapist"; 9 out of 10 daily newspapers carried at least one psychological column, and besides bestsellers, the monthly circulation of thematic magazines reached the tens of millions. In the entertainment world, the psychologist became a stock character, and storylines were often based on a psychiatric problem too (Havemann 1957: 8–9). Slang and jokes reflected the changing cultural climate, with words and phrases such as complex, ego, fixation, obsession, unconscious, etc. The "turn" occurred in the 1970s as psychoanalysis became part of medicine, and since then, psychology has been present in developed countries.

Although scientific literature still lacks a consensual definition of therapeutic culture, comprehensive studies investigate the phenomenon's main theoretical traditions (see also Illouz 2008, Wright 2011, Madsen 2014; Amouroux et al. 2023). Our non-exhaustive list of scholarly works focuses on the most far-reaching examples in each area. On the one hand, the overextending nature of psychotherapy is investigated, which is identical to the examination of institutionalisation from the sociology of knowledge perspective. In this case, studies investigate various social subsystems. The cultural success of psychological knowledge is mainly attributed to the quick institutionalisation of psychoanalysis, including national and international societies, conferences, and journals (Illouz 2008: 26–37). In addition, the role of psychoanalytic techniques has been detected in management practices and corporate culture (Whyte 2002 [1956]), while the Hungarian-born American psychiatrist Thomas Szasz investigated, among others, psychology's growing influence in the medical field (Szasz 1960). Furthermore, psychological

attitude is viewed as a consistent framework that has transformed legal and bureaucratic institutions (Foucault 2020), education and child-rearing (Storr 2017), and marriage and relationships (Illouz 2007). Rieff (1987 [1966]) and Vitz (1994 [1977]) noted that psychology as a worldview became a substitute for or a counterpart to a religion, and may be understood from the angle of “secular religions” (comp. Nyirkos 2025).

On the other hand, literature provides a cultural critique of therapeutic culture, investigating the changing norms and values, and thus the changing modes of subjectivation. It meant the transforming concepts of authority, obedience, and conformity, while on the individual level it went together with the tormenting question of autonomy, self-reliance, self-expression, and the quest for searching authenticity, admiration, and enjoyment at the same time (Cloud 1998.) The first group of scholars catches the change in norms and values from the communitarian point of view (Kepe 2022). It identifies the therapeutic trend as the cause and driving force of a shift in cultural values from a collective and traditionalist worldview toward an expressive individualistic, liberal, and neocapitalist way of thinking (Bellah 1985). “Other-directed man” (Riesman 1973 [1950]), “psychological man” (Rieff 1987 [1966]), “the fall of public man” (Sennett 1998 [1977]), “the culture of narcissism” (Lasch 1996 [1978]), or the emergence of a “therapeutic order” (Lears 1981) were milestones of a cultural change, that ultimately led to the decline of Western culture in the eye of leading social theorists. The emerging theoretical model became common knowledge in 1976, with the article entitled “*The ‘Me’ Decade.*” The author, Tom Wolfe, described and mentally framed the general phenomenon through his declaration in the media. Wolfe explained the rugged individualist, atomised, and anxious reality shared by many as the opposite of previously prevailing social values. It declared the third awakening, referring to the obsession with the self and the development of religion being replaced as a world-ordering principle by psychology (Wolfe 1976).

The other mode of criticism has drawn upon Michel Foucault’s theory of power and technologies of the self. According to Foucault, the socio-cultural order that emerged in the 18th century and the capitalist economic system that accompanied it included a social organising principle with its methods, procedures, and institutions, based on epistemological knowledge (Foucault 1996 [1976].) This “moment gave birth to the sciences of man”, and “human sciences” worked inside the individual’s soul and used the knowledge that emerged in the process in an organised manner. And thus psychology, psychiatry, and sociology became possible and desirable (Foucault 1990: 263 [1975].) Epistemological knowledge – equivalent to

therapeutic attitude – made individualisation a method of exercising power, which directed individuals toward themselves and developed a narcissistic relationship to the world (Kepe 2023). Foucault's Panopticon became the metaphor of modern surveillance through introspection (Haggerty 2006; Lyon 2008; Caluya 2010; Han 2017), and his legacy serves as the basis for the critique of neoliberal governmentality (Donzelot 1977; Castel et al. 1979; Rose 1999). The significance of the Foucauldian theoretical tradition is that it links identity formation to the technological apparatus and, more narrowly, to social media.

Social media as a driver of the therapeutic trend

Social media is a comprehensive term for online media platforms that rely on user interactivity and include interfaces created for various purposes. The popularity of social media can be explained by the idea that it fits the logic of the therapeutic trend and incorporates psychological norms and procedures into itself. In this sense, the invention of social media reflected on and grew out of a blooming therapeutic culture on the ground of communication technology.

According to the sociology of knowledge, the reality of the many is maintained, deconstructed, and recreated by communication. From the point of view of Illouz, in a therapeutic culture, the new model of sociability is most noticeably the model of communication (Illouz 2008: 58–61). Psychology has created a theoretical model that encourages confession and the verbalisation of feelings (comp. Balázs–Dede 2022; Kövecses et al 2024), contributing to the ongoing maintenance of therapeutic values and social reality. In the 21st century, this perpetual recognition is driven by social media (Richards–Brown 2011). Social media platforms are not just places where communication and permanent self-realisation happen, but algorithms are programmed to reward connections, shares, comments, and reactions. Accordingly, intellectual and technological incentives are in line with each other. Average screen time statistics show globally and in Hungary that users between the ages of 15 and 65 spend around 6 hours and 40 minutes per day on the screen, and around 80 per cent of this time is spent on social media (Duarte 2025). Indeed, sites are getting an even larger share of the permanently growing screen time year by year. So, social media is becoming increasingly the way people experience communication.

First, examining the therapeutic nature of social media is possible by understanding the nature of digitalisation. The idea of social media was

prefigured by the emergence of algorithmic thinking, which has been “the greatest intellectual shock of the 20th century” (Burckhardt–Höfer 2018:11 [2015]). Algorithmic thinking stems from the paradigm-shifting, enlightened premise that all phenomena of the world can be understood, through this equated, and practically transformed into a sequence of numbers consisting the digits 0 and 1. Digitalisation and psychology essentially have in common that they consider the subject of their study to be dissolvable and configurable. The therapeutic nature of social media sites can be captured in the quality that they contribute to the realisation of the self as a project. To this end, personal profiles divide the individual into measurable categories, along with utilitarian principles, for the sake of monetisation. As represented above, communitarian thinkers have criticised psychology mainly for its individualising tendency. This tendency occurs “programmed” in the digital space, as the sites’ ultimate goal is segmenting the target group. In this sense, individualisation is just a by-product of the capitalist market logic and consumer society, maximised by the technological apparatus. From a Foucauldian perspective, the fact that social sites 1) individualise, i.e. subjectify users, 2) encourage them to engage in continuous self-reflection and self-observation, 3) so that they generate as much knowledge about themselves as possible in the online space is instrumental because it generates epistemological knowledge and thereby ensures the new type of power to remain in motion (Foucault 1990: 263 [1975]), Foucault 2002: 83–85 [1973]).

Therapeutic culture’s individualising tendencies can be captured by giving personal answers to structural and social challenges. Understanding subjectivation from the technological apparatus perspective means necessary personalisation on the sites facilitated by algorithms to document, classify, and serve users. Compared to centrally edited content in newspapers or television, everyone receives personalised recommendations, rewards, and content on social media. Experienced uniqueness on the sites is just a part of mass consumption, fueled by psychological knowledge of man. Owing to Meta’s highly developed search methods, no two feeds are the same. The cost of personalisation may be the loss of shared meaning of the world. Without the same experiences and references, preserving a common understanding of standing norms and values becomes more difficult. However, psychological technology offers a conceptual, communicative, and self-oriented digital framework to navigate life smoothly without common ground.

The therapeutic nature of social media is also evident from the users’ perspective. Taking a step back, one of the central problems of modernity evolved around identity even before social media. For psychology, the self

is understood not as a given or eternal core of human beings, but as a project. Social media has become the sphere of identity creation, where the self-project is realised. Creating a profile requires, above all, self-awareness. The site's first direct attention inward: username, profile picture, relevant information in the "about me" or "what's on your mind" section must be provided during registration, and these milestones all require awareness of feelings and then their social media-compatible presentation. Every social site is psychological technology in that it presupposes a psychological understanding of the self. This is followed by the therapeutic verbalisation, or more precisely, the decisive textualisation of feelings. It should be noted that with the development of technology, self-expression is becoming increasingly multimedia: in addition to textual content, photos or images (even memes), music, and video content are gaining an increasing role. The steps of this are 1) defining the feelings, then 2) naming them condensed into psychological categories, 3) extracting them away from the speaker, and finally 4) performing all these feelings in the public sphere about the individual (Illouz 2007: 107). Therapeutic language has become a tool for re-creating the self, according to cultural norms in the digital sphere (Illouz 2008: 132–134).

Through identity formation, social media has exacerbated the long-lasting conflict between the self as a social performance and the self as an authentic expression of one's inner truth. From George Herbert Mead's discussion of the "I" and the 'me, to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework of self-presentation, many of the most influential theories of the self and identity have recognised the tension between the real and the pose. Now, social media sites transform the private self into public performance, allowing sociability to be experienced via psychological categories (Jurgenson 2019: 69–72). In 2023, *authenticity* became the word of the year according to Merriam-Webster, America's most trusted dictionary, which ranks popular terms based on the frequency of online searches and discussions, thanks to the increase of "stories and conversations about AI, celebrity culture, identity, and social media." Authenticity in social media means the quality of being genuine or real. The concept also derives from psychology and reflects the desire to be true to oneself. Even in their motto, YouTube (*Broadcast Yourself*), BeReal (*Your Friends For Real*), and X (*Blaze your glory!*) promise true self-expression and authentic connections. From this angle, *selfie*, also named word of the year in 2013, could be understood as a "technology of the self", the authentic expression of someone's inner essence. A self-portrait is not simply a photo, but the public product of self-realisation, on the level of communication, a visual representation of psychological thinking (Jurgenson 2019). In a psychological

sense, sites become where actual bodies, real personalities and honest opinions can be expressed and presented.

However, another consequence of individualisation is the growing need for reflexivity: the individual is continuously forced to reflect and be reflected on (Giddens 1991). On the one hand, without pre-given narratives, tradition cannot be called upon to help interpret the world. So, man has to devote more energy to individual meaning-making and is necessarily forced to relate the world's phenomena to himself and analyse them in relation to himself. In terms of language use, this may also explain why people are increasingly using adjectives that express emotions. Emoticons, GIFs, and customisable avatars encourage sharing emotions. Facebook even facilitates the expression of emotions by allowing users to specify their mood in each post. Although causality cannot be determined, the increasing use of the first-person singular, rather than the plural (including social sites too), and the increase in individualistic terms and phrases, may have changed everyday reality perceived by individuals (DeWall et al. 2011; Twenge et al. 2012, 2013). On the other hand, detraditionalisation also means that the individual becomes more dependent on external feedback. Social sites inevitably contribute to other-directedness (Riesman 1973 [1950]), or external locus of control, because they use numbers to make connections between things. Datafication brings about the quantification of thoughts and emotions. Users are necessarily dependent on the feedback of others, as their content spreads when it receives a lot of input from others, and acceptance derives from the number of viewers.

How to gain attention and acknowledgement? Therapeutic culture gave rise to a new self-definition narrative. It generates a narrative structure in which suffering and victimhood define the self. Life stories have a fixed form in every culture, and in the therapeutic one, "suffering becomes the central 'knot' of narrative" (Illouz 2008: 173). A difficult childhood, early disappointments, or previous bad relationships can explain present successes. The media have always been interested in the extraordinary, the unusual. On social media, content that deviates from the norm spreads more. Thus, content creators are happy to show their vulnerability and weaknesses in the spirit of the therapeutic approach. The sites romanticise suffering and surround it with "the glamour of misery" (Madsen 2014: 84). The psychological approach promotes retrospective storytelling, cyclical attitudes, and vulnerable identities. In social media, confessionalism of suffering gains increased attention. All this contributes to the "culture of victimhood", to quote Füredi's essay, since the human experience is consequently defined not by what people do but by what has happened to them (Füredi 1998). And

if vulnerability has become a key theoretical concept of our times, human beings' perceived reality also becomes vulnerable. Therapeutic persuasion has transformed moral problems into a disease, and thus profoundly transformed autobiographical discourse (Illouz 2008: 155). Thereby, various mental illnesses, such as madness (Foucault 2020), narcissism (Lunbeck 2014), depression (Ehrenberg 1998), or more recently burnout (Han 2015 [2010]) were discussed more in the context of changing norms and values, rather than as an actual increase in the number of cases. Since the therapeutic approach implies that people are not responsible for their situation, it also encourages them to seek external help (Madsen 2014: 127). Medicalisation refers to how everyday experiences become redefined as health problems. After the therapeutic turn, new forms of medicalisation emerged. These were largely independent from the psychological profession and have led to a broader cultural dynamic. There is now a growing tendency to normalise illness and seek therapeutic intervention as a means of defining and validating identity (Füredi 2008). Talking about therapy or motivational obstacles appeared as a way of improving reach on social sites. Content creators recognised the potential of this manner of speaking. Speaking about trauma is a source of capital, a cost-efficient commodity, because it requires low investment. Following telepsychology on television, in social media, trauma survivors and mental health influencers are rising stars (see also TikTok Therapy at Stein 2024). To bridge the gap, or close the circle, CreatorCare is a new telehealth therapy service launched in spring 2025, providing sliding-scale therapy specifically tailored to people working in the creator economy. The narrative framework and the algorithmic wiring of social media uphold the reality of many, based on the argument and value system of the therapeutic theoretical model.

Conclusion

As presented above, in a given society, cultural knowledge is born in the constantly evolving, dialectical relationship between individual reality, social institutions, and theoretical models, and the framework in which these dialectics work is communication. Thus, cultural knowledge is communicative, and understanding the nature of communication is essential to comprehend the present cultural framework – or, in other words, social imagination. According to our hypothesis, the leading communication technology, social media, is organised based on psychological attitude. Social media was conceptualised parallel to the features of the therapeutic trend,

namely understanding the self as a project, individualisation, subjectivation, self-expression, reflexivity, and the narrative of suffering. It is interpreted as an expression of a therapeutic attitude that supports therapeutic institutions and social imagination, consistent with the theoretical model. Along with this, this paper aimed to draw linguists' attention to significant linguistic markers (e.g. changing pronoun use or the popularisation of psychological terms), and the emergence of new genres (*TherapyTok*) in social media which could be the subjects of further investigation to understand better the reality of individuals and competing theoretical frameworks of our therapeutic times.

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