



Liquid Friendship in Brian Lobel's *Purge*

Mehmet ÜNAL¹ 



¹Research Assistant, Atatürk University, School of Foreign Languages, Department of English Translation and Interpretation, Erzurum, Türkiye

ORCID: M.Ü. 0000-0002-6857-2940

Corresponding author:

Mehmet ÜNAL,
Atatürk University, School of Foreign
Languages, Department of English
Translation and Interpretation,
Erzurum, Türkiye
E-mail: mehmet.unal@atauni.edu.tr

Submitted: 08.05.2023

Accept: 30.10.2023

Citation: Unal, M. (2023). Liquid friendship
in Brian Lobel's *Purge*. *Litera*, 33(2), 395-416.
<https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2023-1292864>

ABSTRACT

The advent of technological advancements in contemporary society has had a profound impact on our lives by greatly facilitating various aspects of human life from communication to transportation and changing not only the media people utilize in their everyday lives but also their traditions, values, and relationships. Thus, these changes have sparked debate regarding the overall positive or negative implications of these developments as the dynamic nature of all kinds of human relationships in modern times varying from everyday relationships of friendships, partnerships and sexual encounters to kinship and family has increasingly begun to be characterized by transience, fragility, ambivalence and rapid change. These characteristics are attributed to the impact of modern technological advancements, namely the proliferation of social media applications. The purpose of this study is to examine how social media applications shape relationships today with a specific focus on Brian Lobel's *Purge* (2011) in light of Zygmunt Bauman's ideas of liquid modernity. Since Brian Lobel's *Purge* (2011) is a play about making the decision to end or maintain friendship through social media applications, it provides us with pertinent examples for scrutinizing the themes of transience, fragility, vulnerability and ambivalence that have become the hallmarks of the modern relationships in the age of liquid modernity.

Keywords: Social Media, Brian Lobel, Liquid Modernity, Zygmunt Bauman, Media Effects

Introduction

Internet and social media have become a ubiquitous presence in this age of technology and convenience. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, everything from work and education to social life has necessarily been carried on through the internet and social media. Even before the pandemic, the omnipresence of such technologies had already become difficult to ignore, so much so that it has rendered necessary for writers and artists to begin seriously considering their significance in terms of the effects they have over human relationships. As a natural result of the developments in virtual connectivity, human interactions have eventually taken on a new form defined by frequency, shallowness and transience. Due to the extensive global networks facilitated by social media applications, individuals are swiftly and



effortlessly able to establish new interpersonal connections like friendships and start new relationships (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 138). Unlike virtual ones, real relationships and friendships necessitate considerable investment of time and effort to start and maintain. Furthermore, in social media applications, users are allowed to choose friends by just scrolling individuals down, just like choosing a product from a catalogue. It has become possible to make hundreds or even hundreds of thousands of friends in a very short time and with very little effort. The significance of quantity has surpassed that of quality and terminating such a friendship does not present any consequential challenge, as suitable replacements can be readily found. Nowadays, how many friends, followers or subscribers a person has determines their popularity and acceptance in society (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 109) Thus, in this age of internet and social media we live, the notion of friendship has been rendered devoid of its intrinsic meaning and has regrettably been reduced to mere numerical quantification.

Addressing the contemporary need to raise questions about the nature of friendship, New York-born, London-based performance artist Brian Lobel staged an "arts-meets-digital media show" (Leong, 2014) called *Purge*¹ in 2011. In this performance, random people from the audience voted on whether Lobel should keep or delete a Facebook friend based on a one-minute speech he gives about his connection with this Facebook friend. By putting his 1400 friends one by one to the vote of strangers, he has created a work which perfectly reflects and suits the dynamics of modern relationships, inviting thought about how we make friends and sustain friendships as well as what the meaning of the word 'friend' is in the age of technology.

Within this context, this essay discusses the nature of modern relationships, the digital transformation of intimacy and social media usage in Brian Lobel's *Purge*. Zygmunt Bauman's ideas of liquid modernity, particularly those based on the liquidity of modern relationships, which may be defined in terms of ambivalence and rapid change, will be utilized to scrutinize the present situation of modern friendship in *Purge*. Additionally, the motives and goals of social media usage in *Purge* will be examined under one of the media effects theories, 'uses and gratification', which suggests that people use media for their personal needs and purposes as opposed to the widely-accepted theories claiming that media uses and manipulates its audience. The place of social

1 Once *Purge* was completed after 9 days of performance over 50 hours, Lobel decided not to repeat the project and retired the project in 2011 by realising that it would be cruel to make his friends experience the same process again. Nevertheless, the project was repeated and recreated with its own ethics and process by different performers in various countries like France, Italy, Switzerland and U.S.A. from 2012 to 2015.

media in the life of Lobel and his friends will also be discussed through the ‘dependency’ theory. This is another media effects theory based on the thesis that while people utilize media of their own free will for their own needs, they may become totally dependent on it in time and begin to be controlled by the media influence. In addition to these theories, Jean Baudrillard’s ideas on ‘simulation’ and ‘simulacrum’, identifying the reproduction of the things constituting reality, are also utilized here to examine the relationship between reality, virtuality and friendship in *Purge*.

Purge and Liquid Modernity

Lobel decided to create *Purge* because of some questions surfacing in his mind about his ex-boyfriend Grant. Lobel and Grant lived their relationship through social media and internet until Grant sadly died in 2010. It was only then he realized that “never once did [... Lobel] feel like the body or physical presence was missing—until, of course, he was gone” (Lobel, 2016, p. 15). The implication here is that messages and e-mails actually have the capacity to replace the body or the physical presence, eventually rendering it impossible for him to distinguish the ‘real’ from the ‘digital’. This has indeed become a daily phenomenon for modern people. Since Lobel creates performances about bodies (politicized bodies, marginalized bodies, sick bodies, etc.), the issues that arose about Grant regarding corporeality via internet made him think about “how your body interacts with social media, and how your body relaxes with friends. So [... he has] been very interested in how we look at bodies, and how bodies look back at other people” (Hong, 2016). He then decided to collect in a file all of the messages and e-mails from Grant. During this process, he found out that Grant had unfriended² him on Friendster (a pre-Facebook social networking application) – the platform on which they shared their earliest messages, and this incident prompted him to reconsider the very notion of friendship:

I knew clearly in my heart that we were best friends—but those pixels on the screen said we were not! And that got me thinking about why it is important or not to people. It was also a reflection of going through trauma and finding out who you can rely on, who your friends are, and what the word “friend” really means. (Hong, 2016)

2 “The term ‘unfriend’ was selected as the Oxford Word of the Year in 2009, defined as the action of deleting a person as a ‘friend’ on a social network site” (Chambers, 2013, p. 6).

Here Lobel questions the real meaning of friendship, the reliability of those whom he calls 'friends' as well as the place social media possesses in his life. This point also seems to mark the beginning of his initial thoughts that led to *Purge*.

Lobel's performances usually combine his private and personal stories with public narratives. So far, he has written mainly about illness, technology, nationalism, economy and sexuality. His 2003 performance piece *BALL* is about his experiences with metastatic testicular cancer, and in *Theatre and Cancer* (2019), which is an academic study, he shares his thoughts about the public perceptions and sensitivities related to cancer through his personal experience with the disease. *Purge* is, likewise, a performance in which Lobel tests the steadiness of his friendships through a public evaluation based on his personal experiences and views on his friends.

Apart from the fact that Lobel decided to create *Purge* in order to question the real meaning of friendship after figuring out Grant had unfriended him on a social media platform, he also enunciates another reason why he decided to create a performance based on social media:

Perhaps the reason why this story is told via social media is because Grant and I lived our lives and our relationship through social media and internet communication. From our first Friendster messages, to obtaining celebrity gmail accounts for each other [...], to constant messaging during the day, to stalking each other (and our current flings/boyfriends/partners), [...] electronic communication suited us just fine. (Lobel, 2016, p. 15)

Lobel states that Grant lived in another city but it is not obvious whether it was temporary or permanent. Regardless, it seems that they needed to sustain their relationship and communication through social media and internet for some time due to the physical distance between them at the time. However, when Lobel's statements alongside his collection of Grant's messages and e-mails are taken into account, it can be suggested that he has become dependent on social media and internet as a result of having to use them out of necessity for a while. That means social media has replaced the need itself after a while, which is the main argument of the dependency theory, also known as the 'media system dependency theory' (MSD). First introduced by Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach and Melvin L. DeFleur in 1976, it proposes the idea that while people utilize media since they need it in the first place, in the course of time, they begin to utilize it because they become

dependent on it and begin to be controlled by it. Lobel states that he and Grant 'lived their lives and relationship through social media' and they constantly exchanged messages all day long. He also states that Facebook has become a part of his life (Dawn, 2016). His statements prove that Lobel has become dependent on social media as a result of permanent exposure to media for a long period of time. In this respect, it is not surprising that he decided to create a project closely related to social media as he claims to have practically 'lived through social media'.

Lobel started working on *Purge* by announcing the project to the people in his friend list through Facebook, which resulted in sixty-eight of his friends deleting him within an hour. Though not unexpected, this reaction apparently upset him:

While I was bruised by the angry comments left on my Facebook Wall—'Stupid and a waste of time,' 'Who the fuck is this person!'—for me it was worst when people silently deleted me. I took stock of some of the people who deleted me pre-emptively: my mentor, my favorite one-night stand in Chicago, a DJ I loved in Los Angeles, an activist I respected from South Africa... and they were gone. And even though I had caused them to do it—and, hell, I had even recommended that they Delete me if they didn't want to be part of the show—I was shaken. (Lobel, 2016, p. 17)

This was, in a sense, not very different from Lobel himself deleting a large number of his friends based on the votes of strangers. Yet, when he has experienced the same, it seems to have disturbed him as he has never contacted most of them again, thereby really ending the relationship and any hope of further interaction. Before the advent of the internet which then gave way to social media platforms and applications, it was quite a rare possibility for a person to end their relationship with such a large number of their friends in such a short time. Unfortunately, it has now become a high possibility with the 'great' convenience technology provides. Along with faster speed and higher comfort in transportation and communication, technology also provides us with the convenience of easily ending or starting relationships. The Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who is best known for his ideas on the changing nature of modern relationships, also touches upon this (dis)advantage or side effect of technology as follows:

Unlike 'real relationships,' 'virtual relationships' are easy to enter and to exit. They look smart and clean, feel easy to use and user-friendly, when

compared with the heavy, slow-moving, inert messy 'real stuff'. A twenty-eight-year-old man from Bath, interviewed in connection with the rapidly growing popularity of computer dating at the expense of singles bars and lonely-heart columns, pointed to one decisive advantage of electronic relation: "you can always press...". (2003, p. xii)

Both the pre-emptive deletion of people whom Lobel calls his friends and the purgation that Lobel made on Facebook during the performance of *Purge* show that virtual relationships are, indeed, easy to exit. In most cases, pressing the 'delete', 'unfriend' or 'unfollow' button will be enough to end a relationship in this age of internet since many maintain their communication and relationships solely through internet and social media platforms.

That the modes of modern relationships are likely to change in an instant is indicated by Bauman with the metaphor of liquidity. Bauman defines "Facebook as the embodiment of liquid friendship, that is, the weakening of human bonds, and social networks on the net as a new policy of inclusion and exclusion" (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 132). Since friendships today are experienced in a more digitized form in social media applications, the very notion of friendship has also adapted to the easy-to-use feature of these applications. As a result, friendships automatically assume a level of simplicity. In this context, *Purge* proves that ending a relationship or starting a new one is as easy as pressing a button as Lobel's relationship has ended with most of the deleted friends³ as a part of the performance. Friendships are, however, supposed to be pillared upon strong values such as compatibility, trust, honesty, sincerity, commitment and support. These characteristics do not seem to exist in virtual friendships, turning social media users into somewhat robotic humans. These robotic humans establish relations on the internet as if they were programmed to operate according to some criteria which are neither sentimental nor ironically rational but merely operational. In *Purge*, Lobel deletes his friends due to neither sentimental nor rational reasons but only based on the votes of strangers whose main concern is entertainment. Consequently, the quality and quantity of friendships on Facebook do not seem to be crucially important to Lobel as long as they serve the purpose of the performance. However, on most of the recently

3 Lobel has re-friended some of them after a while depending on whether they send a new friend request or a response to his message informing they have been deleted from his friend list as a result of his audience's votes in the performance. However, most of them did not recontact him probably because they took offence at what Lobel did on social media and ultimately terminated their relationship for real.

popular social media applications like Instagram and Twitter, the quantity of friends⁴ has become something to be proud of and the determining factor of popularity even though the value attached to their quality still remains the same: 'insignificant'.

In spite of the fact that Lobel was uncomfortable with the reactions he received as a result of the announcement he made through Facebook, he states that it has been highly beneficial for him afterward:

Purge was not nice, and I deeply regret that *Purge* caused such sadness or discomfort in a number of people... But for so many of the relationships that changed via *Purge*, nearly all of them changed for the better. Instead of friendships which lay dormant - determined by a Friend Request and Acceptance years ago, *Purge* ensured that each friendship was rigorously tested and considered. (Lobel, 2016, p. 20)

As testing the true meaning of friendship is the real motive behind the creation of *Purge*, it has apparently served its purpose with success. After testing the fragility of his relationships, he seems convinced that the people, who remained in his Facebook list, are his real friends. He explains his expectations from real friendships as:

The greatest problem with social networking is not that friendships become digitized and simple, but that they become unused and taken for granted [...] This isn't good enough for a friendship—a real friendship must be activated, wrestled with and celebrated. (Lobel, 2016, p. 20)

It seems like the ambivalent and inactive status of internet relationships is disturbing for Lobel. 'Real' social media friendships need to prove their 'solidity' or steadiness by being activated by *Purge* and then tested against public evaluation and purgation during the project. *Purge* in a way acts as a catalyst for the activation of his friendships which are 'wrestled with' through the announcement e-mail Lobel sent to his Facebook friends and also the vote in *Purge*. If they manage to pass this phase and prove their solidity, they deserve to be 'celebrated' as real friends and friendships, notwithstanding that the realness of these virtual friendships is extremely debatable as they basically exist in social media networks. Besides, the remaining friends may not actually be real

4 Users of these applications who are connected to each other's web are named as 'followers' instead of 'friends'.

friends as most of them are determined by random public votes. It can be nevertheless claimed that they passed the first stage by not pre-emptively deleting Lobel right after the announcement and accepting to be voted by strangers based on Lobel's one-minute speech defending them. Unlike actual friendships in real life, which are also tested against many odds, Lobel depends on the idea that real friends need to adhere to their friendship even if he may have hurt them with the project by testing them without a valid justification.

One of the reasons why Lobel and his friends, who pre-emptively deleted him, have become so swift to resolve to end their relationships might be that social media network, i.e., the digital environment, offers a variety of options for relationships, unlike the real environment. Bauman adverts to this aspect of social media as follows:

[T]his is at any rate how one can feel when shopping for partners on the internet. Just like browsing through the pages of a mail-order catalogue with a 'no obligation to buy' promise and a 'return to the shop if dissatisfied' guarantee on the front page. (2003, p. 65)

The metaphor of online shopping also implies the commodification of relationships as if they were goods⁵ to sell or buy and use or return if dissatisfied. Since there are plenty of options to have relationships of all sorts on social media applications, people are now freer to set their own rules in determining the terms of their relationships. 'Real' relationships like kinship or workplace relations over which people do not have much control most of the time, however, are compulsory as it is either not possible or easy to end one's relationship with their parents, siblings or boss without bearing the consequences. The relationships on social media networks, on the other hand, are more easily manageable since social media users are the ones who are in full control in terms of starting, preserving or ending them. In virtual relationships, as long as a relationship pleases them, they continue or else they may choose to quit.

Bauman uses the phrase 'top-pocket relationship' to define such relationships which continue as long as they are deemed necessary or comply with the criteria set by people who start these relationships in the first place:

5 Considering that it has been a prevalent practice to buy 'friends' and 'post likes' on Facebook (<https://buyfbstore.com/product/buy-facebook-friend/>) and 'followers' on Instagram and the like, it can be posited that this concrete phenomenon has evolved into actuality for quite some time, surpassing its initial metaphorical connotation.

‘Top-pocket relationship’ [...] is so called because you keep it in your pocket so that you can bring it out when you need it [...] ‘Top-pocket relationship’ is instantaneity and disposability incarnate. Not that your relationship would acquire those wondrous qualities without certain conditions having first been met. Note that it is you who must meet those conditions; another point in the ‘top-pocket’ relationship’s favour, to be sure, since it is on you and only you that success depends, and so it is you and only you who is in control—and stays in control throughout the ‘top-pocket’ relationship’s short life. (2003, p. 21)

Lobel’s one-night stand in Chicago, for instance, silently deleted him as he was most probably no longer needed for her/him. Likewise, one of his friends, Kevin, with whom Lobel “used to live in the same apartment complex and have sex when his boyfriend was away on work trips” (Lobel, 2016, p. 34) seems to have deleted him for the very same reason. Lobel’s other friends who pre-emptively deleted him seem very likely that they decided to end their relationship since either the idea of being involved in his project irritated them or they probably wanted to be in full control of their friendship. On the other hand, even though it looks like Lobel himself did not choose the ones to be deleted during *Purge* as strangers voted and he deleted accordingly, he was, nevertheless, in control of the final action. Not to mention the fact that he keeps some of his friends pre-emptively; he re-friends some of them either immediately or after a while even if the judges have voted to delete them. He likewise deletes some even though the judges have voted to keep them. In all cases, these online friendships can be considered as top-pocket relationships as they are preserved as long as they satisfy both sides; otherwise, one of the ‘friends’ ends the relationship considering that it is no longer beneficial or needed. Nevertheless, he places the blame of ending a relationship on the judges, which seems to make him feel less culpable for he defends himself this way: “I say—the panel deleted you! I didn’t delete you. It’s a very convenient way to not do it myself” (Hong, 2016). Lobel’s words here elucidate that his sense of responsibility towards his friends has gone awry. The difference in the conditioning of human behavior in cyberspace is touched upon by the Slovenian philosopher, cultural theorist and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek:

In VR [Virtual Reality], I can do it, act it out, without really doing it, and thus avoid the anxiety connected with the RL [Real Life] activity – I can do it, and since I know I’m not really doing it, the inhibition or shame is suspended. (1997, p. 177)

The virtual reality provided by the internet and social media applications enables its users to avoid responsibility for their actions because they do not believe they are doing it in real life. Lobel might have considered that ending a relationship on a social media application does not mean really ending it and since he lets strangers do it, he probably feels free of guilt and responsibility about their likely consequences.

Apart from the wide variety of options that social media provides for relationships, it also functions as a barrier between people enabling them to disregard the feelings of one another as in the case of *Purge*. Since interactions happen in digital space in social media, people do not witness body language, gestures and mimics showing such emotions as happiness, sadness, fear or disappointment. Although smiley faces like emoticons⁶ and emojis⁷ are utilized to express feelings on digital platforms, they cannot be substituted for real gestures and mimics by any means as smiley faces are not natural human reactions happening automatically. Icons representing human emotions and reactions are, however, typed optionally by users of social media if they prefer to show how they feel about something or else they can hide their real feelings by not typing those icons in if they prefer to. Gestures and mimics, on the other hand, are innate, intrinsic, highly unique and decisively inimitable reactions emerging out of one's control. In sum, the discrepancy between the experience of real feelings and the feelings suggested by the use of smiley faces proves that the latter cannot replace the former by any means as the former is unique and intrinsically inimitable. This apparent lack of experiencing real feelings in cyberspace seems to make it easier to disregard the feelings of the people who are on the other side of the screen on social media applications. When the messages included in *Purge* are taken into account, it is obvious that Lobel and his friends have communicated through Facebook messages and e-mails during the announcement of *Purge* and afterward. The virtual position they are in seems to have facilitated a mutual disregard for the feelings of one another as they do not witness the actual facial expressions, namely emotions and feelings of the other side at first hand while interacting through social media.

Social media applications do not offer text messaging as the only way of interaction between their users. Instant photo capturing and sharing, voice messaging and video

6 Emoticons are punctuation marks, letters, and numbers used to create pictorial icons that generally display an emotion or sentiment ("Emoticon" comes from: emotional icon) (Grannan, 2020).

7 Emoji (from the Japanese e, "picture" and moji, "character") are a slightly more recent invention. Not to be confused with their predecessor, emoji are pictographs of faces, objects, and symbols (Grannan, 2020).

calls are other features provided by these platforms as other means of communication. Even though these features are in a way akin to actual interaction (in that these features successfully transfer visual data containing gestures and mimics as well as audible data including intonation, stress and tone and sound of voice when compared to text messaging), the physical absence of both sides and the unmediatedness of the interaction only existing in actual face-to-face communications cannot be compensated by new features of these applications. Even if these features are developed to transfer feelings instantly as in science fiction movies, physical presence and unmediatedness will always remain irreplaceable. This lack is thoroughly experienced especially after humanity has been condemned to maintain their lives indoors in 2020 during the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. The situation of people in 2020 in accordance with such precautions taken against coronavirus as wearing face masks, face shields and gloves as well as social distancing is surprisingly like a simulation of the lack in social-networking applications or vice versa, in that physical contact is missing on both occasions either because of gloves and social distancing or virtual space. Likewise, it is hard to show facial expressions and feelings in both cases as a consequence of the lack of visual data either because of masks or the virtual space itself.

All in all, it can be concluded that virtual interactions cannot totally replace actual ones as some of the features of actual interactions cannot be provided by virtual ones. Accordingly, the apparent lack of interpersonal emotion transfer and emotional interaction, physical absence and mediatedness of interaction in social media platforms seem to be some of the reasons why modern relationships have become so shallow, transient and rapidly changeable. These very reasons also appear to explain why starting and ending relationships have become so easy as in the case of *Purge*. Žižek correlates these side effects of virtuality with the perception of distance and presence:

[T]he virtualization cancels the distance between neighbour and a distant foreigner, in so far as it suspends the presence of the Other in the massive weight of the Real: neighbours and foreigners are all equal in their spectral screen presence. (1997, p. 199)

In cyberspace constituted by the internet and social media, close and distant relations become even as they have the same virtual presence on digital screens. While the difference between what is close and what is distant vanishes, the close one may be perceived as if it were distant as a side effect. In other words, people who are far away

and difficult to interact with due to physical distance have become very close as if they were neighbors with the convenience of cyber technologies. However, people who are close seem to have, in a way, lost their advantage as their presence and value have become equal to those of foreigners. Accordingly, close relationships have been reduced to the level of distant relationships as they have lost their advantage of being close and available all the time and become equal to distant relationships in value since distant relationships are as close as the close relationships in their cyber presence and likewise available all the time. Although these (dis)advantages and side effects of social media usage have, for better or worse, changed the dynamics of human relationships, such transient relations are nevertheless likely to be preferred more than the actual ones on account of the fact that virtual ones spare people the 'trouble' of spending time and effort to make a relationship work. Lobel states this bare fact when he says, "There they are, in that digital space, just where you left them" (2016, p. 20). Even family relationships have begun to disintegrate just because modern individuals are not willing to make the effort when there are plenty of alternatives requiring rather less effort (or none at all) in the virtual space.

As social beings, humans have always been in need of each other if for nothing else but to satisfy their social needs like interacting with each other or forming communities. Over the course of time, especially after the establishment of the internet in the 1990s, these basic needs have begun to be met by digital or virtual environments and communities such as social media platforms and groups. This transformation has formed a vast field for communication and social sciences studies from then on. As opposed to a number of communication theories like the 'hypodermic needle' or 'magic silver bullet' theories suggesting that people have been used and manipulated by media, the 'uses and gratifications' theory developed by Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler (1974) suggests that people have begun to use social media platforms to gratify their needs, not the other way around. Some of the needs or motivations according to which people decide to use social media specified in the theory are passing time, companionship, escape (pressure or reality), enjoyment, social interaction, relaxation, information and excitement. Nevertheless, these motivations and needs seem to have even diversified over time. Lobel expresses his own motivation while explaining what *Purge* is about as: "Maybe it is a bit about social media, but only insomuch as contemporary beings discuss, share, enact and (potentially, hopefully) heal from grief on, via and through social media" (Lobel, 2016, p. 15). As a consequence of the loss of his friend, Lobel decided to create a performance about grief and created *Purge* with the purpose of

examining the meaning of friendship and loss in relation to his grief. His intention was to utilize Facebook as a distraction from his grief for “coming out of the thick haze of mourning” (Lobel, 2016, p. 20), in other words, healing from grief. *Purge* associate artist, Season Butler likewise explains the underlying motive behind the performance by associating the performance and the expected outcome of it with the vocabulary meaning of *Purge*: “*Purge* strongly connotes catharsis, maybe even a restorative one - violent in its throes, and then we feel better having released something, let something go” (2016, p. 24). The name of the performance connotes not only the release of feelings but also that of the relations and people, that is to say, letting them go as they are no longer needed or wanted. Butler also adverts to the ‘restorative’ effect of *Purge* thereby referring to Lobel’s purpose in *Purge* which is to heal from his grief and restore himself even if it is at the expense of experimenting on his relationships with his friends and destroying them. Lobel is, therefore, likely to preserve his relationship with his friends as long as they are active and tested via *Purge* as well or else, he seems to end his relationship by showing *Purge* as an excuse for purging dormant friends from his life as an exercise of his healing session.

Lobel has also benefited from social media, namely Facebook and the people in his Facebook friend list, creating a performance out of it. It is obvious from the negative responses Lobel received to *Purge* that his Facebook friends, who pre-emptively deleted him, are aware of his underlying aim in his project: entertaining himself and strangers by utilizing his relationships at all costs. In most of the negative responses, his friends underline and criticize this very same issue. For instance, Lobel’s friends who deleted him, Sandra and Jane, reproach Lobel in e-mails they sent as a response to his announcement about *Purge* for exploiting and abusing them:

SANDRA

Why can’t you, Brian, be the one to decide on your own if we should be associated via this medium? But I get it, it’s ‘performance art’ and you are using your Facebook friends as the raw materials. But I don’t know... we’re people. (Lobel, 2016, pp. 38-39)

JANE

[W]hat you’re doing with *Purge* is interesting in theory. But in actual life, I think it’s kind of fucked up and hurtful to your friends, to ask strangers to tell you whether to stay friends with them and to make a game out of it. (Lobel, 2016, p. 46)

Even though he has had his own reasons, it is a matter of fact that he uses Facebook and the people in his Facebook friend list for deriving a benefit from them by disregarding how they would feel or think about it. He therefore uses social media to gratify his own purposes and needs in the case of *Purge*, just like the uses and gratifications theory suggests.

Lobel shares most of the responses he received from his friends under pseudonyms either because they prefer him to do so or he cannot make contact with them to establish what they would rather have him do. The purpose of this practice is to protect personal privacy mentioned in many of the responses Lobel received as the primary concern about *Purge*:

EVAN⁸

Essentially I feel quite strongly about privacy, particularly my own and I've spent a considerable amount of time ensuring my very compartmentalised life stayed as such. You are the only person I have encountered who has used reference to me in such a public context that has made me feel unhappy. (Lobel, 2016, p. 46)

Zack⁹:

[T]he internet is a strange enough place and privacy is hard enough to come by as it is... It's obviously not about not trusting you [...] but I'd rather not have strangers looking at my info. (Lobel, 2016, p. 68)

Andrea:

I am going to put you on a limited profile¹⁰ [...] I do not feel comfortable with strangers viewing my complete profile. (Lobel, 2016, p. 75)

Although social media users seem to be very eager to socialize through social media applications, they are not completely comfortable with sharing their personal information—even their name—in public. Lobel, moreover, omits some parts from some of the e-mails and states that he “removed [them] in publication for privacy reasons” (2016, p. 74) as those parts most probably included such specific information

8 The names and pseudonyms used in the performance are given centred and in full capital letters.

9 Additional e-mails received after the performance are included in the published text as well as the ones used in the performance and the names and pseudonyms in the additional e-mails are given in lowercase letters as aligned on left.

10 “The person finds that, although a friend request is approved, he or she has limited access to what can be performed on the other's profile. Restricted access includes an inability to see others' comments, personal information, status updates, photos, videos, and write on the other's message board” (Tokunaga, 2011, p. 427).

as location, phone number or any sort of personal data which can possibly be abused by third parties. In other words, social media users feel secure and safe as long as their personal information is only shared with the people they know and trust, not with everybody. More importantly, some of Lobel's friends also mention that they are not only seeking security in their privacy but also in their relationships:

The idea of me being discussed for my value (and then checking back to find I've been un-friended) doesn't really sit well with me [...] I know I'm taking this too seriously, but at the moment I'm needing to feel secure in my friendships... (Lobel, 2016, p. 43)

Some of his friends seem to cherish their relationships existing in the virtual space as if they were not virtual but real and they are apparently apprehensive that they would lose their connection or relation with their friends thereby considering the project of *Purge* as insecure for their relationships. Apart from privacy and security, one of his friends, Evan, also alludes to an additional concern about their relationship with regard to *Purge*: 'not having control over' it. He expresses this concern by writing back to Lobel as: "I appreciate that knowing you has been a two-way relationship and I cannot have any control over how you choose to recall that relationship" (Lobel, 2016, p. 47). The implication here is that he has no control over their relationship as their expectation from it or understanding of it is different from each other's and he is apparently not pleased with the sudden turn which signals that Lobel's choices will determine the future of their relationship. Consequently, Lobel's friends who pre-emptively deleted him seem to preserve their friendships so long as their relationships are secure and private and they possess full control over their relationship by not letting anyone (like strangers in the case of *Purge*) intervene or Lobel take over the control. Privacy, security and having full control are the motivations that are likely to be the purpose that Lobel's friends seek in their virtual relationships.

As exemplified above, Lobel uses his Facebook friends as raw materials for the performance of *Purge*. He commodifies them in a way and disregards that they are real people with real feelings considering that "a performance about grief needs to feature real life stakes, real sadness, real anger, [and] real disruption" (Lobel, 2016, p. 21), and it has to be "a confrontation with loss, an affirmation of friendship and an acknowledgement of the precarious nature of our ties to other people" (Butler, 2016, p. 24). Although he decides not to repeat his performance becoming aware of the fact that it upset and

disturbed many of his friends, his decision about not repeating it does not really compensate for the fact that he has already caused a significant amount of dismay with a single performance. It may be a fact that virtual friendships are not perceived as profound relationships by most, however, Lobel seems to oversimplify the concept of friendship by his project for the sake of producing art as most of his Facebook friends are his real friends with whom he connects out of social media in real life and who take their relationships seriously.

One of his friends puts this situation into words when he writes "I guess I find it a bit cruel to play with people's emotions surrounding rejection in the name of art" (Lobel, 2016, p. 39). Another friend also criticizes the same issue by stating that she finds his project very hurtful for his friends as he asks strangers to determine the status of his relationships and 'makes a game out of it'. He seems to disregard all these reproaches and utilizes all the materials he gets from the responses he received in the creation of his project. He even ignores the request of his friend Evan, who asks him not to use anything related to him in the project:

It is absolutely my wish that you do not use my profile, my name, a pseudonym for my name, this e-mail, or any part of this e-mail as part of the project [...] [I]f you have any consideration for the integrity of that relationship, I would ask that you respect my wishes. (Lobel, 2016, pp. 46-47)

He uses his name or a pseudonym and the contents of his e-mail including the parts he asks Lobel not to share them. Furthermore, he reveals that one of his friends who deleted him had cheated on his boyfriend with Lobel when his boyfriend was away for work trips and also humiliates another friend just because he states he will delete and unfriend Lobel first: "[H]e was kept... but I decided to delete him a few days later. I just did not need that shit in my life" (Lobel, 2016, p. 40). All in all, he seems to adopt a disrespectful, pejorative and even vengeful attitude towards his Facebook friends, especially towards those who deleted him. He most probably considers that he has nothing to lose since they deleted him and proved their untrustworthiness so he has all the right to make them a part of his performance. The very attitude he adopts can be considered as a typical example of liquid relationships as Lobel and his friends have easily given up on each other as well as that of top-pocket relationship since Lobel ends his relationships after utilizing them, considering that they are no longer necessary.

In fact, there is also a possibility that Lobel might have used deliberate provocation in the performance to make a point about the current status of modern relationships by going beyond the bounds of decency. He might be pointing out the ultimate corruption in the relationships of the modern era by exaggerating his attitudes towards his friends to demonstrate the extremity of this corruption. By provoking the audience, Lobel might be aiming to incite criticism and discussion in order to raise awareness.

Lobel expresses what social media and his Facebook friends mean to him stating that “For me, Facebook is part of life, I don’t distinguish (often) real-life friends from friends I connect with online” (Dawn, 2016). Elsewhere, he even claims that “It’s almost immature to suggest there’s a difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘digital’ anymore” (Wilkinson, 2013). From his statements, it can be concluded that in the hyper-reality in which Lobel lives, the digital as a representation or imitation of the original or real has become indistinguishable from the real just like Jean Baudrillard suggests in his ideas regarding ‘simulation’ and ‘simulacra’. In this case, social media, namely Facebook, as a representation of social life, has eventually replaced Lobel’s real social life and rendered it almost impossible for him to tell the difference. He may have provided these clarifications with the intention of justifying *Purge* and implying that his Facebook friends are as real as his real friends. The implication to be drawn here is that he values his Facebook friends as much as his real friends. He, nonetheless, makes the reader question his former clarifications in *Purge* when he states quite the opposite of what he has stated so far:

[W]hat is spoken in the live performance is about digital connection and disconnection and shame and sharing between families, and the limits of sharing. While everyone else is able to be anonymized as part of this publication, it’s impossible to do this with my mother, whom I adore. She is not a fictional mother, she’s a real woman [...] And she is not my Facebook friend. (Lobel, 2016, p. 41)

In direct contradiction to his former statements, Lobel himself differentiates between the real and the digital. Moreover, his mother is not his Facebook friend and therefore not closely related to either the matter at hand or the performance. In other words, he provides these explanations without any necessity, unlike the former ones which are very likely to be provided out of necessity for justifying *Purge* since he was accused of not caring for his Facebook friends’ feelings on the grounds that they are not real or important. His inconsistency, which came out most probably as an ultimate side effect

of living so integrated with social media and virtual space and of heavy exposure to them, also reflects the mental confusion of modern individuals living in this relatively new system. In fact, he confesses that he is confused and his thoughts are likely to change while he is endeavoring to define real friendship:

I guess that's how I currently define it, a definition which will, of course (as I learned from *Purge*) be different from everyone else and perhaps even to myself in the future. It is this ambiguity, this lack of definition, this lack of certainty, which brings me back, heartbreakingly, to Grant, to our relationship, to his death. (Lobel, 2016, p. 20)

The inconsistency between his statements should not be surprising after this assertion. It is very striking that the description of his thoughts ('will be different in the future') and the words he chooses to express his current situation ('ambiguity', 'lack of definition' and 'lack of certainty') connote the characteristics of liquid modernity which are rapid change, transience, and ambivalence.

Conclusion

Human behaviors and relationships constituting the building blocks of culture are influenced by all sorts of changes happening around them. As a natural result of technological and cyber developments, human life and interactions have become easier and faster, and have eventually taken on a new form by adapting to the 'simple and fast' features of these developments. If it is true that these applications provide easier and faster interactions between people, they also ultimately make their relationships simple, transient, fragile, ambivalent, and rapidly changeable. As a performative experiment, *Purge* allows us to observe this transformation in friendships that parallels the easy-to-use features of the applications in the cyber sphere. Zygmunt Bauman's ideas on liquid modernity also testify to the existence of an ultimate corruption in human relations as an inevitable consequence of the influence that modern technological enhancements have over people, and enable us to enunciate this corruption and transformation in a theoretical concept. The examination of *Purge* in the light of Bauman's ideas on liquid modernity shows that human beings in this modern age of technology have been gradually turning into robotic beings showing less and less human feelings. They are therefore losing their ability to empathize as they are adopting the characteristics of technological devices and these devices are functioning as a barrier to empathy since

actual face-to-face communication is an unmediated way of communication and apparently necessary for the maintenance and nourishment of the feeling of empathy.

Another determinant of lack of empathy apart from the mediatedness of internet communication is that internet users consider that they are not actually doing the things they do on the internet in real life, thereby avoiding the responsibility of their actions and behaviors. Thus, although they experience the fulfillment of their actions and behaviors, their conscience remains clear. Furthermore, such actions as starting or ending a relationship and telling one's thoughts about the other in the interaction on/through the internet are relatively easier and more effortless, as in the case of *Purge*.

Lobel had to sustain his relationship with his ex-boyfriend through social media and internet as they lived in different states, which has made Lobel dependent on social media. This is not different from the situation of many who have ultimately become dependent on social media after using it for a while. Despite the fact that technological devices have been invented to fulfill a need, they then become the need itself. The alarm of the ones whose smartphone battery is dead, the level of necessity felt by those who check their smartphones and social media accounts every ten minutes or the case of Lobel, who has practically lived his life through social media and internet, testify to this very fact.

One of the side effects of living so integrated with technology and social media is that the real and the digital become intertwined and then indistinguishable after a while, which is also expressed by Lobel: there is no difference between the real and the digital (Wilkinson, 2013). In fact, he seems to have repeatedly emphasized this conviction because he has been accused of not valuing his friends as 'real people with real feelings'. He nevertheless differentiates the real from the digital in *Purge* by stating that her mother is a 'real woman' and was accordingly not included in the performance. This inconsistency might be another side effect of this close integration with modern technologies and social media as 'inconsistency' connotes rapid change and transience, which are the mutual features of technology and liquid modernity.

Purge appears to be a performance in which Lobel makes use of social media and people in his social media network in the name of creating 'performance art' and as an exercise of his healing session for the loss of his ex-boyfriend by disregarding his friends' thoughts and feelings. While the foundation of the performance was to

scrutinize the meaning of friendship, it has ended up with the commodification of relations and people as well as the oversimplification of the concept of friendship. In fact, Lobel might be endeavoring to provoke his audience into critical thinking by exhibiting extreme behaviors towards his friends on social media with the intention of pointing out the ultimate condition modern relationships will eventually become. In this context, *Purge*, as a play about interactions on social media offering an environment where friendship relations are abstracted from such values as trust, sincerity, sympathy and commitment, is an important performative attempt in terms of revealing how the concept of friendship is perceived today or will be perceived in the near future.

Although *Purge* is a performance and work, containing data from 2011, about making the decision to end or maintain friendship through Facebook, and Facebook is assumed to be an unpopular application that has now been replaced by Instagram, Twitter and the like, Facebook still ranks first among social media applications worldwide with 2.963 billion monthly active users according to statistics as of January 2023 (Datareportal, 2023). The misconception that Facebook is obsolete and unpopular is due to the fact that the rankings and popularity of these social media applications exhibit variability across diverse countries. Therefore, it can be presupposed that these notions regarding the liquidity of social media friendship are also applicable to other social media platforms based on friendship or follower systems.

Much like anything created to promote self-image on the internet, modern relationships seem to have eventually taken on an artificial and hollow form. Human beings have begun to perceive each other as commodities whose quantity (in the form of friend lists, followers, etc.) is the only factor determining their value while the quality is insignificant due to the variety of options for relationships that social media provides. This situation is, surely, related to the capitalist system; mass production and consumerism give direction to our understanding of friendship. In social media, friends have also become, more or less, like mass-produced items and every single friendship eventually "becomes a quantifiable commodity" (van Dijck, 2011, p. 170) and we are trying to consume them as fast as possible. One moment we are looking overjoyed at a series of photos and exchanging numerous comments that contain exaggerated statements of endearment and the next moment we are deleting them because they forgot to click the 'like' button under a photo of ours.

While Lobel does not seem to be valuing the quantity and quality of friendships since his primary purpose appears to be to create art and heal from his grief through entertainment and distraction in *Purge*, the quantity of friendships is crucially important today in most social media platforms as the number of the relationships one has on social media accounts show their popularity. Although many do not know most of the people on their friend list on social media, they establish as many relationships as possible since it is effortless to do and they all are ironically listed under the friend category. This very fact also gives an idea about the meaning of relationships and friendship on social media. In this context, *Purge* serves as a mirror enabling us to see more clearly and evaluate the current condition of human relations in such an age obsessed with social media as ours.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: This study was supported by Atatürk University Scientific Research Project (BAP) Coordination Unit. Project ID: 8952 Project Code: SBA-2021-8952.

References

- Bauman, Z. & Donskis, L. (2013). *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2003). Foreword. *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. viii-xiii. Polity Press.
- Butler, S. (2020). Response from Season Butler, *Purge* Associate Artist. In B. Lobel's *Purge*. London: Oberon Books.
- Chambers, D. (2013) *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Datareportal. (2023). *The Latest Facebook Statistics: Everything You Need to Know*. Retrieved Jan 4, 2023, from <https://datareportal.com/essential-facebook-stats>
- Dawn, T. (2016). *American Live Artist Brian Lobel Questions Why Purging Your Facebook Friends Is Art – Popsoken*. Popsoken. Accessed 21 May 2020. <http://popspoken.com/arts/2016/03/brian-lobel-interview>.
- Ellison, N., Lampe, C., Steinfeld, C., and Vitak, J. (2011b) 'With a Little Help from My Friends: How Social Network Sites Affect Social Capital Processes', In Papacharissi, Z. (ed.), *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (pp. 124-145). New York: Routledge.
- Grannan, C. (2020). *What's the Difference Between Emoji and Emoticons?*. Accessed 10 November 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/story/whats-the-difference-between-emoji-and-emoticons>
- Hong, G. (2016). *Purge - An Interview with Brian Lobel*. ArtHop. Accessed 11 April 2020. <https://arthop.co/editorials/purge-interview-brian-lobel-nus-arts-festival-2016>.
- Leong, D. (2014). *Getting unfriendly*. R.AGE. Accessed 3 April 2020. <https://www.rage.com.my/getting-unfriendly/>

Lobel, B. (2016). *Purge*. London: Oberon Books.

Tokunagresa, R.S. (2011) 'Friend me or you'll strain US: Understanding negative events that occur over social networking sites', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 14(7–8), pp. 425–432. doi:10.1089/cyber.2010.0140.

van Dijck, J. (2011) 'Facebook as a Tool for Producing Sociality and Connectivity', *Television & New Media*, 13(2), pp. 160–176. doi:10.1177/1527476411415291.

Wilkinson, D. (2013). *Feature: Brian Lobel's 'Purge' – a space for dialogue*. A Younger Theatre. Accessed 3 April 2020. <https://www.ayoungentheatre.com/feature-brian-lobels-purge-a-space-for-dialogue-facebook-performance/>

Žižek, S. (1997). *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso.