

FOREWORD: I have all but entirely stepped back from social media since graduating high school in 2018 (Twitter notwithstanding). As a result of this distance, I do not feel as though I have much of substance to speak on in regards to what little remains of my current social media presence and subsequent identities. Therefore, this paper is mainly centered around my high school experiences, a time in which social media played far too big a role in my daily life.

Consequent to my 2000 birth year, I entered early adolescence right around the time social media cemented itself as a prominent cultural force to be reckoned with, for better and for worse. My journey from childhood to young-adulthood was, in many ways (though certainly not all), defined by the emergence of a quasi-compulsory social identity and presence which took place entirely within the digital sphere, unfathomable as this may be for those born of previous generations. At roughly twelve years old, my peers and I were unceremoniously thrust into a digitally modified version of high school popularity politics which extended beyond the brickyard and into the backyard and we seamlessly learned to incorporate these public identity “performances” with all the standard highs and lows of adolescence. While I certainly have qualms about the effects of coming into my own concurrently with social media, I by no means feel wholly burdened by this concurrence or believe it’s negative implications to be insurmountable on both an individual and societal level. That said, to ignore the personal impacts of social media would be to paint a wildly inaccurate depiction of my identity and all of its contextually-dependent iterations. In analyzing the interrelationship between social media and identity, perhaps the most personally significant aspects to consider are gender, distribution, and narrative, as I believe these things played, and continue to play (though to a lesser extent given the deliberate distance), a massive role in shaping many aspects of both my private and public identities.

Deftly and succinctly presented in film critic Lindsay Ellis's video, titled "The Male Gaze vs. The Men: Feminist Theory Part 2", is the idea and execution of the male gaze as it relates to media portrayals of both men and women. Originally defined as the way in which male cinematographers photographed women and narratively crafted in which "women on film are objects for male fetishistic gazing", as its prominence and utilization within various fields grew, the definition of male gaze now encompasses a much broader scope. Still, the original definition of male gaze remains relevant, as unfortunate as that may be, and it should come as no surprise that something so culturally prominent within film and television would also exert itself within the confines of social media.

No clearer is the presence of the male gaze within social media than on Instagram, a social media platform in which the fastest avenue to achieve in-app "success" (measured in likes and comments) is to be an attractive female. This knowledge is well-known and it weighed heavily on my high-school-self as I found myself directly playing into the serpentine hand of the male gaze in a misguided pursuit of recognition and validation. As teenagers often are, I was consumed with the desire to be, well, desired, and through observing my peers, it seemed as though the best way to meet this end was by crafting what I saw as the "perfect" online identity. An identity which required I spend an inordinate amount of time parsing through clothes and filters and photos, lest I present myself as anything other than perfectly desirable for the audience. For all the wrong reasons, I found myself deliberately posting semi-sexualized photos of myself, knowing I would be rewarded in return. That said, I do not want to paint the wrong picture here. I am a firm believer that women (and all people, really) should confidently wear and post whatever they want. Intent is the key player here and I hope that comes across. My intent behind posting these photos and crafting this "Instagram identity" was not of

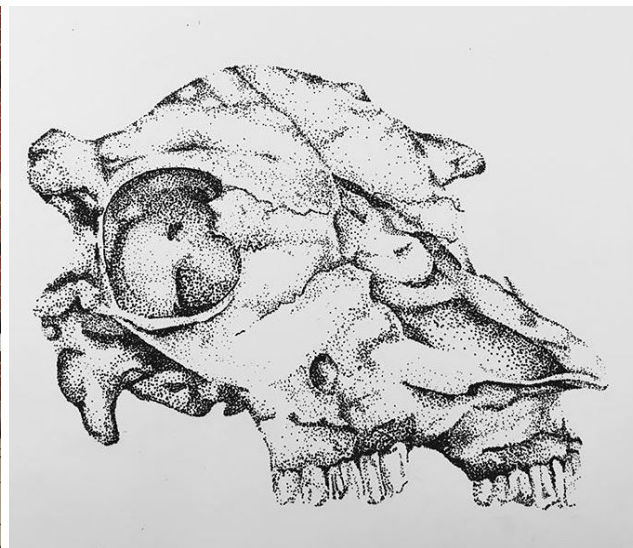
self-confidence or female empowerment, but rather an appeal to the quickest form of online currency and subsequent validation.



(I'm pictured center and right and, unsurprisingly, these were two of my most liked photos on Instagram, clocking in at approximately 350 and 450 likes, respectively.)

Also relevant to my experiences regarding the formation and promotion of online identities is the materialist approach set forth in Laurie Gries's text, "Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics". Centered around how images and their meanings manifest themselves and interact with those who consume them is the idea of iconographic tracking, or, to put it succinctly, visual rhetoric and representation. In looking at one's social media identity as the object of study to which rhetorical value is assigned, one may easily observe the ways in which these entities overlap. Said overlap includes, but is certainly not limited to, the transformation, circulation, and recursivity of images. Perhaps the most glaring similarity between the two is the concept of distribution, defined in Gries's text as "intentional strategies deployed to transport that message to that audience(s) as well as the collective networks of human and nonhuman entities involved in putting those strategies into action."

Conspicuous within the cultivation of one's online identity is the notion of promoting an intended message of oneself, often in ways that either exaggerate or contradict traits and behaviors belonging to one's offline self. These distortions are utilized in pursuit of conveying a specific image of oneself, both in a visual and representational sense. To use a personal example, when I was still active on Instagram, I would often post photos that related to my hobbies and extracurricular activities at the time, such as cheerleading, dance, and art. Implicit in these posts was my own desire to be viewed in a specific manner and I see this desire mirrored in just about every Instagram account in existence. Athletic, artistic, attractive...the list is neverending when it comes to the manner in which we wish to be seen and, through social media, achieving this end has never been easier and, in my opinion, more destructive.



The actuality of my presence at or enjoyment of these activities was near irrelevant when it came to posting about them as the posting was an activity in itself. Though I certainly enjoyed all of these things, there was a disconnect between the actual experience and the experience I portrayed online and, ultimately, I believe this disconnect has the potential to negatively impact an individual's perception of oneself and others if left unchecked long enough. Implicit in the

existence of these varied identities is the pressure that arises when one fails to adequately manage presentation and outside perception. I personally find that pressure to be unnecessary and time consuming, hence my decision to distance myself from social media, and I find it quite a relief to no longer waste my energy on virtual identity upkeep and rather focus solely on my offline identity.

Additionally integral in analyzing the interrelationship between identity and social media is the idea of critical making as conveyed in Matt Ratto's text, titled "Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life, The Information Society". Proposed by Ratto is the idea of a disconnect "between conceptual understandings of technological objects and our material experiences with them" and the text focuses heavily on the interconnectedness of social and technological engagement and the subsequent intellectual constructions and understandings of this engagement. *Is technology restrictive or emancipative?* That is, it seems, the million dollar question, though one I do not believe there is a clear answer to. Although my paper thus far likely indicates the former, it is merely the result of my focus upon what I believe to be the negative aspects of social media when said media is related to identity formation in a way that distorts and negates identities conveyed offline. Put briefly, I do not believe technology itself to be inherently restrictive or emancipative, but rather a vessel through which our own innately human tendencies are elevated and multiplied across a digital sphere. In the case of adolescence and social media, I believe this socially restrictive online energy to be all but inevitable as adolescence is, in many ways, socially restrictive. As a teenager, almost nothing seems near as important as figuring out who you are and how who you are relates to your peers and what they think. It seems odd, now, even with minimal distance

from that point in my life, but in reflecting back on that time period I know just how true this sentiment rang for myself as well as most of my peers.

References

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