Adolescent girls are constantly striving to identify themselves. We want to be able to label our emotions in order to apply them to situations. We want to be able to envision our futures and provide explanations for all of girlhood's events. We want to know how to present ourselves to the world in order to be the right amount of everything: "Be sexy but not too sexy, cool but not too cool, care but don't care too much" (*Living in a Teenage Dream: Kelly Mcnutt, Kitty Pryde, and Art's New Teen-Girl Aesthetic*, Sophie Weiner). Being part of an era so consumed with technology, we are well aware that we are being watched. Online social networks enable a high level of exposure that is not evident in a face-to-face interaction. When I meet someone new **in real life**, I will sometimes look them up on social media afterward to see what their "personality" is like. The way others perceive us is very important because it provides a base for social status (something that is very relevant to teenage life). We want our adolescent lives to serve as perfect reflections of the teenage dream.

Sometimes I find myself writing in my journal asking myself, "Is this real or am I just putting on a face for you?" This is something that writers and artists have coined, "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic"(*The Teen Girl Tumblr Aesthetic*, Alicia Eler and Kate Durbin*)*. This phrase refers to the dramatic and gloomy moments of what we consider "growing up." Crushes, gossip, the loss of virginity, and all the emotional moments of girlhood; "American pop culture idealizes the adolescent experience, recreating it through nostalgia, hypersexualized female bodies and fleeting, sugary feelings" (*The Teen Girl Tumblr Aesthetic*, Alicia Eler and Kate Durbin*)*. We wait patiently to encounter this magical youth but for most of us it never comes. The aesthetic is, in fact, just an aesthetic and not a truthful way of living: in the end, it is simply a visual impression rather than a reality. We go through life flooding our heads with these fuzzy scenarios that the media tells us we should be experiencing to such an extent that our imaginations begin to seem real. We start to appropriate qualities from this fairy-tale persona. We think that because we are supposed to be sad about boys we are, in truth, sad about boys. There is no one to blame for this other than Western Internet culture. Online social networks rely on their users to establish their own identities through their sites. We use this as a tool to differentiate ourselves from others. Teenage girls feel the need to express themselves in the most individual and unique way possible. This act of differentiation can often lead to a falsehood. We want to believe that life has the potential to be beautiful in some way, so we romanticize it to make it beautiful even if it is not actually real. This sought-after aesthetic can become a life choice. It is an essential component to the presence of teenage girls on social media.

"For fellow internet wunderkind Bebe Zeva the decision to start blogging wasn't about keeping record so much as it was self-invention" (*What-its-Like-to-Be-Tumblr-Famous*, Johannah King-Slutzky). We use this aesthetic to craft personas and to showcase them to the rest of the community. This concept of social media being used as a branding of someone's identity is often deemed detrimental, but is it actually negative? If these false personas bring us a sense of joy and satisfaction, then where is the harm? Being perceived as you'd like to be can be a great source of happiness. Social media could evidently serve as a powerful and successful method of self-expression, though it is important that users remember not to take other's profiles to heart. We can't compare ourselves to the electronic performances of our peers which are based on "a single story" (*The Danger of A Single Story*, Ted talk) but we can certainly still produce them ourselves. This is not to say that I think one's self worth should be based on how many followers they have on Instagram, but I don't think there is any shame in wanting to romanticize yourself and share that identity with others. Our desire to curate perfect versions of ourselves via the Internet is, in actuality, a very effective way of articulating ourselves.

I asked several female Oxbow students if posting on social media brought them pleasure and I received a variety of responses. The results were about fifty-fifty. I noticed that the majority of people who said that it brought them pleasure said that it was because they genuinely liked the things they were posting. It makes them happy to gain acceptance from their peers for posts that they feel they identify with. The people who said it didn't bring them pleasure said it was because they felt obligated to post on social media so much so that it became a chore rather than an act of creative expression. They felt like they needed to post in order to tell the world that they exist. They felt confined to certain posting rules such as, "don't post two times a day, or if you do, make sure you space it out by at least 4 hours." I came to the conclusion, with the influence of myself and my peers, that different social media sites permit a different level of expression, thus perpetuating different feelings from its users. "Individualism and self-focus are evident in the vast marketplace of apps, which gives youth endless opportunity to personalize their digital experience according to their (at least seemingly) distinct combination of interests, habits, and social connections" (Davis and Gardner, 72). I created a scale for myself based on the most common social media used among girls. From least intimate to most intimate, it reads:

1. Facebook
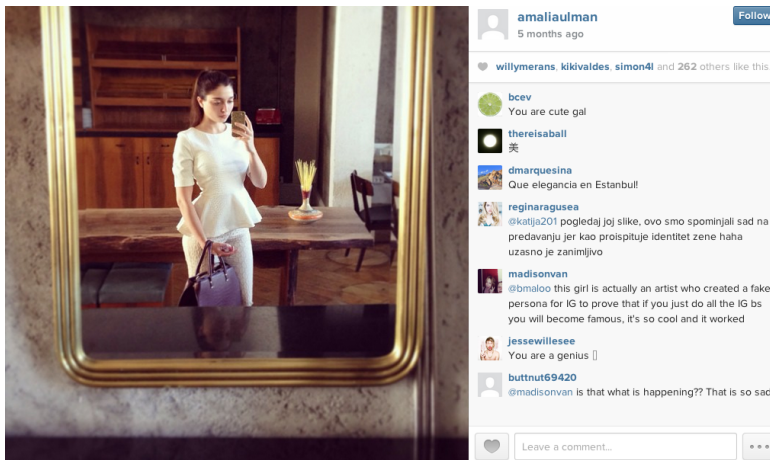2. Twitter
3. Instagram
4. Tumblr

Facebook and twitter seem to cause the user the most stress. This is because they are larger networks. Usually, one has more Facebook friends than Instagram followers. These networks feel more public and in many cases they are. On Facebook you are friends with everyone you know whereas on Tumblr you only follow the people whose blogs you admire.

The four networks allow you to manipulate your persona in a variety of ways. For instance, Facebook has a very specific layout. It gives you the ability to know a person on the most basic level. You can see where they live, where they go to school, what their friends are like, and maybe what some of their most general interests are. Teenager, Molly, states in an interview, "On Facebook people are more concerned with making it look like they are living than actually living" (Davis and Gardner, 63). It serves as a very superficial method of connection where people can confirm their existence in the community. Twitter allows you to experience someone's tone but only to the extent of which they want you to. On Instagram there are only so many filters that allow someone to see you in a different way. You are judged by your subject matter- what you think is important or cool enough for the rest of the world to see. Tumblr allows you to do the same, but to a more controlled group of people. By this I mean that, unless you are Tumblr famous, you have the security of knowing that not everyone is looking at your Tumblr. I suppose this is just an act of modesty, but it is definitely easier to find someone on Facebook using their name than it would be to find someone on Tumblr where you would have to know their URL address. Therefore, making the network more exclusive, allowing teenagers to give away more extreme information about themselves. This is not to say that the information is more scandalous on Tumblr, even though sometimes it is, but it is simply less customary. However, this characteristic of Tumblr and other, more free, forms of social media becomes questionable when the information girls are giving away online is, in a quest for individuality, even more generic. So much so that it is possesses its own aesthetic.

Psychologists and technology specialists often fear the usage of social media among teens. "By turning everything into a joke, you risk nothing because they (teenagers) make nothing of themselves vulnerable" (Davis and Gardner, 105). They think that it destroys

authenticity, and on some levels it does. You don't experience someone's personality in the same way as you would in a physical interaction. It is commonly said that teenagers lack the ability to communicate verbally and they can only function properly through the artificial barrier of a computer screen, but is this always the case? Certain networks allow less room for freedom and more room for oppression, but others provide teenage girls with a sense of empowerment, even if that means over-romanticizing your life to the extent that you may be living a lie.

Having this kind of control over the way people perceive you allows you to create "a healthy identity- a multifaceted but ultimately coherent sense of self that is personally satisfying while at the same time being recognized by the surrounding community" (Davis and Gardner, 66). Personally, I know how pleasing it can be to get a lot of recognition for content that I created. It gives me a momentary sense of self-worth and lets me know that people see what I am doing and think I'm doing it well. I don't think we should completely rely on social media, but why not use the Internet as a way to create better versions of ourselves if we can?

Excellences and Perfections

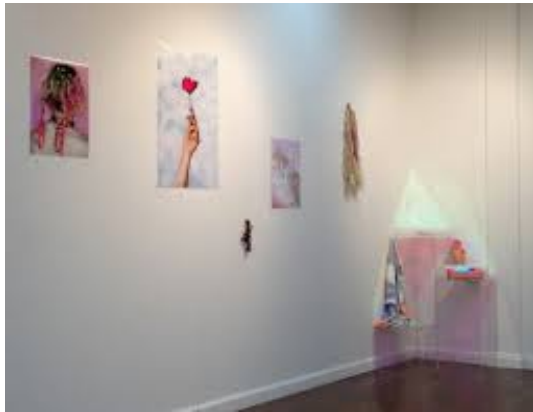Artist Amalia Ulman, created a fake Instagram account where she posted about the life of a "beautiful but unremarkable twenty-something" American woman (Instagram Art is A Joke, And It's On You, Niamah Mclntyre). Her followers immediately fell in love with the account, some very infuriated with the news of her non-existence. She refers to her presence as a performance art piece called, *"Excellences and Perfections."* Amalia's work comments on how we use social media to identify ourselves. By doing this, we are essentially branding ourselves based on qualities and interests. Amalia's posts consisted of mirror selfies, inspirational hashtags, and fitness photos. We create a type of person for the world to see so that when someone else thinks of you they will think of your type rather than who you are. *The App Generation* states that (On app appearance), "One could argue that the icon serves less to signify the purpose of an app and more to represent a particular brand and the lifestyle, values, and general cache associated with it. In other words, part of an app's appeal lies in its external representation rather than its internal functionality" (Davis and Gardner, 72). The same concept ultimately applies to a persons social media profile. By posting about yourself online you are creating a foundation for how you want your followers to perceive you. The foundation is based on surface level things that may not apply to what you do in your real life. Amalia now has 73,500 people following her Instagram account. Her stereotypical young and cheerful persona is directly parallel to the overly romantic "teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic" performed by my generation on social media. The aesthetic has become a brand. But this branding is just a "shared fantasy" (*Living in a Teenage Dream: Kelly Mcnutt, Kitty Pryde, and Art's New Teen-Girl Aesthetic*, Sophie Weiner). We are living vicariously through the stories we create in our minds about adolescence rather than just living

true adolescence. Our social media profiles reflect this image precisely. However, telling a false story is not all bad.

Brooklyn artist Kelly Mcnutt, exhibits this theme of the teenage dream and its positive effect on girls in her exhibition titled *Beauty Now 2000*. Her pieces consist of videos, photos, and

Beauty Now 2000

zines that portray teenage girls interacting with beauty tools as to comment on the stereotype associated with the adolescent experience. Her work is an honest reflection of the aesthetic young girls are appropriating on social media. "One image that stood out showed a nail art-embellished hand holding a hot-pink rose against a cloudy sky" (*Living in a Teenage Dream: Kelly Mcnutt, Kitty Pryde, and Art's New Teen-Girl Aesthetic*, Sophie Weiner). Although Mcnutt does not consider herself to be part of the romantic social media movement, she recognizes its existence and its powerful impact on young girls. "One of the most encouraging parts of this…is how it's helping to destroy the longstanding cultural view of teenage girls as worthless in every way but as objects of scorn or sexualization" (*Living in a Teenage Dream: Kelly Mcnutt, Kitty Pryde, and Art's New Teen-Girl Aesthetic*, Sophie Weiner). The teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic is allowing girls to take control of their narratives and recognize their value as young women.

Artists like Mcnutt have the ability to showcase the presence of the Teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic to the world through their work. Mcnutt is an active artist. It is her responsibility to bring awareness to social issues and project them effectively. With her work, she is showing that young girls are not just girls who care about boys and looking pretty. She is teaching us a way to empower ourselves while embracing the stigma placed on girls: that we should be light, playful, and pretty. By creating art that embodies this aesthetic, she is commenting on the power of girls. We are more than just personas. We are deep individuals with real thoughts and dimensions.

Mcnutt is not the only artist bringing attention to this movement. Will Cotton, known for his paintings of girls and candy, created something similar in the form of an image for singer Katy Perry's, *California Gurls* album cover, released in 2010. The pale pink fluff and

provocative positioning of Perry's body emphasize the same feeling of female youth nostalgia described in the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic. Cotton admits to the popularity this image has brought him in American pop culture. He said in an interview with *Hyperallergic* Online Magazine, "It's a totally different scale. The video had 100 million hits on YouTube. That's just way beyond art-world scale. And now, I can get an email from a 12-year-old girl in Brazil who knows my imagery because of the Katy Perry album cover and video" (*Living in a Teenage Dream: Kelly Mcnutt, Kitty Pryde, and Art's New Teen-Girl Aesthetic*, Sophie Weiner). Young girls truly are excited by this aesthetic. His piece establishes the connection between the teen-girl identity quest and the Internet. Teenagers are in the midst of

California Gurls Album Cover

developing themselves, much of which takes place online. We rely on our online personas as a way of showcasing our identities to the world. Like Mcnutt, Cotton knows that he is bringing attention to the aesthetic with his art. With this spotlight he has the ability to inform girls about their true potential as human beings.

The narratives we create for ourselves are more than just facades. We use them as tools to express ourselves and discover our worth. I am living evidence of this aesthetic and I can say that it has had a great impact on my life. The Internet has opened me up to new communities of artists and unique tastes in mediums I never thought I could find beautiful. The Internet has also brought several social issues to my attention. Without my presence on social media, I wouldn't have had as strong of an interest in fashion, art, or feminism. The internet presents issues from a different perspective that prompts me to reflect and question my own thoughts, as the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic has taught me how to be a feminist while still embracing certain "girly" characteristics of femininity. While detractors have said that the Internet has had a negative influence on teenagers, forcing them to abandon traditional methods of communication, I speak on my own behalf when I say that it has helped me pinpoint my interests and explore them to a fuller potential.

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