

My process began with exploring the difference between how I present myself online and how I present myself in real life. I realized that I edited the image of myself that I presented online in order to be better liked. Masking my true self caused me to get lost in my various identities, and I used this experience as inspiration for my final project.

My work became both a performance piece and a social experiment. I created an alternate identity that existed solely online. I named her Yvette, my goal for Yvette was to turn her into a social media icon. Ideally, her followers would idolize her. At the end of the experiment, I would reveal that her identity was in fact false, in the hopes of showing that any “internet celebrity” is really just another human being.

I chose Instagram as Yvette’s only social media platform, giving her a sense of exclusivity. I edited Yvette into photos at high profile events, and photos with other Internet celebrities to confirm her status. I even edited her body to conform to western beauty standards, and she began to gain quite a following.

This performance work really aimed to intrigue young girls like myself, who can get caught up in the world of online fame, and show them that a lot of what they see on social media is fake. This way, they can stop comparing their own lives to the manicured, photo-shopped, “perfect” lives that appear online. My project helped me realize that living in faux-luxury for social media was surprisingly boring, and my real life is pretty great.

Ella S.

It seems somewhat obvious that the Internet has become a tool for teenagers in the formation of their identities. Today's youth are creating online profiles at ages as young as ten years old, and I aim to analyze how their involvement in the online world contributes the development of their authentic selves, and whether their engagement with social media at such a young age benefits them or hurts them in the long run.

Social media can have one of two effects in the formation of identity. The first is that it causes a sense of ease for teenagers, allowing them to "try on" multiple personas and get a feel for whom they truly are. The second is that social media clouds a teenager's true identity, leading them to become caught up in the world of their *virtual selves*. With this paper, I hope to showcase both how positive the influence of social media can be for teenagers as well as how problematic it can be. To do so, I am going to begin by telling a story about a girl I know.

This story takes place during a girl's second year of high school. This girl, our protagonist, we can call her "Yvette," had absolutely no friends. She had spent her entire freshman year under the wing of her best friend and role model, Katie Draisen, who, later in the year, ended up transferring to a school that could better handle her. You see, Katie was experienced and opinionated, and everything that she did was extremely inspiring and incredible, but she was also a problematic "party girl." As a result, Yvette was at a loss. She had spent so long admiring Katie, that when she left, Yvette didn't know what to do with herself. She had no one to talk to, not even her parents were ever around.

She went to school for seven hours each day, going from class to class, no one spoke to her. She went home at the end of the day, and got no attention from her seemingly always-busy parents. She locked herself in her room for hours and hours, just surfing the Internet. She felt no connection to the social groups at school, so instead, she went online. Through Instagram, Tumblr, and YouTube, she found a community that she wanted to be a part of. This community consisted of tall, skinny girls with big doe eyes that dressed effortlessly cool and posted photos of themselves smoking and making art. She wanted to be friends with those girls, and to do so she had to be like them.

She bleached her beautiful long brown hair to blonde, and cut it five inches shorter. She started carrying a camera everywhere with her, snapping photos she planned on posting. She had a college boy she knew buy cigarettes for her, and although she didn't enjoy smoking them, she would occasionally light one, smoke a little; all in order get a few good photos. In a matter of a few days, she had a new wardrobe, new hair, and a new identity.

She created new social media accounts where she could secretly showcase the new her. She stopped people in the street and made them take pictures of her outfits. She spent money on expensive food, not to eat it, but just to take Instagram photos. She smoked for two reasons: to look cool, and to kill her appetite. She was taking in half of the calories she was supposed to each day, losing weight at a rapid pace.

All of this was happening, and no one knew. She acted the same at home; her parents didn't bring up her change in appearance. They assumed she was fine. It was like she was balancing a double life - acting like a normal teen at home, and then going to school and being someone completely different. She couldn't believe that no one seemed to care about this monumental shift in her identity. However, she did have some sort of support system. While she was reinventing herself and rapidly producing content for her many social media profiles, she had begun to gain quite a following. In the matter of two months, her new Instagram went from having two followers to 3000 followers; and her Tumblr, which she had started in middle school, responded well to her change, gaining over 14,000 new followers. She was proud of what she

was doing. Well aware that if she gained enough followers, she knew she could easily be taken seriously by her online role models.

Her life went on like this for more than half of the school year. And then her parents finally caught on.

It was an intervention just like in the movies. She walked home from the train, and opened her front door to see her parents sitting in the dining room looking dismayed at an empty pack of cigarettes on the table.

“What the fuck is this?” her mother asked. “Don’t think this little lifestyle change has gone unnoticed.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she replied.

“Look, you don’t eat, you don’t sleep, you look different, you’re bony, you spend all day on your phone, and apparently you smoke *cigarettes!*?” her mother exclaimed in an exasperated tone.

“I know,” she murmured to herself, feeling tears well up in her eyes.

“This isn’t healthy, we don’t like seeing our daughter like this. I don’t know who you are anymore. What the hell happened?” her dad asked.

“I don’t know...” she said again as she tried to figure out how to explain herself. “This isn’t me.” By now, tears were streaming out of her eyes, and her parents’ looks of disappointment had become looks of worry. Her mother and father got up from the table and gave her a supportive hug.

“We love you and we want to make sure you’re okay,” her mother said.

That night, as Yvette lay in bed, she deleted her online profiles. No more Instagram, no more Tumblr. She knew they weren’t healthy for her self-esteem and that they were the cause of her identity crisis.

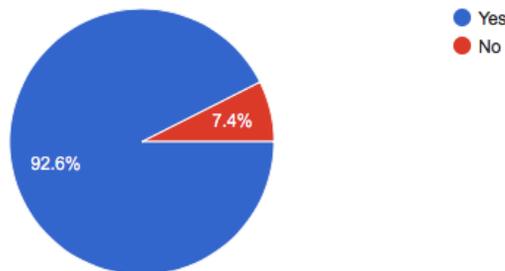
The reason I chose to tell this story is because that girl was me. In tenth grade, I had a full-blown identity crisis. After having my best and only friend transfer schools, I isolated myself. Instead of making new friends, I turned to the Internet. I found my “ideal” group of girls and became completely infatuated with them. I tried to become them. I didn’t know who I was anymore, which is why I referred to myself in the third person. It wasn’t until my parents found out and confronted me that I even realized what I was doing was so detrimental to my physical and mental health. I don’t know where I would be today if no one ever tried to help me, and for that I am so grateful for my parents.

After receiving the help I needed through both my parents and a developmental psychologist, I made the conscious decision to partake in the online world once again. But this time, I would be “the real me.” I didn’t try to present myself as someone I was not, and in that way I was authentic. I put myself into social situations at school that in turn, helped me make friends. I vowed to myself that from there on out, I would never again let myself use the Internet as a way of escaping reality, and I would only be authentic.

I conducted a survey of 54 people between the ages of 15 and 50. In this survey, I asked participants if they felt as though the Internet in part shaped who they are currently. The results were shocking. As shown below, over ninety-two percent of the responses, fifty people said that the Internet in fact did have a role in the formation of their identity. Even more interesting is that all of the people who said that the Internet had not affected their identity were older than forty. People who didn’t grow up online, weren’t influenced by it in the long run, while everyone from “the internet generation” did believe that it was a part of their growth and identity.

Do you believe that the internet, in part, has shaped who you are today?

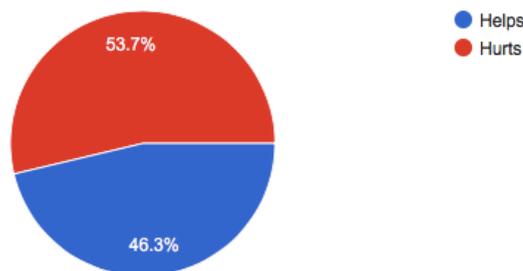
(54 responses)



I also asked if people thought social media had a positive impact or negative in one's identity development. To my surprise, the results weighed pretty evenly. In the pie chart below, it is clear that over forty-six percent of respondents had a positive outlook on social media while the rest were negative. I think that this can be translated into the fact that the Internet and social media as a whole aren't bad, but it's the way that people use them that can become out of control. If people used social media for its true purpose - connecting with others - instead of using it to show off and promote themselves, the Internet would be a much friendlier environment.

Do you think that social media helps or hurts the way teens shape their identity?

(54 responses)



One of the main problems with teens' Internet use is that there is a lack of diverse representation, leading to a sense of online conformity. People are scrolling through their news feeds and seeing the same thing over and over again, a skinny, white, well-dressed female with tanned, perfect skin, and blonde hair, or a toned muscular white man who has great hair and a killer smile. Because this kind of human is what companies portray as "ideal," people are compelled to be and look like that. To do so, they use the Internet. Katie Davis and Howard Gardner's book, "The App Generation," captures the way today's youth are using the Internet to reinvent themselves. "The identities of young people are increasingly packaged. That is, they are developed and put forth so that they convey a certain desirable image" (Davis & Gardner 63) Teenagers are complying with society's social and beauty norms. They follow these strict guidelines that say they must be and look a certain way in order to be successful, and by doing so, they are trapping themselves in ways that prevent them from reaching their potential. In the book, "Is The Internet Changing The Way I Think?" psychologist Jamshed Bharucha compares this conformity to a synchronization of human minds. "In the early days of the Internet, few predicted it would plug into our social instincts as it has. Not only has the blinding force of the

Internet changed the way we think about ourselves and the world, it has also possibly enabled an emergent form of cognition - one that occurs when individual minds are intricately synchronized” (Bharucha 287). The intertwining and understanding of the human brain is what Bharucha believes to be the force that binds all humans, and the Internet aids the process of mind synchronization.

The Internet gives everyone a similar mindset in attempt to make people think in one certain manner. This is damaging because when everyone thinks that one kind of person is beautiful, it oppresses anyone who doesn't fit those standards. Making everyone conform to the mindset of “being beautiful means being white, skinny, and rich” in the way that the Internet tends to do, simply isn't right. But not fitting into those categories can sometimes urge people to make up a virtual identity where they meet all of those standards.

People around the world are constantly creating profiles where they are completely different people. This is such a common occurrence that it has coined the name “catfishing” (Joost & Schulman). Psychologist Jim Prime writes, “social media has caused us to shift away from expressing our self-identities and toward constructing facades based on the answers to these questions, ‘How will others look at me?’ and ‘How can I ensure that others view me positively?’ The goal for many now in their use of social media becomes how they can curry acceptance, popularity, status, and, by extension, self-esteem through their profiles and postings” (Prime). What Prime writes in this article couldn't be more true. Because popular culture no longer reflects our identities but instead tells us whom we should and shouldn't be, people feel pressured to present themselves online in a way that, most times, greatly differs from who they really are. I think that one of the best examples of this, and something that occurs frequently online, is that young girls will use apps like “Airbrush” and “Facetune” to alter their appearances. Whether it's clearing up acne, changing their eye color, or even reshaping their body, these virtual tools allow people to combat their insecurities. The problem with this is that it re-enforces the beauty standards placed upon youth by media. Instead of embracing their differences, these girls are editing themselves into who they want to be or what they view as beautiful, when in reality they already are beautiful. They are losing their identities by virtually transforming themselves to the point that they don't even look like themselves.

We all want to put forth our best selves, but how far is too far? In my survey, I asked 54 people between the ages of 15 and 50, “In what ways has the Internet and more specifically, social media, affected your life?” One person said the Internet “changes the way I present myself. It is everywhere in our world, and we can't help but compare ourselves to those we see online. The Internet is an excellent place to create the most perfect version of ourselves because we have complete control of what people see. This leads to the cycle of people comparing themselves to edited, unrealistic versions of friends, celebrities, etc. and gives us unrealistic expectations we have to fill in order to feel worthy.” Seen through this perspective, it is apparent that everyone on social media is manipulated in some way. Through the use of filters, face and body enhancing apps, curated posts, and even plagiarized images, everyone online is simply trying to look better.

Despite this, social media can be positive for the young people of today. Many teens see the Internet as an outlet for the opinions they may not feel welcome sharing in real life. In fact, in my study, one of the more positive responses was, “I have so many interesting thoughts and opinions and questions that I've formed from seeing and participating in other people's discussions about interesting and complicated topics. Finding other people like me to talk about their experiences helped give me the words to understand myself.” For some people, the Internet

is an outlet for their opinions and social media gives them the opportunity to connect to people with similar views. The social aspect of the online world provides an education in the sense that it broadens people's perspectives and vocabularies, in turn, leading to a sense of self-discovery.

Social media has evolved into a platform for people who need excessive external affirmation. It has come the point where people only post a photo because they know it will get likes. They will curate their Instagrams into set "feeds" and "themes" so that they are aesthetically pleasing and attract their target audience. It is as if there is this subconscious marketing scheme users have programmed into their minds where the only goal is to get followers and likes, and to do so, they jump through all of these hoops to make their profiles stand out. In late 2015, Instagram star, Essena O'Neill, made a post about how fake social media is. She spoke about the need for validation and the obsession to be "perfect." She writes, "I've spent the majority of my teenage life being addicted to social media, social approval, social status, and my physical appearance, [social media] is contrived images and edited clips ranked against each other. It's a system based on social approval, likes, validation, views, and success in followers. It's perfectly orchestrated self-absorbed judgment" (O'Neill). Clearly, there is an epidemic of teens - young girls especially - who get wrapped up in likes and follower counts, associating these numbers with beauty and perfection. Because of this, there is absolutely no originality on social media anymore. Teens who are "thirsty" for likes and followers easily give into this online conformity and begin to lose their own identities in a way similar to Essena O'Neill.

As seen through my personal experience, I have lived through both positive and negative aspects of social media, which I am sure, is similar for many teens. Social media has completely formed the person I am currently. I spend too much time online, making videos, connecting with my viewers, and catching up with friends. I rely on the Internet for all of these things. It has given me the confidence to be authentic and be a role model for other people. However, social media has also been a huge problem in my life many times. As stated earlier, social media caused my major identity crisis last year. It has also prevented me from many opportunities. It is a huge distraction that I often find myself too caught up in. I always have to remind myself to put my phone down and concentrate on my surroundings. Social media is also damaging to my self-esteem. While I try my best to only live authentically online, I still find myself getting caught up in other people's lives, which perpetuates my own insecurities. It will never be easy to look at someone whose life seems perfect online and not compare it to my own and be disappointed.

Overall, yes, our participation in social media at the levels of today's standards plays a huge role in the formation of our identities. Whether we want to admit it or not, we are constantly striving to do and appear better. We view our insecurities as flaws and the Internet is a way to mask those "flaws." We look at Internet celebrities and we idolize them. We infatuate ourselves with these role models and leaders, which is problematic, especially for young girls. Next time you find yourself looking at an ad online, or someone's profile, and you start to feel bad about yourself, remember that most things online are fake. People edit their appearances, and put their best selves forward. People lie to look good. From my research, I learned that the Internet works in ways that can be detrimental to the identity formation of youth. This makes the Internet a dangerous place, and while there are people who use social media for good things like showcasing their talents, connecting with family and friends, or marketing their businesses, there will always be the liars and the people faking their way to success. It's of utmost importance to be careful and safe on the Internet as to not let yourself get caught up in other people's lies and lives.

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