

Generation of Social Avatars: Closing The Gap

Should I post this on Instagram? Which filter do you like better? Does this make me look cool or weird? Can you erase my pimple (in that picture) if you post it? Oh no! I've only gotten twenty-six likes in thirty minutes—should I delete the picture? Is it lame if I tweet this? Do I look hotter in this picture than she does? Is this picture too artsy to post? Should I make this my profile picture?

As a freshman in college, I hear these kinds of questions more than I should. In fact, I too have fallen victim to this type of inquiry. Twenty-first-century teenagers, equipped with hundreds of platforms for self-presentation in the palms of their hands, *obsess* over these questions and crave answers, unconfident in their own instincts. Teens *obsess* over seeming a certain “cool,” “hip,” “artsy,” “popular,” or “trendy” way on their social media platforms (the list is endless). We obsess over having the perfect self-representation and self image on our dozens of social networking sites. Why? Why do teens use their social media platforms to make their not-so-perfect lives look crowning and carefree—utopian? What happens when your Instagram doesn't reflect your actual self? Social media was created as a harmless tool for sharing one's personal life with others; yet, it allows people to strategically edit and distort their real self and life, deceptively tricking their audiences to believe a flawless façade. Today's youth— arguably the most dispersed and engaged population with these social sites—fosters incredible self-comparison and self-doubt from viewing others' “perfect” online images, and trying to manage their own. Suburban teenage parents, and elite social psychologists who conduct and analyze studies on college students and their relationships with Internet communication surprisingly praise social media; in fact, they find the communication methods the platforms allow aid self-esteem and social support among teens. Further, these individuals believe that this aspired

increased self-esteem motivates teenagers to obtain a perfect self-image online. Media professors and technology researchers, while not entirely against social media, postulate that teenagers utilize an ideal social media image for more selfish and egocentric reasons. They hypothesize that teens post on social media to self-promote, following the lead of celebrities, and to gain connectedness and popularity within their different social circles. Media professors and technology researchers' findings uncover a shadier side of social media; a side that cultivates greater self-enhancement given the improved quality of one's self-image. These academics begin to crack open the teenage mind, investigating teenagers' aims for a model online self-image; however, their observations merely explore the belief that teenagers inherently *want* a superb self-image on their social media sites. Therefore, these academics miss the broader side of the social media spectrum: today's teens don't just "want" a perfect self-image on social media for personal gain, but they *obsess* over having and maintaining one. Thus, teenagers' real identities and real lives are altered and confused by an array of filters and edits that make them appear as if they live a flawless, utopian life.

What falls short of the conversation is the compulsion teenagers have with their social media images, and how detrimental this obsession is once teens' utopian life on Instagram doesn't match up with reality. Before we delve into these obsessions, we must first acknowledge the teenager perspective to understand why these adolescents strive to maintain a positive online self-image, and why social media is crucial to their everyday life. We must analyze the outcomes of upholding social media platforms. After discussing the social media habits of today's teenagers, along with the new pressures and social norms that arise from managing a pristine social media image, we can conclude that the younger generations are developing an extreme

addiction to the act of perfect self-presentation which is blurring the lines between reality and falsehood.

Why is social media such an important part of teenage life? I interviewed one of the most socially-advanced teenagers at the College of Charleston, Isaac Greenbaum, a chirpy, New York City strolling, lox bagel loving, freshman at the college. Greenbaum thrives for all things fashion, and he is a magnet for friends. Apart from his lively offline world, Greenbaum is a social media guru—he doesn't go a week without posting on his Instagram (his number one favorite social media platform). "I like to post regularly," Greenbaum asserts, "I like to see who is liking and commenting on my pictures; I like people knowing what I'm up to; I like people seeing the fun I'm having." Greenbaum urged that beyond merely "liking" to post, it is extremely *essential* for him to post regularly, because "it's important for [his] aesthetic to look good." He stated that it makes him feel good when he gets over three-hundred likes and ten comments on his Instagram pictures. "Most people care about this stuff," Greenbaum demanded, "and when people say they don't care, I don't think that's true a lot of the time." Beyond the enjoyment of receiving likes and comments on his pictures, Greenbaum told me he couldn't go a day without using his social media; further, he claimed he would probably have an "anxiety attack" without social media in his life. Greenbaum has used Instagram for about four years now, and within this past year he has started using a "Finstagram" or "Finsta" (Fake-Instagram). A Finsta is a separate Instagram, different from a person's main Instagram, where they can "post really whatever they want," says Greenbaum. Valeriya Saftonova, a web producer for the *New York Times*, analyzes the Finsta phenomenon in her article, "On Fake Instagram, a Chance to Be Real." Saftonova describes Finstagram accounts as "intimate online spaces intended for an audience of friends, with the number of followers purposely kept in the low double digits."

Greenbaum claims his Finsta account is private allowing him to reveal funny pictures with “double chins” to a strict group of his best friends. While Greenbaum did agree that the pictures he posts on Finstagram are more in-line with his real self, he would feel utterly embarrassed if they were uploaded to his real Instagram. Because of this, Finstagram, which is made for an audience of people who are tuned into the user’s point of view, has become, “paradoxically the ‘real’ Instagram,” claims Saftonova. This made me wonder why teenagers, like Isaac, are so afraid of showing their real, un-edited, selves on their social media accounts. Greenbaum likes his Instagram to look “visually appealing” to other people: “I want people to look at my Instagram and think ‘Oh, he’s cool,’ ‘He has a fun life,’ ‘He has lots of friends,’” says Greenbaum. What would happen if Isaac’s followers thought of him as boring, uncool, and anti-social? Would his Instagram pictures change their minds? Maybe posting a selfie with a double chin, or a picture of your disappointing report card with three D’s, or a picture of your massive pile of dirty laundry isn’t “visually appealing;” further, it would not reflect you as a cool, social person living a perfect life. Maybe this is the exact reason Greenbaum, like many teens, refuses to post the funnier, more accurate, Finsta pictures of himself on his real account for his 1,311 followers to see. Maybe it would disrupt the quality his image.

This “image” that teenagers like Isaac are creating on social media is referred to as an “avatar;” a term used by many experts, such as forensic psychiatrist David Brunskill. In his scholarly article, “Social Media, Social Avatars, and the Psyche: Is Facebook Good for Us?” published in *Australasian Psychiatry* in 2013, Brunskill claims the term “avatar” has evolved into a new term, “social avatar,” which shapes the recent advances of social media. According to Brunskill, “social avatar” now incorporates the process of “self-selection of representation material” that cumulates and effectively creates a socially derived, and socially-driven composite

online image (527). In other words, today's greatest social media users—teenagers— have the opportunity to selectively chose what materials, pictures, images, posts, etc., they want to represent themselves on social media platforms, and they're almost always positive. This tendency for humans to characteristically choose favorable material to represent the self is nothing new; however, as Brunskill points out, social networking platforms allow a “previously unavailable level of personal image control and a blank screen for the projection of aspects of [one's] personal identity” (528). This is unique to my fellow teenage generation. We're growing up, trying to figure out who we are and how to establish our identities in the real world; yet, we're simultaneously submerged with social media platforms that enhance our confusion, and hinder our success at self-discovery. These platforms don't constrain teens to appear as “who they really are offline;” rather, they allow teens to be “whoever they want to be,” even if it's an unrealistic version of self. By selecting the best/favorable bits to represent the self in the creation of a social avatar, Brunskill asserts, “online image is therefore highly unlikely to match offline identity and a ‘gap’ is created,” with an obvious potential to contribute to internal conflict and lead to emotional distress in the long run.

This unsettling “gap” in identity can also be attributed to “the online disinhibition effect,” says psychology professor John Suler in his article, “The Online Disinhibition Effect,” from *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, and “Identity Management in Cyberspace,” from the *Journal Of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*. The online disinhibition effect is essentially the idea that people split or dissociate online fiction from offline fact, often jeopardizing one's identity. Given social media's varying mechanisms of self-presentation, this “power to alter oneself often interlocks with dissociation and valence;” further, claims Suler, “hidden positive and negative parts of oneself may seek expression in an imaginary identity that comes to life online.” This “imaginary

identity” coincides with Brunskill's idea of a social avatar. However, Suler doesn't completely blame the unconscious human mind for self-alteration online. “Striving in cyberspace to be a ‘better’ person also requires at least some conscious awareness—a premeditated vision of where one is headed,” Suler suggests. In other words, yes, social media does give people the chance to express and explore facets of their identity that they do not express in their face-to-face world, but it's almost always intentional. People can feel shame, guilt, fear, anxiety, or hatred about some aspect of their identities, while accepting and appreciating other aspects; Suler urges, “people also *strive* to attain new, idealized ways of being.” Similar to Brunskill, Suler acknowledges that people have the ability to use their social media platforms to exercise positive characteristics or to develop new ones; and, through the O.D. effect, Suler further recognizes the threat this ability launches on users' identities. To fill Brunskill's “gap” between online image and offline identity, Suler offers a general solution called the Integration Principle: “Bringing together the various components of online and offline identity into one balanced, harmonious whole,” which Suler believes may be the hallmark of mental health. But when it comes to social media platforms today, this solution seems unachievable and outdated. Today's teenagers aren't required to coincide their online and offline selves; in fact, social media is the biggest supporter of controlled self-presentation. If parts of one's identity— characteristics of one's self or life — aren't favorable, then social media is a place where they don't have to exist. The whole purpose of a Finstagram is for virtually concealing unlikeable, embarrassing parts of one's self—not for “bringing [them] together” with one's visually appealing parts of self, as Suler suggests. While Suler's obsolete integration principle may be inept, he's correct that without addressing the troubling “gap” issue, mental health in teenagers will crumble.

Brunskill stresses that the “gap”—division between online image and offline identity—

creates tragic emotional states within teenage users: “by inviting comparisons with the projected/inflated/exaggerated lifestyles of others, there is clearly a potential for an unhelpful sense of dissatisfaction to result” (531). This artificial comparison of self-image and self-presentation links to immense jealousy, envy and depression among teens; further, it fuels psychological pressures such as “the narcissistic pressure to conform (everyone else’s virtual identity is above average also)” (531). These pressures to conform, encourage teenagers to “keep up” with everyone else’s evolving social avatars, continually enhancing one’s own image on social media. Thus, what emerges is a revolving cycle of increased competition and harmful, unlimited mindsets.

These pressures to conform go hand-in-hand with the pressures to *perform* on social media platforms. Consider the recent story of Essena O’Neil, a nineteen-year-old Australian who, with more than eight-hundred followers, along with myriad of modeling contracts, offers from major agencies, and an endless lineup of sponsors, was considered an Instagram star before she deleted her account. O’Neil, the exceptionally posed, dirty-blond, breathtaking bikini babe made a career of posting dreamy photos of herself in perfect outfit, perfect makeup, with the perfect backdrop. After recently quitting Instagram, Ms. O’Neill quickly developed the website *Let’s Be Game Changers* to stand against the “pressure to perform that seems integral to the social media experience” (Safranova). Ms. O’Neil writes on her website: “I made myself into a machine that gave others what they wanted from me, never knowing or valuing my true self. I was lost to expectations, pressures and a fearful desire to be accepted.” Ms. O’Neil’s case may seem extreme, but it’s not far off from the majority of today’s teenagers who believe that their main Instagram accounts “do not present fully authentic versions of themselves,” as Safranova claims. In Katie Fagan’s article, “Split Image,” on *ESPN*, she writes about Madison Holleran, a

gorgeous, lively, 19-year-old Penn State track runner, who jumped off the ninth-level of parking garage in January of 2014. An hour before Madison took her life, she posted a breathtaking image of the downtown Philadelphia skyline on Instagram. The life Madison projected on her Instagram feed was filled with shots that seemed to confirm everyone's expectations: "Of course she was loving her first year of college. Of course she enjoyed running" (Fagan). Madison "seemed acutely aware" that the life she curated on Instagram was notably different from the one she was actually living; yet, "she could not apply that same logic when she looked at the projected lives of others" (Fagan). Madison and O'Neil, couldn't bare the pressures of trying to live up to their Instagram personas any longer; further, both of their stories exemplify the haunting power of social media platforms to facilitate facades. Madison and O'Neil bring awareness to the huge dangers regarding social media networks which enable teenagers to live multiple different lives and create pressures among teens to conform to a perfect self-image online.

So why don't teenagers just quit social media already? It's arguable that the psychological pressures teenagers feel to conform, these pressures to create an idealistic self-image on social media networks, can simultaneously be an obsession for many teenagers. As Greenbaum said earlier, he not only wants people to think he's a cool person who lives an exciting life, but he also would have great anxiety if he couldn't use social media to fulfill these desires. Danah Boyd, a principle researcher at Microsoft Research, delves into the topic of teenage technology addiction in her book *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. Boyd claims that unlike most compulsions, teens are not less social when they engage deeply with social media; on the contrary, their participation in social media is typically highly social. Listening to teens talk about social media reveals an interest not in the features of their

computers, smart phones, or even particular social media sites, “but in each other,” Boyd asserts (80). Boyd makes a complicated case: that most teens aren’t addicted to actual social media sites, “they’re addicted to each other” (80). While Boyd hopes to minimize the criticism of social media, her argument is blundered. If, in fact, social media sites allow users to share perfected self-presentations and become artificial “social avatars,” then teenagers aren’t addicted to “each other” at all. Rather, teenagers are addicted to, and obsessed with, the unrealistic, over-edited, online avatars that scroll across their feeds. Even if teenagers may not have legitimate addictions to the platforms as they would with drugs for instance, it is evident, as Boyd makes clear, that “socializing online is rewiring teens’ brains” (93). Therefore, it’s highly likely that new addictions to, or obsessions with, mastering an ideal self-presentation are emerging within today’s teenagers. On Essena O’Neil’s website under the heading “I Don’t Like This Game,” she passionately writes about her old social media use, and she advocates for change. Without realizing it, “I’ve spent majority of my teenage life being addicted to social media, social approval, social status and my physical appearance,” O’Neil admits. O’Neil labels social media platforms as systems “based on social approval, likes, validation in views, success in followers;” further, O’Neil claims, she “was consumed by it.” Experts agree that social networking websites have emerged as another potentially addictive technology, which, similar to other addiction-prone internet systems, fills social voids in people's lives and produces ongoing thrills.

Ofir Turel, a professor of information systems and decision sciences at the College of Business and Economics at California State University, and Alexander Serenko, an associate professor of management information systems in the Faculty of Business Administration at Lakehead University, conduct several studies regarding the enjoyment of information systems and the adverse outcomes, such as technology-addiction, in their article, “The Benefits and

Dangers of Enjoyment with Social Networking Websites.” Turel and Serkeno compare three types of technology addiction, including social media websites (SNW), with the four core symptoms of technology addiction: conflict (i.e., the activity interferes with other tasks); withdrawal (i.e., negative emotions arise if the activity cannot be conducted); relapse and reinstatement (i.e., inability to voluntarily reduce the activity); and salience (i.e., the activity dominates thoughts and behaviors). Ultimately, these individuals find that SNW are equally, if not more, addictive than other information systems. Turel and Serkeno collect data through an online-questionnaire administered to SNW users who were taking a sophomore year marketing class at a large American business school; participant ages ranged from 19-40 years, with an average of 23 years. Through their study, perceived enjoyment [on SNW] was found to be the key antecedent of habit: “when the level of habitual use increases, some users may start presenting core technology addiction symptoms.” Not surprisingly, “we see an increasing number of SNW users who may be classified as addicted or dependent,” deduces Turel and Serenko. At the same time, excessive habitual interaction with SNW, they infer, “may be psychologically, physiologically, and socially harmful.” Even more interesting, Turel and Serkeno conclude that younger users are more prone to develop SNW habits, which can increase their levels of addiction through “neural sensitization” and diminishing the attention they pay to potential long-term harms. Much of this evidence supports the implication that the users’ expectation of positive rewards, or the positive reinforcement they’ve received from using social media in the past, develops compulsive behavioral patterns. It then makes sense that if a user posted a flattering picture of themselves and received numerous positive comments and likes (positive reinforcement), then they would be driven to repeat this behavior; ultimately, desiring greater positive reinforcement. However, to fulfill this desire, the user would need to obtain a

higher-quality photo; and further, create a better self-image. Suddenly, this user's desire or need for positive reinforcement through their social media platforms provokes an obsession with perfecting their self-presentation.

What happens when this obsession with obtaining an ideal self-presentation ultimately creates a "gap" between your online image and offline identity? Turel and Serkeno said that the habitual abilities of social networking sites can lead to addiction which can cause tremendous psychological, physiological, and social harm. In Brunskill's article, "The Dangers of Social Media for the Psyche," he acknowledges that social media users give more thought to their choice of "social avatar" material, and he believes this can facilitate negative psychological transformations such as identity shifts, compartmentalization of personality, depression, envy, narcissism, etc. However, I think it's too early to tell. It's too early to find an answer.

Stay with me as I digress for a moment to a monumental situation that just recently occurred in China. Last month, many Chinese civilians celebrated the Communist Party decision, after more than three decades of the one-child policy, to allow married couples to have two children. But for some of the more one hundred fifty million young people who grew up as only children, the announcement has reawakened feelings of isolation and regret. In a *New York Times* article, "End of China's One-Child Policy Stings Its 'Loneliest Generation,'" many individuals from "the loneliest generation," their new nickname coined by the Chinese media, feel they were sacrificed in a political-mistake, a failed experiment. While outsiders claim "the loneliest generation" is one of the most privileged, lavished, blessed generations in Chinese history, the reality says differently: the majority of these mid-thirty-year-olds are miserable, ignorant of family-love, pessimistic, isolated and exceedingly self-centered. I'm confident that thirty years ago Chinese policy-makers and officials believed this only-child experiment would be a total

success in the future. Likely they didn't know what outcome to expect, but remained optimistic. Today, three decades later, these individuals are shaking their heads with remorse and guilt; knowing now, *after the fact*, the dangerous outcomes of such a condensed, mechanical generation.

American history has never seen a generation grow up like today's youth: engulfed in artificial, self-promoting social networking platforms. American history has never experienced a generation of smartphone-obsessed young millennials. Just like the Chinese officials thirty years ago, American society today has no understanding of how these modern social media networks will shape our youth as they approach adulthood. And sadly, I fear that, today's adolescents will suffer similar consequences to "the loneliest generation" such as wrecked mental health and damaged wellbeing. I fear that I, as with many concerned experts and professionals, will shake our heads too in remorse and guilt. I fear that we too are waiting until *after the fact* to expose the damages social media has on our psyche and identity. I don't want this for my generation. I don't want my generation, thirty years from now, to be known as the "social media avatars," or the "social media obsessed," or the "self-promoting narcissists." While we don't have all of the answers regarding social media, we need be aware of its ugly potential, and proceed with caution.

I'm certainly aware that the majority of my generation is successfully adapting to these new technological tools, and utilizing them to build communication networks and knowledge; I'm not shaming this. I'm not saying we need to all band together and delete our Facebook or Instagram accounts like Essena O'Neill. What I hope is to spark some deeper inquiry about *how* we teenagers interact with this transforming technology amidst our fingertips; *how* we obsess over our own and others' social avatars that scroll across our phone screens. If we grow up

continuously adapting our lives to fit on our small phone screens, continuously perfecting our online image for fake social media platforms, what's at risk? I'm afraid what's at risk is not only our personal identities and our understanding of reality, but maybe identity and reality themselves. If we place all of our importance and self-worth on these artificial and intangible social networking sites, we lose ourselves. We lose the ability to be present in our offline lives. We jeopardize face-to-face relationships. We forget how to actively experience and engage in life's most precious moments, because we're too focused on our Twitter and Facebook feeds. We will forget what real life looks and feels like; the life that only our physical selves, not our smart phones, can capture. Ultimately, I fear the greatest risk of long-term social media dependency is the inability to value life or live meaningfully. But I guess we will just have to wait and see.

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