

“I’m Cooler on Instagram”: The Social Disconnect Between Real and Reality

According to a recent study by Common Sense Media, the average teen spends a whopping nine hours on “entertainment media” every single day, a significantly larger amount of time than the average seven hours that they spend sleeping (“Landmark Report: U.S. Teens Use an Average of Nine Hours of Media Per Day, Tweens Use Six Hours” 1). If this statistic holds to be true, it means that today's teenagers are spending approximately 53% of their awake time scrolling through Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, dedicating their days to engaging with others online instead of in real life. In today's digital landscape, this statistic might not seem surprising to some—after all, it seems the whole world is online now. We use social platforms and mass media as a way to stay updated on the news, talk and share with friends, network with colleagues, express our creativity, and even meet potential partners. While the coming of the digital age is often celebrated due to the enhanced ability it has provided to save time and connect to people from all around the world, it is the disadvantages that have caused the biggest change in modern life. The advent of social media over the past few years has not only changed the world but the people in it, most notably teens who are by far the most active social media users. The average teen's excessive use of social media apps and websites tends to create a divide between true self and online self, a divide that can lead to serious emotional, physical, and psychological repercussions.

A notable personification of this divide is Essena O'Neill, an 18 year old model who accumulated over 800,000 Instagram followers by posting “fitspo” photos and other images that captured a seemingly perfect life, only to become fed up with the disingenuousness of online presentation. O'Neill deleted thousands of posts and edited the captions of remaining ones to reflect what was really going on when they were taken, including painstakingly real statistics about how many shots it took to achieve the perfect one and her motivations behind posting certain images. In *The New York Times* article “Essena O'Neill, Instagram Star, Recaptions Her Life”, one of the many major

publication articles written about O'Neill following her departure from social media, author Jonah Bromwich tackles the modern-day phenomenon of social media stardom and its often negative effects on both personal and public bases. Although mostly factual, Bromwich's piece also brings in opinions from Nathan Jurgenson, a researcher at Snapchat who says “. . . intentional construction of our identities is not an activity unique to the online world. Identity performativity isn't new, but how we do it is new” (Bromwich 2-3). As Jurgenson points out, the idea of constructing a certain identity and performing with it is not revolutionary, but the medium through which we now curate ourselves and share this edited version has changed drastically. Even within the Instagram app itself, users must first pass through a series of editing options before being able to post a photo. It is these subtle signs that support an online culture where real isn't good enough—if a photo has to be edited before it can be shared with the world, it must mean that our personalities must be edited too.

By spotlighting O'Neill's unique situation and willingness to be a self-appointed voice of the Internet generation, Bromwich presents readers with a tangible grasp on the differences between actual reality and virtual reality. The Essena on Instagram is presented as a life-size Barbie, a smiling embodiment of health and happiness whose hair, makeup, and outfits are always pristinely applied and put together. That portrayal is a far cry from the raw, unedited Essena we see in her makeup-free YouTube videos where she laments the destructive effects of social media. The comparison of the two brings to mind an inevitable question: which is real? In O'Neill's case, we know that her YouTube self is the realer of the two, but not many people are as candid or willing to own up to the discrepancies between real and what is passed off as real online. Aside from just editing oneself for social purposes, this idea of the enhanced self has become so prevalent in real life that the phrase “seeing is believing” seems to no longer be of merit.

A common theme that has emerged throughout the social media revolution is the idea of constant evaluation: evaluation of ourselves, evaluation of others, and, most relevant in terms of this essay, evaluation of how we stack up in comparison to others. As Matthew Crawford states in *The*

World Beyond Your Head, “One thing that distinguishes human beings from the other animals is that we are evaluative creatures. We can take a critical stance toward our own activities, and aspire to direct ourselves . . . we can also form a second-order desire, 'a desire for desire', when we entertain some picture of the sort of person we would *like* to be . . .” (Crawford 19). In this section of his book, Crawford addresses the idea that we have a constant inner edit going on that is formed in response to how we would like to be viewed. By directing ourselves, we give ourselves the upper hand when it comes to how we are perceived. Choosing to showcase certain aspects of our personality and hide others allows us to present our “best” self, a self that might be more towards who we would eventually like to be than to who we currently are. In her article for *The Huffington Post* titled “The Social Media Effect: Are You Really Who You Portray Online?”, RKG Marketing Solutions CEO R. Kay Green writes:

“ . . . Your 'real self' is what you are—your attributes, your characteristics, and your personality. Your 'ideal self' is what you feel you should be, much of it due to societal and environmental influences. From a societal standpoint, many of us are driven by competition, achievement, and status; hence, the creation and portrayal of our ideal selves.

Consider the fact that on social media sites we consider our profiles to be presentations of who we are. Therefore, through interaction with the social medium, the real and ideal selves intersect: and the ideal self is at least partially actualized. In essence, our online selves represent our ideals and eliminate many of our other real components.” (Green 1)

Green makes a powerful point here about our motivations behind cultivating an “ideal” self and how that ideal self relates to our “real” self. Presenting ourselves through online channels makes it easier to eliminate anything we don't wish to share; we can show our audience a highlight reel that omits our least favorite aspects of ourselves and creates an illusion of effortless ease and perfection.

Consequently, this constant switch between hopeful self and actual self can become confusing and debilitating. Editing oneself so much is almost like lying—if we do it enough, we start to believe it's

the reality.

Further in her article, Green makes another thought-inducing observation, asking “Are we really presenting who we are or are we presenting a hyper-idealistic version of ourselves? It has been argued that the social media effect creates a false sense of self and self-esteem through the use of likes, fans, comments, posts, etc.” (Green 1). With just these two lines, Green brings an integral aspect of the social experience into view: the interaction. Once our posts are edited to perfection, they then become available for all of our followers or friends to see (depending on the platform). The engagement rate of a post can contribute to the user's mood to an almost embarrassing degree. I have noticed, and experienced firsthand, the joy that comes when a post rapidly receives a ton of likes and positive comments and the dismay and self-doubt that takes over when a picture, tweet, or status doesn't receive the amount of love I had been expecting. The fact that we allow ourselves to be influenced by social statistics is a testament to how vital our social media presence is to our self-worth. Social platforms have ingrained themselves so deeply in our psyche that they have become a part of us, forming the correlation that a post that is well-received means that we ourselves are well-received. To some extent, the degree of how likable we are depends on how “like”-able we are to our followers and friends.

As a millennial myself, my personal experience with the topic of the social media self has helped me to keep my finger on the pulse of the social movement. I am part of the generation that has experienced life both with and without social media. My peers and I are the target audience, the most engaged users, the face of the social media phenomenon. We were the early adopters, the first to experiment with Instagram filters and Snapchat stories, the ones who have expanded the social media circle by teaching our parents and siblings how to use it. As a part of this group, I am able to experience the break between real and idealized self firsthand. Am I the exact same character online as I am in person? Of course not. Like almost everyone my age, my online self shows the dimension of my personality that I want the world to see, the side that only does cool things and never seems to have a bad day.

The complicated world of millennial media isn't something that can be easily explained. For whatever reasons, it has evolved into a space where people don't always feel free to be themselves, to show who they truly are or what their life is actually like. As Green mentioned in her *Huffington Post* article, the competitive nature of humans is most likely one of the main motivating factors behind trying to appear better, cooler, and more popular online.

With the swirl of controversy that is constantly surrounding social media, it can be difficult to decipher whether social platforms are making our world a better, more connected place or contributing to our demise. The only way to accurately answer this is to say there is no clear answer. Is social media inherently bad or good? I think that depends on how we use and relate to it. One thing that can be said for certain and be backed up by both research and personal experience is that social media is most often not an accurate depiction of real life. The nature of online engagement is wildly different than actual person-to-person engagement, and these differences often create divides within us. For young adults who do not yet have a fully formed persona yet, these differences between actual self and virtual self can make growing up even more confusing. Which is real, which is only sort of real, and which do I *want* to be real? For a tech-savvy young adult like myself, the biggest issue is whether I want to be seen as “Nora McCarten” or “@noramccarten”. I envy the previous generations who didn't have the burden of choosing.