

Louisa in Analog: Reflections on Social Media and Identity

When I first conceptualized this project, I had a romantic vision of sitting in front of the full-length mirror in my living room, painting a self-portrait in the tradition of the old masters. This vision never came to pass—after a week of trying and failing to recreate it, I gave up and pulled up my LinkedIn profile picture. This would set the tone for the next four months, where I would sit in my living room right next to my mirror and draw off a photo on my laptop. What I realized in those four months, though, is that I was still in a way referencing a mirror through my paintings—that social media *was* the mirror, one that, through my past self, my social circles, and my interests, reflected my identity back to me.

Social Media and Identity

Identity Development

In one of the most well-established psychological measures of identity, rouge is smudged onto an infant's face before they're placed in front of a mirror.¹ The logic of the experiment is that if the infant touches the rouge on their own face, they recognize the image in the mirror as a reflection of themselves. About half of Western 18-month-olds 'pass' this test.² From this first recognition of one's own reflection—aptly named 'the mirror test'—children continue to anchor their sense of self through mirrors. Endless child development sites tout the value of 'mirror play' for children, naming increased self-awareness and improved bodily control among its many benefits. And later, beyond the infant years, mirrors are used to monitor your appearance as you grow, providing proof of your continued development and existence.

Now, the role of the mirror in identity formation is increasingly fulfilled by social media. The photos saved to the Google account I made in middle school date back to when I was twelve years old; I signed up for my first Instagram account when I was thirteen. My story is common within my generation. While the job of taking photos of children used to be exclusively the domain of adults, who were the only ones who knew how and could afford to use a camera, the ubiquity of phone cameras has given youth the autonomy to decide how they are represented.³ And the existence of photo-sharing platforms like Instagram and VSCO provides an easy way for them to create their own personal narrative using these photos, the modern version of the photo album, free from the influence of adults who may impose inaccurate or harmful narratives onto them.

The difference between social media as a mirror and an *actual* mirror, though, is that mirrors forget about you as soon as you stop standing in front of them. Your reflection on social media, meanwhile, is becoming increasingly impossible to erase—see, for example, the nearly decade-old photos of myself on Google, or sites like the Internet Archive that are dedicated to preserving past iterations of nearly every webpage.⁴ The issue with a mirror that has a perfect

¹ Beulah Amsterdam, "Mirror Self-image Reactions before Age Two," *Developmental Psychobiology* 5, no. 4 (January 1972): 297–305, <https://doi.org/10.1002/dev.420050403>.

² Michael Lewis and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, "Mirror Representations of Self," *Social Cognition and the Acquisition of Self*, 1979, 29–68, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4684-3566-5_2.

³ Nausicaa Renner, "How Social Media Shapes Our Identity," *The New Yorker*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/how-social-media-shapes-our-identity>.

⁴ Manoush Zomorodi, James Delahoussaye, and Sanaz Meshkinpour, "How Do You Create an Internet Archive of All Human Knowledge?," NPR, January 27, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/27/1151702292/how-do-you-create-an-internet-archive-of-all-human-knowledge>.

memory of everything you've done is that it forces *you* to also have those memories, including ones you'd rather forget. This is especially salient when it comes to childhood and growing up. Developmental psychologist James Marcia describes adolescence as a psychosocial "moratorium", a time to experiment with one's identity and make mistakes,⁵ with the reassurance that any particularly embarrassing decisions will be forgotten eventually. Social media takes that reassurance away. With a mirror that remembers, it can be difficult to distance yourself from those adolescent mistakes, to assert yourself as a person capable of change.

I distinctly remember my horror and embarrassment when, two years ago, my friends uncovered the Instagram account I'd made when I was fourteen. I treated this account like a diary, posting photos of my daily life with reflections in the captions (you can imagine the content and quality of these posts). It had been so long since the last time I logged in that I was now permanently locked out of the account, rendering me incapable of deleting the evidence of a version of myself I barely recognized and wanted desperately to pretend didn't exist. The glaring reminder of who I'd been back then made me question all the growth I'd undergone in the eight years since. If it was so easy for other people to access the fourteen-year-old version of myself, was that person really gone? Had I really changed at all? Reflecting on that memory makes me think of the children who'd unexpectedly gone viral on social media and the adults they are now, being constantly confronted by a past self. In this way, I question whether social media *truly* gives youth more autonomy over their identity. If your social media reflection is impossible to erase, and available to be paraded around by strangers or unearthed unexpectedly by your friends eight years later, are you really in control of it?

The reason I told myself I couldn't paint off my reflection like I wanted to, and had to resort to photos of myself, was because most of the ideal daylight hours were taken up by other commitments that took me out of the house and/or necessitated the use of social media. Now, though, I'm wondering if this was strictly true—hadn't I spent multiple weekends sitting at home in the sunlight, looking at my phone? With the days lengthening, didn't I have more opportunities to paint after I came home from class, when it was still bright out? The photos I chose, invariably taken from my social media accounts or otherwise posed and filtered, also became a source of doubt. Couldn't I just have taken a photo of myself as I was in that moment, to preserve some kind of similarity to painting from a reflection? The answer to all those questions is 'yes', which is why I'm now wondering if there was an underlying motivation to all the choices I'd made to the contrary.

I'm very careful now about what I post to Instagram. Part of it is because I don't like taking pictures of myself, and part of it is because of the fear of vulnerability that growing up on social media creates. As a twenty-two-year-old, looking at my permanently preserved fourteen-year-old self—unflattering haircut and all—makes me think of how my thirty-year-old self would react if confronted with how I look now. The thought that this future me could be embarrassed by the current me, which will be preserved online just like the past me, creates a deep aversion to looking even slightly unacceptable. And with photo editing becoming both undetectable and widely available,⁶ the baseline for what's acceptable is straying farther from

⁵ James E. Marcia, "Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3, no. 5 (1966): 551–58, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023281>.

⁶ Sophia June, "Is TikTok Automatically Adding Beauty Filters to Creators' Faces?," *Nylon*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.nylon.com/life/tiktok-automatic-beauty-filters-angry-creators>.

reality. The result of this is an alienation from what I look like in real life, hence why I refused to observe it for the hours that painting a portrait requires.

When you compare each self-portrait and its photo reference side-by-side, there's a distinctly smoothed-over quality that emerges from the portrait. Some of this could be attributed to the style: I draw using layers of pure colour stacked on top of each other, which lends well to a bright, vivid painting but isn't friendly to small details. However, it's undeniable that the details that I glossed over while painting—acne scars, stray eyebrow hairs, sunscreen marks—are the exact same ones a beauty filter would delete. My unconscious 'beautifying' of a process that was meant to portray an authentic version of myself is the natural result of how social media attempts to erase anything less than perfection. My experience is not an isolated one; high school students now are openly discussing how using social media has worsened their body image.⁷ The problem, however, is that just like an infant recognizing themselves in the mirror, the experience of being imperfect and authentic is crucial to development. I wonder now if these students might share my experiences of aversion to their genuine selves; if they, too, shy away from looking in a mirror for too long.

Social Identity

In my student nightlife experience, there's no place more socially relevant than the mirror in the women's bathroom of a club. There, groups of friends congregate to take pictures, give status updates, discuss plans. There's still an element of the individual, of checking one's own appearance, but very rarely have I ever stood in front of such a mirror alone. They're representative of publicly available mirrors as a whole—from the ones inside stores to the reflective walls of buildings on the street—as ways to take stock of yourself in the context of the people around you. To stand together in front of the same mirror is to affirm that a group of people are occupying the same physical space. These groups have long been identified as cornerstones of identity: according to social identity theory, people use the groups they belong to, which can be as broad as a nationality and as narrow as a group of friends standing in front of a reflective wall, as important sources of self-esteem and definition.⁸ Mirrors reinforce this identity by providing an in-person, real-time visual confirmation that an individual belongs to such a group. Social media as a mirror provides the same confirmation, but with more people, across longer stretches of time and space, and with a new definition of belonging.

When I graduated high school and started university, one of the first tangible things I did to cement this transition was to change the caption of my Instagram profile from the name of my high school to Western. My hopes of a clean transition, however, were thwarted almost immediately, when I received a notification from Instagram that someone from my high school had liked one of my posts about the university campus. This was someone whom I'd had little to no interaction with over the past four years, whose name now continued to appear in my notifications. This isn't an isolated experience: universities encourage incoming freshmen to signal their belonging to the university, sometimes before they've even started their school year,

⁷ The Learning Network, "What Students Are Saying about How Social Media Affects Their Body Image," The New York Times, March 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/learning/what-students-are-saying-about-how-social-media-affects-their-body-image.html>.

⁸ J. C. Turner, R. J. Brown, and H. Tajfel, "Social Comparison and Group Interest in Ingroup Favouritism," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 9, no. 2 (April 1979): 187–204, doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420090207.

as a way of digitally supporting the transition in identity from ‘high school student’ to ‘college student’.⁹ Once the school year started, many of these students began reporting conflict between their new university self and their high school self, because all their activities as the former were accessible to the people they’d known as the latter.¹⁰

Social media is now providing ways for people to be in touch long after a separation that, in earlier times, would’ve spelled the end of the relationship. In the list of usernames who’ve liked my Instagram posts, there are old middle school classmates, current university friends, and coworkers from a summer internship. They’re all accessible at the press of a ‘send’ button, with nothing but a time zone difference keeping us apart. The benefit of this is obvious, providing a means to maintain a relationship that is worth preserving. The drawback of this, however, is that relationships that were meant to be transient—like the one between me and my high school classmate—now linger in the constant appearance of their name, of their ability to access your life. This prevents clean transitions between social groups and, like university freshmen who suddenly had to contend with managing their university and high school identities simultaneously, can generate confusion and tension.

Social media also facilitates relationships across space, forming connections between people so physically separate from each other they likely wouldn’t have met in a non-digital world. In social psychology, the proximity principle dictates that people are likely to form relationships with those who are physically close to them.¹¹ On social media, the principle expands beyond the physical to *digital* proximity: rather than being confined to a physical radius, anyone who frequents the same websites are candidates for connection. This can be a boon to those who find themselves at odds with their physical social environment; finding refuge within a group online can protect against the effects of social isolation in the physical environment, which can pose a real threat to a person’s mental and physical health.¹² Essentially, by negating the requirement of physical proximity in forming social connections, social media provides a greater volume of opportunities for connection, as well as a greater chance that these connections are the ones you want to have.

There are drawbacks, however, to a social identity that can transcend the limits of space and time. As social objects, physical mirrors reflect only one group at a time—that is, whichever group you are currently with. Social media, however, doesn’t give you the same grace. Rather than reflecting solely the group to which you currently belong, platforms like Facebook and Instagram bring every single group you belong to into the same place. In *No Sense of Place*, Joshua Meyrowitz compares this melting pot to a surprise party where a bunch of people from different parts of your life are all in attendance. Which version of yourself do you present? The family-friendly version that your parents know? The college student that drinks and parties? The polished young professional that you present to your coworkers? What ends up happening,

⁹ Lisa Thomas et al., “Understanding Social Media and Identity Work in Young People Transitioning to University,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 76 (November 2017): 541–53, doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.08.021.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter, and Kurt Back, “Social Pressures in Informal Groups,” *The American Catholic Sociological Review* 11, no. 4 (December 1950): 268, https://doi.org/10.2307/3707362.

¹² Amy Novotney, “The Risks of Social Isolation,” *Monitor on Psychology*, May 2019, https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation.

Meyrowitz suggests, is a muddled middle ground where key parts of your personality are sacrificed for the sake of remaining acceptable to the lowest common denominator.¹³

I saw this effect myself when I joined Ivey Business School last year. Going from the progressive, diverse classrooms of my arts degree to an environment that upholds and promotes traditional power structures was a jarring transition, to say the least. While I managed to keep my ‘arts’ and ‘Ivey’ personas separate in real life, Instagram was a different story. Now I had to consider an audience of people who might not hold the same beliefs as I did, who might find some aspects of my personality or lifestyle disagreeable. The most prominent example of this happened during Pride Month last year, when I decided not to post anything in celebration, essentially going back into the closet. This ‘middle ground’ approach not only generated more ambiguity surrounding my identity, but also forced me to hide important parts of it.

The groups that social media provides are more abundant; they also demand more of you. The age of instant messaging creates an expectation that we are always available to others, in ways that are increasingly beyond our control. When I meet new people, I joke about taking three business days to reply to a text, partly as a disclaimer but also as an apology for violating the new social norm of instant responses.¹⁴ Similarly, and perhaps more insidiously, my iPhone-owning friends complain about not having twenty-four-hour access to my location (cursed Android phone!). This expectation of constant access means that relationships and groups encroach onto the self, and condemns any desire not to be immediately beholden to any person who demands your attention. This makes spending time alone harder than ever, because even if you’re physically alone in the mirror, the phone on the counter still holds your entire social circle, only one tap away.

I’ve always defined myself as an introvert who thrives on solitude. This definition was thoroughly shaken when I started working on my self-portraits and realized I couldn’t go five minutes without talking to myself—specifically, talking to myself *as if I were another person*. I realized that I didn’t know how to be truly alone; even when I was experiencing my beloved solitude, I was filling in the gaps left by other people. It’s easy to see how this could be an effect of social media. The problem is, true solitude—that is, self-imposed time apart “from our customary social and physical contexts”¹⁵—is important to identity, facilitating self-examination in the absence of the groups that typically define it. Without true solitude, this sense of identity becomes weaker, as seen by my inability to engage with myself without pretending to be in dialogue with an imaginary other person. It’s as if every time you looked in a mirror, you were always surrounded by other people. We’ve already seen how connecting with one’s reflection is crucial to identity development; what would happen if we were never truly alone with it?

Interests-Based Identity

Let me first admit that the analogy to mirrors here is a bit more personal. As a dancer, I’ve always coveted the ceiling-to-floor mirrors in dance studios; for my 19th birthday, I asked for my own full-length mirror so I could have a piece of the dance studio at home. That mirror

¹³ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Bryan Lufkin, “The Crippling Expectation of 24/7 Digital Availability,” BBC News, February 25, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220207-the-crippling-expectation-of-247-digital-availability>.

¹⁵ Christopher R. Long and James R. Averill, “Solitude: An Exploration of Benefits of Being Alone,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 33, no. 1 (March 2003): 21–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5914.00204>.

traveled with me when I moved out for college, and is the same one I was planning to use for the self-portraits. It's nearly impossible to become a good dancer without a way to monitor yourself; as such, this mirror has become intrinsically tied to my love for dancing. When I look at my reflection while dancing, I see myself as a dancer and nothing else. Social media replicates this same effect across all my interests, and makes it increasingly easy to forget the person I am outside of them.

According to *The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet*, identity cues can be either 'given' or 'given off'—actively and deliberately displayed, or assumed implicitly by the observer, respectively.¹⁶ On social media, identity cues fall almost entirely into the former category. This generates possibilities for identity presentation that are wholly unique to social media, including but not limited to identities formed solely based on interests, without any demographic information (typically one of the first pieces of information that is 'given off'¹⁷). On Reddit, people join communities formed around a common interest, like sports teams or video games or bands. Within many of these communities, there are opportunities to further categorize yourself using a 'flair', a marker that appears next to the username. In the biography section of their profile, many X users forgo any demographic indicators in favor of listing their interests.

This isn't to say identities based partly on interests are unique to social media. However, what *is* unique is identities that are formed *wholly* on interests, that use favorite TV shows or songs in place of other dimensions like personality traits or beliefs. When you're interacting with others using accounts that are identified only by interests, it can be easy to forget that you're still a person beyond the list of TV shows in the biography section of your X profile. And social media, especially algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok and Instagram, actively try to encourage this forgetting. Users of these platforms now define themselves as '___ girls' and the aesthetics of their existence as '___ core'.¹⁸ These labels work as indicators of interests, but also as shorthand for broader aspects of identity, including preferences, attitudes, and values. For example, the 'clean girl' label automatically signals a certain level of wealth, an appreciation of minimalism, and a preference for high-quality (if expensive) products.¹⁹

This kind of all-encompassing interest exists at the cost of parts of one's identity that don't align. The reshaping of oneself to completely fit into the typical profile associated with whatever interest-based marker one chooses is encouraged by social media, where shorter attention spans²⁰ and snap judgments favor one-dimensional presentations of identity. But people aren't meant to be summarized neatly by an aesthetic or a particular interest; they are full of nuances and contradictions, which don't fit well within the neat box of a 'clean girl' label. And of course, adhering to these identities often involves making purchases of 'essential' items to

¹⁶ Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, *The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Anna Mikhaylyants, "TikTok Core: The Fashion World of Today: Arts: The Harvard Crimson," Arts | The Harvard Crimson, 2023, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/3/9/tiktok-aesthetics-microtrends-fast-fashion-style/>.

¹⁹ Chelsea Candelario, "Here's Why the 'clean Girl Aesthetic' on TikTok Is Problematic," PureWow, February 5, 2024, <https://www.purewow.com/beauty/clean-girl-aesthetic-tiktok-trend>.

²⁰ Jui Zaveri, "TikTok and the Death of the Attention Span," The Oxford Blue, May 23, 2023, <https://theoxfordblue.co.uk/tiktok-and-the-death-of-the-attention-span/>.

prove one's commitment to the lifestyle, benefiting social media platforms by giving them avenues to encourage spending.²¹

The moment I decided to do this project about identity, it was obvious that I would use painting as the medium. I chose to use the same style I've used for other portraits, which imitates the style of watercolour painting I spent six years learning: using the drawing software on my tablet laptop, I first sketched a rough outline, then used layers of monochromatic colour stacked on top of each other. Although I took it as a given then, the things I've learned now have led me to question the decision. Returning to the definition of true solitude, it can be argued that drawing *is* a physical context for me, someone who's been doing art for almost a decade. The act of drawing, then, might've prevented me from achieving the solitude that was necessary to facilitate self-examination. Furthermore, while painting as a medium did allow me to convey an important part of my identity, it might have also become the *only* part of my identity that was transmitted through the project. The portraits themselves are of my disembodied head and shoulders, free of any other context that might lend more insight into who I am. In the absence of this context, the only clue to my identity is the medium itself. In other words, social media may have rendered me unable to define myself outside the bounds of my interests, and so I resorted to drawing to do so instead—defining myself as an 'art girl'.

Conclusion

In the realm of personal identity and its development, social media has taken on the role of a mirror, presenting multifaceted ways for people to develop and solidify their identity. By providing a way to record and return to past versions of oneself; by allowing more people to enter your life and stay for longer; and by allowing identities to be constructed from interests, social media reflects multiple facets of an individual's identity and its development. Nonetheless, despite the consistent analogy throughout this report, social media isn't like a mirror in several crucial, and potentially harmful, ways—it does not forget; it is not bound by space and time; and the identities that it allows people to create can become all-encompassing.

The effects of these features were illustrated throughout the creation of my self-portraits. My fear of vulnerability and imperfection stemmed from the permanence of social media. I could not endure the emptiness left by the absence of other people without trying to fill it: a dependency on other people created in part by the overwhelming number of connections on social media, and the expectations of those connections. And finally, the very choice of drawing as the basis of the creative piece reflects an inability to define myself without relying on my interests, a reliance curated and nurtured by social media and its algorithms.

Reflections on the Process

At the start of this project, I had a vision of seamlessly integrating my arts and social sciences educations into the process. While the final product itself would be an artistic one, I wanted to keep my research methodology up to the standard of the psychology studies I had spent the past four years reading. Almost immediately, though, it became clear to me that I'd have to dramatically rethink how this project was going to look. The existing literature turned out not to be as relevant as I'd hoped. Most of the studies I came across preceded the availability of TikTok, by far the social media platform that I use the most, in the West. The gap left by the

²¹ Anna Mikhaylyants, "TikTok Core: The Fashion World of Today: Arts: The Harvard Crimson," Arts | The Harvard Crimson, 2023, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/3/9/tiktok-aesthetics-microtrends-fast-fashion-style/>.

literature thus had to be filled with less traditionally ‘academic’ sources, including essays, op-eds, and my own reflections. This was where the gaps in my methodology began to make themselves known. My reflections were loose and unstructured, following no format other than ‘write whatever comes up’. Although they did eventually generate enough content to work with, I now find myself struggling to define exactly why I chose to do things the way I did, and what impact this might’ve had on my learnings. If I were to do this project again, I’d choose a pre-established research methodology, so that my process had more structure and intention. One strategy I could use is a form of discourse analysis that I used for a gender studies course. In this analysis, I looked at a body of discourse, identified broad themes, and coded each statement based on which theme they reflected. Applied to the reflections that arose from this project, this could lend more clarity into the overall pattern of my learnings.

I’d also strengthen my commitment to going analog. Towards the middle of the four-month project, it became easy to draw in silence for about an hour and a half, and then immediately go back on my phone once the allotted time had passed. This likely derailed any further reflection, and makes it impossible to determine whether that hour and a half without social media had any effect on my identity. In the future, I’d extend the moratorium to larger portions of my life; going a full week without social media, for example, or designating a set amount of time every day to be spent offline. I also want to increase my commitment to the drawing process. This means drawing from a reflection rather than a photo, along with turning off my laptop and returning to traditional, brush-on-paper painting. This would require significantly more time and resources than might be possible on the budget and schedule of a full-time student, but, like extending the no-social-media time to more parts of my life, would likely yield more interesting reflections and represent a greater departure from the influence of social media. Having to paint off a mirror might generate closer feelings of connection and self-examination, by forcing me to confront the real-time, imperfect version of myself.

Final Thoughts

When I presented my report, I argued that the relationship between the person and the platform was bidirectional; at least in my case, I thought I was aware enough of social media’s pitfalls to prevent myself from being completely consumed by its influence. Now, reflecting on the choices I made throughout the process—choices that, at the time, were so obvious to me as to not feel like choices at all, like the choice to draw or the choice to reference photos of myself—I wonder if awareness of influence necessarily translates to freedom from it. In other words, after all this learning and reflecting, perhaps my identity and sense of self are as much under the control of the platforms I use as ever before.

Appendix

Appendix A: November 2023



Appendix B: December 2023



Appendix C: January 2024



Appendix D: February 2024



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