What the Net
MADE OF ME



Constructing Identity Online

Lior Edrich

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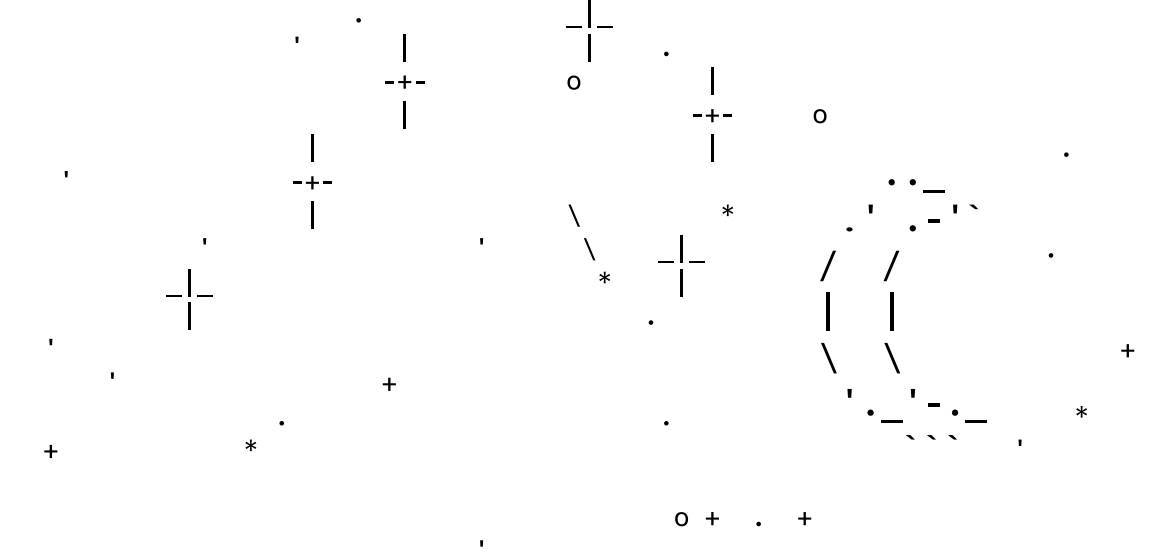
Please scan this QR code to watch the videos I created for my pamphlet.

Thank you :)



or click this link:
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Abstract



My research examines how identity is constructed across digital and physical environments, focusing on how social media platforms shape the relationship between the online self and the offline self.

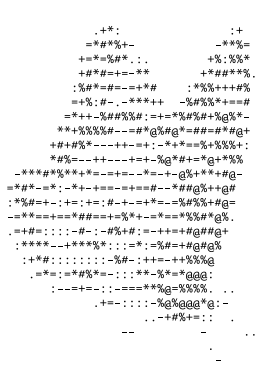
Growing up online shaped how I understand creativity, connection, and myself.Early experiences on platforms such as YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, and fandom-based communities shaped my creativity, sense of identity, and ways of connecting with others. In contrast, observing my 12-year-old niece engaging with contemporary platforms like TikTok highlights how differently social media now functions: less as an intentional space of exploration and more as a continuous, algorithmically structured feed of content.

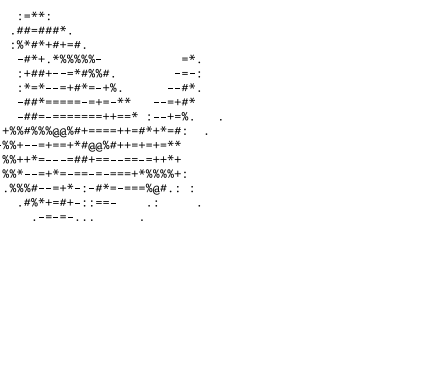
This shift raises questions about how identity develops within environments shaped by visibility, recommendation systems, and performance. My research explores how these conditions influence self-presentation, perception, and creative expression, and asks what happens when the spaces that once enabled exploration begin to shape behavior in more constrained ways.

Key WORDS

HOME

a space online I built for myself, before
it started being built for me.

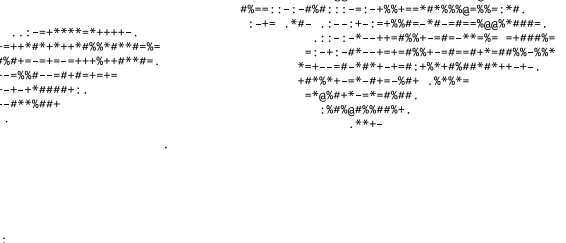






RELATION-SHIPS

people I've never met, but still know in some way through shared interests





PERSONA

something I shape, but also something shaped for me by the platform.

Literature REVIEW

I keep coming back to the question whether identity online is something we actively are authoring, or something shaped for us by the environments we move through. At first it felt like an obvious split, like there's a "real" version of you and a more curated version online. But the more I think about it, the less stable that separation becomes. One way to understand this is to look at how the online environment itself shapes behavior. In A Brief History of Internet Culture and How Everything Became Absurd, the author describes how social media developed alongside rising anxiety, isolation, and overstimulation, and how people began using humor, irony, and absurdity as a way to cope. That made me think that the way people act online isn't just about expressing themselves, but also a response to the environment itself. If the space is chaotic or emotionally intense, then identity in that space starts to reflect those conditions.

I can see that in my own experience. When I first used Instagram, I wasn't really thinking about how I came across. I just posted things. But at some point, when more people I knew joined, I became aware of being watched. I deleted a lot of my old posts because they suddenly felt embarrassing, even though nothing had really changed except the audience. That shift made me understand why people create multiple accounts or separate spaces for different sides of themselves. It doesn't feel like being fake, it feels more like adjusting depending on who is looking.

But then that starts to get complicated. In The Overlapping Worlds View: Analyzing Identity Transformation in Real and Virtual Worlds and the Effects on Learning, a study conducted by

The Cultural Effects Of Rapid Technological Integration

Smart technology paired with social media hit the world fast and hard. There's something to be said about how "now" is always the craziest time in history. Each year the world gets smaller and problems get more complex. As these sociological and psychological changes began impacting the masses, mostly being young people, there needed to be new adaptations to process the chaos. There was no education or research in place to help assimilate anyone into these newly integrated worlds between digital and human. The more confused, isolated, anxious, and overwhelmed everyone got, the more they took to Internet culture as a way to relate with one another through humor, absurdity, and irony. Even bringing up the mental health issues magnified by social media has always been difficult, especially for kids. How do you explain to someone that you have a cool phone, tons of friends online, and access to all the world's information, but you're still lonely? Or depressed? Or anxious? Mental health issues have always been stigmatized in most cultures and it's clear that we live in a time where that stigma has actually decreased in many ways. [redacted] there's a strong degree of relation.

you just get thrown in

Tbh, I feel like no amount of educat is going to help you when it comes to navig the internet. You need to learn & discover yourself.

people go to the Internet to cope. It's a digital shelter for them.

!!

!!

A micro-example of this occurring is through the world of Instagram, which has become integral to people's public identities. Users want to be perceived a certain way that makes them seem happy or fun or popular. [redacted] The period highlighted being "authentic" and "natural," pushing health, all natural, DIY, and all the rest. The more that wave pushed, the more it created an undercurrent of "finstagrams" (fake Instagrams) that started popping up around 2015. Finstagrams are Instagram accounts where people could curate secret feeds to vulnerably be themselves by goofing off, sharing memes, and posting unpolished pictures, while their official Instagram feeds were more PR friendly and glamorous. Many young people, especially young girls, have become so tethered to their identities on Instagram t[redacted]

this is why I have multiple accounts. I need to be perceived in a specific way for each account.

aka "spam accounts" I had one

Michael A Evans and Feihong Wang delved into how immersion in the virtual 3D environment of a game may have positive effects on students' sense of self. In one example, a student who was disengaged in a traditional classroom became much more active and expressive in a virtual environment, even identifying as a "technology expert." What stood out to me is that the study doesn't treat this as a separate or artificial identity, but

For example, one participant, Cliff, who had previously expressed disinterest and lack of motivation [redacted] "lit up" when he entered the 3D virtual world and became a collaborative, supportive, expressive contributor. [redacted] Cliff expressed agency through the adopted role of "technology expert." [redacted] Cliff [redacted] was proud that he could now express his inner "techno-geek" identity amongst classmates and teacher. This reported episode compels us to question a simple either-or distinction between virtual and real worlds. [redacted] Better stated is that there is a mutually constitutive relationship (Barab & Wolf, 2006) between real and virtual world identities.

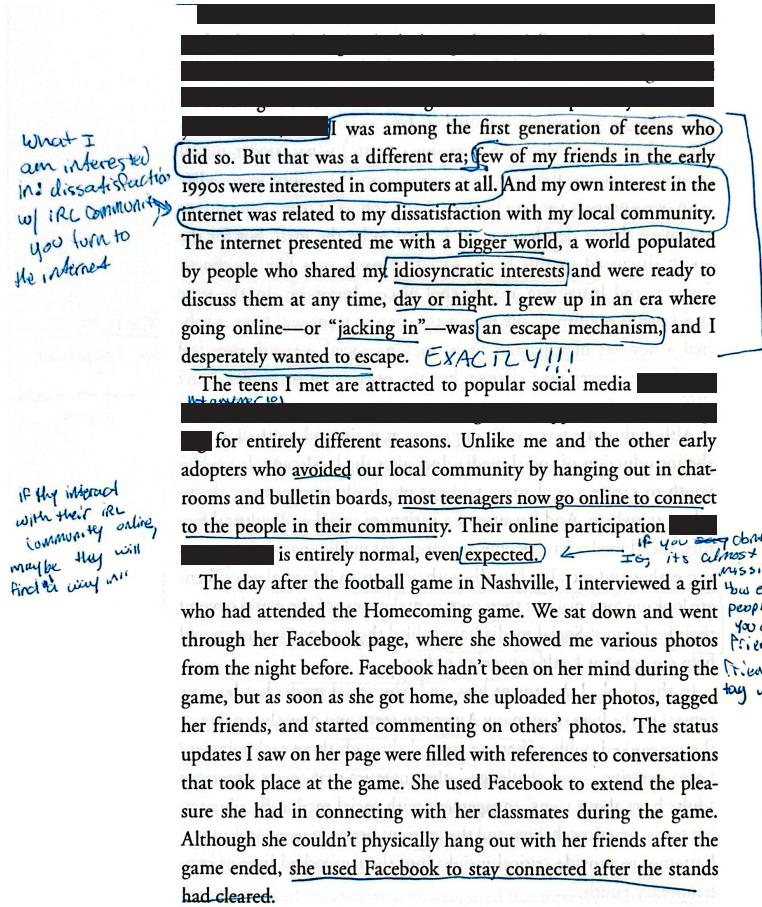
unmotivated → motivated w Cliff

id say so too! you bring what you learn online to irl.

Literature REVIEW cont'd.

instead suggests that real and virtual identities overlap and shape each other. What stands out is that this shift is not treated as a separate or artificial identity, but as one that emerges under different conditions. The study suggests that real and virtual identities overlap and shape each other rather than exist as two distinct versions of the self. This challenges the idea that online identity is simply fabrication. Instead, it suggests that digital spaces can surface parts of someone that may not have room to exist offline. In that sense, identity online is not only authored or performed, but also enabled by the structure of that environment itself. I see that in my own life too, especially with creative interests that developed through online communities and exposure to other people's work.

At the same time, the internet I experienced when I was younger doesn't feel the same as it does now. In It's Complicated, danah boyd describes the early internet as a kind of escape, where people actively went online to find others who shared their interests. That matches how I remember it. It felt intentional. You had to look for things, and when you found them, it felt meaningful. Now it feels less like that. Content is shown to you, and algorithms shape what appears on your feed. You don't really choose in the same way, and that changes how you relate to what you see. It becomes harder to tell whether your interests are genuinely yours or just things you've been exposed to repeatedly. You get shown trends and viral posts over and over again and it's almost like you grow to like or just accept these things. This shift connects to Program or Be Programmed,



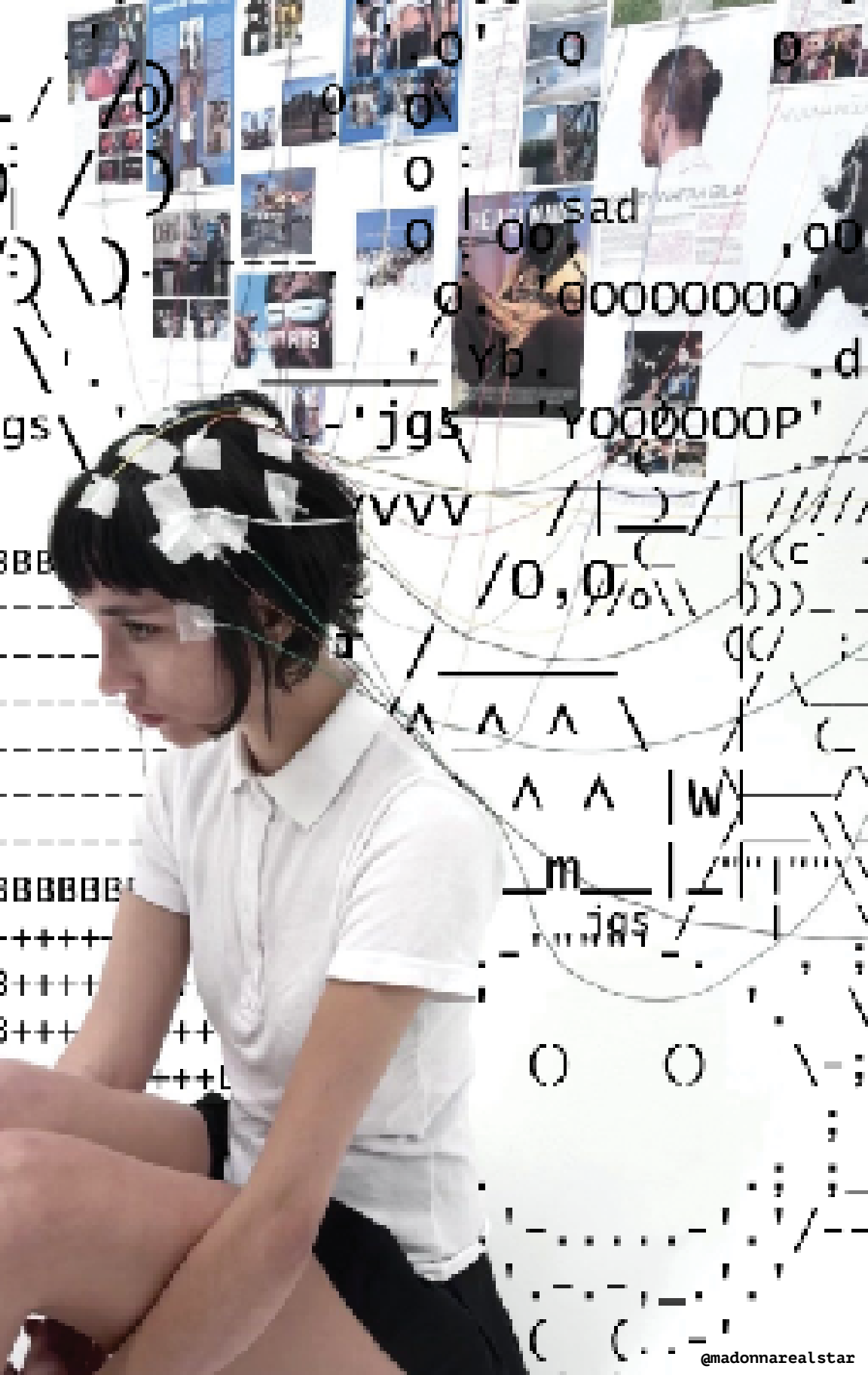
I was among the first generation of teens who did so. But that was a different era; few of my friends in the early 1990s were interested in computers at all. And my own interest in the internet was related to my dissatisfaction with my local community. The internet presented me with a bigger world, a world populated by people who shared my idiosyncratic interests and were ready to discuss them at any time, day or night. I grew up in an era where going online—or "jacking in"—was an escape mechanism, and I desperately wanted to escape.

The teens I met are attracted to popular social media [redacted] for entirely different reasons. Unlike me and the other early adopters who avoided our local community by hanging out in chatrooms and bulletin boards, most teenagers now go online to connect to the people in their community. Their online participation [redacted] is entirely normal, even expected.

The day after the football game in Nashville, I interviewed a girl who had attended the Homecoming game. We sat down and went through her Facebook page, where she showed me various photos from the night before. Facebook hadn't been on her mind during the game, but as soon as she got home, she uploaded her photos, tagged her friends, and started commenting on others' photos. The status updates I saw on her page were filled with references to conversations that took place at the game. She used Facebook to extend the pleasure she had in connecting with her classmates during the game. Although she couldn't physically hang out with her friends after the game ended, she used Facebook to stay connected after the stands had cleared.

where Doug Rushkoff argues that digital systems are not neutral tools, but rather structures that actively shape how we think and behave. His idea that users either "program or be programmed" suggests that participation in digital environments often comes with some loss of control, especially when the underlying systems aren't fully visible. In the context of social media, this makes it difficult to determine how much of identity is self-directed and how much is being shaped by the algorithm that prioritizes engagement, repetition, and visibility.

Taken all together, these perspectives make it difficult to define online identity as fully authored or fully produced. Instead, it seems to exist somewhere in between, shaped both by choices made by the individual and by the social media systems that structure, guide, and even sometimes limit those choices.


@madonnarealstar

A HOUSE OF DEVOTION
IN THE NIGHT
USING LONGING
INHABITED BY NIGHT OWLS

A HOUSE OF PASSION
IN THE HYPERLINK
USING SHARED LANGUAGE
INHABITED BY STRANGERS

A HOUSE OF ESCAPE
IN THE EXPLORE FEED
USING SILENCE
INHABITED BY AVATARS

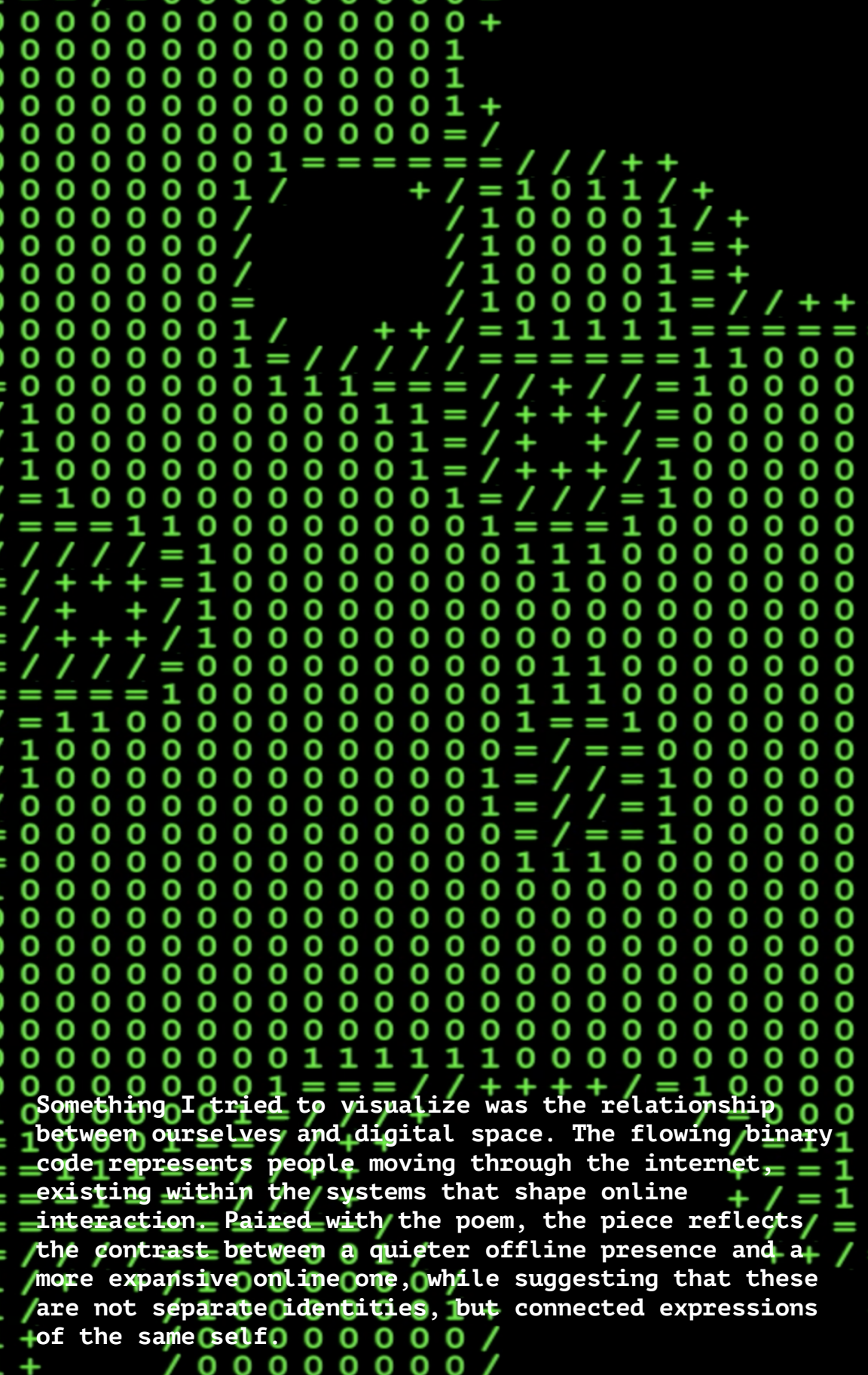
A HOUSE OF MEMORIES
IN THE CLOUD
USING FRAGMENTS
INHABITED BY DIGITAL GHOSTS

A HOUSE OF SILENCE
IN THE EMPTY THREAD
USING LONGING
INHABITED BY PEOPLE I WILL NEVER MEET

A HOUSE OF LIGHT
IN THE VOID
USING REFLECTION
INHABITED BY WANDERERS

A HOUSE OF CONNECTION
IN THE GLOW
USING MEMES
INHABITED BY USERS

A HOUSE OF ANOTHER SELF
IN THE MIRROR
USING IMPERSONATION
INHABITED BY STRANGERS



Something I tried to visualize was the relationship between ourselves and digital space. The flowing binary code represents people moving through the internet, existing within the systems that shape online interaction. Paired with the poem, the piece reflects the contrast between a quieter offline presence and a more expansive online one, while suggesting that these are not separate identities, but connected expressions of the same self.

offline, i am quiet
online, i am infinite
pixels carry my laughter
two selves, one heartbeat
split along the wires





I desperately wante



d to escape.

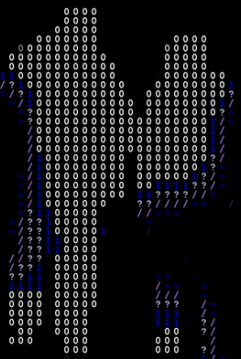
danah boyd, It's Complicated
This section makes me realize how much things have changed. I also used the internet as an escape when I was younger, but it didn't feel like a negative thing. It felt like I had more control over what I was finding and who I was connecting with. I could follow my own interests, get deep into fandoms, and find people who actually cared about the same things. It didn't feel like I was being watched or pushed in a certain direction, it just felt like I was there because I wanted to be.





we talk every day
through messages
through posts
through late night calls

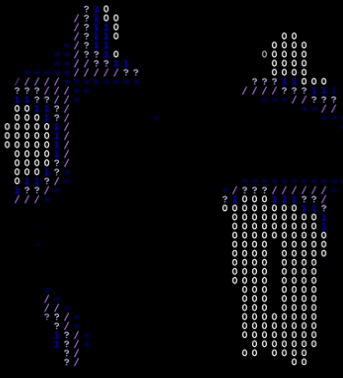








sometimes it feels like
we’re in the same room
but when the screen goes dark
they are still far away





Questions





This project asks what happens to identity when the self is no longer authored, but produced by the systems it exists within. As social media platforms structure visibility, interaction, and participation, identity may not come from intentional self-expression alone, but from constant exposure and response to what is shown.

In that case, is the online self actually an extension of the IRL self, or something shaped by the platform itself? What does it mean to have multiple accounts? Are these different versions of me, or just the same self adjusting to different environments? And if identity is being shaped within these systems, how much of it is actually mine?

Proposal

I grew up online. From a very young age, I was constantly moving between different platforms and devices, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, early fandom communities, and drawing apps like Procreate. It's hard for me to separate those experiences from how I grew up at all. The internet wasn't something separate from my life; it was where I spent a large part of my time thinking, making, and connecting. I would watch videos, draw, and try to recreate what I saw online, slowly developing my own interests through these spaces. At the time, it didn't feel overwhelming or negative. It felt open, exploratory, and self-directed, like I could actively look for things and build communities around them. I didn't feel like anything was being decided for me yet.

A lot of my early sense of creativity came from this environment. I posted drawings, wrote small stories, and participated in fandom spaces where people shared very specific interests. Even though these were digital spaces, they felt personal. They shaped how I understood myself and how I related to other people, often through shared interests and slow discovery rather than constant exposure.

Ten years later, when I look at how my 12-year-old niece engages with social media, that experience feels very different. She uses platforms like TikTok in a way where content is constantly flowing rather than something she actively goes out to find. Instead of

searching for specific interests, she is placed into a feed that is constantly updated and shaped by algorithmic systems. The content she sees is not something she actively searches for in the same way I once did. What stands out to me is not just the content itself, but the way it is structured. There is less separation between choosing to engage and being presented with content. Seeing this shift makes me uneasy, because it suggests that the conditions of growing up online have changed significantly in a relatively short amount of time. I understand what she is doing, but I don't fully recognize the environment she is doing it in.

This contrast has led me to question how identity is formed within these changing digital environments, and whether the way I understood identity growing up still applies now. My research examines how identity is constructed across digital and physical spaces, focusing on how social media platforms shape the relationship between the online self and the offline (IRL) self. I am interested in whether identity remains something continuous across these contexts, or whether it becomes multiplied, taking on

Proposal cont'd.

different forms depending on the platforms people inhabit.
Part of this question also comes from how I currently use social media. I maintain multiple accounts for different parts of my life, including art, design, personal expression, and more anonymous spaces. This does not feel like performance in a deliberate sense, but more like a way of organizing and protecting different aspects of myself, even if it seems like a bit much from the outside. However, I am also aware that each of these spaces comes with different expectations, audiences, and forms of visibility. This makes me wonder whether these "separate selves" are actually distinct identities, or if they are better understood as expressions of a multiplied self shaped by the environments I am moving through.
This project situates itself within a broader investigation of how platform structures influence identity, attention, and social behavior. It considers how algorithmic feeds, visibility systems, and platform-specific cultures shape the ways people present themselves and understand others. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and earlier spaces like Tumblr and fandom communities are not neutral spaces; they actively structure what is seen, how it circulates, and how users participate within them. This project draws from personal reflection, comparative analysis of

platform environments, and making as a form of inquiry of digital spaces. This includes visual making such as creating ASCII art that can explore identity and interaction through social media. It looks at earlier participatory internet cultures, where users actively sought out communities and content, alongside contemporary platforms where content is increasingly surfaced automatically. This comparison allows me to trace how changes in platform design affect creativity, self-expression, and the formation of identity over time.
Ultimately, this research asks what happens to identity when the self is no longer authored, but increasingly produced by the systems it exists within. I don't think the answer is fully one or the other, which is what makes it difficult, and worth asking. It considers how people navigate these conditions in their everyday lives, and whether it is still possible to distinguish between an authored self and a produced one within these environments.

Next STEPS

Autoethnographic Research:
I will continue using my own experiences online as a primary site of inquiry. This will include the work I have been doing such as free writes, personal reflections, and specific moments in my life that helped shape my online identity. Rather than treating these as subjective, I will frame them as autoethnographic data, where my personal experience becomes a way to analyze broader patterns around identity and self presentation online

Ethnographic Research:
Building from my observations of my niece, I will shift towards a more structured comparison between different generations of platform use. Instead of focusing on her as an individual subject, I am interested in comparing the conditions of use: what I was doing on platforms like Tumblr at her age versus what she is doing on TikTok now. This can include looking closely at moment to moment behavior (how content is interacted with, shared etc.) rather than making assumptions. I plan to focus on observing and documenting the actual practices of children on the internet now.

Platform Behavior Research:
I will conduct a close analysis of specific social media platforms (such as TikTok and Instagram) to understand how their structures shape identity. This includes examining reward mechanisms, feed and algorithm logic, and asking what kinds of self each platform encourages.

Designing Alternatives to Social Media:
Moving forward, I'd like to explore what it would mean to create a space that operates differently from current social media platforms. Rather than attempting to redesign existing systems, I am interested in creating smaller scale environments that prioritize intentionality, authorship, and slower engagement. The question that is guiding this is what would a digital space look like if it protected expression rather than optimized it?

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