

Opinion

Somebody

By Kitty Doherty

Last year, I stumbled across a page on The Guardian website. It asked: Are you a social media narcissist? Take our quiz to find out. Like presumably many others, I amusedly read through the questions and moved on. Then, I thought again about Facebook, Instagram and the Smartphone that never leaves my pocket. Am I a social media narcissist? Being too fearful to partake in the quiz, I quietly began to question my social media use, my reliance on my Smartphone, my laptop, my love of the tiny red notification sign. How did I get here? Technology.

When a discussion about technology occurs, there are words we expect to hear. Progress, speed, connectivity. Phone adverts make similar promises; Get more out of now. Stay connected. As a consumer, whatever more is, I feel like I want it. And whatever I am staying connected to, I am pretty sure I want that too. But is there any truth behind these well-designed slogans? On the one hand, yes, due to technology, we are self-expressing in new ways, broadening our quest for knowledge and satisfying our cravings for approval and companionship. In a way, we are more

connected than ever before. But in terms of basic human needs, technology users are suffering beneath the surface. At the core of our complex relationship with technology is the outbreak of Social Media. In 2017, around 1.6 billion of us are monthly active Facebook users. 328 million of us are active monthly Twitter users. Around 700 million of us for Instagram. Instead of being connected, are we utterly disconnected from reality? To attempt to answer this question, I, naturally, consult my laptop.

Apparently, (Google says) in 1991, a man named Tim Berners-Lee in Switzerland invented what we recognise today as the World Wide Web. By the end of the 1990's, the internet had moved fast, and had moved into most households. Big names we recognise today, like Amazon and Yahoo, developed. Two students at Stanford University invented the super power, Google, in 1996. Myspace broke in 2003. Facebook opened to the public in 2006. Since the popular explosion of the iPhone, a multitude of apps now simplify our lives, and simultaneously invade them. Is this the progress and connectivity we have been

promised? It has not ended there. Instagram lets registered users upload photos and videos, creating a unique profile for themselves. Users can apply digital filters to uploads, add Hashtags to link them with other users' posts, add their location through a Geotag. Distorted face filters and augmented reality stickers appeared in 2017. Technology, in all its distorted and augmented glory, is not locked outside anymore; we've let it right into our lives. Most notably, a 2017 survey featuring 1,479 people aged 14-24 concluded that Instagram was "worst for young mental health". Whilst a wave of technological connectivity has swept over the younger generation, so has its dark, anxiety-ridden, FOMO-filled underbelly.

Art has certainly not escaped social media's stealthy grasp. The human species has always expressed itself through some form of portraiture. Ancient figurative cave drawings, statues of great leaders, portraits of royalty. Today: the Selfie. Courtesy of technology and Social Media, we can explore and express ourselves in a magnitude of ways. One spontaneous click, one post and caption later, and your virtual portrait is hung up in the whole World's living room. Recently, London's Saatchi Gallery opened an exhibition entitled 'From Selfie to Self-Expression', which traced a visual human history of the self as a creative subject matter. On display was Frida Kahlo, Basquiat, Schiele and... Kim Kardashian. Further on, rooms with entire walls were covered with everyday people sat at their laptops, cameras trained on them. It was a display of art meeting technology on an equal plane, and it was jarring. Seeing a Rembrandt in the room adjacent to a Kardashian sister toilet selfie was more disheartening.



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How can we explain this jarring difference between a selfie and an artistic self-portrait? Hurst, director of the Saatchi Gallery, discerned between a Rembrandt and a selfie. "He [Rembrandt] is really trying to get to the bottom of what makes him a human being, how he shares that humanity and what is unique about his character, and what his face gives away. Most selfies are a construct; it's more to do with how we want the world to see ourselves, and also our lifestyle, our environment, our social world." Reaching the end of the exhibition, it felt like technology had taken away the very essence of what made a great self-portrait impressive as a thorough exploration of oneself. Dedication, reflection, understanding, skill, all are undermined by the effortlessness of taking a selfie on your Smartphone, and the fact that most Instagram users will admit to deleting a post for receiving an inadequate number of likes. I will leave the debate open about whether or not Kim Kardashian's book of selfies, *Selfish*, is the new *Sunflowers*.

The inundation of selfies taken and posted every second, artistic self-expression or not, has created a societal phenomenon that is likely the root of the many labels now pressed upon the younger generation. Shallow. Narcissistic. Materialistic. Innate self-expression, plus technology as the latest tool, plus social media as the latest stage, has equalled the boom of the image. An obsession with image. Thumbing our phone screen we do not see people, we see images. Tabs open on our Macs to more images. Adverts on billboards and televisions again show only images. Not real people but the image of them. Is it any wonder, then, that we are obsessed with the way we look, when others are commended for having an attractive image, and when we are far more likely to be seen by people as a photo on a social media profile as an image, than we are to communicate with someone in real life? Photos do speak more loudly than words. We are the first generation with this unique pressure. And from fragile self-esteem springs narcissism, as sufferers exaggerate their achievements to others and to themselves out of desperation for adoration and attention.

This image pandemic is escalated with the photo-shopping tools encouraged by Instagram. Smooth and Refine, filters, angles, lighting and the fact that a photo is only an artfully constructed snapshot of a moment means that perfect has now reached levels way beyond that which can reasonably be attained. But, as they are all around us, we still measure ourselves by their unreachable standards, losing ourselves to narcissism and superficiality. Ideas of our own and others' identities are skewed, and, accordingly, it is unsurprising that studies on the mental effects of social media use reveal increased feelings of anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem and Fear-of-Missing-Out. In 2016 it was reported that 73 people died taking selfies that same. Self-expression seems more like self-destruction.

Whilst many selfie and social media advocates cite the new platforms as encouraging equality and fighting hegemony, this is not, ultimately, the case. Our dystopian new world has its hierarchy, and those at the top become inspiration for the rest. Idle teens across the globe are sitting on virtual thrones while really perched on their living room sofas. Successful is defined by the Vlogger, the #instafamous and the Twitter famous. In LA, if you fork out \$429 you can attend The Social Star Creator Camp, and learn 'the best practices for exceptional platforms that result in earning money and viral fame!' A quick internet search of 'How to be Instagram famous' generates around 400,000,000 results. The follower count of the likes of Kim Kardashian (102.7m) and Gigi Hadid (35.6m), or #instafamous lifestyle bloggers and fitness models, like Jen Selter (11.5m) are, truthfully, nothing to be scoffed at. As Will Storr concludes in his recent book *Selfie*, the new ideal is an 'extroverted, slim, beautiful, individualistic, optimistic, hardworking, socially aware yet high-self-esteeming global citizen with entrepreneurial guile and a selfie camera'. Sound familiar? Nonetheless, these people have the attention of, literally, millions, whilst earning a living and getting their voices heard.



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Consequently, it is difficult to pin point what makes the pursuit of social media fame something we so quickly turn up our noses at. The answers can be found when looking behind Instagram's mask of authenticity. Instagram started out as a diary-like expression of identity for anyone and everyone. However, this is an illusion, because the intimate bathroom selfies celebrities post are designed, filtered, captioned... ultimately, faked. But on most profiles this is not made clear, misleading millions of impressionable young users into believing that the lives of those they follow are perfect and real, and that their own ordinary lives can never compare. Instagram has quickly become another discriminative space where those who can fabricate the most flawless online profiles, those often with the most time and money on their hands, 'win', and the rest of us, apparently, lose.

In addition to the lives of the #instafamous being entirely fabricated, their success is equally so. Peter Speight is a professional skier and occasional social media user, who finds the attention and money some receive through social media in his profession as disproportionate to skill and hard work. He linked the vacuity of the new #instafamous to external validation: the receiving of 'the rewards that come with achieving something, without feeling like, or knowing that you have worked hard to actually achieve it.' Social Media expert Bailey Parnell in her recent Ted Talk "Is Social Media Hurting Your Mental Health?" defined the value of likes and followers in a not dissimilar way; they are the 'social currency' in our new 'economy of attention'. They give us a feeling of success without the hard work or real self-satisfaction. After all, you could upload a selfie, by chance catch the attention of an Instagram star and find yourself inundated with followers and likes and supportive comments from strangers. The external signs, the social currency of success is there, when you know you have not truthfully worked hard to achieve something.



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The difference between a Kim Kardashian Selfie and Van Gogh self-portrait at the Saatchi? The success of the former is based on external validation; the latter's is not. Griff, a Manchester student who received attention for drawing and writing songs on guitar which he uploaded to Instagram, has almost 20,000 followers, but realised that he was starting to 'write and draw for the purpose of uploading', instead of the other way around. 'What initially was about discovering I could be happy by being me eventually developed into changing myself, moulding myself in order to satisfy and maintain this audience'. Griff worked hard, but found his success only existed in the material world and in terms of his online identity.

On a larger and more recognisable scale, this pattern of dissatisfaction with the material world is seen with the very publicised mental illnesses suffered by major celebrities such as Lady Gaga and Kanye, to name only a few. Self-exploration and expression, companionship, knowledge; technology started out as a tool to further these basic human needs, and to an extent it does. But to a greater extent, instead of enriching humanity, technology has replaced it. The labour of art has been replaced by the Selfie. Self-fulfilment and persistence with instant external validation. Real people with just their image. Our ability to create virtual identities for ourselves and to view the virtual identities of others has made us lose touch with real humanity around us, and as we look more at these images, we become blind to the artifice of them. Many are losing touch with happiness in their everyday lives, as they seem miserable compared with the fake virtual worlds of other users profiles. And as we become increasingly over reliant on technology, we spend less time actually feeling companionship with our friends, reflecting on our identities and working hard towards and achieving personal goals. Our society has been hit with a complete lack of self-awareness, and with each post, we are handing over a little piece of ourselves to the alien world of technology.

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