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**STUCK ON U: HOW AND WHY CAPITALISM USES OBSESSION WITH ONLINE
IDENTITIES IN MASS MEDIA TO FUEL SELF-DISDAIN**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, one of the most common problems I've repeatedly heard discussed among people I know is dealing with issues of self-esteem. Specifically, these discussions have been about low self-worth, and can go as far as feelings of self-hatred. I myself have experienced it; for almost my entire life, and still, at twenty-one years old, struggle to feel enough; to feel content with exactly who I am. There is always a search to find the key to what might make you finally feel satisfied, varying from a product, to a lifestyle change, to a certain status on social media. However, there is never satisfaction in this materialistic change, thus creating an endless cycle of trying and failing to change into a version of oneself that you are content with. This ideal that we-- consciously or subconsciously-- strive for, is forever changing.

This image is shaped today by mass media-- the numerous platforms that allow people to see, watch, and interact with hundreds to thousands of posts. Furthermore, this system has increasingly thrived on creators who make content to make money. Though consumerism has always been attached to the ideal societal figure, via fashion, makeup, etc, the monetization of personal media has exponentially added to the emphasis on the economic aspect of self-improvement, with a focus on the importance of one's internet-identity. Thus, under the hegemony¹ of capitalism² in today's society, mass media is used as a tool by this very system to trap individuals into an endless cycle of self-disdain and "self-betterment" in an attempt to become this unreachable "lovable self," both online and off, crafted by capitalism itself. These issues differ greatly from place to place, therefore in order to narrow my topic, this paper will

¹ James Lull, *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach* (Columbia University Press, 2000).

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. "Capitalism." Defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "an economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit"

focus on the standards and expectations that I am personally familiar with in the United States and the West.

The How and Why

The internet grew quite slowly, and used to be something disconnected from the self. However, slowly, then soon after, rapidly, it inserted itself much deeper into people's sense of self and identity. In *Trick Mirror; Reflections of Self-Delusion*, Jia Tolentino takes on conversations surrounding the interjection of the internet into our lives, and how much it has affected how our minds work and how we present ourselves. First, Tolentino introduces the core concept of the emphasis on individuality, but in an alienating sense, taking the individual out of their community and putting a focus on them. She explains that "where we had once been free to be ourselves online, we were now *chained* to ourselves online, and this made us self-conscious. Platforms that promised connection began inducing mass alienation." She continues to discuss how in life offline, you can be seen simply in the state you're existing in, but in order to be seen online, you must act.³ This could translate to a post of one form or another, but showing yourself online takes action more tangible than in real life (IRL).

Tolentino introduces Erving Goffman, a sociologist who, in 1959, laid out a "...theory of identity that revolved around playacting,"⁴ explaining how, through our daily lives, we put on performances. These performances change and tweak depending on who we are with, and how serious, new, or casual the circumstance is. We are "relieved" of this show of sorts in a backstage area that might be alone time, or time spent with close and trusted friends/partners/coworkers/family members, etc.. As pointed out by Viktor Gecas and Michael L.

³ Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (Random House Publishing Group, 2019), pg 8.

⁴ Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*, pg 12

Schwalbe, “Goffman's work can best be viewed as dealing essentially with the appraisals of others as the major source for sense of self, even if these appraisals are objects of the actor's manipulations.”⁵ Similar to online identity, there is a search for status on social media, tied to one’s personal identity, even if the image is a facade or only pieces of someone’s life.

Interestingly, Tolentino reveals how this theory has been altered with the online world, and how our performance runs deeper and more unavoidable, as our online identity follows us at all times, especially with specialized content and advertisements, creating a constant performance that feels necessary, and, “persists because it is profitable.”⁶ Along with this idea of profitability comes the idea of sustainability; how people continue to buy and try new things, changing themselves in this way, and then continuing to do so when they face failure or when the ideal they are trying to reach changes. This high rate of retention could seem confusing, especially in the way Tolentino describes how such obsession with this online upkeep leaves us little time to truly rest or even just take a break. However, she explains how “...it is essential that social media is mostly unsatisfying. That is what keeps us scrolling, scrolling...”⁷

The actual science behind such addiction has to do with the dopamine our brains get from things such as likes, comments, or messages, that contribute to the “Feedback Loop Mechanism,”⁸ that causes our brains to essentially continue scrolling or checking up on our account since our brain anticipates the production of dopamine specifically tied to this activity. However, too much of the search for this quickly dissipating dopamine production has been shown to leave individuals “disheartened and disengaged,” yet we often still go back and try

⁵ Viktor Gecas and Michael L. Schwalbe, “Beyond the Looking-Glass Self: Social Structure and Efficacy-Based Self-Esteem,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1983): 77–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3033844>.

⁶ Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*, pg 14

⁷ Tolentino, pg 30

⁸Rasan Burhan and Jalal Moradzadeh, “Neurotransmitter Dopamine (DA) and Its Role in the Development of Social Media Addiction,” *Journal of Neurology & Neurophysiology* 2020 11, no. 7 (November 27, 2020): 507.

again.⁹ Thus, the cycle in trying to feel complete contentment with oneself continues, indefinitely, expending oneself and assets, in an attempt to achieve what intentionally cannot be reached. This has only exponentially grown as higher numbers of people use social media more.¹⁰ This has the potential to lead to full immersion of identity within this realm of self-disdain without consumerist action, which Tolentino explains:

Capitalism has no land left to cultivate but the self. Everything is being cannibalized--not just goods and labor, but personality and relationships and attention. **The next step is complete identification with the online marketplace, physical and spiritual inseparability from the internet: a nightmare that is already banging down the door.**¹¹

When analyzing capitalism, it is integral to discuss and dissect the system as a whole, and the implications that come along with it. capitalism is an undeniably White Supremacist, Patriarchal structure-- rooted in colonization and colonialism-- which benefits off of the oppression of marginalized people. As Bell Hooks describes, “Columbus’s legacy is an inheritance handed down through generations. It has provided the cultural capital that underlies and sustains modern-day white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”¹² This inevitably informs all of the systems under this umbrella, especially mass media and this image of “the ideal” that I have discussed. There are numerous aspects which go into these ideal images that take up such a large amount of space in mass media, which are curated by this hegemonic capitalist structure.

Capitalism, having been created upon this history of colonization and colonialism, is anti-Black. In the article “The anti-Blackness of global capitalism,” Bledsoe and Wright look at “global capitalism and anti-Blackness as co-constituted phenomena in order to assert that

⁹ Rasan Burhan and Jalal Moradzadeh, “Neurotransmitter Dopamine (DA) and Its Role in the Development of Social Media Addiction.”

¹⁰ Andrew Perrin, “Social Media Usage: 2005-2015,” October 8, 2015, 1-12.

¹¹ Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*, pg 33

¹² Bell Hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (Routledge, 2006).

anti-Blackness is actually a prerequisite for global capitalism,”¹³ in which they address the connection between “global capital accumulation” and “acts of anti-Blackness.”¹⁴ Specifically pertaining to the ideal that is strived for via mass media, this anti-Blackness is present in the beauty standards existing under this hegemonic structure. Black people, specifically Black women, have been fetishized and oppressed because of the way they look.¹⁵ However, in today’s society, there are features that are popular and sought after, often in an appropriative manner, that are these very features that Black women have been scrutinized for, such as big lips or wider hips. There is a clear statement that indicates power in whiteness, since these features have become popular once displayed on white women.¹⁶ Therefore, it is crucial to remember that capitalism is a white supremacist, patriarchal structure that profits off of marginalized folks, and often exists as the source of these beauty standards. This system of power continues to profit off of this oppression, while creating this continuous cycle of discontentment within each individual unable to meet its unattainable standards.

Video Project

My original video project was based off of this theory, focusing on the aspect of the unreachability of self-love when aiming unknowingly for a capitalist expectation through mass media. Focusing on a woman as the main character, the project aimed to show the extent to which this cycle can consume someone, leading to a breaking point, and ultimately landing right back into the very cycle they just attempted to break. Choosing to write about a woman, I thought I would focus on the extent that capitalism and consumerism is often gendered, and

¹³ Adam Bledsoe, and Willie Jamaal Wright, “The Anti-Blackness of Global Capital.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 8–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818805102>.

¹⁴ Adam Bledsoe, and Willie Jamaal Wright, “The Anti-Blackness of Global Capital.”

¹⁵ Andrea Alvarado, “Alvarado: The Appropriation of Black Women’s Beauty,” *The Daily Utah Chronicle* (blog), November 11, 2018.

¹⁶ Leah Donnell, “Is Beauty In The Eyes Of The Colonizer?,” *NPR*, February 6, 2019, sec. Ask Code Switch.

though it affects everyone, has many specificities, especially in the dieting and fashion industries (which have now become a part of mass media), targeted towards women. In this original satire short film, taking from narrative and experimental form, “college student Charlie, like everyone around her, is glued to her social media. And, with there being achievements to reach, unlocking higher status and therefore more interest from her peers (i.e. people want to follow you, get followed by you, be your friend), and competing with your peers, everyone seems to be even more invested. As Charlie attempts to reach one of the harder achievements, Self Love™, she is pushed by a mystery friend, completing all the required steps, buying things, making posts, changing herself, etc. She slowly realizes that it may be an impossible feat when done for appearance, that it is something which can only be accomplished when done for oneself and their community.”

I ended up shifting directions, and decided to put the script aside. I wanted to use my original structural ideas, but create something more abstract and, as such, I adopted a more experimental outlook. My final video held the same main focus, this aforementioned search for the unreachable through mass media and online identity, but with more of a focus on the overwhelming weight of this online identity, not only taking a toll on one’s mental health and relationship with self but also just the extent to which such a habit consumes one’s time and energy.

Film Inspiration

I decided to use video as my medium because it is one of the things I am most familiar with. Even though I have worked with and considered using photography, the aspect of movement and sound drew me to the former; I wanted to orchestrate the visual and auditory

environment that the audience would witness, but allow room for interpretation within it. Though I first leaned towards a more narrative-driven and dialogue-heavy form, I decided to implement a more experimental approach. I like the idea that “a film is considered experimental and, therefore, unmarketable if it is short, low-budget, independent, and not aimed for the commercial market,”¹⁷ and thought it corresponded well with my anti-capitalist rhetoric. Often, experimental or avant-garde film creators “...use technology in unconventional ways to produce new visual and sound experiences, the goal is not necessarily to make conventionally beautiful images, but, rather, to create thought-provoking sensual and aesthetic experiences.”¹⁸ I wanted to combine this idea of breaking away from narrative and traditional cinema, focusing on framing, editing, and sound, while still implementing loose storytelling structure through key themes which informed the work.

In the beginning, when I was planning to create a satire piece, I looked to the television show *Black Mirror* for inspiration. Even after switching plans, I felt drawn towards their emphasis on storytelling through aesthetics and cinematography. The accompaniment of this artistic choice aided their criticism of media and technology in society. The cinematographer for the aforementioned episode *Nosedive*, Seamus McGarvey, has discussed his strategic emphasis on focusing on the cohesiveness of the aesthetics of that episode, aiding in how it made the audience feel, in addition to the actual content of the episode.¹⁹ With this knowledge, I aimed to have my own cinematography aid the tone of my video. I focused on long mixing slow and fast shots, and, inspired by breaking formality, played with the overlay effect, hoping to bring the audience into the mundanity of everyday life that they may be used to, while also breaking out of

¹⁷ Joseph Blanco, “The Experimental Film,” *Vision: A Journal of Film Comment* 1, no. 1 (1962): 3–4.

¹⁸ Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis, *Film: A Critical Introduction*, Second Edition (Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2005).

¹⁹ Danielle Turchiano, “‘Black Mirror’ DP Seamus McGarvey Talks About Finding the ‘Photographic Heart’ of ‘Nosedive,’” *Variety* (blog), August 16, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/tv/awards/emmys-black-mirror-seamus-mcgarvey-interview-1202520496/>.

this through this experiment effect. Additionally, towards the end, I focused on two long shots of the main character of my project sitting in bed on her phone. These were aimed to make the audience sit and watch, perhaps becoming aware of how long these felt, even possibly creating discomfort, as most of the other shots are much shorter; I hoped these would give the audience room to reflect on if or how they related to this character, and what feelings were brought surrounding their own involvement with their online identities.

When I switched my video to a more minimal and experimental direction, I started thinking about what films I had seen that made the audience experience a lot through silence. One of the first films that came to mind was Bo Burnham's *Eighth Grade*.²⁰ Though this film does have dialogue, there are many moments where nothing is spoken but a lot is said. I felt like those scenes really allowed the audience to project feelings from their own experiences into whatever the character was specifically going through at that time, whether they related to the actual event or not. One place we see this is towards the beginning, with the montages of the main character Kayla, spending what feels like endless hours into the night on social media. There's also a big emphasis on the soundtrack and how it aids what emotions Kayla is feeling, and I hoped to do the same, thus meticulously selecting my song choice. Additionally, later in the film, there are many scenes of Kayla dealing with stress and anxiety, though at times these struggles are voiced, there is often a lack of dialogue, accurately representing how internal and hard to voice times of anxiety can be.

Process, Production, and Reflection

My process began with narrowing down what type of video I wanted to make. I went with what I was most familiar with, hoping to incorporate both a narrative and experimental

²⁰ *Eight Grade*, directed by Bo Burnham (A24, 2018), 1:33:00

structure. I originally wanted to focus on the genre of satire. I was inspired by Black Mirror, which used exaggeration and futuristic ideas to show the absurdity of the media's control on humans, specifically in the episode Nosedive²¹. From here, I slowly began to build my script, writing down shot lists, sketching out storyboards, and constructing my main characters. I knew I wanted to stray away from giving a straightforward description of how capitalism affects us in these negative ways, so I created the idea of this app which had achievements that affected your status, likeability, and self worth, along with a mystery character, who was never seen but a crucial force in getting the main character to obsess over this cycle of achieving and re-achieving.

After finishing my script, I was in the process of casting the parts when the people I was talking to had their schedules fill up and became too busy to participate. This caused me to change the direction of my project, going in a less narrative-run and more experimental-based video, therefore causing me to work with only one person rather than casting multiple people. I had three separate film shoots, each time taking notes, getting feedback, and narrowing down the subject of my film. I decided to use the main themes of my thesis for my video's direction, focusing mostly on conveying how overbearing our online identities are. With this I hoped to create a discomfoting feeling, representing our dissatisfaction with ourselves, as well as in a more literal way, showcasing the media's effect on mental health and self image.

This project changed quite abruptly half way through the process, and I ended up going in a different direction with my video than the one I intended. Since this happened at the end of October, a bit later in the semester, such a change in casting caused me to essentially put aside my entire script and original plotline. It was a bit of a struggle to come up with a way to maintain the core themes that I wanted to interact with while not relying on dialogue and narrative. This

²¹ Black Mirror, "Nosedive," *Netflix* video, 63:00, October 21, 2016

caused me to brainstorm more about symbolism and ways to resonate with an audience by showing rather than telling. I concentrated on a mirror, for reflection on identity and its restructuring due to mass media, and an instagram ad, showcasing body and self image issues, alongside parallel issues with food and diet culture, fueled by consumerism. With all this, I decided to incorporate a more experimental direction to the project.

One of the obstacles I faced was figuring out how to keep the aspect of consumerism and capitalism clear to an audience member without having the entire context of my paper. After my first new draft, I got feedback saying how the tone was achieved, and that there was some discomfort coming up from seeing someone being on their phone so much. I was worried, however, that the video had lost a bit of the critique of capitalism that is so crucial to my main argument. I pondered the idea of filming additional footage in a beauty or diet-oriented store aisle to add to this commentary, especially since I was concerned that the video may feel too spatially-confined. However, when I brought this up to the class and professor, there was a consensus that the footage felt complete and that the limit to the space itself aided to this feeling of isolation I was looking for. Thus, I focused more on editing, and lengthened the clip of the instagram advertisement to slightly longer in hope to keep this critical narrative while also allowing the viewer to insert themselves and think about what these simpler, less defined scenes made them feel. If I could work more on this project, though, I would tie in more scenes surrounding the consumerist aspect of self-disdain.

Throughout this process, I learned more about how much work it really takes to create even a short video, and that for me, the hardest part is the beginning. I have a hard time feeling like I am able to think creatively and come up with ideas, which causes me to present roadblocks for myself, causing me to take my time in trying to figure out what direction I want to go in.

This, overall, sets me back, and gave me a late start to make progress with this project. Next time, I would give myself more freedom to change my direction, which would allow myself to put more time into the new trajectory.

The change in this process also caused the overall pace of my video to shift to a more introspective and melancholic tone. Rather than creating an upbeat satirical piece, the project transformed into an observation of the reality of feeling so drained and obsessed with your phone and media, and your identity feeling defined by your own online persona. I decided to use “Song on the Beach; Photograph” by Arcade Fire because, to me, it is able to capture the complex juxtaposition of temporary happiness or contentment with the long term and deep-seeded unhappiness and, especially, loneliness, that can come from feeling so attached to such an intangible and, at many times, quite pointless and fabricated thing. There is also a moment in the song, just over half way through, where there is a pause in between the slower and sadder part of the song, that I thought is almost the perfect length for a deep breath, before the song continues to be slightly more upbeat. Towards the end of the song, which is cut off, the initial phrase that is played at the beginning of the song is reincorporated, and the piece comes to a slow stop. I decided, though, to end the video project with the faster-paced section, since to me it felt almost like a natural pause one might have, realizing how much time has passed since they have only been looking at a screen and worrying about the world that exists within it. To me, this pause is a moment of self-realization, and leaves the possibility of making a change, or even just stepping away from it. Pairing this with the last shot, which has the main character look directly at the camera, or possibly the audience, as we (or you) exit her room-- the only place we have seen her exist-- I wanted to make you wonder, as the screen went black, what was next for her. The more general themes in this project-- an artistic translation of the overwhelming nature of online

identities and striving to reach the unreachable-- allow room for the watcher to use their personal life, informed by these themes, giving them an individual experience, allowing them to extrapolate both from the frame and from within.

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