#KNOW THYSELF @SELFIEGENERATION

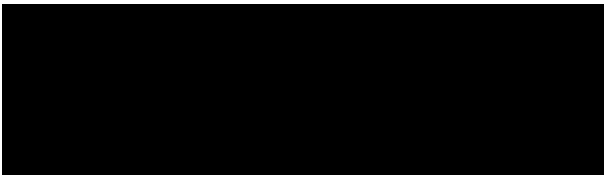## Philosophical foundations of self-knowledge expressed through social media

By Rebecca Mace

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Declaration

I, Rebecca Mace confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed:

Rebecca Mace
Date: 6/10/2023

Abstract

This doctoral thesis examines the complexities of the Delphic Injunction, "Know thyself," within the context of a social media-dominated world. It is suggested that the ancient command takes on new dimensions because social media platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for self-articulation. Influenced by various approaches toto the concept of human virtuality, I set out to reveal how the modern digitally engaged generation navigates self-knowledge on social media. A hybrid real-virtual self is explored as a way to understand what self-expression via social media might mean for self-knowledge. Drawing upon the notion of a fantasy-laden virtual life (Frankel and Krebs 2021) within the digital virtual arena, I propose that social media opens an important and play-full space for self-understanding and a new framing for engagement with the question 'Who am I?'. Narratives that shape assumptions about the self and self-knowledge are explored through philosophy, art, popular culture, and educational theory in a way that mirrors actual cases of social media usage.

Part One provides an account of self-concept and self-knowledge. Tracking some of the theoretical territory on these linked topics, it explores introspection, extrospection, and the influence of emotions and experiences on self-understanding. It then emphasises how self-knowledge as worked out through social media functions as a series of nodes rather than a static conclusion or identity. The Injunction "Know Thyself" is importantly unresolved, and the question "Who am I?" is never completely answered in online spaces – if it ever has been or could be.

Part Two, advocates a broader definition of "real" on social media. Inspired by Plato's Forms, it challenges notions of reality and representation, asking us to consider the boundaries of reality and consider what is "real". As a result, this section is organised around the themes of (virtual) Truth, Love, and Beauty. However, rather than suggesting that the physical world (or that which shows up on social media in this instance) is a lower form of reality, with the Forms (or real-life) being higher and more authentically real, all three sections (Truth, Love, and Beauty) acknowledge the importance of a blend of reality, virtuality, and fiction in shaping human self-expression. It is suggested that social media could be viewed as an important virtual playground for role-play and storytelling.

Moving from the classical to the modern context reflects the enduring relevance of our human inquiries into reality and representation. Just as Platonic ideals shed light on the nature of reality and the role of perception, in contemporary contexts hyper reality might also prompt viewers to question their perceptions. It therefore serves as a helpful tool to understand the blurring of boundaries that Part Two suggests is crucial to our understanding of self-knowledge as mediated by social media. Part Three therefore draws parallels between hyper-hybrid art forms, and the hyper-hybrid nature of social media. It focusses especially upon abstraction and conceptualisation, and then further blurring of boundaries between the "real" and the "virtual", to reach for a way in which we might understand self-knowledge in the context of social networking sites (SNS).

The overall conclusion of the thesis that that the Delphic Injunction's meaning in the context of social media is significantly different. It presents new problems but also offers a new and unprecedented space for imaginative, creative and dynamic engagement with self-knowledge.

Impact Statement

This research presents a transformative impact as it explores the age-old directive "Know thyself" within the dynamic context of today's pervasive social media landscape. By shifting focus from conventional perspectives to a comprehensive understanding, this study delves into how contemporary individuals navigate the realm of self-knowledge.

In this exploration, social media emerges as an influential platform for multifaceted self-expression, seamlessly blending reality and creative imagination. Interweaving philosophical theory, artistic works, and popular culture, the research sheds light on the different ways self-knowledge is articulated and explored within the digital age. By redefining the significance of the Delphic Injunction within the realm of social media, this study underscores the innovative space it can provide for dynamic, imaginative, and creative engagement with the question "Who am I?"

 The study's multi-dimensional approach contributes significantly to our understanding of how individuals express and comprehend their identities in the modern era.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Introduction

Part One

The Philosophical Search for self knowledge

Part Two

Truth, Love, & Beauty

Truth

Love

Beauty

Part Three

Knowthyself@selfiegeneration

Know Thyself@selfiegeneration

INTRODUCTION

Know Thyself@selfiegeneration

Introduction

Situating Myself

I started my teaching career at the Mulberry Bush School, a residential unit for children struggling with extreme emotional and behavioural difficulties. Working with children from such challenging backgrounds and difficult starts in life, meant both staff and pupils frequently reflected upon the questions "Who am I?" and "How am I showing up in the world?". Often, unable to sit on a chair or be in a group long enough to engage with any formal curriculum when they arrived at the school, these children struggled hard to overcome a narrative in which they were perceived as "unredeemable". They frequently believed it was a mistake to try to overcome the boundaries that had been drawn by their nature" and upbringing (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, p. 8 cited in Arslan, 2015, p. 112). And yet, although a world away from my own childhood, their previous interactions with School as an institution did not seem entirely alien to my own. My own experience of education, as one of a handful of girls attending a boy's school[1] and eager to be a part of the system, meant I had unconsciously internalised the implicit messaging present. In my case, the message was that in order to include myself, I was "supposed to have a masculine status, ignoring [my] womanhood" (Moi p. 348). In the case of the children at the Mulberry Bush, the messaging came all too often from life experiences that required, and sometimes forced them, to ignore their childhood, asking them to perform a different role and adopt an alternative status. From

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[1] Having been with the same group of people since Primary School I was looking for a change as I came to the end of my GCSE year. My parents gave me the opportunity to attend my brother's old school for sixth form, but desperate for greater independence I decided I wanted to apply to a boarding school. So, I did. Much to the surprise of my parents I researched the potential schools, then organised an interview and the entrance exam myself. I subsequently gained a place at a large Independent boy's school that had only just started accepting girls into the 6th form.

this, I developed a pedagogy based on the notion that education is often a personal struggle to obtain one's own thinking, find one's voice, and develop "a critical self that gives one the right to choose rather than be chosen" (Arslan 2015, p. 111). Finding one's voice is more than just having something to say, but refers to a person's distinct perspective, opinions, ideas, and emotions. It empowers active participation (in class) with people encouraged to enrich the (learning) environment through contributing their unique insights. It is vitally important therefore that students move beyond merely repeating information or conforming to the opinions of others, but instead, they should be encouraged to express their own thinking and engage critically with the world. It is this narrative that I have tried to carry forward, believing it to be central to my educational career.

The same questions, "Who am I?" and "How should we be?" that had formed a pointed part of my adolescence, remaining largely unanswered as I grew older, continued to be a key feature of those I interacted with in my work with young people. Following the years after I left the Mulberry Bush, I worked as a Secondary School teacher of Philosophy and Ethics[2]. The subject required me to help students explore questions regarding the concept of humanity and the notion of 'self' from an abstract academic perspective, yet also simultaneously offered the potential for those taking the course to consider personal self-growth and reflection.[3] However, as much as "[a]utonomy depends on the existence of options [,] Education cannot supply these, but it can make students aware of them. Its job is partly to open up horizons on different conceptions of how one should live- ways of life, forms of relationship, vocational and nonvocational activities" (Callan & White, 2003, p. 97). As a result, I have always aimed to leave students with questions that stick with them long after the exam has been sat and we have parted ways. It was apparent that the classic existential question "Who am I?" remained unsatisfactorily answered, generation after generation. Each time posed anew, with everyone still reaching for the answer or *an* answer at the very least.

Running parallel to this has been the infiltration of technology into every area of our lives. It became increasingly apparent that while education became full of talk of platforms, apps, tracking data, on-screen assessments, and most recently, Artificial Intelligence, the pupils' lives became filled with social media, online messages, updates, and push notifications. Articulations of "Who am I? seemed to initially develop in an online parallel, but eventually online and offline existences ceased to be experienced as separate events. Lines between the two became blurred further, with online schooling and digital interaction becoming the "new normal" for the vast majority during the COVID-19 lockdown of 2019, and most recently AI 'friends' being added to social media to become a part of everyday experience.

I am keen to try to understand how this is potentially affecting concepts of self. In this age of social media and new technology, it is uncertain how the Delphic imperative to 'know thyself' has changed in relation to the lives of young people. Not only have a multitude of

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[2] I have taught a combination of Religious Studies, Theology, Philosophy and Ethics for over 12 years to students aged between 11 and 18, covering GCSE, International Baccalaureate, AS Level and A2 Level. I have also run Philosophy taster days for children aged between 6 and 10.

[3] The current OCR A Level course, for example, asks students to study notions such as personhood and autonomy through applied ethical theory, thereby offering them the security provided by the abstraction and intellectualisation of theoretical approaches, as well as experiencing a simultaneous sense of personal engagement with meaningful issues and truly situated learning.

opportunities for self-definition and expression opened up, but society's relationship with knowledge has also rapidly changed and developed. In The *Phaedrus*, Socrates alludes to people appearing absurd when they try to know obscure things before they know themselves, arguing that wisdom began with self-awareness and an understanding of ones limitations, beliefs and values. He believed that people who lack self-awareness are susceptible to being deceived by their own ignorance and biases and therefore trying to understand obscure or complex matters without a firm grasp of one's own beliefs and limitations could lead to arrogance, false confidence, and intellectual confusion. Socratic self-knowledge involves questioning one's assumptions, beliefs, and values through critical reflection and introspection. It requires an honest examination of one's motives, desires, and actions to better understand one's strengths and weaknesses. The *Phaedrus* continues to carry relevance in our contemporary context, with the challenges presented by new technologies, often regarded as "obscure things", it becomes crucial to ensure that we do not neglect the pursuit of self-knowledge or lose touch with the various aspects that give us our sense of who we are and what it means to be human. This said, the notion of what it is to be human is one of the most fundamental enquiries of existence and one that can be approached in a multitude of ways, resulting in a series of further questions rather than necessarily producing a satisfactory answer. It was this that led my research to address the question "What meaning does the Delphic Injunction to Know Thyself have in an age dominated by social media?". Exploring and responding to this question is the central aim of this thesis.

Situating my research

It can be said that until very recently, the bulk of research into the field of social media[4] has not been directly concerned with the philosophy of ontology, with the focus being largely upon the measurable and quantifiable, often in relation to commercial interest, addiction, or recommended amounts of screen-time. It is also true to say that much has been made in the press regarding the potentially negative impact of social media in relation to mental health and wellbeing, with causal links being suggested (but not proved[5]) between depression/suicide/ self-harm/ eating disorders and social media use. However, this thesis is not an attempt at causal research but rather it is the expression of a new hybrid onlife[6] self that I seek to explore, considering what social media self-expression can offer in terms of self-knowledge. I propose that social media opens an important space for self-understanding and a new framing for engagement with the question 'Who am I?' and, therefore, can serve as a valuable tool for many in the modern articulation of a search for self-knowledge.

In order to pursue this matter, I adopt something akin to what education research methods call bricolage for the examination of some of the ways in which the question of what knowing-

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[4] By social media I mean "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking" https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/social_media

[5] A paper published in 2019 discredits that the evidence used to suggest that social media causes depression and raises suicide rates in teenagers; Orben et all suggest that the trivial trends have been routinely overinterpreted, and problematic conclusions. They found that social media use is not, in and of itself, a strong predictor of life satisfaction across the adolescent population. Instead, social media effects are nuanced, small at best, reciprocal over time, gender specific, and contingent on analytic methods. **Invalid source specified.**

[6] Onlife is a term used by Luciano Floridi to describe the hybrid existence that spans both online and offline life (Floridi, 2015)

oneself might mean or how it might be understood and interpreted. It is my intention that the application of this approach will allow for an expansive and innovative exploration of the injunction to "Know thyself" within the context of social media. As a result, I will be drawing upon diverse and heterogeneous sources ranging from philosophical writing, and contemporary art works, to social media posts in order that I might demonstrate connections and generate rich and nuanced perspectives on the complex emerging phenomena.

Dominant ways of thinking in different disciplines, aspects of professional practice in education and other fields, and a variety of media images, all tacitly or explicitly construct assumptions about the self and about how it might be understood. Rather than broaching such questions head-on, it will be worth, as a way into these problems and to avoid prejudging the matter, looking at the kinds of practice and ways of thinking in which conceptions of the self and of self-knowledge have emerged. In this thesis, I propose to identify these as different "narratives" that in some ways rival one another in their influence, however, I will intertwine philosophy, art, and educational theory in the hope that this interdisciplinary conversation enriches the perceptions and interpretations of our newly framed digital existence. By exploring, combining, and juxtaposing connections among different sources and insights, I will draw attention to the patterns, contradictions, or novel perspectives that emerge from this process. However, I am not concerned with producing a general theory of self, and as a result, I do not attempt either a final amalgamation nor a combat between theories. I intend neither resolution, assimilation, nor segregation of disciplines, but instead an exchange across the boundaries.

In an environment where society is presented with the notion that technology knows us better than we know ourselves, this research seeks to articulate the development and formation of contemporary individuals' understanding of who they are. As I have used the experience of Facebook/ Instagram/ LinkedIn/ Tinder as a starting point of study, my focus will be on Western models of self. Digital platforms and networks encode particular theories of self[7] and are shaped by the Western liberal pluralist legal system with its particular norms of responsibility, autonomy, control, choice, and privacy, as well as the regulatory frameworks that govern the internet and instantiate the autonomy and rights of the individual self[8]. Furthermore, people use a variety of platforms through which to express or explore themselves, and the ways in which they use each platform or digital ecology is as much a part of what they are choosing to say about themselves as the content they post. Given that the majority of those on social media access an average of five different platforms (6.55 networks for those aged 16-24 and 4.21 networks for those aged 25-34[9]) it seems only natural to take the range of these into account when reflecting upon the ways the modern generation comes to self-knowledge in an emerging techno-culture. I use the term *social media* therefore to refer to a range of social networking sites, including, but not exclusively, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, and it is, therefore, important to keep the research located in the area of social media in general[10].

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[7] For more on this, see (Cohen, 2012, p. 10)

[8] These are developed further by (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017)

[9] Mander (2018) https://www.globalwebindex.net/blog/internet-users-have-average-of-5-social-media-accounts Accessed Jan 1 2019

[10] Although the majority of examples in this piece are from Facebook and Twitter in my wider research, they will not be limited to such.

Part One is largely descriptive: it sets out to reveal some of the territory that needs to be crossed if a better perspective on the topic is to be achieved. In Part Two, by contrast, I consider the themes of Love, Truth, and Beauty, in order to address the subject of the self[11]. These seek to provide plausible, compelling, or perhaps provocative discussion on self-knowledge in the social media dominated age. In the final section, I bring these thoughts together to suggest that it is not only high theory or the arts that elucidate life experience, but that "trash" culture reveals much about that which is reflected, accentuated, and experienced within the webs of our online and offline existence. I will be arguing that social media offers an important space for self-understanding and engaging with the question "Who am I?". Placing a more metaphysical understanding of self in light of Platonic ideals, alongside constructivist tensions in relation to the social media self, as well as drawing upon the concept of a verifiable and provable "me", I will consider how existence and essence interact in relation to self-knowledge.

Who am I? Online, Inlife, on the Web.

Sometimes, life can be punctured by upheaval, and it seems that what was coherent about one's existence up to a certain point is entirely disrupted. Such situations force us to reconsider our position in the world, bringing a series of questions intensely into focus: Who am I? Who was I? Who will I be? How can I know who I am? It allows for things to be questioned under sharp illumination. Navigating such a personal reality and questioning one's interactions with the world, runs parallel with the ubiquitous mainstream concern to "Be the real you" and "Be who you are", which presumes there is some sort of solid foundation upon which to be. Yet, by contrast, many do not really feel they have knowledge of who or what that is.

"Spiders make their webs which are nearly invisible until the dew falls on them. They are made with threads stronger than steel and take their shape from the surrounding circumstances and the spider herself."

(Griffiths 2003 p2)

Figure 1 https://www.outdoorphotographer.com/gallery/submission/686110-spider-web-with-dew-drops/

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[11] The transcendentals are the properties of being, nowadays commonly considered to be truth, beauty and goodness. The concept arose from medieval scholasticism. Viewed ontologically, the transcendentals are understood to be what is common to all beings. From a cognitive point of view, they are the "first" concepts, since they cannot be logically traced back to something preceding them.

For many social media serves as an important vehicle through which they seek to provide evidence of who they are, both to themselves and to others. It is as if there is a need to document or prove who they are via concrete things such as check-ins, photos, status updates, or statistics from their smart watches regarding their step count. There is a sense in which they are archiving their lives and, weaving webs of existence that take shape from themselves and their surrounding circumstances. Furthermore, in a certain regard, social media posts could be an attempt to curate 'droplets' to make their spider webs visible (like in the image above). The boundary between the shape of the web and the droplets is blurred, cutting across both the intensely personal and the openly public. However, there is a sense of performance in the drops, they simultaneously seem to reveal a hint of the shape of someone's life as well as the reality they want to inhabit. Just as the drops and the spider's strands need one another to reveal the web, people's performance and realities need each other to show up as a coherent social-mediac-life, or Facebookself.

A Vignette

A wife and a mother, a teacher and a runner.
My existence summed up on Facebook, on my fitbit, online, on my cv.
Educated with certificates and degrees to prove it.
I ran fast and I ran far – there are pictures of medals and data from races as evidence.
You will see that I am a chameleon, or perhaps not.
There are photos to show I morph from having credentials, degrees, and higher education, to being 'just mum' through societal expectation.
My Twitter would tell you I am serious, that I have a viewpoint.
But my Facebook would show you that viewpoints are all we have.
I aimed to show up as Wonderwoman – a juxtaposition.
Presenting myself to the online world as a feminist triathlete / Religious Studies teacher, with long blonde hair and killer heels, who bakes cakes for her babies, when she gets back from running marathons and writing her PhD.

But if you look closely, you will see I disappeared for a year or two.
The dew drops that made me show up in the world were shaken off and, as a result, 'I' disappeared.
The things I had relied upon to make me visible, both to myself and the world, were impacted upon and I was left without image, without voice.
It took me nearly three years to begin to make sense of why I went away.
I am still in the process of re-making the web of 'me' visible and laying down new drops.

I disappeared online (and offline) after intensely trying to prove I was valued, and I was good at things, with a ferocity and an anger I had not known before.
An anger that scared me.
There is a distinct before and after.

Photographs that had one meaning before, changed.
So, I de-faced friends, I purged my facebookself of specific people, places,
times, and events.
I took control of my facebooklife and created my after.
A very specific and angular, almost sharp, perspective.
I sought to create a hard shell from my facticity, an armour to stop you
touching me.
The Timeline was there but I had redacted it.
Looking through it today without this knowledge people would probably never
know.

But I do.

And it was me that received the "this day 2 years ago" updates.
It was me that saw you 'liked' pictures that were mine to like, it was me who
saw the 'mutual friends' listed.

You made my skin crawl, so it was me that pumped out subtexts showing
I was SO fun, SO loving, SO successful,
SO MUCH BETTER THAN YOU.

But then I stopped. I disappeared.

Because it was me who also gradually became speechless, unable to find the
words, unable to find the actions to move, unable to go to work, unable to find
the button to click, to share.
I became paralysed.
Unable to be that Wonderwoman of the photos or the data.
Some days unable to get out of bed.
Since my world had so cataclysmically destabilised how I saw myself it made
sense that the world should no longer get to see me.
But I disappeared to myself at the same time as I disappeared from the world.
I thought I must be the sum of my actions, but the sums equalled nothing.
I disappeared inside myself, but I found nothing.
I had no armour of existence but neither did I have an essence.
The dewdrops that made the web of me were shaken off and I fought to see
where I even was.
I thought I had disappeared but now I know
I was simply invisible.

I look back now at my Facebook and pictures have new meanings overlaid,
new memories attached.
A new sub-text.
These pictures remain evidence of my existence, making me show up to myself.
I can now allow the world to see *me* so I add more pieces of evidence.
Carefully curated, but content.

My face features rarely. I am not sure I want to be reminded of the me-now in
the future. Not sure I want to know how I look. I want to know what I did
though. I want to be reminded of how I showed up in the world.
What things happened when, with whom.

I am still not fully present online or inlife.
I am a spiders-web.
Invisible until the dew falls.
I am laying down new strands of me, but they remain invisible until the
droplets of water fall.
I add others' photos as dew, check-ins and droplets, articles as evidence of my
mind.
Some drops show I have pruned aspects of my web away or added to others.
Other drops will show different aspects of my web to me.
Things I had not noticed.
They will show tears and breakages.
These will be aspects that show up the strength of who I want to be and
hopefully to an extent already am.
They will show up my next self, now self, past self.
They will make me visible.

(Anonymous 2020)

I need you to hold onto those thoughts. Watch them weave their web as we progress.

Research Approach and Structure

Non-linear Part-to-whole

Given that my thesis explores a variety of ways we document ourselves through social media, presenting evidence to both ourselves and others as we reach to "know thyself", it seems appropriate to write in a style that reflects the experience of using social media and my experience of researching the topic. Writing logically in a linear style is not the way one writes online, nor is it the experience inherent on social media. As much as the likes of Facebook initially formed themselves around timelines, users' experiences resisted this format, preferring instead an orderly but not ordered approach to their posts. Tiles of pictures form an aesthetic whole but force no motion through time. Rather than logical, progressive, and rational arguments, social media is formed around content as much as the desire for rabbit

holes[12], and the constant pull of deviations and distractions. Although I have tried to retain a linear argument, the subject matter has in many instances defied this approach. Footnotes seemed to contain arguments, larger points became bracketed, and backstories seemed to foreground themselves. I have tried to lead the reader through what my supervisor frequently referred to as a dense forest, but there have been points where I have come to appreciate that my style has ended up as reflective of the immersion in, or perhaps fusion with, an online world.

This lack of linearity in approach led me to the "graphic novel[13]" *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis. Taken from the idea of a graphic novel it puts forward the suggestion that our traditional, linear modes of thinking, particularly through text-based mediums, limit our perception and understanding of the world. As an exploration of the potential of using visual language as part of education, *Unflattening* aims to teach us how to fuse words and images to produce new forms of knowledge. Entirely through the use of cartoon imagery Sousanis suggests that we can expand our perspectives by embracing a more multi-dimensional approach to knowledge and learning. His cartoons explore the way new possibilities open up when you are not constricted by one form of language, suggesting that when you encourage other modes of making / thinking / doing it can send you in different directions, with new avenues for knowing through alternative ways of constructing a language serving to reframe our view of the world.

"you can have more information in an image than seems possible, the page becomes less flat than it might be. Non-linear, tangential, layered… Image gives you the opportunity to expand you thinking in several dimensions"
Nick Sousanis in an interview with Steve Dahmberg & Mary Alice Long on Creativity in Play blogcast

The importance of what Sousanis calls "visual thinking" on the back of his book will be in evidence throughout my work as ideas are supported and furthered with images, however there are two particular images within *Unflattening* that I use to bookend this thesis. These served to articulate my thinking, making less than logical ideas feel more tangible and coherent.

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[12]This reference to rabbit holes is a deliberate nod to Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. The rabbit hole is a significant and iconic element of the story in which it serves as a metaphorical representation of leaving behind the rational and predictable world aboveground and entering a realm of imagination, dreams, and absurdity. It serves as a symbol of adventure, curiosity, and is a place where reality is distorted, representing Alice's departure from the conventional and mundane reality of her everyday life. Throughout her journey in Wonderland, Alice's experiences prompt her to question the nature of reality, identity, and the rules that govern the world. The rabbit hole therefore became a gateway to self-discovery and self-knowledge and it feels wholly appropriate to refer to rabbit holes on social media while holding this interpretation in mind.

[13] I have put the phrase graphic novel in inverted commas as the work does not follow the traditional form of this medium. For example, while it is presented in a sequence of panels or frames, where each panel represents a specific idea, there are no central characters or narrative progression in *Unflattening*.

The first image serves as a scaffold for my entire thesis, specifically in relation to its structure and rhizomatic approach. As outlined in the image, "each node is connected to any other" (Deleuze and Guattari), and in much the same way, it will become apparent that the nodes, or divisions, within my writing serve only as panes or panels from which a cohesive narrative can be seen to form. Aspects connect to one another, and ideas resurface in multiple sections. The Kaleidoscopic views referred to by Sousanis (in relation to the work of Bakhtin) are apparent through the constantly turning kaleidoscope of my writing to produce new views of self-knowledge in relation to social media. I shall return to this image at several points within the thesis.

The second Sousanis image of the Mona Lisa speaks more specifically to my conceptualisation of the nature of self-knowledge within the context of social media. It focuses upon imagination and image, themes that I visit in Part Two. In the sections entitled Love, Truth, and Beauty, I focus upon specific moments and how they fit within the context of a larger narrative, exploring the nature of self-knowledge on social media in part-to-whole form. In Sousanis' depiction, the Mona Lisa is deconstructed and set out in panel form, focussing upon individual aspects of the image that make little sense when viewed linearly. However, when placed on the image underneath that is viewed 'in the round' they offer detail and clarity to certain aspects of the whole. As Sousanis argues, this makes us use our imagination to fill in the less clear elements of the image. The same can be argued for social media. We can gain knowledge of the self in some very acute and specific ways – qualified and quantified – from and through social media, but only when we appreciate the importance of creative imagination that unifies our understanding of the image will we be in a position that offers the potential for self-knowledge.

Miniature and Immense

The nonlinear, part-to-whole relationship is further reflected in the way that social media arranges itself in such a way that the minutiae is collided with the immense [14]; for example,

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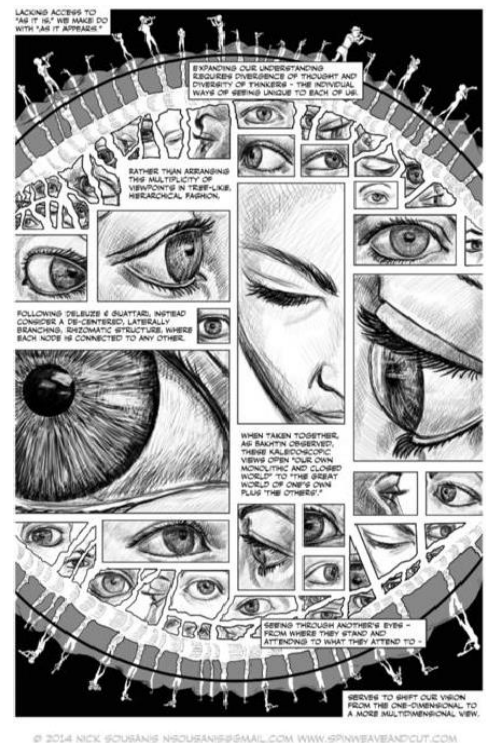
[14] Lawrence Scott (Scott, 2018) refers to social media feeds being inherently bathetic, clashing our personal concerns and the big issues of the day. He contrasts this with a more formal news report, which deliberately and carefully manages the emotional tone through its ordering of the news stories. Starting with shocking and ending with lighter style reports.

on a timeline, political events sit next to a friend's birthday, and war stories run alongside images of a cat in fancy dress. There are routinely promiscuous jumps between people, topics, and issues.[15] I have echoed this sense of collision, using the 'immense' themes identified in the Platonic Forms of Love, Truth, and Beauty to form an overarching structure, and yet deliberately crashing, yet connecting, them with the minutiae of social media and the 'immense' of human existence. I interweave this with ideas from existentialism, epistemology, and theories of visual communication. However, the structure of my work not only develops a clash between grand classical philosophy with trash culture, but also plays upon the juxtaposition of a vast, sprawling, high-tech, World Wide Web connected social media, with the diminutive, containing, natural web of the spider, encouraging a further sense of mismatch between metaphor drawn from nature and the technological world.[16]

Figure 2: spider on a web. Figure 3: Internet of Things depiction of Connectivity Framework https://www.iiconsortium.org/iicf/ Figure 4: Html Network – each computer / router forms a Gateway or node.

The points of intersection between a spider's strands form connections between separate aspects of their web and its anchor points. It could be argued that these are echoed by Gateways[17] on an html web. Both allowing for the linking of disparate and distinct entities. In my writing, I have created what one might also call Gateways that serve to link the disparate and distinct aspects of digital social media, to both the communal of human nature and philosophical ideas of self-knowledge.

Yet, on the one hand, just as happens with objects, colliding ideas can also result in a shattering or a splintering. However, just like a mirror that has also shattered, the parts somehow remain part of a connected whole, even though they are now separate. They can still produce a reflection with some unity, even if it appears somewhat differently to before. I wanted to echo this sentiment and bring the sense of a splintered unity social media can offer through my writing.

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[15] As a result, serendipity and osmosis seemed to form as much a part of my research method as more traditional approaches.

[16] It is also worth noting that the use of nature words for internet-based concepts is not unusual; clouds, viruses, worms, swarm, and bugs to name just a few.

[17] Gateways on an HTML network work as network nodes, offering connections between different networks or aspects of the network.

The installation shown on the left was created to reflect a teenager's experience on social media.[18] I shall return to this image in more depth in 'Beauty' but for now I think placing the splintered mirror and the picture of the spider's web side by side, serves as a useful frame for my writing. The shapes echo one another, one tying aspects together, the other in the process of breaking apart. In a similar way, the Delphic injunction to" Know Thyself" produces an effect of personal unity, like the spider's web, but one that splinters into a myriad of questions and pathways, regarding self-reflection, self-reflectivity, and self-deception, like the mirror. In my mind, they are both reminiscent (in different ways) of the first Sousanis cartoon image above.

Splintered Unity

This sense of a splintered unity and part-to-whole relationship, coupled with inspiration from Walter Benjamin's Bricolage[19] approach to thinking, has informed greatly upon my exploration of self, as expressed through and on social media. Influenced by a description of Benjamin's work as tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrate one another[20], I will also be tearing fragments from the prose I began with, 'Who am I? Online Inlife', as well as work by philosophers, poets, and artists. I will be holding them alongside a variety of online experiences, and interactions with the intention that they are placed anew in order to illustrate ways people attempt to form self-knowledge in an age dominated by social media. Literary theory, art or film criticism, tends to base itself upon a particular text, or style, and in much the same way, this research will take specific examples of the social media genre and analyse them philosophically. However, to overcome any criticism that the cultural object, social media, is subservient to theory, it must be allowed space to speak for itself, not merely through the theoretical frame imposed upon it. For this reason, I will draw upon specific moments, individuals, as well as groups, and genres from social media platforms. It will also look to the notion of intertextuality in the context of social media; in which videos, memes, and GIFs are placed in different contexts to create new knowledge and meaning. My aim is to allow each to express through the differing rhetoric and techniques their varying representations, and conceptions of self.

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[18] Created by Alex Cove and exhibited at Cheltenham College Art Department 2019

[19] Bricoleur is a French word that means to fiddle, tinker, and make creative and resourceful use of whatever materials are at hand. It may be interesting to note that the French equivalent of the UK based DIY shop B&Q is called Mr Bricolage.

[20] Notable in the Arcades project – this was never finished but is a text frequently used as a working model upon which to base bricolage centred methodologies.

My writing will bring to the fore many interpretive paradigms, highlighting that the boundaries between previously separated traditional disciplines no longer hold. The outcome will be a complex, quiltlike, bricolage, or a reflexive collage of interconnected representations. However, pushing the folksy tradition of quilting[21] into the twenty first century, my writing will also reflect the experience of being on social media. Although social media stitches together genres, ideas, and images to form a quilt like impression, the cover is not flat, but multidimensional. Therefore, my Web-writing or html-writing style seeks to reflect this multidimensional aspect, meaning various pathways will be 'scrolled' through quickly; some will be metaphorically swiped left and discarded, while others will be swiped right, dwelt upon, and looked at in more depth.[22] The structure of my thesis will take the form of a sequence of representations ultimately connecting the parts to a whole, if not a centre, in much the same way as the tiles on an Instagram account offer a sense of unity, if not a middle.

Figure 3: Be Her Lead Instagram account (reproduced with permission)

The choice to write in this way is not only appropriate but necessary because exploring questions related to the convergence of the search for self-knowledge within a digital culture requires both contextual and granular analysis of the articulation. Social media, being a subjective realm shaped by lived experiences, embodied through digital interactions, necessitates a holistic approach that considers the interconnectedness of various aspects. Merely isolating and examining specific elements of this complex landscape would not provide a comprehensive understanding. In the words of Wittgenstein, the subject matter "compels us to travel over a wide field of thought, criss-cross in every direction" (PI Preface). Therefore, similar to a journey that can have both planned destinations and spontaneous detours, this exploration of digital culture involves following a structured path while also allowing for serendipitous routes that lead to new territories and uncharted spaces. This dynamic approach enables the discovery of novel insights and a deeper grasp of the multifaceted nature of digital culture.

The approach I have chosen considers how embodiment shapes and is shaped by social media, with the landscape continually shifting and shimmering. In line with this, it will therefore also be important to bear the concept of lubricity in mind, as often both knowledge

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[21] The process of quilting is one that has been characterised as the feminine equivalent of bricolage (Elsley, 1996, p. 13). The quilter collects and creatively assembles the odd or seemingly disparate elements into a functional, integrated whole. Donna Harraway describes how each patch becomes "[...] a knot of knowledge-making practices, industry, and commerce, popular culture, social struggles, psychoanalytic formations, bodily histories, human and nonhuman actions, local and global flows, inherited narratives, new stories, syncretic technical/cultural processes, and more" in (Haraway D. J., 1997, p. 129). A quilt highlights and enables individual voices to engage within a communal sphere, forming what Mikhail Bakhtin referred to as an "eternal harmony of unmerged voices", Baktin cited in (Tanaka, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997, p. 264).

[22] On many online dating sites, swiping left on someone's profile indicates that you are not interested. To swipe right means you want to explore something further.

and a sense of self can slip through our fingers when we clutch at it hardest.[23] The notion of a stable truth, especially within an online context, is becoming less and less straightforward, which, when combined with the ever-changing and developing nature of who we feel ourselves to be, makes for a difficult view from nowhere. As a result, attempting to measure self-knowledge as if it were an objective reality would not prove useful, but referencing the phenomenological experience within the established continental philosophical framework of existentialism, will be valuable when reaching for an understanding of the possibilities to "know thyself" in today's techno-culture. Placing emphasis upon the experience of coming to know highlights the relationship between the knower and that which is known[24], and as a result, rather than attempting to identify a tangible and consistent truth in relation to self-knowledge, I will be considering a relational way of knowing[25], suggesting that one could say that the emotional connection with the idea that we know who we are functions as a touchstone, rather than as a sense in which one possesses self-knowledge.

Through discussion of the goals and methods used in relation to the examples on social media, the thesis will look to develop the sense of self-understanding created through the medium. I show the manifestation, reinforcement, and accentuation of this way of thinking, and I follow this with reflection on the limitations or problems that come with the picture of self-knowledge that the narrative enables. As a result, the research will be interpretive rather than analytical; not so much a systematic and exhaustive study of one specific form of social media or another, but rather a philosophical reflection upon our present circumstances in relation to the notion of self-knowledge in the face of a culture dominated by social media. I aim to draw upon the notion of things themselves[26] capturing the phenomenon of self-knowledge in light of social media, rather than looking to question whether the self is 'real' or 'knowable' beyond this. Instead of focussing upon whether 'I' exist, but rather on how people gain and

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[23] This was inspired by Emerson - "this evanescence and lubricity of all objects […] lets them slip through our fingers […] when we clutch hardest…" (Emerson, 1909)

[24] For example, there can be shades of knowing. It is possible for those who studied remotely during the pandemic to feel that they may know UCL, perhaps they even went to the lengths of Google earth-ing the main building and became familiar with its various pathways and routes. However, when they were eventually able to travel, they formed a new relationship with the areas that they already knew in one sense yet had no knowledge of at all in another. Knowing UCL is a qualitatively different experience. Forming memories in hallways provides orientation for other thoughts and judgements. It is possible for a moment in that exact location to open a connection, a different knowledge to 'what it is' but instead a feeling of what it was like. Similarly, there is the feeling one gets when one understands something for the first time. For me as a teacher, it was one of the most rewarding moments in a day when a pupil had the lightbulb moment, and they know-that-they-know. It is more than mere comprehension of a fact, but there is a sense in which they have taken it inside themselves and woven it into their narrative of understanding the world. Interestingly, a similar experience would take place for me, only in reverse. When attempting to assist pupils with Maths or French homework, I would have the feeling that I knew it, and I remembered the sensation of knowing it from the past, but frequently I could only connect with the feeling, rather than the actual knowing. The sensation of knowing something was all I was left with, unable to recall the actual information. I would be incapable of reformulating the verb or offer the solution to the equation. This relational form of knowing is something quite different from ownership of information, it cannot be verified in terms of tangible evidence, as from this perspective, one cannot use the five senses to establish the truth or meaning of the knowledge. It would make no sense to do so. This in turn leads back to the lubricity of knowledge, and it is worth exploring more fully in relation to self-knowledge. To this end, the impression of feeling like you know (yourself) will be discussed further in Part Two Section 1, Truth.

[25] Inspired by Cavell's work on knowing by feeling.

[26] For more on this see Husserl (Husserl, 2001 [1900/1901], p. 168) and (Husserl 1982, sec. 75).

create a sense of who they are from the relationship between presentation and perception (be that their own or other people's), the research seeks to understand experiences on social media as real things in themselves. It will consider self/ self-knowledge 'as it is', looking to provide a clear, undistorted description of the ways things appear. It is worth exploring how we, on the one hand, perhaps seek to present many versions of ourselves as a way of capturing, owning, or pinning the "me" down in an evidential, documentable form, thereby moving "me" from a set of beliefs about who I am to a verifiable, almost scientific truth, a proper noun with a capital letter "Me". Yet on the other, perhaps it is more along the lines of wanting the examples of "me" to hint at the Platonic Form of "Me", one that is not verifiable in the same way but simply known through rationality coupled with innate knowledge of self. Or maybe we seek to construct ourselves through the versions we present, creating ourselves from the exemplars we post. But, then again, perhaps we should not look for meaning to be uncovered through our posts, pursuing a true metaphysical reality beyond this world, but instead we should focus upon the apparent, adopting a position where all we have and all we can know is how we appear and how the world appears to us. In this case, asking whether there is a 'real me' or even a 'different me' beyond that is to ask the wrong question.

In conclusion, this thesis is not posing the question "How should one come to know oneself?" in an attempt to come to a definitive answer, but instead is more interested in considering the attempts that are made as we reach to try and "know thyself" in a world dominated by social media. For it is through endeavouring to come to know a thing that we learn the most.

Summary of Introduction

Introduction

Situation myself
Situating my
research

Research
Approach &
Structure

10
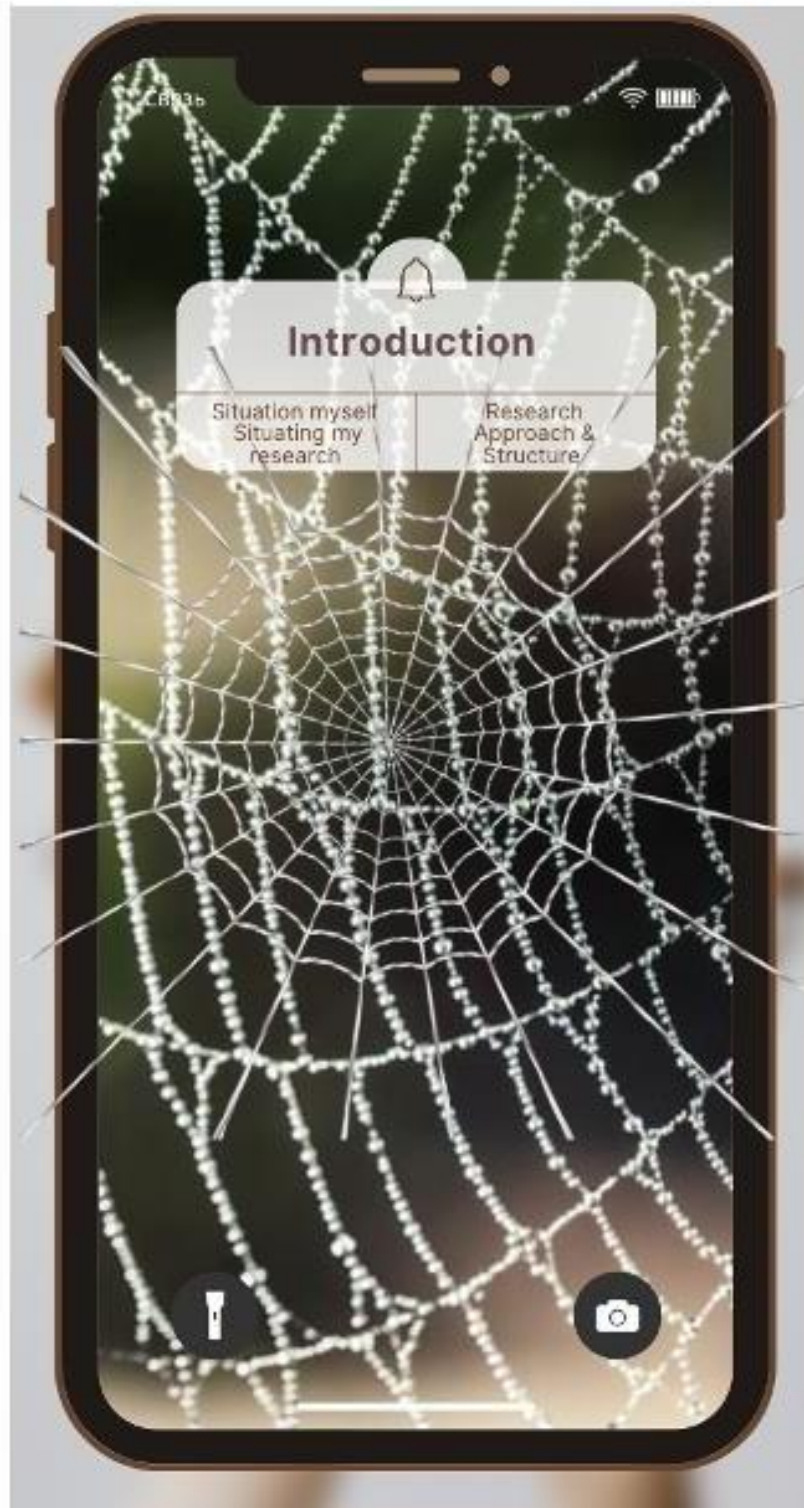
PART ONE

Part One: The Philosophical Search for Self-Knowledge

Tracking the territory

This section will be partly descriptive: it sets out to reveal some of the territory that needs to be crossed if a better perspective on the topic of self-knowledge might be achieved. Philosophy has often used cultural examples as a pedagogical tool, and in line with this, my thesis will explore the oracle's injunction to "Know thyself" in terms of what it might mean in an age of social media. Exploring self-knowledge within this frame will add depth to an understanding of the contemporary way in which we too have reached for an answer to this question "Who am I?" just as those from previous generations have also done. Confronting the question "Who am I?" in the contemporary age, dominated by the influence of social media, means the Delphic Injunction to Know Thyself" takes on a distinct and evolving significance, yet it remains in the same philosophical space as all that has gone before as it is concerned with an issue that cannot be resolved in any definitive way. However, the dynamic nature of our digital existence and the interconnectedness facilitated by social media perhaps offers a different and/or evolved response to the inquiry.

It is worth noting from the outset that the views on self in Western and Eastern philosophy are diametrically opposite: in the West, there exists a multitude of definitions of the self, it is a problem that remains unsolved, whereas in eastern philosophical approaches, the predominant view is, instead, that the self is an illusion. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to focus upon the Western conceptions of self in relation to self-knowledge. This is largely due to my interest in the way westernised social media interacts with, has influenced, and reflects, this multiple and refracted perspective on human understanding of self.

But let us pause a moment.

Reportedly inscribed above the entrance to the Temple at Delphi "Know Yourself" is not phrased as a question. It does not ask "Do you know yourself? Therefore, it did not require introspection or soul-searching from those who entered, but rather served as a pause, with a sense of "check yourself" or "know your status in life" inferred. More modern interpretations of the notion of self-knowledge have led to our retrospective interpretation, with similar statements from philosophers of the time like "the unexamined life is not worth living"[27] taking on a different significance from the way they would have been understood in their original context. It is therefore important to spend a moment considering the perspective from which "Know Thyself" was initially uttered.

In ancient Greek times, the notion of self was intricately interconnected with the concept of community and an individual self made little sense to the Greeks as they understood it not as an isolated individual entity but as an integral part of the larger social fabric. Greek notions of self were often expressed through a collective identity rather than an individualistic one, with citizenship and family bonds playing a crucial role in shaping one's sense of self. It was these that conferred a place within the social hierarchy and fostered a sense of shared identity and mutual obligations. Individuals were encouraged to prioritise the welfare of the collective over individual desires, and loyalty to the community and its values were highly valued. As a result, any requirement to "Know Thyself" would have been deeply influenced by one's role as an individual's identity and status were defined by their relationships within the community.

However, over time the focus of self-knowledge has expanded (or arguably retracted) to include introspection, as well as the use of reason and observation, to understand one's place in the world and this led to a re-reading of "Know Thyself". For example, towards the beginning of the 19th century, Kant (1797) wrote that "know thyself" should be understood as an ethical commandment to know one's own emotions and to understand the motives behind one's actions, in order to harmonise one's will with one's duty. The more recent rise of self-help, wellness and psychotherapy foregrounds the introspective understanding of self-knowledge, highlighting the importance of understanding not only conscious thought and feeling, but also unconscious fears that may influence our behaviour.

As the concept of self and its relationship to community has become more complex, interconnected, and diverse in the contemporary globalised world, the interpretation of "know thyself" has continued to evolve. In modern times, there has been a notable shift towards individualism, where personal identity and fulfilment are often prioritised over collective well-being. The emphasis on personal rights, freedoms, and autonomy has led to a more independent and self-focused approach to life and although globalisation and technological advancements have connected people across the world, giving rise to diverse virtual communities that transcend geographical boundaries, traditional community structures have eroded, often leading to feelings of disconnection and fragmentation in contemporary societies. Moreover, the values and priorities of modern individuals have shifted, leading to an increased focus on personal achievements, self-expression, and the recognition of diverse identities.

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[27] The unexamined life is not worth living was supposedly uttered by Socrates as his trial for impiety and corrupting youth. It is recorded in Plato's Apology 38a-5-6.

Although many philosophers have advanced conceptions of the self, such as Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Freud, Jung, Adler, James, Horny, Fromm, Skinner, and others [28], it is worth noting that within the western tradition there are still those who argue against the existence of self. Patricia Churchland, for example, when considering eliminative materialism, denies the existence of a self, and David Hume suggests that self is a fiction given that identity is solely a quality that we attribute to an object, which in turn we perceive inconstantly (Hume, 1738/2003, pp. 179-188).[29] Added to this, more recently Taylor, Chechtmann, and Nelson introduced the narrative theory of self and personal identity.[30] At this stage, I will borrow something akin to the approach of handbooks of educational research and set out the categorisations of self in a neat table:

Table 1. Basic conceptions of the self in Western philosophy (Dimkov, 2020) (adapted from: Bachvarov, Draganov & Stoev, 1978: 16-17[31]; Sturm, 2007[32]; Dimkov, 2015, 2019[33])

Author/Philosophical School	Conception of the self
René Descartes (Rationalism)	The "self" represents something, which belongs to the thinking substance as an intuitive beginning of rational cognition, emphasizing its independence.
Solipsism	Solipsism represents the viewpoint of the isolated individual and contemplation (idealistic view).
Fichte, German classical philosophy	The "self" is a substance, the absolute creative beginning, which implies not only itself, but also everything that exists as is "not-self".

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[28] Their views are discussed in more length in Bachvarov, M., Draganov, M., & Stoev, S. (1978). Philosophical Dictionary. Sofia: Partizdat [Бъчваров, М., Драганов, М., & Стоев, С. (1978). Философски речник. София: Партиздат]. Mosig, Y. D. (2006). Conceptions of the Self in Western and Eastern psychology. Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 26(1-2), 39-50. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0091266. Zhu, Y., & Han, S. (2008). Cultural differences in the Self: From philosophy to psychology and neuroscience. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2/5, 1799–1811. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00133.x

[29] For further discussion on Hume's ideas re self as fiction see Giles, J. (1993).

[30] For further discussion on this see Sturm, T. (2007). The Self between philosophy and psychology: The case of self-deception. In Mitchell G. Ash & Thomas Sturm (Eds.), Psychology's Territories: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives from different disciplines (pp. 169-192). New Jersey & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers. Renz, U. (2017). Self-knowledge: A history. New York: Oxford University Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190226411.001.0001. Berčić, B. (2017). Perspectives on the Self. Rijeka: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka. Dimkov, P. (2019). Bipolar affective disorder with respect to the theories of the constitution of selfhood via narratives. In Annual collection of papers of the Department of Philosophical and Political Sciences (pp. 115-133). Faculty of Philosophy, South-West University "Neofit Rilski".

[31] Bachvarov, M., Draganov, M., & Stoev, S. (1978). Philosophical Dictionary. Sofia: Partizdat [Бъчваров, М., Драганов, М., & Стоев, С. (1978). Философски речник. София: Партиздат].

[32] Sturm, T. (2007). The Self between philosophy and psychology: The case of self-deception. In Mitchell G. Ash & Thomas Sturm (Eds.), Psychology's territories: Historical and contemporary perspectives from different disciplines (pp. 169-192). New Jersey & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

[33] Dimkov, P. (2015). A philosophical study of Freudian primary and secondary thought processes: Parallels of acute schizophrenic psychosis, psychedelic state and mystical experience. MSc Thesis, 203 unpublished. Osnabrück, Germany: Universität Osnabrück, FB 8 Humanwissenschaften, Institut für Kognitionswissenschaft (IKW). Dimkov, P. (2019a). Bipolar affective disorder with respect to the theories of the constitution of selfhood via narratives. In Annual collection of papers of the Department of Philosophical and Political Sciences (pp. 115-133). Faculty of Philosophy, South-West University "Neofit Rilski".

Hegel/German classical philosophy	The social essence of the human self-positioned as an estranged force, standing above concrete individuals, thus representing a world reason [absolute spirit].
Henri Bergson/Irrationalism	This view represents the self-confidence of the individual in the bourgeois society, which encounters the negation of the self.
Freud/Psychoanalysis and Metapsychology	Freud conceived of the self as a submersion of the ego in the id (the kingdom of the blind instincts) and a distorted perception of the individual of his societal essence as a result of the control exerted on it by the enraged "super-ego".
Dialectical materialism	The real battle of man for an accreditation is conceived as a creator of societal relations and the societal norms of life. The biggest and freest expression in each individual as an active subject of his human self becomes possible in the conditions of the all- encompassing (total) development of the personality.
Patricia Churchland/Eliminative Materialism	The self is thought as a sensus communis or a product of folk psychology and, as such, it does not exist in reality.
Daniel Dennett/Cognitive Science	The self is conceived as a homunculus or "a little man" that controls the performance on the theatre of consciousness.
Marya Schechtman & Hilde Nelson/Narrative theories for the constitution of self	The self is constructed through an incessant process of interpretation of the whole experiential richness of the individual, which is arranged in a chronological way. Some parts of this experiential richness can be more constitutive for the self in comparison to others.
Mead	Self is a cognitive, internalised conversation of gestures.
Social Constructivism	A reductionist view, according to which the self is constructed on the basis of the social interactions among people.
Alain Morin/Inner Speech	The phenomenon of "inner speech" is conceived as constitutive for the self-due to the fact that it represents a delimiter of the inner and the outer world of man.
Kenneth Gergen	Post modern culture has erased the category of self. A person is saturated with images from the media "that furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self (Gergen K. , 1991, p. 6). The images of the self are the reality of the postmodern self (Tseelon, 1992)

However, let us not run away with things. This table seems to miss something. It seems too clear cut.

The synoptic approach encapsulated by the table above is peculiarly misguided as it seems to suggest a level of concreteness which can be seductive. It may even lead us towards false solutions. Furthermore, reducing the philosophical contributions of one person or another to one or two sentences in a table serves to all but reduce or even remove meaning, not least because attempting to contain amorphous ideas with a few sentences or words when they are out of context, lacks something. It is as if we were using emoji to describe human emotions. Additionally, placing such things in a chart as if it were a means of scientific

classification makes such issues seem somehow resolved, as if they provide *the* answer of what a self is should you wish to subscribe to it. This implies that you simply need to decide which one you think is best and then work on the *knowing-the-self* aspect.

However, asking "Who am I?" and or "What do we mean by my self?" requires an expansive and unresolved approach. There is no escaping that knowledge of self is qualitatively different to knowledge of the world, as it does not relate to unequivocal facts in the same way– whether you have brown hair, or green eyes, or how tall you is not what is to be explored when thinking about self-knowledge. Instead, self-knowledge is what you notice when you are pulled up short, as in the example of the vignette, rather than what is contained in your passport. There are no short cuts to this kind of understanding, and we cannot encapsulate who we are, or how we encounter ourselves, in any a table. The key point is that the question will remain eternally unresolved specifically because every generation is faced with this question anew, and every individual needs to work out their way of answering. While previous generations can provide guidance, it is something that each individual needs to encounter for themselves. Their approach will be personal, shaped by their experiences, culture and society as self and knowledge of the self is not something that transmits as a fully formed answer to the next generation. Self-discovery and self-awareness can only be discovered first-hand.

Furthermore, to suggest that an answer exists to questions like "Who am I?" or "What do I mean by my self?" is somewhat reductionist. Not least because even in those moments where it may feel like insight or self-knowledge is achieved, an individual is continually changing, and the answer can only ever be transient. It cannot be fixed in nature because it is built on shifting sands. Additionally, as each generation faces unique challenges and opportunities simply asking such a question itself raises further questions. However, it cannot be denied that it is, and has always been, part of human nature to raise questions that cannot be answered, yet it remains the reaching for answers that is so important, and in turn it is the expression of these attempts at understanding who we are that are so interesting. As a result, I have always been wary of clear-cut solutions with regard to grasping a sense of self and have therefore struggled with any work on the self that has resembled the table above or taken a more prescriptive "handbook" approach and this is reflected in my research approach throughout this thesis.

However, even having acknowledged this, before we move on it is worth noting that there is yet a further aspect of the knowledge of self that is important to consider as it has specific resonance in relation to the digital world: "What is meant by the "real" self (as distinct from any other kind of self)?".

This division between "real" and "perceived" can be seen in Plato's Cave (a metaphor I return to through the course of my thesis) and is not specific to the digital world by any means. Plato's Cave underscores the idea that our everyday experiences are limited and imperfect reflections of a deeper "more real" and unchanging reality. True knowledge can only be achieved by leaving the cave and the world of appearances. This idea has been applied to self-knowledge, and just as the prisoners in the cave initially perceive the shadows on the wall as reality there is a narrative that suggests that people perceive themselves and their identities based on a distorted or incomplete version of who they "truly" are. I touched upon this notion

with regards to the narratives presented in schools about "be the real you", and it is one I shall return to later in the thesis.

However, I have long observed a misalignment between the way social media practically functions in the lives of many and the commonly assumed division between the "real" and the "virtual" worlds, as often expounded by commentators and researchers. It was therefore incredibly refreshing to encounter the work of Frankel and Kreb's (2021), most especially because they are careful to avoid the dichotomisation of the virtual and real. They argue that any unquestioned belief in this division needs to be contested, highlighting the irony that our digital lives are the vehicle that compels us to question this so earnestly (2021, p. 3/4) and they suggest that many are utterly mistaken in their assumption that "the virtual, like the pilot fish on the shark, is parasitic on the real" (2021 p.3/4). Rather than focussing upon the "reality" of digital life Frankel and Krebs (2021) make "the concept of the virtual the fulcrum of [their] whole investigation (2021 p.3).

Their perspective seamlessly incorporates human abilities like dreaming, imagination, and fantasy into the realm of digital virtuality, and actively deconstructs any harsh division between virtual and real. As a result, it offered me a deeply affirming validation of my own beliefs concerning how humans engage with the world of social media, relying on the playful and metaphorical affordances of the medium as a strength in self-exploration and an important part of the journey of self-knowledge, rather than as a mask. Krebs refers to himself as a member of the "scribal" generation, those people who were born in the pre-digital time ((Frankel & Krebs , 2021, p. 15). It seems that there has been a push back against the way the online world is conceptualised with Gen X and the Millennials (those born from 1965-1996) understanding the online world differently to those in Gen Z (born 1997-2012). Gen Z have come to build themselves alternative spaces and have an augmented view of the world suggesting, as Frankel and Krebs (2021) elucidate, that they / we no longer need to think in terms of the original (real) and then its copy (virtual), and this new way of working with virtuality does not rely upon a set relationship with what exists but is producing fresh hybrid experiences[34]. Discovering they drew upon the work of Massum (2014) in which "the question of perception is no longer one of truth or illusion, but of differing modes of reality" (Massumin cited in Frankel and Krebs p.9) gave breath and air to the way I was observing young people encounter their existences. This understanding paves the way for more liberated connections and blurred boundaries between virtual and actual, and imaginative and real.

"Human being nowadays stands in a place where the fundamental tension between the infinite virtual and the finite concrete real is coming undone" (Frankel & Krebs , 2021, p. 254). However, the intercourse between these remains vital as neither stands fully alone. The

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[34] This need not be tied specifically to the advent of the digital per se as this play on "real" and "virtual" is a thought explored by much of the work of Andy Warhol (although equally he is sometimes heralded as a pre-cursor to the social media world). He presented a new way of working in which the reproduction of the real was also real. Warhol's work was known for its exploration of the reproduction of the real in a way that retained its own sense of reality. He achieved this by employing techniques and concepts that blurred the lines between reality and representation. Warhol's iconic pieces, such as his famous Campbell's Soup Cans portraits, involved the repetition and reproduction of "real" images. The method of his production meant that he was able to reproduce several hundred "real" Warhol's in turn representing "real" soup cans.

digital space offers a place to hold together the various tensions and multiple paradoxes that we are presented with, it is here that the unresolved nature of what it is to be "me" can be held up. "The obdurate unknowability of the self and the other and the indeterminacy of human existence and the unbearable uncertainty about all things is endemic to being alive" (Frankel & Krebs , 2021, p. 271)

Therefore, rather than approaching each of those outlined in the table above in turn, and rehearsing their arguments, this thesis will trace a path through the multitude of their thinking, beginning with an approach to knowledge of self from an individual and introspective perspective. It then moves on to think through self-knowledge as realised in relation to an other.

Ultimately, I am keen to consider the (social mediac) self theorised as both introspective and extrospective simultaneously. I will seek to reflect the self's essential reflexivity, yet in such a way that I do not idealise or overly privilege the agent's own self-understanding. Self-reflection is consonant to self-knowledge, but the two are not the same. Arguments from existentialism suggest that self-knowledge cannot be split between internal and external factors, not least because we exist in the world and understand ourselves in response to that world. Therefore, what we know about ourselves can only ever be partly in response, and deeply interrelated to the external world. In line with this, I argue that although self-knowledge can only be achieved by the individual, the role of other(s) remains integral. However, before moving on to consider the integrated nature of both internal and external understandings of self-knowledge in relation to social media, it is worth considering these approaches separately.

Individually and Introspectively: or "To thine own self be true"

Although the notion of an individual true self may have little value outside of western culture, a version of self-contained individualism is often found in educational settings. For example, today's UK Personal, Social, Health, and Economic Education (PSHEE), Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculums or Character Education programmes often encourage young people to focus upon cultivating their agency, autonomy, and (social) independence. Doing your own thing and being critical of following the crowd is positioned as being emancipatory in terms of 'being true to yourself', and a sentiment that is something to be very much aspired to. In line with this, many educational approaches focus upon a sense of self-knowledge through discovery, leading to personal development and an endless transformation of the self[35]. Young people are frequently encouraged to "be the real you", "be true to yourself" and to "look inside" themselves, as if they will see the gems of self hidden away and be able to verify their authentic existence. Such knowledge is presented as something to be accessed through introspection and self-conscious reflection; it is conceptualised as something to be uncovered from within, as if finding one's kernel or core at the centre of one's being. Knowledge of one's 'real' self allows for personal development, self-creation, and self-enlargement. This model seems to be further perpetuated within the context of education by the ubiquitous notion of students *'living up to their potential'*, a phrase often used in the

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[35] Much of the modern focus of self-knowledge stems from the humanistic psychology of Maslow, Rogers, and May and their version of self-contained individualism that is often found in educational settings.

context of school reports. These various emphases seem to suggest there is someone inside the young person struggling to get out; it is the real them, the more capable them, the them they are meant to be. This potential version is, for example, far more dedicated to their studies, or perhaps kinder to their peers. It implies that an individual needs enough self-knowledge in order to connect with, and ultimately free, or expose, the real self. However, this seems not only to indicate that they will know who or what this self is, but that it is something that is possible to know.[36] This is a high expectation, especially given that such questions regarding self-knowledge have been raised, without definitive resolution, throughout history.[37]

However, the assumption that we all have knowledge of self seems to exist in wider culture as well. Such individualism fits well within the market economy, where individual needs are at the centre. For example, Burger King's 1970s slogan "Have it your way" was updated in 2014 to "Be your way", following the company's decision that "Have it your way" focussed too much on the transactional element of the individual and they wanted to make it seem more personal. They wanted to be the ones appreciating the individual *being who they were* and "making a connection with a person's individual lifestyle" (Press, 2014). Similarly, self-knowledge and 'Being the real' you has continued to play an important part in a range of other advertising campaigns, e.g., Reebok's "I am what I am", and Coca-Cola's "Be Yourself". I shall return to this idea of being the 'real you' in Part Two: Truth, but it is interesting to further note the strong cultural assumption that we all know who this real version is.

It is worth pausing to unpack something of how this has come about. As well as being a side effect of the individualist cultural situation that the West increasingly inhabits, perhaps this understanding of self can be said to have its origins in the way the Cartesian formulation, "I think therefore I am", has traditionally privileged introspection and rationality as the way to know. Descartes' ocular model[38], summed up in the infamous "*cogito ergo sum*", foregrounded an understanding of the world from a first-person point of view. It coincided with the rise of science and an observational, disengaged stance and encouraged introspection as the way to ascertain truth. Yet it also weakened an understanding of our embeddedness and engagement with the external world and ultimately served to harden the dichotomisation of subject /object, inner /outer, and (later) to some extent fact /value. This, in turn, reinforced the suggestion, evident in modern western conceptions of self, that the self is an ontologically distinct thing, one which is separate from society. An internalist perspective, such as this, would indicate that as it is only the contents of one's mind that one can be certain of, introspection and self-reflection will lead to knowledge as aspects of self are treated as if they were objective facts, verifiable, and accessible. Framed like this, self-knowledge constitutes an individual cognitive achievement. It is as if we are attempting to gain self-knowledge by possessing information about this thing called a 'true self'. Taking this conception of self-knowledge to its conclusion suggests that self-knowledge becomes a version of "knowing that" about the self. However, this is problematic, not least because the

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[36] Whether such knowledge is entirely within the control of the young person and, furthermore, whether there are limits to how much self-knowledge one can have, is more often than not left unaddressed.

[37] From Ancient Greece, with the Delphic Injunction to Know thyself, Hamlet's "To thine own self be true (Act 1, Scene 3, lines 78-82, Hamlet. Polonius' words of advice to his son, Laertes) or the more recent alignment of self-knowledge with the meaning of life, the search for self-knowledge has continued.

[38] (Marcia Cavell (2008) discusses the ocular model further

attempt to explain first person authority as an epistemological phenomenon originates from a place where the contents of one's mind are assumed to be like constants in the world. Furthermore, it also intimates that one begins with an already accomplished self who, by definition, has first person authority. Yet, even taking this into account, the Western world appears to favour a model of authoritative self-knowledge[39] with the irreducible and unique relationship of the self to itself, given a privileged position. We tend to defer to others' claims about themselves and offer first person privilege in line with their capacity to determine and describe their own states of mind. The agent has what McGeer refers to as, 'makers knowledge', not just the knowledge of a particularly accurate perceiver (McGeer, 2007, p. 82). States of mind are presented in such a way that personal experience of the interiority of the mind is valued above all else. Often, such things are presented as if others could not possibly be in possession of all the facts and therefore only have an inferior understanding. It is this personal omniscience that has come to be considered something akin to a faculty of introspection. Therefore, as it is assumed that an individual will have a clearer view of their own self it is framed in such a way that the individual is held up as being best placed to achieve this knowledge.

Yet, there are at least two major problems with this; firstly, confronting one's self in isolation from the influences of others does not necessarily result in self-knowledge, not least because on a very basic level we potentially fall foul of our own confirmation bias when we privilege the first-person perspective; and secondly; if an individual is best placed to achieve knowledge, it presumes that there is a singular, identifiable, internal self that exists beyond our actions in the world, that is in the position to gain self-knowledge, and this is by no means agreed. Immaterialism, for example, suggests we are only ever perceived, be that by ourselves or by others, and perceptions can differ. It is along these lines of thinking that Cavell refers to facts as having two surfaces. […] "because a fact is not merely an event in the world but the assertion of an event, the wording of the world" (Cavell, 1992, p. 44). I shall revisit this further in Part Two when considering the quantified self, linking the ways in which some people use tracking data to search for an objective 'view from nowhere' of their self in an attempt to gain self-knowledge. I will also relate it to the notion of social media self-presentation as metaphor, or a wording of the self as opposed to an assertion of the self, and this will be discussed in Part Two. However, before then it is important to consider self in relation to other(s), rather than in isolation from the external/ outer world that Cartesianism seemed to encourage.

Extrospective and relationally: "A wife and a mother, a teacher and runner"
Having just presented a position in which the self is viewed as wholly individual, and self-knowledge is an activity for which only one person can take responsibility (the person whose self it is), it is worth also exploring an alternative idea that our relationships with others shape our understanding of ourselves and our self-knowledge. This challenges the traditional belief that self-knowledge is solely an individual pursuit driven by rational thinking, as it overlooks the significance of emotions and the complex workings of our unconscious mind. Such individualistic models play down the role of emotions, as social or emotional relationships seem to be held as undermining and threatening to objectivity. They also appear to ignore the "complexity of the dynamic, intrapsychic world of unconscious fantasies, fears, and

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[39] For further discussion, see McGeer, 2007.

desires"[40]. However, such a formulation fails to recognise the reality that relationships and caring responsibilities are core to many people's sense of who they are as our relationships and the responsibilities we have towards others play a crucial role in shaping our identity.[41] According to this perspective, our sense of self is not formed in isolation but is deeply influenced by our connections with others. Therefore, it can be argued that self-knowledge is best pursued in the context of meaningful relationships where concern for others is balanced with concern for ourselves. This suggests that self-knowledge is not an individualistic endeavour but one that involves interacting with and understanding others, as our relationships with others are fundamental to our self-knowledge. It emphasises that our identity is not solely constructed by our own thoughts and actions but emerges through the connections we have with others.

Therefore, taking a relational perspective, self-knowledge is more effectively pursued in connection with others, within a moral framework that balances the self's responsibility and understanding of others with its concern for itself. Self-knowledge serves a significant social and interpersonal purpose, in addition to its intrapersonal aspects. Therefore, while it is the individual ('I') who takes on the task of knowing oneself, exploring the question "Who am I?" is not solely an endeavour pursued by and for the self.

At the heart of this approach is the claim that the self emerges from of our relationships with others. The prose at the start of this thesis begins with the words "A wife and a mother, a teacher and a runner" highlighting that the writer's sense of self was constituted by and emerged through her relationships. Those relationships seemed to give her a structure through which to understand herself. Relationships contribute something deeply fundamental to our being, as in many ways, we are for others what we can never be for ourselves. For example, it is impossible to think of oneself as a mother in isolation from the relational aspect embedded in that sense of self. Motherhood, and perhaps to an even greater extent, motherhood during pregnancy, exemplifies how the boundaries between our own self and the identity of others becomes blurred. It is a particularly poignant example of the way there is no hard-and-fast line that can be drawn between the mothers self and the baby.

> *"think of human beings as inseparable from their relations. The guiding idea is that we are formed through relations – the mother-child bond provides an obvious one – and that we move through life within, and more importantly as, a great shifting constellation of relations. Within relations we become what we are as persons; here, we must make sense of our lives, which in turn must be understood by scholars who wish to explain us. There is never a full separation between persons, and indeed, human beings draw their very identity from their relations. When they work well, relations are not*

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[40] C. Willett and E. Anderson, 'Feminist Perspectives on the Self' (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy) https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/ [accessed 29th July 2022]
[41] Feminist critiques of individual self, where the dominant model of self-knowledge relies on individual rational thought, claim that assumptions about the self in law, politics, and wider culture are based on a (male) norm This is discussed more fully in D. Meyers (ed.) Feminists Rethink the Self (2018).

*only formative (and unavoidable) but also conducive to human autonomy
and to the flourishing of the individual."[42]*

In this relational formulation of self, we exist and enter into our experiences in some senses only in so far as others exist and enter in to our experience also. Yet their selves are not one and the same, there is a grey area or liminal space between the two. This space is worthy of further attention.

Sartre particularly focussed upon the space between self and other in the Voyeur,[1] looking to open it up and explore the interchange between self and other. At one point Sartre describes a man peeping through a keyhole into a room, totally absorbed by what he sees. Suddenly, he hears footsteps and becomes aware he is being watched. It is this moment that becomes the focus- the one immediately after he is aware he is being watched but before he begins to reflect upon that. For that space of time, there is recognition that the peculiar private point of view that the man occupied could now be seen by the other observing him. Following the experience of being caught at the keyhole. 'The Look' at once reifies and individuates a person. 'I see myself because somebody sees me" (Sartre J. , 2003, p. 284). Although, his account is not straightforward[43] and there are many conflicting interpretations, not least due to apparent contradictions in Sartre's own writing, it is important because it decentres the egocentric emphasis of Western philosophy. It focusses upon the self, gaining a sense of how it appears to others- a reflective self-consciousness. In challenging the egocentric perspective, Sartre's exploration opens possibilities for a more nuanced understanding of self as inherently connected to and influenced by its social context. It invites us to consider how our self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-definition are intricately intertwined with the way others perceive us, as well as the social and cultural norms that shape those perceptions. Until this articulation, Existentialist philosophy had generally sought to understand the other through self-reflection, seeing parts of them in you and moving to a place of knowing them. The other was seen as a subjective reflection of oneself. However, Sartre's account changes things, and the other is approached as a subject, not known through oneself but as a disruption of oneself. For Sartre, becoming aware of the Look marks the initial stage in developing a unique sense of self. This newfound awareness is then further strengthened, as the Look continues to influence individuals when they realise they are being perceived as objects of others' attention. In other words, once someone recognises that they are being watched or observed by others, it triggers a process that contributes to their understanding of their own individuality and self-identity. The ongoing experience of the Look reinforces the notion that one's sense of self is intimately tied to how they are seen and acknowledged by others. It is this sense of becoming an object that changed the ego-centric emphasis of western phenomenology and opened an exterior space, as opposed to the interiority of one's mind, where contemplation becomes possible. This feels particularly poignant in the age of social media.

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[42] Naffine, 'The Liberal Legal Individual Accused: The Relational Case', 123, cited in (Herring, 2019, p. 11).
[43] He "seems to slip between epistemological, ontological, and self-evaluative concerns when considering the role of intersubjectivity and of objectification in the constitution of reflective self-consciousness" (Dolezal, 2012, p. 10)

Part Two discusses the nature of such *exterior spaces* in the context of social media further, spaces in which one is forced to look at oneself through the eyes of other. I will be extending the relational aspect to include our relationships with and through social media, especially because these online spaces compel individuals to perceive themselves through the perspectives of others. Social Networking sites are not mere tools for connection, but powerful entities that shape our perception of the world through their ability to present us

Figure 5: Schultz TEDxSMU 23rd April 2016
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSpyZor-Byk

with a view of ourselves- in much the same way as the Voyeur is confronted with a view of himself. This clashes with a message of internal introspection and search for an essence when looking for self-knowledge.[44] We develop technology, and in turn, it develops us, shaping our identities.[45] It can be argued that our newfound connectivity brings forth diverse voices and opinions, creating a virtual chaos of competing self-definitions[46] and consequently, an understanding of the self as a relational ontology, constructed through lived experiences, becomes vital for self-knowledge in an era dominated by social media.
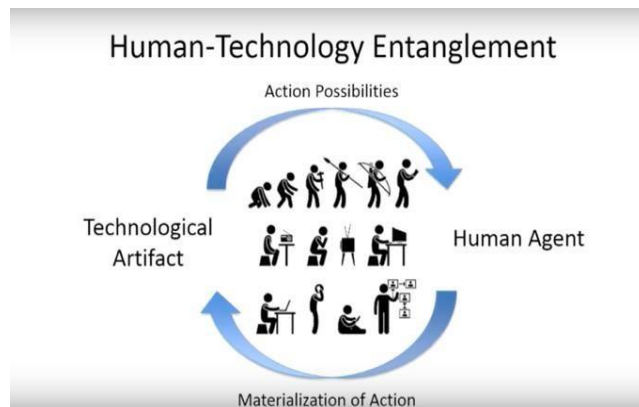
Know thyself – beyond epistemology

Having considered both introspective and extrospective ways to reach for self-knowledge, it is worth considering the way that the knowing aspect of self-knowledge is experienced. The phrase "beyond epistemology" refers to going beyond the scope or limitations of traditional epistemological inquiry or the study of knowledge.

Epistemology focuses on questions such as how knowledge is acquired, justified, and understood, exploring concepts like truth, belief, evidence, and rationality. However, in relation to self-knowledge, the act of knowing surpasses or extends beyond the traditional boundaries of epistemology. Self-knowledge cannot convincingly be studied from a purely cognitive or intellectual perspective, as there are aspects of understanding, knowing, or experiencing self that cannot be fully captured or explained through conventional epistemological frameworks alone. These aspects may involve subjective experiences, emotions, intuition, personal perspectives, or other non-cognitive elements that contribute to our understanding of the world. Therefore, going "beyond epistemology" implies a recognition of the limitations of purely rational or intellectual approaches to knowledge and

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[44] This is discussed further by Gergen (Gergen K. , 1996)

[45] Schultz (2015) refers to the entanglement of humanity and technology, suggesting a co-constructive relationship between the two. He argues that while we construct the technology, it also constructs us as we become what technology allows us to be.

[46] The Fourth Revolution[46], as it has been described, is a new era, building and extending the impact of digitization in new and unanticipated ways, thereby changing our behaviour and affecting what it means to be human (Davis, 2016). The result is a profound influence on the concept of self and personal identity, shaping and reshaping self-image, and it has been argued that the proliferation of emerging technologies has made it increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of self at all in our modern age (Gergen K. , The Self in the Age of Information, 2000).

an openness to consider broader dimensions of human experience. So, while it has been seen that relationships form a rich addition, it must be noted that experiential knowing is also of utmost importance when it comes to self-knowledge.

Some of this importance can be traced back to and through the origins of the Delphic Injunction to "Know Thyself". Even though in Ancient Greek thought, the concept of self-knowledge, as it is understood in modern terms, was not explicitly developed or articulated, the idea of self-understanding and introspection can still be found within the broader Greek tradition. Ancient Greek literature, such as epic poems like the Iliad and the Odyssey, reflect a sense that individuals' understanding of themselves was shaped by observable facts and external aspects that were publicly available to all. Self-perception was largely influenced by reputation, actions, and roles within society, with the emphasis on the external, observable aspects of one's identity. Initially, the Greeks had limited interest in exploring different perspectives or questioning their own worldview, and they relied on their imagination and what they could directly perceive to understand the world around them and their place within it. The prevailing belief was that the world could be comprehended through the lens of their own experiences. However, the first Greek philosophers brought about a significant shift in this perspective. In seeking to explore the nature of the world and the underlying principles that governed it, they challenged the prevailing notions and questioned the accepted ways of understanding reality. Likewise, in questioning the established worldview, these philosophers called into doubt the reliance on personal experience and observable facts as the sole basis for understanding oneself and the world.

Plato's allegory of The Cave is a good example of this, suggesting that because the material world is changeable, it is also unreliable.[47] The Cave allegory depicts people who spend their whole lives chained up in a cave and facing a blank wall with all they ever see being shadows projected on the wall
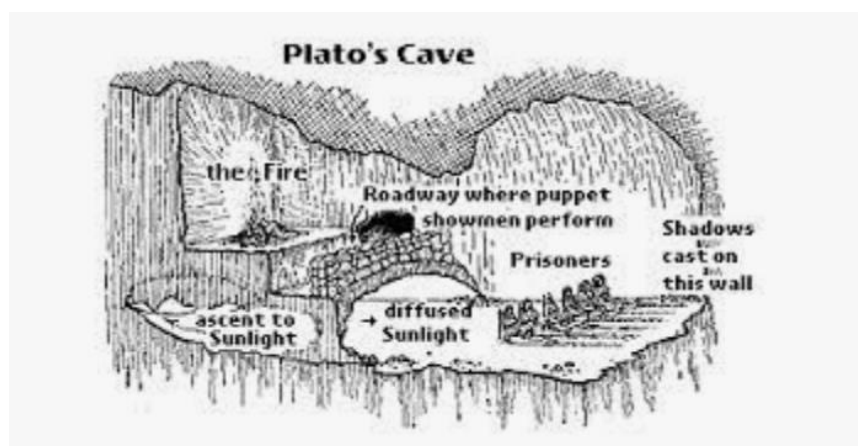
from objects that pass in front of a fire. The shadows are the prisoners' reality, but they are not accurate representations of the real world. The shadows represent the fragment of reality that we can normally perceive through our senses, while the objects under the sun represent

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[47] Plato's Theory of Forms asserts that the physical world is not really the 'real' world; instead, ultimate reality exists beyond our physical world. that there are two realms, the physical (inside the cave) and the spiritual (outside the cave). The physical realm is represented by the shadows, which are changing and imperfect. The spiritual realm, also called the realm of the Forms or Ideals, is abstract, unchanging, and perfect. The concepts that reside there are archetypes that transcend space and time, and in Platonic thought, these are more real than any physical object.

However, this becomes inverted in a sense, in our technologically dominated existence, as the 'real' is the physical world, and the non-real is the virtual world.

the true forms of objects that we can only perceive through reason.[48] The allegory demonstrates that behind the unreliable world of appearances is a world of permanence and reliability. This world of 'Forms' or 'Ideas' is presented as more real because it is permanent. Platonism puts forward the idea that true and reliable knowledge rests only with those who can comprehend the true reality behind the world of everyday experience, and the process of knowledge seems to be an awareness of what is most real. Initially, this appears to be closely related to rationality and reasoned knowledge, especially as Platonism values rational analysis, logical deduction, and philosophical contemplation, emphasising the role of the intellect. These aspects sit most readily with the individualist models of self that are described above. However, Plato also recognised the role of dialogue, dialectic, and the collective pursuit of truth in his philosophical system. In this allegory it is significant that the Prisoner comes back to convince the others to leave the cave, rather than choosing to simply know the truth on his own therefore, while initially seeming aligned with individualistic models of self and rational knowledge, the allegory, also recognises the communal and interactive nature of the pursuit of truth.

Furthermore, in our modern interpretations of the Cave, we should not forget that for ancient Greeks, knowledge can come in two forms: propositional and practical (Ortiz de Landazuri, 2015), and therefore we should also seek to understand the meaning of the Cave allegory in a way that moves beyond epistemological analysis. In the allegory, the Prisoners encounter with the truth involves two dimensions: the intellectual or propositional aspect and the practical aspect. While the intellectual aspect involves acquiring knowledge and belief, the practical aspect goes beyond that. The practical in this instance must be understood as more than simply 'knowing by doing' but knowing through affectivity, as it entails knowing through emotions and experiences, rather than solely through cognitive processes. To truly understand something, such as the concept of the Good, the Prisoner must not only possess knowledge but also have a personal and emotional connection to it. The allegory can be seen to emphasise that true understanding goes beyond mere intellectual comprehension. The practical dimension involves knowing through affectivity, which means knowing through emotions and experiences rather than solely through cognitive processes. To fully comprehend and internalise a concept such as the Good, the Prisoner must not only possess intellectual knowledge but also establish a personal and emotional connection to it and in this context, knowing through affectivity implies experiencing the truth on a deeper level, allowing emotions and personal experiences to shape and enhance understanding. It suggests that a purely intellectual grasp of concepts may be incomplete without the engagement of emotions and personal involvement. Therefore, it can be argued that this is a step away from a self-contained, objective reality, or indeed an introspective 'uncovering' of truth instead, it serves as an acknowledgement of the importance of the affectivity of the world when we reach for self-knowledge. Therefore, when talking about self-knowledge, it is clear that it is certainly more than simply being in possession of all the facts, but rather closer to the conception of knowing through feeling.

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[48] This links to Plato's interest with mathematical education- number is an abstract concept, maths is more than what you can see or experience. You must rely on something other than the senses to acquire mathematical knowledge. Plato holds that students should be delivered from a complete reliance on perception but made to employ purely intellectual processes. Mathematics deals with Forms.

This line of thinking was not reserved for the Ancient Greek philosophers; it can be tracked over time. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, also focuses upon the way self-knowing depends upon experiences as opposed to epistemology.

> *"[..] I still believe to this day in the theory of 'transcendental ego'. The self has only a probable objectivity, and anyone saying 'I' only grasps the outer edge of it; an outsider can get a cleaner and more accurate picture. Let me repeat that this personal account is not offered in any sense as an 'explanation'. Indeed, one of my main reasons for undertaking it is my realisation that self-knowledge is impossible, and that the best one can hope for is self-revelation."* Simone De Beauvoir The *Prime of Life*

To Beauvoir, existence depends upon *experiences*, and not upon thinking (as in Descartes' I think therefore I am). This is exemplified in her novel *She Came to Stay*[49] in which the first chapter opens with Françoise, the protagonist, being aware that she exists (Beauvoir, 1999, p. 11). "The typewriter was clicking, the lamp cast a pink glow over the papers […] And I am here, my heart is beating." (Beauvoir S. d., 1999 (1943), p. 11)). However in the novel, Françoise needs someone else to confirm her as a self, as a subject, and not as a *mere* object (she is to concede later that she can never be a total subject for the other). Beauvoir's self is not independent of the Other, and this relationship is later exhibited through a conversation with Gerbert, in which Francoise and he exchange views on themselves. Gerbert, in the role of the "other," serves as a confirmation for Françoise's sense of self and the understanding she holds about herself. Gerbert is someone who can be the other for Françoise, who in turn needs an other to confirm her as the self she believes herself to be. From Beauvoir's writing, it is clear that Francoise needs to experience herself through her relationship, knowing herself to exist epistemologically is not enough.

> *"She smiled at him. He had been so considerate, so attentive. Whenever she felt discouraged, she only had to look into his sparkling eyes to regain her confidence"* (Beauvoir, 1999: 13).

This view of self-knowledge requires both an affective/ experiential and epistemological base. The recognition by the other of herself as an almost conscious subject like his/herself, and her ethical recognition of the other as also nearly a conscious subject can be instantaneous. Françoise has chosen Gerbert as the other because he confirms her as a self like himself and confirms the knowledge which she has of herself. He is certainly not an alienated other.

Beauvoir seems to ascribe priority to this affective and relational way towards self-knowledge over other knowledge of the self. Having epistemological knowledge of the self or biological

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[49] *She Came to Stay* is a novel by Simone de Beauvoir that explores the complexities of love, jealousy, and identity. Set in Paris, the story follows the relationship between Françoise and her partner, Pierre. It is both a philosophical and autobiographical novel based on de Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre. The novel addresses the themes of freedom, dependency, sexuality, and the concept of the "other." The story weaves together existentialist principles alongside the dynamics of love and complex relationships, ultimately considering Francoise's search for purpose and self-knowledge through free will and individual accountability.

knowledge of what constitutes oneself is not enough, because it is, in a sense, static. For Beauvoir (2004), to *act* is a necessary (ontological) aspect of being human. One cannot *not* act; our actions cannot be logically, absolutely, or totally rationally justified. It is by *placing* ourselves in the world and looking at our relationships with one another that leads to self-knowledge. In the section on Beauty, coming later in the thesis, I will spend time drawing attention to the way many social media postings behave in a similar way. They require a response; they are not simply informing people of news, but they posted specifically for a response, be that a thumbs up 'like', or a comment. Just telling people bits of information is not enough; the information posted is designed to be affective, seeking confirmation that they, like Françoise, are the self they believe themselves to be.

This relationship between the more static epistemological way of knowing and understanding who we are and that of the importance of affectivity has also been explored frequently in art and poetry. One example of such is the Phillip Larkin poem "Home is so sad" (Larkin, 1964).

> *Home is so sad.*
>
> *It stays as it was left,*
> *Shaped to the comfort of the last to go*
> *As if to win them back. Instead, bereft*
> *Of anyone to please, it withers so,*
> *Having no heart to put aside the theft*
>
> *And turn again to what it started as,*
> *A joyous shot at how things ought to be,*
> *Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:*
> *Look at the pictures and the cutlery.*
> *The music in the piano stool. That vase.*
>
> *(Larkin, 1964)*

"The music in the piano stool. That Vase" holds an affective meaning for Larkin. There is a knowledge he has of these things that is qualitatively different to the knowledge that the reader has. "That vase" is an entirely useless marker for the reader, furthermore, any real meaning ascribed to the vase is lost once it is obscured by epistemological understanding, knowledge of the vase as an object adds nothing to the understanding of the meaning intended by the poem. In a similar and related vein, Dalmiya and Alcoff (1992) refer to the knowledge someone could learn about parenting from a book but highlight the importance of the many other sorts of knowledge one learns through observation, participation, engagement, feeling, or simply trying it ourselves. "Some of what we acquire in the process can be expressed in propositional form (e.g., "Newborns often like to be rocked gently to mimic the feeling of the womb)" (Dalmiya & Alcoff, 1992, p. 221). Yet, a newborn's cry is affective – it is what matters in that moment - and "the ability to tell from an infant's manner of crying and behaviour just what she or he needs is an ability that cannot be taught or expressed in a manual" (Dalmiya & Alcoff, 1992, p. 221). Nor is knowing that, or even why, they are crying that is important; but the meeting the need of the child in that moment is what matters. It is therefore important to acknowledge that knowledge for the prisoner in the Cave allegory, or for Francoise can be understood as the way they are acquainted with their situation, affected by it, and to the extent they are changed by it.

Self-knowledge is, in the same way, both a practical and a theoretical task, and 'know thyself' has been seen to have an affective importance tied up with the epistemological. It is more than simply knowing that one exists or knowing how one behaves (knowledge *of* the self), but is largely understood as awareness of what is most real and true in ourselves. It is an important sense with emotional and experiential/ affective roots. Furthermore, it is more than a single, once off cognitive achievement, not least because we are affected by all those we encounter but are impacted by moments in our lives. We do not gain and then keep possession of who we are; self-knowledge requires building and maintaining, and the continual process of relational self-knowledge is important.

Self-Knowledge: Who am I? Who will I be?

Having taken into account the ways we are continually affected by the world, and our relationships, it appears that self-knowledge is an evolving concept requiring not only building but maintaining. We do not appear to gain and then keep possession of who we are, as we are continually developing. However, this notion of building self-knowledge can be seen frequently in the current cultural narrative, yet, the question posed is now more often than not framed with a more aspirational or future focussed emphasis; "Who will I be?" as opposed to the present tense "Who am I?". An element of deliberate, knowledgeable self-construction is germinating.

THE CORPERFORMANCE PROGRAMME

How it works and why

A journey to deliver sustainable change, the CorPerformance programme takes participants from **subconscious incompetence**, making ill-informed, poor lifestyle choices, through to **conscious competence** and on to **subconscious competence** – a sustainable, new-normal based on well informed and sustainable lifestyle choices.

Individual Assessment	**Wellness coaching**	**Positive social proof**	**Bringing teams together**
Everyone who enrols in a CorPerformance programme gets an individual resilience and fitness assessment that forms the focus of their journey.	Acquiring knowledge, personal goal-setting and expert coaching allows us to deliver sustainable lifestyle change with optimised physical and mental performance.	Success drives success and individuals seeing the progress of their team and leaders around them is a massive driver of inspiration and commitment.	The process brings co-workers together on a common journey, outside the normal workplace boundaries, having a marked, positive impact on team building.

It can be argued that the modern notion of self has become deeply informed by the market economy, with the rise of capitalist values like competition, productivity, and profitability increasingly corresponding with the non-market values of personal wellbeing and fulfillment (Bloom, 2017). Over time, the mind and body have gradually become viewed as economic resources for which workers and workplaces alike are responsible for cultivating and bettering. Many white collar workspaces now offer Personal and Professional Development programmes as a matter of course, ranging in scope from training in 'work-life balance' or 'stress management', to more holistic programmes such as that by a company called CorPerformance. This offers to "actively develop the use of nutritional and lifestyle

interventions to improve human performance…". It suggests it will "take participants from subconscious incompetence, making ill-informed, poor lifestyle choices, through to conscious competence, and on to subconscious competence- a sustainable, new normal based on well informed and sustainable lifestyle choices (CorPerformance.co.uk website). This is very much in line with the recent cultural suggestion, being played out on a variety of platforms such as reality TV, social media, and through high profile business people, that seems to indicate that personal success now includes the achievement of an improved /new self made visible through tangible wellness and health goals. Engaging with self as such has become an entrepreneurial project, requiring constant renovation and improvement. There is a sense in which our default is a *broken-person that needs to be fixed*. Many popular reality TV shows or social media stars capitalise on this notion of a personal journey – before and after photographs feature heavily. The internal emotional struggle for betterment may have been achieved through psychotherapy or yoga retreats, but it is often externally expressed via a six-pack, invasive or non invasive cosmetic procedures. These physical attributes are frequently pitched as ways connecting the mind and body (Illouz, 2008), with one expressed by the other, however, I shall consider the way beauty and self knowledge intersect more fully in the Chapter called Beauty.

Blackburn refers to his personal discomfort with the narrative of the 90s "Because you're worth it" advertising strap line from L'Oreal, being rooted in the haughty narcissism displayed by the models in the campaign. There was an implication that some are worth it, having worked hard to achieve the ideals of beauty, and others, by default, are not. McGuigan (2014) explores a hypothesis that the leading cultural, political, and economic features of a given civilization tend to be implicated in a 'preferred self' that is a discernable social type. There are some important touch points between McGuigan's "preferred self' and Nietzsche's "Best self, next self". The preferred self operates in the popular imagination as a model of achievement for an aspiring generation. Although it cannot be found in its pure form in any one place, lingering shadows and fleeting glimpses of it can be seen in celebrity brands, advertising, and popular cultural idols. The haughty models Blackburn speaks of are an example of such. They have mastered the self and now deserve luxury as a reward. They are "worth it". This improved, future focused, aspirational self will be explored in relation to Best Self, Next Self in Part Two: Love,, most especially in relation to the constructivist, co-creational approach, with and in light of social media, as mentioned above.

There has been a growing cultural narrative of self improvement since the early 80s, with the rise of the self-help, authenticity movement, or "Wellness Industry" being well documented (e.g. Sharone, 2013), so the notion that authentic self discovery has become something of a ubiquitous expectation in the intervening forty years is not surprising. Self governance, self control, and self work are all part of the new wellness economy, yet specific body shapes and exercise approaches seeming to gain a moral component. If people fail to live up to the wellness demands, practice enough self mastery, they are viewed as a "direct threat to contemporary society for their inability to contribute to economic prosperity" (Cederstrom & Spicer, 2015). Foucault saw these new technologies of the self as means for capitalist enterprise, generating new middle-class subjectivities (Foucault, 1988). This required, in turn, a "mobile and flexible self" (Foucault, 2004/2008, p. 230). The suggestion being the self is something to be worked upon, with the fruits of one's self-labour being presented in a concrete way, through activities and / or physique. Health, wellness and happiness have been

conflated with productivity. Being active in the process of this self-work is an important element. There has to be 'graft' in evidence, with empowerment coming through individual control; self tracking feeds into this. This will be explored more fully in Section Two relating facticity and transcendence to self presentation and self understanding.

Coming to self knowledge: what next?

Having tracked some of the territory, this thesis will now move on to more fully explore the ways in which we can be seen to reach for self-knowledge in the context of a world dominated

Figure 4:
https://inpacevivimus2015.wordpress.com/2015/05/18/oralit y-literacy-ong-on-plato-plato-as-a-reactionary/

by social media. These will range from; our attempts to pin "me" down in an evidential, documentable form, thereby moving "me" from a set of beliefs about who I am to a verifiable, almost scientific truth; to something more akin to examples of "me" that hint at the Platonic Form of "Me"; or, finally, a constructed self, in which we attempt to know our aspirational selves from the exemplars we post.

As a nod to the ancient Greek philosophers who have sought to identify the ways in which we can attempt to "know thyself" in such a world, I have chosen to organise the rest of my thesis under chapter headings that relate to the Platonic Ideals: Love, Truth, and Beauty. This is a deliberate collision of immense themes from grand and ancient philosophical thinkers with the minutiae of social media. I have chosen to deliberately use these Platonic Forms that suggest that reality is metaphysical and beyond this world and collide them against an approach more akin to the phenomenological position, one in which all we have and all we can know is how we appear and how the world appears to us.

Summary of Part One
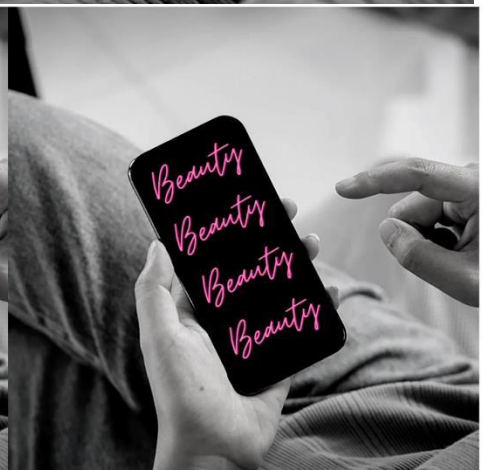
Part Two: Truth, Love, and Beauty

Truth

Truth (and reality)

The topic of truth (and reality) has been one of the main preoccupations of philosophy for many years, and as a result, in this short section, it would be impossible to cover everything that has been said in any meaningful way. However, given that society's relationship with truth has changed inexorably since the advent of the internet[50], with some even going so far as to refer to our current state of existence as post-truth,[51] this section will try and make sense of some of the ways truth and reality are represented and

Be the real you. Be true to yourself.

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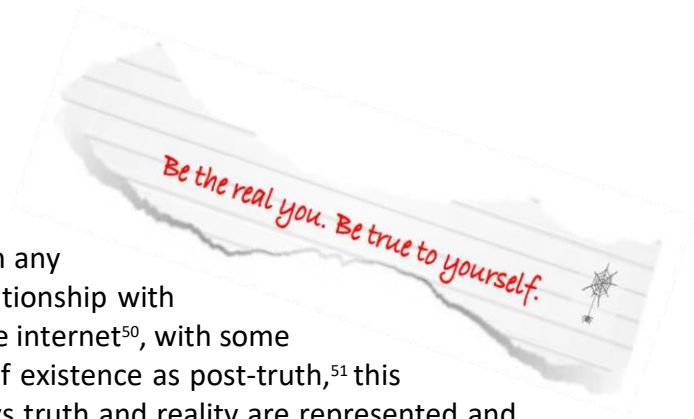
[50] Much public debate has centred around a correspondence theory of truth, one where words correspond to a mutual or accepted understanding of reality, yet the nature of a mutual understanding of reality seems to have been disrupted by the ubiquity of social media. It has instead instead to discrete echo chambers in which one community's truth is internally reinforced but often differs wildly from those held by another group. Due to various algorithms designed to deliver content "you might also like", their ideas are rarely challenged, nor are they exposed to alternatives. Each group is left thinking they hold *the* truth and believing they are in the majority. It seems that truth has come to be something experienced as a local concept rather than a universally accepted state. Furthermore, when coupled with the more generalised breakdown in trust of institutional authority, i.e., government, religion, or respected news sources, and fuelled by a rise in user created content, it has resulted in confusion and diffusion about what a ground truth might look like at all. The dangers of relativism and/or emotivism are evident.
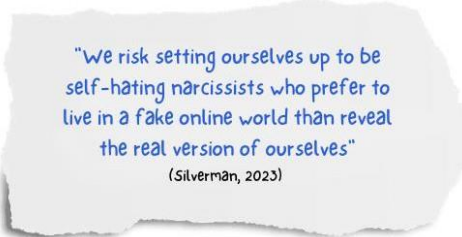
[51] Although used beforehand in both academic and public forums, the term Post-Truth was named word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary in 2016 following the Brexit referendum and USA elections. It means relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

constructed on social media. However, in response to the much-repeated refrain, "Be the real you. Be true to yourself", it asks "What do we mean by the true self?", for within this instruction there exists firstly a nested presumption that people are posting something other than this online and secondly, that a "true you" involves the "whole you", with any suggestion of alternative or partial presentation(s) being duplicitous and misleading. It is therefore worth problematising both in order to consider the nature of truth and reality in online contexts.

The chapter therefore calls into question the supposed boundaries between virtuality and reality, questioning the notions of true and fake within the context of a self as expressed on social media. Considering the approach of the Quantified Self movement with its accounted, measurable self, the section will begin by looking at the ways people attempt to use social media to concretise themselves as a way to self-knowledge. It will then move on to consider the notion of the Qualified self, and look to see how people engage with symbolism, metaphor, and playfulness in SNS posts, reflecting on how they serve as important vehicles for self-expression and self-knowledge. Instead of discussing truth and reality in relation to the broader aspects of metaphysics or epistemology, the focus will be one away from facts about the person towards what is understood as true knowledge about the individual self.[52] Returning to the words of Cavell from Section One, suggesting that facts have two surfaces. […] "because a fact is not merely an event in the world but the assertion of an event, the wording of the world" (Cavell, 1992, p. 44). In short, this chapter will be addressing the question "How can we identify, understand, and thereby know a true self within the context of social media?".

The blurring of boundaries: A True / False You

Instances of trolling, fake profiles, grooming, and catfishing on social media all add to an overall scepticism about the truth of online interactions. The argument that social media enables people to formulate false selves or alternate realities[53] is well rehearsed,[54] however, such mistrust is not specifically located in the world of SNS. Its roots can perhaps be seen to stem from debate twenty years ago, when many were concerned about the potential the internet as a whole offered for people to freely formulate fake versions of who they were. Rather than the intended utopian online world, where people were not restricted by physicality, it seems this freedom led to unease. This in turn has translated more latterly into a lack of trust of social media selves. As a result, this perceived lack of truth has continued to be a persistent theme in discussions surrounding online interactions, and self-presentation with people frequently criticised for posting misleading content.[55]

"We risk setting ourselves up to be self-hating narcissists who prefer to live in a fake online world than reveal the real version of ourselves"
(Silverman, 2023)

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[52] For Phenomenology, that means changing the way we view metaphysics and epistemological claims. For Existentialism, it generates a normative ethic on how to live a worthwhile life.

[53] See Turkle, 1995

[54] Some of the motivations for this including online disinhibition, privacy concerns, social capital, or a lack of security perhaps related to gender or sexuality.

[55] Although there are some more positive understandings see the potential for using alternative selves as a way to disrupt many have viewed the portrayal of different identities online as deception. (Rheingold, 1993)

Figure 9: Edited image of me October 2021

Figure 10: Edited image of me November 2021

Figure 8: Edited image of me 15th May 2021

It is often argued that social media actively encourages users to present an online existence that runs parallel or adjacent to their real life, operating as something 'like life', a veneer or fake version of life, in which a better self pretends to be.[56] For example, a reported 90% of young women use filters to do things such as reshape their nose, appear to weigh less, or whiten their teeth (Gill, 2021), and there are multiple filters available to airbrush or augment images. The Bold Glamour Filter is one such instance. [57] "[It] gives a flawless make-up look that makes you look effortlessly gorgeous. But the freaky and unsettling thing about it is how real it looks - it doesn't look like you've used a filter at all, however much you wiggle your eyebrows or cover your face with your hand" (Silverman, 2023). While AI developments are exciting, it is now virtually impossible to decipher what is reality and what is digitally enhanced on real time videos, and as a result, this could be said to construct a different arena for social interaction.[58] This in turn, raises important questions about the role of social media in shaping our understanding of ourselves and others. As it is increasingly hard for society to say where digital life begins and ends, or indeed how it even differs from, or is separate to, 'real life' it is crucial to critically examine the experience of this supposed boundary between real and fake.

The Quantified Self: what about me?

One way in which people have tried to utilise their various social technologies in an attempt to develop some sense of a 'real', concrete ground truth of who they are is through data tracking.[59] The vast majority of people now wear or carry devices like smart phones, smart watches, or Fitbit's, capable of tracking information like location, movements, amount of sleep, calorie consumption, reproductive cycles, and so on. Some of these data are consciously logged, with users voluntarily adding information about themselves daily, be that the date they menstruate or the food they have consumed,[60] but other information is stored automatically by the smart device, for example, an individual's step count, or location.[61] According to advocates of self-tracking, meticulous surveillance of self through this data will provide a new perspective and self-narrative, increasing one's self-knowledge, awareness, and understanding.[62]

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[56] (Gardner & Davies, 2014)

[57] Bold Glamour went viral on TikTok in early 2023, with more than 17 million videos shared in a few weeks.

[58] When asked if social media representations reflected their life, 86% of the University of London study participants said no (Gill, 2021).

[59] The use of individual trackers, data gathering apps, and wearable fitness devices that facilitate self has been growing exponentially since the mid 2000s (Lupton, 2016) (Neff & Nafus, 2016) (Kelly K. 2., 2016).

[60] Although self-tracking seems to entail self-surveillance there can often be an element of co-surveillance encouraged, involving the sharing of tracked data with chosen friends or competitors.

[61] Generally, this is a default setting on peoples phones and they need to make the effort to deactivate this function on their phone or social media, rather than activate it.

[62] (Singer N. , 2015).

Such a preference for a measurable, seemingly objective, proof of self has led to the rise of the Quantified Self (QS). Those who subscribe to the QS movement[63] seem to be trying to define themselves through tangible data, believing it will bring new insights and self-knowledge. Defined by their "self-knowledge through numbers"[64] approach, followers seeking to enhance their personal well-being, productivity, and self-knowledge through the tracking and gamification of personal data.[65] They aim to incorporate technology and data acquisition into their daily lives, in order to improve their physical or emotional wellbeing.[66] This stems from the assumption that humans are selective, biased, and error-prone when it comes to understanding the variables that affect their day-to-day lives.[67] It is suggested by those who subscribe to the QS movement that people make errors all of the time but could avoid this by gathering data so they can make better decisions based on better information. The cultural rise of the importance placed upon the scientific and measurable has, to an extent, legitimised the self-knowledge that is supposedly gained through shared self-tracking, and such data is approached as having complete information, complete accuracy, and complete reliability. Measurement, quantification, graphs, and arithmetic precision are framed as providing reliable self-knowledge, and data tracking is ascribed a kind of super perceptual capacity, and epistemic authority. As a result, it is possible to argue that storing, sharing, and monitoring data tracked by the user gives rise to a "new range of relations to the self" (Lupton, 2013).

According to this mode of thinking the more information you have, the more transparent to yourself you will become. In seeking to render our patterns of behaviour visible and knowable, it is specifically the lack of emotional attachment and arithmetic precision that is attractive to advocates of the quantified self-movement. It is argued that once people know how they behave then they can manage and potentially change what they do. Therefore, in theory, by playing on the social and gamified elements of technology, this data can be used to change some people's behaviour in positive ways.[68] Foregrounding data gathering like this reveals something about the way the possession of information, and the perceived objectivity and truth of such data seems to be changing our relationship with self-knowledge within the context of everyday life. The presumed objective nature of the data tracking tool seems to offer greater credibility through presumed objectivity in the form of a non-emotional 'God's eye view'. Numbers seem to hold an appeal of scientific objectivity, providing privileged access to the truth, offering a third persons perspective unclouded by human bias.

However, the Delphic Injection does not command one to "know Thyself in order to …x, y and z" but simply says "Know Thyself". *Knowing that* one walked or ran six miles, for example, is a far cry from having real insight into who one is. Knowing-about the self from the perspective of the measurable could be described as more closely aligned to 'knowing-that' and there are important differences with regards to knowing-that about the self as opposed to having self-knowledge. "Knowing-that" refers to having information or data about oneself, such as personal details, preferences, or experiences. On the other hand, however, self-knowledge

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[63] According to the Quantified Self website https://quantifiedself.com/

[64] (Wolf, 2009)

[65] (Danaher et al, 2018 p3)

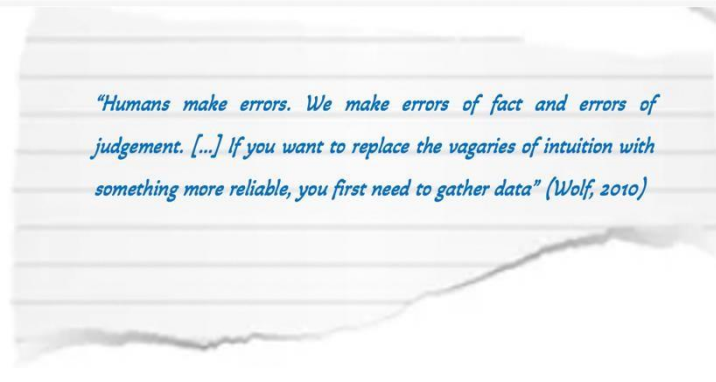[66] (Singer E. , 2011)

[67] (Danaher, Nyholm, & Earp, 2018)

[68] (Lanzing, 2016) (Hare, 2016)

goes beyond mere facts and involves a deeper level of understanding and introspection. Furthermore, while "knowing-that" may provide surface-level insights, self-knowledge delves into the underlying aspects that contribute to a person's sense of self. It entails comprehending the motivations, desires, values, and emotions that shape one's identity and behaviour.

In many ways, the distinction regarding self-knowledge is somewhat similar to that between knowing and understanding. For example, knowing refers to the possession of factual information or awareness of a particular piece of knowledge. It is a more straightforward form of awareness, often based on memorisation or recognition. When you know something, you can recall or recognise the information without necessarily appreciating its underlying meaning or context. Understanding, on the other hand, goes beyond mere factual knowledge and involves grasping the significance, implications, and relationships of the information or concept being considered. In much the same way, knowing someone as a Facebook (FB) contact or Instagram follow is different to knowing them as a friend. You can know a lot of things about a FB contact without necessarily realising the significance of those things. In just the same way, self-knowledge can enable you to know a lot of things about yourself, but until you understand the significance of those things, how they weave into your past, present, and imagined future, then you will only have a superficial sense of "knowing that" about yourself. A person reaching for self-knowledge sits closer to *knowing-who* in the relational sense of the word – that is "to have developed a relationship with (someone) through meeting and spending time with them; be familiar or friendly with." (Oxford Dictionary). This relational perspective, as stated in Section One, is where self-knowledge is more effectively pursued in connection with others. Therefore, while it is the individual ('I') who takes on the task of knowing oneself, exploring the question "Who am I?" is not solely an endeavour pursued by and for the self.

Was I wrong?

Furthermore, to categorise our actions as either errors or correct is a particular peculiarity of being a thinking human agent. Animals exist in the moment, in the now, but humans constantly exist in an amalgamation of the past, present, and future. We create a narrative about the direction we take in life as a result, making decisions and then afterwards decide whether they were good or bad, right or wrong, often post rationalising the process in order to justify why we behaved how we did to ourselves or other people.[69] There is no neutral or constant version of our life that we deviate from when making decisions in a good or bad way. To say that someone made an error can only be decided afterwards, it cannot be defined as such at the time, as this would imply there is a determined
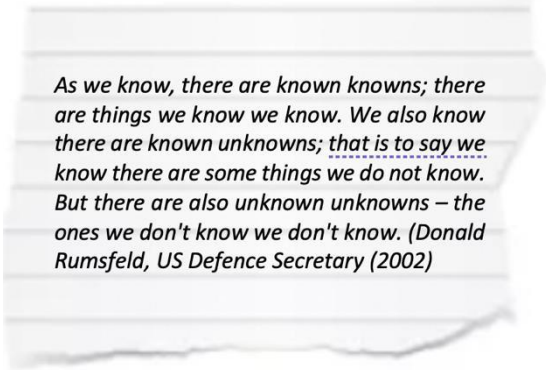
"Humans make errors. We make errors of fact and errors of judgement. [...] If you want to replace the vagaries of intuition with something more reliable, you first need to gather data" (Wolf, 2010)

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[69] Utilitarianism as a normative ethical process involves, to a certain extent, predicting what will happen in the future (how much pleasure / pain or happiness / unhappiness will be generated through one's actions) in order to decide how to act in that moment. Or it looks back with the benefit of hindsight (at that moment at least) to make a judgement about the past.

path that is the 'right' or true way.[70] In response to this, there is an argument that we have self-opacity (I shall return to self-opacity in more depth later in the chapter) which is different from making an error. The opacity is not clear at the time, and the judgement will be made in good faith. Later, once the opacity has been lost, cleared, or shifted a little, then the judgement might be reclassified as an error. However, there is so much more of life that may well mean that the same thing is then later reclassified as something that was in fact not an error. The action itself will not have changed, simply the conception.

Added to this, there are some things that one can call errors only in a wider context. An error marrying one person that later turns out to be something other than you thought – is that an error of judgement, or is it something else? The error is perhaps located in the self-opacity or assumption that your life would be one way, when in fact it is another, or it may be in that you thought they might be supportive when in fact they are not. The error is not in the marrying or in the action, but rather in the version of your life that you have intended on living. This cannot be described as an error that any amount of data gathering would have any impact upon. This is something that is entirely unrelated; it is about a version of life and future that one feels one deserves, and perhaps this has shifted. Furthermore, perhaps the person you marry turned out to be self-centred. Is the error the self-centredness or the marrying? Or you not being able to see it? Or none of them? Or all of them? Life is not mathematical. Mathematics can contain errors, but life is more organic, and life contains mutations, not errors.

Enough of me talking about me, what do you think about me?

It seems that followers of the QS movement are being drawn in by the authority that numerical data seems to have, seeking to overcome the complexity of life by having ownership or control over some of the information. However, many claim this is not an accurate description of their approach. Rather than seeking to achieve perfectly optimised selves, entirely calculable and controlled, they argue that tensions between the data (third person perspective) and the individual (first person perspective) provoke conversation and engagement and ultimately more meaning, as opposed to the numbers themselves. As outlined in Section One, a problem with privileging the first-person voice is that there is no sense in which the individual is partly constituted from (previous) interactions and/or relationships and experiences with others in society. To position the first-person view as most relevant suggests the self is seen as *in society* rather than *of society*, thereby indicating that, although there are aspects of a social self, society does not constitute the self in any meaningful way.[71] But, approaching data as a conversation starter in which the first-person voice is in communication with the third person voice, refocuses the privilege of the first-person voice,

As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. (Donald Rumsfeld, US Defence Secretary (2002)

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[70] Schools, however, inadvertently seem to present life as being a linear path. If you google "teaching resources life journey" for example, you will be presented with a large number of work sheets that show life as a road. It might be a bit windy, but it moves from start to destination. This suggests, however subtly, that there is a right way with little space for deviation.

[71] (Karaba, 2016)

and ensures that the perspective of an albeit technological other, is involved on some level. When the data is not positioned as the end goal in this way but as an intermediate stage in considering the tensions that arise between the first person and the third person, then the self is no longer ontologically distinct from the world it inhabits. The self then remains *of society*.

Therefore, in this instance, knowledge or data ought not to be dealt with as if it were building blocks that need to be put into place in order to achieve complete self-knowledge, but rather as conversation starters in order to cultivate a growing, shifting, and changing knowledge of self. There is communication between subjective knowledge and any, so-called, objective facts that are tracked.[72] For example, your tracking data may suggest that you are not very active, whereas you like to think of yourself as a sporty person. This information can challenge self-perception or even self-deception with positive outcomes and has the potential to provoke an updated self-concept at the very least. It is clear that the spectatorial capacity of data tracking is not purely passive. Tracking frequently relates closely to a desire to change or improve, and the first-person authority coupled with the sense of a "God's eye view" offers the individual potential for this. Such interaction between the first person and (technological) third person gives a sense of authorial control over the behaviour observed and ultimately changed. It seems that both knowledge and self-knowledge here is really about the relationship between subject and object. In much the same way as knowing something's name is different to knowing about it, the relations between things give them meaning, rather than the actual things themselves. The meaning of data, in just the same way as words and concepts, can only be understood through relations.

What is wrong with measuring things?

There are problems with measuring things, even if framed as the start of a conversation, and as stated above, data is not framed only in terms of the scientific paradigm but also in social, political, and economic terms. As has been seen, concretising one's actions to find a ground truth or attempting to "know that" about the self is problematic, however, there are further complications with regards to measurement taking and quantification as means to self-knowledge. This next section will consider the following three problems in more depth; firstly, the potential for reliance on quantifiable data for self-knowledge to lead to a performative approach, where individuals are judged based on measurable metrics; secondly, self-tracking encourages an instrumental view of one's life and relationships; and finally, the inherently reductionist nature of self-measurement, whereby reducing complex human experiences and emotions to simplified categories and algorithms results in a focus on quantified data rather than understanding subjective experiences. All these problems ultimately result in an impoverished sense of self knowledge.

The problem of measurement: narratives of performativity

A narrative of performativity seems to have spilled over from a market-based economy, where when something is measured, it is in order to optimise output, reach a performance goal, or it is measured in comparison with something else to assess success. Society seeks "bigger, better faster", and measurements are key with regards to baseline testing and the relationship to the increased performance. However, what one measures is an interesting

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[72] (Sharon & Zandbergen, 2017, p. 1700).

indicator as to what individuals / society values. For example, often success is measured by wealth, popularity by the number of followers on SNS, or intellect by exam results. Dating apps sometimes measure success in terms of volume of matches, when the number of potential partners can be said to bear little relation to whether any one of those results in a relationship. Yet there is the potential to have embedded within any of these measures gendered or stereotypically dubious approaches. For example, one relationship app available was quantifying what constituted a good relationship in terms of the G-force deployed by one partner during love making! As well as being more than a little questionable in terms of a frame of heterosexual relationships, the measurement could be said to entirely exclude lesbians, or not be relevant or linked positively to the female experience. The statistic and the objective are weakly linked at best.

There is no denying that society's focus upon the measurable is clearly evident within the context of social media, for example, Djick (2013) refers to the popularity principle that underpins the online economy of social media. He argues that popularity (as a coded concept) is quantifiable, with people who have many friends or followers being held up as influential. Their social authority, and/or reputation, once recognised affords them yet more popularity because of their Influencer status.[73] These individuals leverage their online presence to engage with their audience, build trust, and establish themselves as authorities in their respective domains. There are various types of influencers based on the size of their following and reach. Macro-influencers have a large following, typically in the hundreds of thousands to millions, and are well-known figures in their fields. Micro-influencers have a smaller following but often boast higher engagement rates and are considered more relatable to their audience. Nano-influencers are individuals with a relatively small following, but their impact can still be significant within their niche communities.

Brands and companies recognise the power of influencers as marketing tools and often collaborate with them to promote products or services. Influencer marketing has become a significant aspect of digital advertising, with brands partnering with influencers to reach their target audience in a more authentic and relatable way. A site called Klout was set up in 2008 in order to tap into this desire to be influential – it uses social media analytics to rank its users according to online social influence via the *Klout score*. This is a numerical value between 1 and 100, with higher scores corresponding to the higher ranking of the breadth and strength of one's social online influence. In determining the user score, Klout measures the size of a user's social media network and correlates the content created to measure how other users interact with that content. Some businesses and employers will look at people's Klout score as a means of assessing their value. Critics argue that the Klout score devalues authentic online communication and promotes social ranking and stratification by trying to quantify human interaction, thus further reinforcing the objectification of self.

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[73] Influencers are individuals who have gained a substantial following on social media and have the ability to impact the opinions, behaviour, and purchasing decisions of their followers. They typically have a specific niche or area of expertise, such as beauty, fitness, travel, fashion, or lifestyle, and create content related to their chosen field.

The above images are taken from https://klout.com/corp/score

More recently, a localised version of this has become embedded into ubiquitous apps like Instagram, available for all individual users to assess their 'stats' and work out their influence for each individual post.

Measurability is brought to the fore once again. Not only does it seem that a 100% score of "Perfect popularity" is in theory achievable, then a top grade in terms of popularity rating is required. All of this begs the question, 'Who exactly is doing the assessing?'. These seem natural modes of being for most young people as they are in school settings, with grades, reports, and feedback all making up part of their everyday existence. The main difference being that education is set up as delivered by "experts" and feedback is imparted by those who are qualified to be "in the know". Often, there does not appear to be any qualified justification for the scores and grades regarding people's existence in relation to SNS.
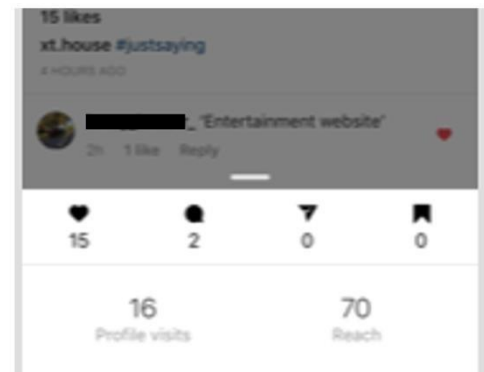

Figure 8: Screen shot from an Instagram insights page

One danger with performativity narratives spilling over into identity narratives is that people have the potential to link moral attributes to objective data about themselves.[74] Weight is a common example where, for years, many have equated their weight as related to performativity in a sense in which they do not measure up if they weigh too much. They often end up with the impression that they are, in effect, a bad or flawed person, leading to depression and/or low self-esteem. Rather than establishing healthy parameters, individuals are drawn into a narrative in which cultural or societal norms lead to a specific interpretation of data, and this in turn leads to a moral judgement being attached to objective fact. They are then led to believe they are failing to "perform". The same is true for the examples referred to above: prettiness or popularity are turned into performance measures and, intentionally or not, ascribed some form of moral dimension (this will be discussed further in the Chapter on Beauty). When life is presented in terms of a performativity narrative, as a linear, measurable, task orientated progression then issues of self-knowledge and identity become problematic. As such, performativity and productivity measures, the importance of achieving certain goals and levels, as prescribed by cultural ideals, become intrinsically linked to one's "internalised and evolving life story" (McAdams and McLean 2013, p 233). Rather than asking the question Who am I? one is left with "Do I measure up?". Linking this to James' potential selves, in which possible selves are viewed as bridges to change, the change will possibly then

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[74] To this end, Instagram and other social media platforms removed the 'likes' counter so that it was no longer visible to all. It was noted that such a statistic was having a negative impact on some people.

only be directed in terms of performativity, and measurable, concrete goals, e.g.: the goal to "be healthy" as measured by weight, as opposed to abstract and relative ideas about the right way to live or the sort of person one might want to become.

The problem of measurement: knowledge and information as instrumental or intrinsic

The information gathered by apps and tracking devices can be said to encourage an instrumental view of one's life and relationships (Danaher et al. 2018 p. 9) in that one's activities become instrumental in goal-orientated behaviour rather than intrinsic in and of themselves. Measuring often relates to using something for a purpose, for which some quantified idea of the value of that thing is of importance. For example, the most frequently used apps tend to be related to step count and sleep quality, with the idea being that a specific amount of these should be achieved. The closer you are to this amount, the better. Take step count as an example: the iPhone has a Health Tracker pre-installed that tracks the number of steps taken and number of flights of stairs climbed as standard. Some more sophisticated apps will be designed to encourage the user to improve on their previous performance through a variety of gamified techniques, with prizes and levels often playing a part. It can be seen that this quantified information is used for a purpose beyond simply doing the activity. In most instances, the purpose is to ultimately achieve a specific amount of something, e.g. 10,000 steps. This in turn is instrumental in relation to a wider ideal, e.g. losing weight, which in turn is instrumental in conforming to wider social ideals about how one should look and so on. The idea of simply being active for the fun of it is not enough. Some runners who use running trackers, for example, will have been witnessed running past their house and a further 98 metres down the road, or for another 48 seconds just so that they can complete their run. Arriving home does not mark the completion but the time/distance measured by the tracker marks the end. The run becomes part of fulfilling a quota rather than an end in itself. Alternatively, some people will wave their arms around more when they walk so their tracker apps will pick up that they have been walking "and then it counts". Obviously, phones will only track data when the user has their phone on their person, which in itself leads to a situation for some in which their activity only counts if it is logged. If they climb stairs without their phone and the data is not recorded, then it is not included and therefore, in some way, did not happen and will not be included in the final reckoning (this may account for the popularity of wearable trackers as the tracker is always attached and counting). In these instances, the activity of walking or running is not enough in itself but needs to be logged and measured in a specific way in order to meet a set criteria of achievement.

https://www.pinterest.co.uk/myfavoriterun/funny-running-quotes/

To generate broader self knowledge from the specifics of one's step count is difficult, but the wider issue of how to infer generalities from specific instances is of importance, and the relationship between individual facts and wider knowledge is worth considering in

greater depth. Simply memorising facts about things cannot be said to be the same as understanding the things in themselves. Many facts have a history and form part of a wider relational understanding that one needs to grasp before one can be described as having knowledge of a concept. In just the same way as Feynman (Feynman, 1973) suggests that knowing something is different to knowing its name, then knowing one took 10,568 steps in a day is different to knowing something of the self. A fact can rarely, if ever, convey meaning on its own, as it needs to be situated in a framework in relation to other concepts. We, in turn, need a conceptual system that allows one to test how that information functions in relation to other facts and concepts. This then allows us to build up a model of the world and grasp an understanding of how the specific fact shows up within that world. For this to happen, there needs to be some form of mediating activity in which the pieces of data are seen as more than individual pieces of information, but as entirely relational and as part of a wider system. But it is this wider system that ends up being constrained by norms that we ourselves have instituted, and as a result we "see as" rather than simply "see". For example we might see a lake *as* something to swim in, or *as* a great place for a holiday, or *as* something hugely threatening to our existence. We are in the world and we come to things as a result of our purposes and circumstances, therefore attributions of significance arise as a result of our purpose, and meaning is located in a network of relationships. A step count could been seen *as* an indication of how hard we have worked in a day, but for someone else, the same number of steps could be seen *as* an indication of a lack of fitness. We take the correctness of a representation (or fact) as governed by what we take to be its relation to other concepts, even if they turn out to be incorrect further down the line. It is the relationship between the data, and how it fits in with other concepts of fitness, health, or self image that will give it significance, and it is this awareness of "Seeing as" that opens one to self knowledge. The data itself cannot do this, the tracker apps do not ask questions that would lead to an awareness of one's "seeing as" and therefore the quantified aspect remains the focus. An awareness of "seeing as" alerts one to the possibility of the intrumental relationship one might have with knowledge.

It could therefore be argued that one's step count is only ever going to be one dimensional if understood on its own. There are those who would argue that the information step counters provide needs to be seen in conjunction with other types of tracking data in order to create a fully rounded view of the self. However, this would seem to suggest that every aspect of humanity can be quantified, or perhaps should be quantified, in order for it to be tracked so that we, in turn, gain greater self knowledge. And this raises the question about whether self knowledge is possible by tracking every single aspect of one's life. If you increase the amount of data, do you necessarily increase the amount of self knowledge? It was agreed above that increasing the number of facts does not increase the amount of understanding or generate knowledge. It seems the information remains instrumental when developing self knowledge but not intrinsic.

Yandell (2012) suggests that knowledge should not be rarified, as in removed from the socio-semiotic processes that are implicated in the production of knowledge. Knowledge is made meaningful in part through its production. Vygotsky (1962), talks about the journey of meaning only beginning when a word is first learned. Its definition and significance to the user develops over time and circumstance, the same could be said about data. It is the relationship that is built up between the word, the user, the concepts, and the norms that give the word
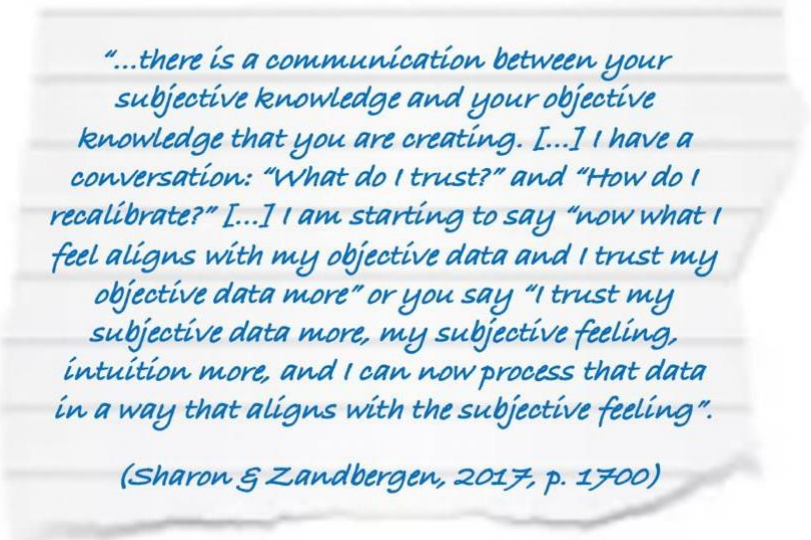
significance. This significance leads to knowledge of the word. In much the same way, it is the relationship between the data and the person tracked that is the key to self-knowledge, as opposed to the data itself. The data may be used to tell someone about their facticity, to quantify how far they can walk or how fast they can run. Self knowledge can be gained, not by studying the facts of someone's existence, but asking what it means or why those things matter.

The problem of measurement: the inherently reductionist process

Self-tracking works on the basis that messy, less easily defined phenomena such as "mood" or "health" can be reduced into a set of categories and algorithms. In doing so, there is the potential for human complexity to become lost. Tidying up such concepts and ensuring they conform to a set of parameters can lead to data representing some form of definitive truth. For example, "healthy" could be defined simplistically: users track their intake of fat and calories and then measure that against their output of exercise. But the relationship between these variables is not something that can be reduced to a simple algorithm. For example, when calculating "health", reporting that one is "52% healthy" is meaningless in real terms. As measuring and datafication of people seeks to reduce all phenomena and means of accounting for to that which is expressible in numerical form, it is possible to see those other insightful ways of coming to know something are lost or displaced. For example, Lupton (2015) argues that reproductive tracker apps suggest that women can achieve better and more accurate knowledge about their own bodies than they did with experiencing their own bodies signs and sensations. Morozov (2013) refers to an imperialistic streak of quantification that implies that as one's trust in numbers grows, one's trust in the subjective and embodied experiences, or intuitive knowledge about oneself, declines. He warns that "Human experience, run through the quantification mill, is reduced to little more than a stream of silent and mind-numbing bytes" (Morozov, 2013, p. 256).

The distinction between the Quantified Self and the Quantifying Self, drawn by Sharon and Zanbergen, is worth referring to at this stage (Sharon & Zandbergen, 2017). They argue there is an allure to data tracking that runs beyond objectivity, with self tracking offering the potential to be a communicative and narrative aid. The suggestion that followers of the QS movement are drawn to numerical data as a way to overcome some of the complexity of life, seeking control over the information, is contested. Nafus & Sherman (Nafus & Sherman, 2014) put forward the idea that those who engage in self tracking practices seek to actively engage with the data and render it meaningful rather than seeking to achieve a perfectly calculable, controlled and optimised version of self. Instead of working on the basis that the numbers will take over from other forms of intuitive, subjective, and/or embodied knowledge, the self quantifiers to which Sharon and Zandberg refer spoke about the relationship between this type of knowledge and the concrete data they may be presented with. […] a negotiation, that produces meaning" (Sharon & Zandbergen, 2017, pp. 1699-1700).

The notions of knowing and believing are relevant here. The believing and assimilating aspect of the data, so that it remains coherent with a self model held by the QS tracker seems to play an important role. These individuals do not believe that the information has to form a necessary and sufficient role in the development of self knowledge, but that it simply opens one up to a new way to encounter oneself. It could therefore be argued that one's

"...there is a communication between your subjective knowledge and your objective knowledge that you are creating. [...] I have a conversation: "What do I trust?" and "How do I recalibrate?" [...] I am starting to say "now what I feel aligns with my objective data and I trust my objective data more" or you say "I trust my subjective data more, my subjective feeling, intuition more, and I can now process that data in a way that aligns with the subjective feeling".
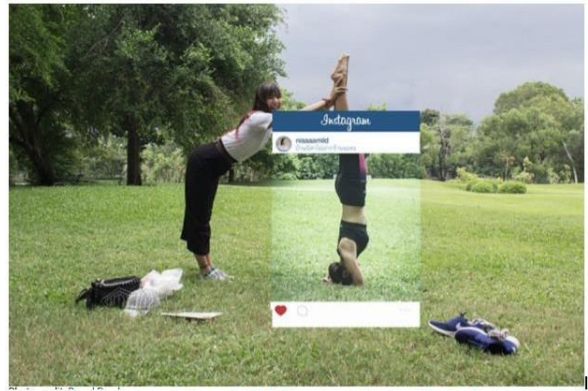
(Sharon & Zandbergen, 2017, p. 1700)

step count is only ever going to be one dimensional if understood a) on its own or b) as sufficient for self knowledge. The information step counters provide needs to be seen in conjunction with other types of tracking data, and a set of intutive and relative aspects in order to create a fully rounded view of the self. It counters the suggestion that QS'ers are implying that every aspect of humanity can, and perhaps should, be quantified and tracked so that we, in turn, gain greater self knowledge. If you increase the amount of data, quantifiers would suggest that you do not necessarily increase the amount of self knowledge, as it is the 'conversation' between the objective and embodied that creates this. However, it remains the case that the information generated and the data collected is instrumental, as opposed to intrinsic, when developing self knowledge.

To measure or not to measure? That is the question.

It seems that collecting statistical, measurable, and objective truths about oneself is not as straightforward as it first appears. The emphasis on quantifiable data not only presents challenges, potentially leading to a performative approach to self-knowledge where individuals are evaluated based on measurable metrics, but it also brings about the narrative of performativity from the market-based economy into self-tracking. Added to this, the tendency to view knowledge and information as instrumental and the inherently reductionist nature of the measurement process cause further problems when reaching for self-knowledge. It seems that an emphasis on objective data can fail to capture the depth of self-knowledge as it involves understanding motivations, emotions, and values in a way different to that which objective truth can offer. Therefore, it is worth considering alternative ways in which people have attempted to reach for self-knowledge in relation to the notion of a real or true version of themselves. Visual language and the use of images, can serve as a useful bridge for our understanding.

Documentary evidence: proof of reality?

Photographs have taken over from words on social media, with images being the default option when posting. However, photographs have always had a complicated relationship with truth and reality, long before social media or digital imagery came into play. They seem to sit

on the boundary of truth and manipulation, with questions over the representation of ultimate truth and accurate witness or whether images remain vulnerable to illusion and deception. Somewhere bound up in an image is the sense in which the photograph is not expressing reality, only capturing a framed version of events. Yet simultaneously, they are assumed to perform a documentary role. Perhaps this is why they are so popular, as they seem to straddle the boundary between truth and fiction, behaving in the same way as social media itself.

https://www.elitereaders.com/the-truth-behind-instagram-twitter-and-facebook-photos-revealed/
(Tipples, 2015)[accessed on 25th July 2021

Dangerous selfie-Angela Nikolau. FlickR

Our selfies aren't just pictures; they represent our ideas of self. Only through "reimagining" the selfie as a meaningful mode of self-representation can adults understand how and why teenagers use social media. (Fang, 2019)

The selfie[75] is a prime example of documentary-meets-imaginary. "Selfies, as many adults see them, are nothing more than narcissistic pictures to be broadcast to the world at large" (Fang, 2019). It is assumed they perform a documentary role. Barthes[76] calls photographs like these "certificates of presence" and Sontag refers to similar pictures as "phot—trophies". However, many teenagers use the selfie as something more than solely evidence that they did a thing or were in a place. In this way, the line between real and imaginary, or augmented, can be seen to be blurred. It seems that the digital image has become a type of hinge between real (physical) and virtual (digital) modes of existence, combining elements of familiar ocularcentric culture – with its trust and reliance on the true-to-life photograph– and an aspirational, sometimes imaginary, sometimes character-based version of life. Pictures such as selfies, problematise the presumption of a direct ontological connection between images and objects or people, often suggesting something more about who an individual is, what their character is like, or how they would like to be perceived. These types of images can be thought of as augmented in a sense in that it is greater, more

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[75] https://www.lavocedinewyork.com/en/lifestyles/2019/10/21/are-you-suffering-from-selfie-tis-what-the-selfie-craze-may-say-about-you/ (Russo Bullaro, 2019)[accessed 27th July 2021]
[76] (Barthes, 1993)

complete, when the implications of the picture beyond its documentary or aesthetic aspects are considered.

Sometimes the representation of personality is more obvious, for example in the augmented image below. Filters are popular on Snapchat with people having a variety of options to overlay on their own image.

https://graziadaily.co.uk/celebrity/news/use-snapchat-filters-like-pro/
[Bowen, 2016] [accessed 25th July 2021]

However, other filters can be more subtle, in which case the blurring of boundaries between truth and reality is less obvious. Sometimes filters simply airbrush wrinkles away so someone can appear younger, or they add makeup, so they appear older. In these instances, it is not so much the personality that is being represented, but the imagination / pretence of the individual. While some may police every photo to try and uncover its real "truth," we may also need to start admitting that our relationship with real beauty involves a hefty dip into the fantasy world. I shall discuss this further in the following section on Beauty.
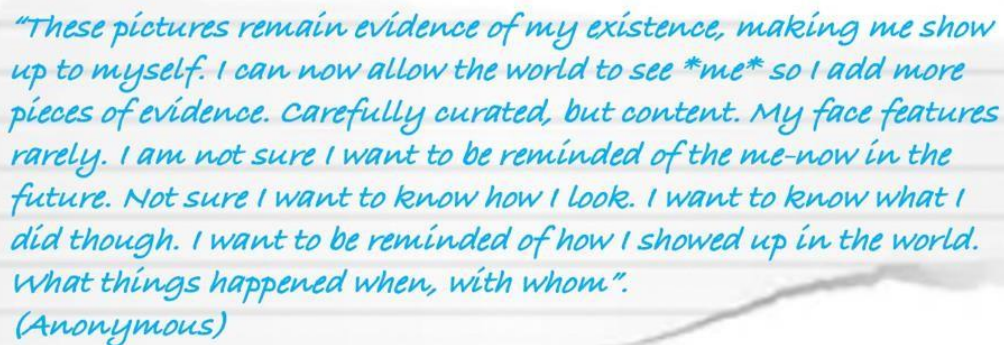
As a result, it appears that pursuing a line of argument that concerns itself with fake and real online existence is not the most productive. Those choosing this stance could be said to be judging social media as if it were intended as a factual documentary, looking to see if what is posted correlates directly with the offline world. In doing so, a social media feed will invariably fall short. As a result, rather than looking for the offline world to correlate exactly, perhaps we ought to expect no more than it simply tessellates.[77] It is precisely the relationship between factual and fictive that is worth considering further in relation to the self as expressed online, asking what real is and where it exists, not least because it seems social networking sites have, rather than being merely instrumental, become increasingly integral to the ways in which young people experience themselves. For example, online, there is a continual blurring of fictive dimensions and factual actions. People are posting images of themselves sometimes doing factual things that relate to the real world. For example, they may post a photo of themselves visiting a friend in hospital; they are physically present at the hospital, and there is a documentary element to the image, but they are also conveying conceptual, or fictive, dimensions of themselves in some way too, e.g., that they are a caring person. There is truth in both fact

Selfies, as many adults see them, are nothing more than narcissistic pictures to be broadcast to the world at large. But even the selfie representing a mere "I was here" has an element of truth. (Fang, 2019)

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[77] The relationship between online and offline might be better conceived of as a painting or a film (and sometimes even a cartoon).

and concept, but the conceptual aspect contained within the image (caring) may not be constant, it might not even be universally agreed upon, it might be aspirational as opposed to actual. There is no denying that these expressions of the world contain powerful realities, they have elements of what some might call real from a documentary perspective, but they are also more than that. What they can express beyond that is every bit as important, meaningful, true, and real, albeit in an alternative context. These images are a way of showing

> "These pictures remain evidence of my existence, making me show up to myself. I can now allow the world to see *me* so I add more pieces of evidence. Carefully curated, but content. My face features rarely. I am not sure I want to be reminded of the me-now in the future. Not sure I want to know how I look. I want to know what I did though. I want to be reminded of how I showed up in the world. What things happened when, with whom".
> (Anonymous)

who we are to ourselves and to others. In this way, it can act as scaffolding – a stepping-stone towards self-knowledge. Or, crashing the visual with a literary metaphor, images and check - ins act like a series of sentence starters for the (auto)biography of that individual. When considering why one image was chosen over another, or why one artifact was given preference over another, the conceptual version of self is brought into contact with the literal version of self. The two once again tessellate, but do not need to directly correlate. However, it is only by bringing both the literal and conceptual self together into an understanding of truth that makes it possible to reach for self-knowledge within the context of social media.

A suggested divide between 'fake' and 'real' is problematises a popular view that modern existence is taking the form of something that is *like* life rather than anything that is real. Subscribers to this idea hold that people are spending too much time performing in *their* world rather than existing within *the* world. However, in line with Frankel and Krebs (2022) in perhaps the way we perceive the world has moved on and the divide between fake and real is not as concrete as it may once have been presented. If the online world is viewed as an extension of the offline world, as opposed to a separate entity, it can mean the online realm need not be viewed as wholly illusory. Therefore, rather than suggesting the online world is entirely made-up, it can be seen as closer to incomplete or partial, as opposed to entirely fabricated. Viewing the online world as something akin to augmented reality games such as Pokemon Go (in which users view the real world through their phone screens and find imaginary creatures added to their real environment), rather than Fortnite (in which users can create their own entirely virtual gaming environments)
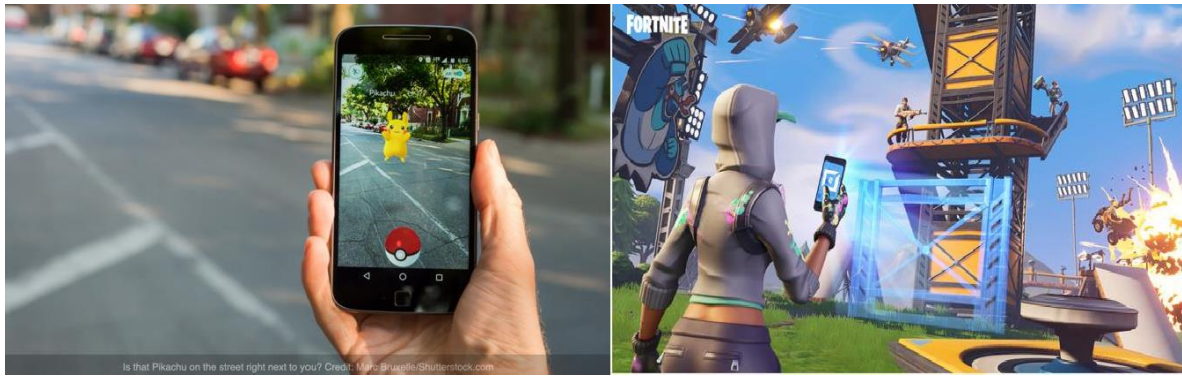
It is interesting to note at this stage that the gaming world has developed an enmeshed relationship with social media, with many now considering gaming as a form of social media itself. People can communicate, strategize, and forge relationships in a meaningful way, and some people develop lifelong friendships from video gaming platforms.[78] One possible explanation for this assumption is that many people seem to judge online gaming platforms, in which users deliberately develop fictional characters and define the entire online realm as unreal or as a dramaturgical arena ((Kendall, 1998, p. 133), differently to chat orientated social media forums, in which there is a level of expectation from other users that people are honest and behave in congruence with their offline identities. It seems in this environment, people are more comfortable with the lines between real and imaginary being flexible or blurred. Whereas when pursuing a line of argument that concerns itself with fake as opposed to real online existence, people could be said to be judging more traditional social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat, as if it were intended as a factual documentary of people's lives, looking to see if what is posted correlates directly with the offline world. In doing so, a social media feed will invariably fall short as a documentary of a life.

Problematising a "Completely True You"

After exploring the suggestion that individuals portray something other than their "real" selves online, it is important to address the second assumption outlined at the start of the chapter: the notion that a "true you" encompasses the entirety of one's being, with any indication of alternative or partial presentations being perceived as deceitful and deceptive.

Although at its outset there was only one platform and everyone had to share everything with everyone, nowadays there are many different channels to inhabit. With the average number of accounts held by one person being five SNSs, the idea that one platform would present a whole self is clearly vastly outdated. The ubiquity of individuals' multiple SNS's suggests that presenting a uniform, continual, whole self is not how social media is currently being used. Instead, it has become more of a collection of self-presentations, disparate, and more cross-platform. By creating/ curating content to specifically cater for people on one platform as opposed to another, individuals remain deliberately disintegrated, rather than a holistic self. Although the uniformity of picture tiles, may give the casual observer the impression of a contained and whole self, the use of multiple platforms for self-presentation, one possibly adopting a counter narrative to another, avoids a sense of grand design and purposefully steps away from a unified story or attempt to articulate a whole self.

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[78] Twitch is reported to have 15 million daily users (MediaKix, 2021 [accessed 3rd August2021]), and Discord sees over 140 million monthly users VentureBeat.com, 2020 [accessed 3rd August 2021]).

One person's social networking sites can therefore express a multitude of voices and differing presentations of self, each approaching (the same) things from a variety of angles. Siegel refers to self as being an "intersection of coordinates" (Seigel, 2005, p. 7) and this is a useful description to apply to self-expression on social media. His suggestion is that the parameters/ axis when plotting these coordinates online should be taken to include more than documentary, factual aspects of self, but also self-concept, fictional aspects of self, self in relation to other, augmented and/or imagined self. When considering why one image posted on social media was chosen over another or why one artifact depicted was given preference over another, the conceptual version of self is brought into contact version of the literal self. The two once again tesselate, but do not need to directly correlate. However, it is only by bringing both the literal-self and imagined-self/ self-concept together into an understanding of truth, that makes it possible to reach for self-knowledge within the context of social media.

Although we are drawn to a definitive account and reach for a unified version of ourselves, perhaps in an attempt to secure the fluidity of who we are, it remains the case that just as[79] there is no complete description of the world, there is no totalising, systematic unity, or unified self, merely overlapping aspects. Therefore, it can be argued in just the same way, that on social media, there is a continual blurring of multiple conceptual or fictive dimensions as well as factual properties of who one is. Factual aspects being things that can be verified, events, times, locations etc; fictive and conceptual being the aspects of what is posted that may describe more about personality, or how the individual wants to be seen by others. In this way, the relationship between the imagined and the real self is enmeshed, and this grey area of true-self should be embraced rather than treated with suspicion. While younger children frequently exist, unjudged, moving between imaginary play spaces and real-world happenings, experiencing a version of reality within them both, for a teenager/ adult within the context of self-presentation on social media, this seems to be ignored. There is merit in foregrounding the childlike moments of adolescent behaviour to re-frame perceptions of their online self-presentation. Pretend play, storytelling, and "as if", afford users space to *make-believe,* and, as a result, these can serve to scaffold the move to more grown-up moments of adolescent self in just the same way they do for the developing child. As a result, this next section relocates discussion to focus upon the role of play, imagination, and stories within healthy self-expression and development.

A Qualified Self

Lee Humphreys (2019) uses the term "qualified self" to describe an understanding of ourselves that emerges from creating and reengaging with media traces. "We create representations of ourselves to be consumed" (Humphreys 2018 p.17) both by others and ourselves. It exists beyond a statistics driven quantified self,

> "When we look at photos of ourselves or read what we have previously written about ourselves, we can engage, relive, and scrutinize ourselves from different perspectives from our lived experiences."
>
> (Lee Humphries 2018 p18)

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[79] Zizi Papacharissi commenting on Lee Humphreys "A qualified self" 1998)

instead conveying one's character or qualities. The qualified self is therefore a described self, rather than an accounted self, experienced as an aggregation of experiences, achievements, and 'moments' depicted on social media.

Virtually True Selves

It is possible to argue that people use the images of themselves they post to convey an existence they want to live. This does not have to be superficial for example, perhaps a shared image will portray a version of self that is one desperately wants to inhabit, a happier, better version than the one an individual might be going through at the time. They may need to be portrayed in the world as much for themselves as for others, with the image acting as simultaneously aspirational and

restorative.[80] A movement inadvertently started in July 2018 by Tracy Clayton, host of the Buzzfeed podcast, demonstrates this. She had shared the reality behind her picture from the


previous year, and tweeted[81] "im curious. If youre comfortable doing so, post a picture of you that you have shared on social media where you were actually having a really tough time in life even tho you look perfectly fine in the picture". People replied with pictures of their own, adding the "real stories" behind them.[82] All of these stories were far more vulnerable than the images first appeared. The picture of the mother walking her son to school depicted is one such example. It can be argued that these people felt the need to be construed, by themselves as much as by others, as coping or doing well. It is possible to put forward the suggestion that, to some extent, they viewed themselves through their future eyes, which then, in turn, played a role in facilitating their personal construction of themselves into someone who can cope. Neil Haynes argues that the public spaces of social media allow individuals to present themselves as they would like to be seen (Haynes, 2016, p. 72), and this does not always have to be considered as fake or narcissistic in its focus. It could be seen as empowering or simply as something to hold on to in tough times.

Another example of the blurring of fictive/conceptual, and factual can be seen in the three posts below which display different aspects of the same person.

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[81] This was reproduced from an article in Quartz (Fessler, 2018) with further permission granted by Tracy Clayton @brokeymcpoverty 22/01/2020
[82] Also contained in the Quartz article and further permission granted from @KrisMissTime 24/01/2020
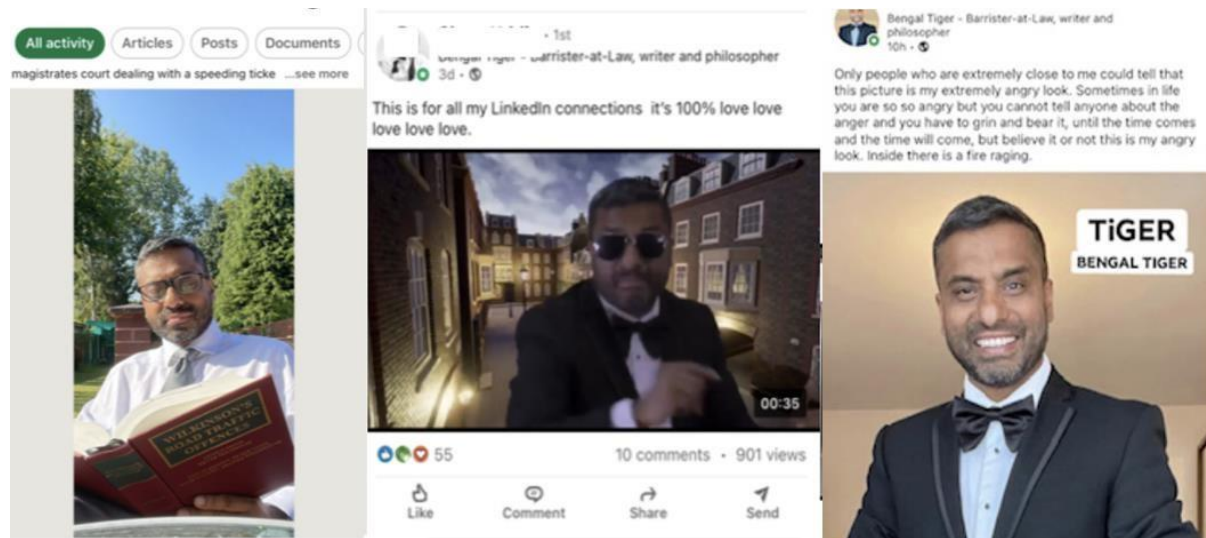
The first is an 'update' style post on LinkedIn about his work as a barrister,[83] whereas the second is a video he has made of him singing a song called "100% Love Love Love" with the use of a green screen to superimpose himself onto a variety of locations – ranging from a TV studio to a city and a park. The third is an example of where he describes himself as a Bengal Tiger; he often posts pictures of Bengal tigers. It could be argued that there is nothing fake about any of them, in that he is singing in the music video, in just the same way as he is reading the book on traffic offences. The first image is perhaps closer to a documentary style image of his life, whereas the second and third images express something very real about his character (if not about his location). For example, he seems to use the tiger to convey the idea that he is powerful and perhaps a revolutionary,[84] or perhaps that he is seeking the meaning of life.[85] In this way, the images are clearly not documentary but offer some truth to us in terms of his character and personality. This further calls into question the suggested binary between real and fake, suggesting that something may be less real in terms of documentary but very real in terms of character. Ultimately, social media displays this type of self-expression publicly in a way and on a scale that was never possible before. The technology is being used to support a narrative of someone's life, and in this way, the images are clearly not documentary but offer some truth in terms of character and personality.

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[83] (permission granted by individual for use of his images on 3rd August 2021).

[84] The nickname of Bengali tiger has been applied to revolutionaries in the past: Bengali revolutionary Jatindranath Mukherjee was nicknamed Bagha Jatin; a political cartoon from the 1857 edition of Punch in which Indian rebels were depicted as tigers.

[85] The film Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo (2010) is based on the true story of a tiger that escaped from the Baghdad Zoo in 2003 and roams the streets of Baghdad. This was more recently turned into a play in which the tiger is seeking the meaning of life (Joseph 2012).

"Technologies become meaningful as they support narratives of who we are and who we would like to be. From diaries to selfies these stories intimate feeling, experience, being."

(Zizi Papacharissi 2018)

A hybrid fictive and factual self is neither a new phenomenon nor one that is peculiar to online existence. Existential thinkers like Sartre have explored this phenomenon in their own lives. For instance, Sartre tells of an imaginary version of himself from childhood, a powerful warrior called Pardaillon.[86] When he pretended to be this warrior, he felt empowered. As he grew up and discovered boxing in his twenties, he found that he could tap into the essence of this Sartre spoke of feeling like he was able to re-capture some of the essence of this imaginary warrior, blending it with his real self to become what he perceived as a better version of who he was. . He was in effect dipping in and out of his fake self and real self, overlaying one on top of the other in order to make his real self into a better version. "I never stopped creating myself" (Sartre J. , Words, 1963/2000, p. 23). The process of blending the fictive and the factual, overlaying one on top of the other added to his sense of radical freedom, giving him a sense of empowerment. Similarly, in the realm of social media people overlay alter egos and alternative realities to feel more empowered.[87] This online self-presentation is sometimes documentary, sometimes life/self-affirming, sometimes partial, and sometimes aspirational.

There is no denying these expressions of the world contain powerful realities, they have elements of what some might call real from a documentary perspective, but they are also more than that. What they can express beyond that is every bit as important, meaningful and real, albeit in an alternative context. In this way we are returned to the words of Frankel and Krebs (2021) "It is precisely the unquestioned belief in the radical separateness of real and virtual that needs to be contested". It is therefore worth considering that pursuing a line of argument that concerns itself with fake and real online existence is not the most productive.

Social media as play:

Barbie-self

This brings to mind an in-app game I was introduced to: "What does your Barbie version look like?".[88] The app appears to analyse your Facebook status updates and projected self and then produces an image that claims to sum you up. I enjoyed participating in this, especially given the nature of my research, and, coupled with an interest in a Twitter account I had also followed, @ArtActivistBarbie, I decided to continue posting as Barbie for several months afterwards. The things I posted about were real events, as in they happened to me, but I posted as Barbie. The line between real and not real was deliberately blurred.

What Does Your Barbie Version Look Like?

This is barbie version Rebecca!

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[86] *Les Mots* (1963; *Words*) as cited in Boulé, 2005

[87] (Dennison, 2019)

[88] WOW – an in app free game that analyses your posts and status updates to provide you with one of a range of pictures with your name attributed to it.

Yoga this morning #plasticfantastic

Barbie's significance as a cultural icon and her status as a container for multiple and conflicting ideals made her a compelling vehicle for examining social media's impact on self-knowledge. Barbie's role as a blank canvas allows individuals to project their own identities and values onto her, making her a symbol of personal expression. Her iconic status means that there is an ordinary sense in which she is a physical doll, but there is also a wider semiotic sense in which she carrying symbolic meaning beyond her physical form, operating as a cultural signifier.

In the realm of social media, the presentation of the self could be seen similarly, as something akin to a metaphorical construction. Metaphor as a linguistic and cognitive tool serves as a means to unveil unforeseen realities by drawing parallels between concepts. In this concept the persona we create on social media platforms, much like the Barbie on my own platform, can be considered a metaphorical representation of aspects of ourselves that we wish to convey to our audience. A person may choose to frequently post images of themselves doing adventurous things, and create a metaphorical representation of themselves as an adventurer, even if their everyday existence is far from this. This metaphorical self becomes a vehicle for presenting and emphasising the adventurous aspect of their personality, serving to place the evident quality of one thing over the overlooked quality of another. Just as a metaphor presents something in a new way, making a new connection between the qualities of one thing and another, viewing social media as a metaphorical presentation of self highlights / presents a person in new ways. For example, Barbie and I shapeshifted in the way metaphor allows. For me she represented that unassailable quality I have always admired in swans. Effortlessly gliding across the lake, with unseen legs kicking nineteen to the dozen. It was this that I had hoped to encapsulate. I wanted to present a version of me that was my "best self" and in my mind Barbie-Me seemed to sum that up.

However, metaphors do not always work well in a binary, technological world. We have come to expect things to be presented as either one thing or another – a thumbs up or a thumbs down. There is less space for grey the area that metaphors offer, as metaphors are both exact yet inadequate. They are deliberately ambiguous. As it turned out each person encountering me as Barbie had a different understand of what Barbie represented. This is because barbie embodies various cultural norms with people projecting their own beliefs, desires and aspirations on to her. As a result, some of my friends say Barbie as representative of specific body ideas, or as a product of capitalism. Things that were a world away from the swan I believed I was representing. It was this

I had my laptop stolen earlier this evening... so here are some docu pics of the rest of my day.

that led to a misinterpretation of the metaphor, allowing them to think I was trying to present a different version of who I was. Some became quite exorcised about the inauthenticity of Barbie (or the hybrid Me-Barbie).

However, this said, in my mind Barbie works incredibly well as a container for conflicting ideas. By using Barbie as a vehicle to explore social media and self-knowledge is was possible to delve into the complexities of identity projection, the role of symbols and icons in shaping self-perception, and the interplay between individual expression and societal influences on the digital realm. Barbie's role as an object of projection and identification reflects the ways social media users may identify with and aspire to certain lifestyles presented by others, blurring the lines between self and other (a relationship I explore more fully later on in the section on Love). Just as Barbie's advertising slogan "You Can Be Anything" promotes a message in which people can play around with their identity (in Barbie's case from a career perspective – Doctor, Lawyer, President etc) and represents different aspirations for young children, social media allows users to explore and experiment with various aspects of their identity, giving rise to questions about authenticity, self-discovery, and the influence of external factors in shaping self-knowledge.

Although he was talking in a time pre-social media ubiquity, Bartle stated, "Virtual worlds let you find out who you are by letting you be who you want to be" (Bartle, 2004, p. 161). Initially representations of self were text-based, leading to suggestions that social media could lead to a radical freedom from embodied existence, allowing users to take on whatever form or persona they wanted to (Turkle S. , Life on Screen: Identity in the age of the Internet, 1997) (Haraway D. , 1991). However, image became a key element of social media, which led to a different way of constructing and defining the self, one in which users are "disembodied and re-embodied as avatars, photos, and videos" (Belk, 2013). Belk continues this line of argument, referring to the way behaviour changes, for both positive and negative reasons, when a mask is worn or a character is enacted. Because one cannot see oneself from behind a mask it is important to rely on feedback from others, but Belk argues that avatars offer a multidimensional approach to this, because not only are you inside the character, receiving feedback, but you are also able to adopt an external approach to the avatar by being outside of it and looking at it from an objective perspective. This, according to Belk (Belk, 2013), is a far more effective mirror and has a stronger effect than others' feedback alone. This has been exemplified in the Proteus effect;[89] psychological experiments have shown that people can change after even small amounts of time wearing an avatar. A taller avatar increases people's confidence, and this boost persists later in the physical world. It also appears that a more attractive avatar makes people more sociable, an older one leads to a more responsible approach to finance, and a physically fit one makes people exercise more (Blascovich, 2011). Therefore, by developing one's "real" online self to the extent that one essentially becomes it or comes to think of one's self in much the same way as, an avatar, an individual can inhabit this liminal space, becoming a virtually-real self. Much of Belk's (Belk, 2013) discussion referring to the relative freedom when configuring one's avatar self can be applied to personal social media profiles and the construction of real online selves. Belk considers the suggestion made by some that the avatars people create represent their ideal selves, possible selves, aspirational selves, or a canvas on which to 'try out' various alternate selves. All of

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[89] The phenomenon was labelled the Proteus effect after the ancient Greek God who could take on whatever form he wished (Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009).

these options seem entirely plausible when applied to any number of personal Facebook profiles or Instagram posts. People use objects, vistas, possessions, etc. to help create this version of their character. It is not all about how they look. Social media feeds are not solely head shots; they are about the lifestyle that is depicted.

Imagination Play

There are well-rehearsed arguments in educational theory that suggest imaginative play is widely recognised as an essential method of learning and development for young children. Not only does it provide opportunities for motor skills, vocabulary development, and creativity, but it can allow participants to adopt different perspectives, during which ideas and emotions are moulded and rearranged. Erikson, for example, noted the "playful and yet planful dialogue between infant and mother that negotiates the first interpersonal encounters; the light of the eyes, the features of the face, and the sound of the name become essential ingredients of a first recognition of and by the primal other" (Erikson, The Life Cycle Completed, 1998, p. 40). It starts the formation of self as individual. Later, as toddlers begin to develop a theory of mind, playing also helps sensitise them to the intentions of others (Marks-Tarlow, 2012). Furthermore, playing on words, solving puzzles, choosing sides, or singing silly songs, enlarges their working vocabularies, practices and stimulates the sense of number and proportion, as well as maintaining friendships, augmenting a sense of fairness, and exercising a feeling for rhythm. Essentially, imaginative play also helps a child find their place in society. Children are actively encouraged to play throughout primary school because of the strong benefits it offers.

However, this seems to contrast with a narrative of "Be the real you". It is this I would like to focus upon: translating the younger child's experience of make-believe across to the adolescent online experience and paying particular attention to the use of social media as a method of play. Research into online play for older children and teenagers has largely focussed upon gaming, rather than upon the use of social media more generally; however, due to a blurring of the lines between the so-called *fake* and *real* (as discussed above), I would argue that it is possible for teenagers (and some adults) to approach some of their use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) as a form of play. Imagination play is therefore, albeit articulated differently in online contexts, simply being extended into teenage years and beyond.

When a child engages in pretend or imaginative play by pretending to be different characters or by controlling objects in their own way and observing the result, they are essentially experimenting. Social media can also offer this experience, and some uses of it are closely linked to the experience of pretend play. Both are about learning who they are as individuals and how they fit into the world around them- how the world works. Memes, filters, silly faces, using a bunny filter, or "elf-ing themself" are all examples of play. In these moments people are usually not trying to fake their existence but are playing in
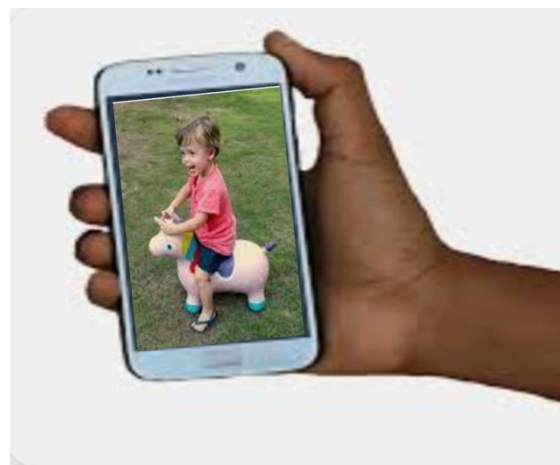
much the same way as one might dress up, trying on a parent's high heels to "be an adult" or putting on a stethoscope to "be a doctor". It is a form of "wishful imagination" in which the young child creates for itself a reality of imagination or dreams, tending "not to establish truths, but to gratify wishes" (Piaget, 1923, pp. 59-60). On social media this understanding can easily be broadened to include lifestyle by using filters, or careful positioning of the camera so specific angles enhance or reduce aspects of their lives. They are creating a version of them that is not the same as the real world them, pretending to have fabulous holidays or attend amazing parties. Importantly, this should not always be interpreted as cynical deception of others. If everyone else is also participating in the pretence and playing along, then it can happily form part of a make-believe world, with their behaviour being understood in just the same way as young children pretend to ride unicorns and fly to the moon. The problem comes when it is not perceived in this way by others. However, assuming they are self-sharing as a way of playing, perhaps "It just isn't that deep".[90]

Children play before they are able to speak, and thus play becomes a central means of expression when vocabulary mastery is not great enough to communicate orally. As adults, we brainstorm ideas verbally, and we may talk through our problems. Teenagers are straddling both adult and childlike worlds, at a point developmentally when they may not have the words to express their changing identity, relationships, and sense of how they show up in the world. Adolescence is arguably a time when vocabulary may not extend to describe the emotions or sense of flux one experiences, and in the same way as a child who does not have strong mastery of language can use play, teenagers could be described as using social media to work out situations that cannot yet be explained. As demonstrated in Furth's 1996 (Furth, 1996) study, children will not compromise their storylines when they cannot find words to express them, but rather they will increase their use of representations, whether this is with props or with more fantasy images. Filters and augmented photographs are the online equivalents of these. In this way, as imaginative playtime provides an opportunity for a child to practice important reasoning skills and to expand upon ideas before they can be adequately verbalized, so could online play be said to do so for teenagers. Therefore, allowing adolescent's the space to play online in some form ought to be recognised as important rather than belittled, dismissed, or treated with suspicion.

Storytelling

Blurring the boundary between play and reality can be a positive for teenagers, and in the same way, storytelling also plays an important role in self-understanding. From the time of our birth, we are immersed in a web of narratives and become who we are through the stories others tell of us and the stories we tell of ourselves. Barthes and Duisit (1975, p. 237) famously stated that 'there has never been anywhere, any people, without narrative' and stories regarding broader culture, family, religion, morality, and myth all play an important role in child development, helping them to discover and articulate their space and place in society. Storytelling also continues to be in evidence in a variety of ways on social media, and there are several aspects of the term 'story' that are worth focussing upon. This section will focus upon the ephemeral nature of social media Stories;[91] the narrative ark of the storied self as

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[90] Teenager from north London interviewed as part of a workshop on e-safety 2019

[91] The use of capital 'S' on Stories denotes a specific application/ function within a social media platform, using a lower-case s is for the broader concept of a story or tale.

presented through social media, and the nature of curated content in order to form a self-story.

Facebook Stories, Instagram Stories, Twitter Fleets (Stories), LinkedIn Stories, Pinterest Stories, Snapchat Stories, YouTube Stories, and others typically take the form of a 10-15 second video clip or photo. They are designed to give people a glimpse of the individual captured, and while social media *feeds* are generally carefully curated, *Stories* tend to have more of a spontaneous feel. However, the biggest defining factor in stories is that they are temporary. On most platforms, they last only 24 hours,[92] helping drive a more casual feel to these stories. They are presented as disposable. The human desire to 'airbrush' stories, inflate or reduce certain elements, tell white lies and omit details is unremarkable offline, and yet, online people are often held accountable for their stories in a different way. It is here that we, as observer, need to be careful, adopting a more flexible understanding of the S/story. Often True-stories and Real-stories are referred to as such, but on social media there is no qualifying term and it is precisely because they remain (S)stories, they ought be free-er from the factual and allowed to move closer to the fictive. The temporary nature of a Story, combined with the very nature of a story in its more general definition, arguably decouples the content they contain from documentary and truth. People have the potential to post content and images of themselves as a way of telling their self-story, viewing literal and conceptual/fictive content in the same blurred way as discussed above. The way these Stories (and stories) disappear may give further freedom for poetic licence as the accountability that can come with a sense of permanence is reduced. Therefore, in understanding the social media Story as just that, not a *true story* or a *real-life story*, it can mean that different characters or aspects of self can be brought to the fore and held up to the world in order to gauge a reaction. People are able to build a self by cycling through many selves[93] and there is safety for the teenager in it being *only a story* as the reality need not be inhabited if that reaction is not favourable. In just the same way, a child can experience a storybook as real in that moment, but they can close the book if they do not like the story, and it might all go away.

As well as the 'Story' on social media, it is also important to pay attention to the broader stories and tales that are in evidence on social media feeds. Narratives are not easily defined, but narrative scholars tend to emphasise temporality, one event following another, and causality, one event caused by another. These components together create the plot, that in turn, can be said to give a narrative meaning (Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2011). Tracing this through to social media, some platforms, e.g., Facebook, are formatted specifically to present a personal self-story as a linear narrative on a timeline.[94] The literary rules of causality and temporality are therefore facilitated by virtue of the platform. They can be said to reinforce a sense of life having an end goal or perhaps purpose that people are moving through time and working towards. For some users the notion of a *narrative identity*[95] is in

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[92] although Instagram does give users the option to save some stories to their highlights reel to view again.

[93] (Turkle S. , 1995, p. 178)

[94] Other platforms, however, such as Instagram allow for a non-linear approach, presenting the individual through tiles that could be described as a quilt or mosaic. Although they are non-linear it is still worth noting that they form a regular, organised pattern and they form a sequence of representations, ultimately connecting the parts to a whole, if not a centre. The tiles on an Instagram account offer a sense of unity if not a middle.

[95] Understood as a person's internalized and evolving life story, in which they integrate the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose

evidence. Narrative identity is defined as an internalised and evolving life story, it integrates the reconstructed past, made up from what one notices in the moment and holds on to as significant, with the present and the future, offering up some degree of unity and purpose.[96] Users are not putting up a Story with the intention that it remains a static artifact, but rather showing themselves as constantly moving through time. Erikson (1963) suggested the psychosocial task at the stage of adolescence is to answer the question Who am I? in such a way that continuity can be found between "Who I was" and "Who I am becoming", and this can be said to continue throughout life. Social media affords the opportunity to try out many storylines, with self-continuity found in the way narrative self-stories, linking the potential self with the actual self, are constructed with past selves, present selves, and potential selves brought into alignment. Ideals of future selves are integrated with memories with the aim being that the two are eventually aligned into a coherent narrative, or self-story.

Giddens (1991, p. 54) argues that we often also continually integrate events from the outside world into our ongoing story about the self and these add to our capacity to keep a meaningful self-narrative going. This can often happen over a number of platforms rather than in one social media space. "Digital Technologies allow for self-relevant information to be instantaneously accessed, refined, and indeed even fabricated," in self presentation (Kernis & Goldman, 2005, p. 112). Information extending beyond events one actually attended, memes, political statements, photographs of celebrities, and news articles are all things that might suggest something of what one wants to say or re-live at will relating to one's character. They apply to the current audience, future audiences, and the future self. Rather than having to specifically knit them together into an obviously coherent and well-crafted story, "we now seem more content to collect cues for a series of self-related vignettes that we hope will somehow selectively cohere into an integrated sense of self" (Belk, 2013, p. 489). In the online world, where tales abound of multiplicity and fluidity, of deceptions and revelations (Rheingold, 1993) (Stone, 1995) (Turkle S. , 1995), it seems people persist in seeking essentialised groundings for the online selves they encounter, providing a counter narrative to one of separation between online and offline selves.

It appears that some people post different images or status updates in a deliberate way to create this cohesive self-story, by appropriating the form to generally construct a story about themselves or *curate* the self.[97] This phrase 'Curation of self' emphasises the importance of the capacity to display a particular kind of self; to "take charge of or organise, to pull together, sift through, select for presentation […] and *to preserve*"[98]. Curation implies that different aesthetic objects are put together deliberately to create a cohesive story, and in a social media setting, it serves the function of throwing spotlight on the self you want to present. Simply posting a picture on Facebook, or a collection on Instagram, may not count as curation in the sense that is normally associated with galleries and museums, but, in the same way as curation can be described as an organisational tool,[99] adding value to the content posted by the way in which it is co-presented with other content, it can be argued that when by deliberately appropriating aesthetic forms, such as photographs, memes, or selfies, people are constructing a story and looking to present who they are in a particular way.

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[96] (McAdams & McLean, 2013)
[97] as Taylor (2014) refers to it
[98] (Mihailidis & Cohen, 2013).
[99] (Mihailidis & Cohen, 2013)

It can therefore be suggested that people post different images or status updates in a deliberate way to create a cohesive self-story, by appropriating the form to generally construct a story about themselves. [100] "People are able to build a self by cycling through many artifacts of their selves. I shall return to this idea of curation or collection of self later in the chapter on Beauty in relation to Baudrillard's unalloyed collections and collections proper[101].

Conceptualising status updates and images as artifacts of the self[102] through which people accumulate being can be a useful way to understand how this works. Just as we accumulate objects we could be said to accumulate being. Our prized possessions offer (us) 'ontological proof' to our being, expressing our identities and values[103]. These images are a way of showing who we are to ourselves and to others. In this way it can act as scaffolding – a stepping-stone towards self-understanding. Roland Barthes calls these kinds of photographs "certificates of presence" (Barthes R. , 1981), and Susan Sontag refers to them as "photo-trophies" or "souvenirs of daily life" (Sontag, On Photography , 1977). In just the same way that we externalise ourselves into the things we collect, it is my contention that we externalise ourselves into images that we then collect on our social media platforms. The souvenir picked up while travelling, the rug handed down from our grandma, the picture painted by a niece- all these offer a framework, or a grounding, into what we find important and who we feel we are/want to feel we are. Sharing photographs on social media does the same in the sense that it records that you were in a certain place, with certain people. "I was there, and I did that". There is a collection of curated images that suggest something about the individual, a reference catalogue that tells a story. It is something on which to peg out their identify. It could act like a series of sentence starters for the (auto)biography of them. Due to the linear nature of *timelines* or *stories,* for example, it is easy to presume that there is a core of self that evolves over time, something akin to character development within a story. This can be reassuring at a point in life where you lack certainty about who you feel you are. Sorapure observes "in an online diary, pieces of information about the self may be brought together in different configurations, signifying the multiple and shifting ways of understanding the self" (Sorapure, 2003, p. 8) but as Giddens states, our "identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is- in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going (Giddens, 1991, p. 54) [104]. A self-story articulated on social media seems to have a beginning and a middle at the very least, if not an ending that makes it all make sense quite yet.

The nature of social media forces people to look at themselves through, not only the eyes of others when posting but also, their own future eyes. From the time of our birth, we are immersed in a web of narratives of which we are both internalised author and object, to some extent becoming who we are through the stories we tell ourselves and others. Therefore,

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100 as Taylor (2014) refers to it

[101] For more on this see Baudrillard and Benedict (2020)

[102] For more on this see Baudrillard and Benedict (2020)

[103] Greg Noble (Noble, 2004) develops notions of 'existential breadth' and 'ontological depth' to explore this notion of accumulated being in relation to material objects. He discusses this further in Accumulating Being

[104] In Sartre's *Nausea* (1964), one of the protagonists speaks of creating 'aventures' in her life. These 'aventures', are not daring adventures, but trivial moments that she shapes into a framework, that give form to formless time, and thus create meaning out of meaninglessness. She calls them 'perfect moments' that she can re-live at will and thus appreciate and understand her life. The same could be said with regards to the online world. People often post boring or mundane content making the everyday seem like an event.

rather than seeing the online presentation of self being some kind of veneer, perhaps the notion of epistemic distance is of more use. The space between the real and the ideal, be that in moral, intellectual, or aesthetic terms, allows for a space to open up, and this provides ground for personal development and self-reflection to take root. Users are not putting up a profile picture with the intention that it remains a static artifact, but rather that it becomes a stepping stone (or a dew drop in the case of the prose at the start of the thesis), showing themselves as constantly moving through time. Erikson (1959/1980) suggested the psychosocial task at the stage of adolescence is to answer the question Who am I? in such a way that continuity can be found between "Who I was" and "Who I am becoming", and this can be said to continue throughout life. Self-continuity is found in the way narrative self-stories, linking the potential self with the actual self are constructed, with past selves, present selves, and potential selves being brought into alignment. Ideals of future selves are integrated with memories so that the two are aligned into a coherent narrative or self-story. Narrative identity is defined as an internalised and evolving life story, it integrates the reconstructed past, made up from what one notices in the moment and holds on to as significant, with the present and the future, offering up some degree of unity and purpose.[105] Social media is now dictating this narrative of significant moments more than ever.

Apps like Timehop, iPhone's 'Memories', and Facebook's 'On This Day' feature, present users with images from the past. Initially, the content is only available to you, but if you want to you can reshare it easily on your main feed. Timehop and Memories do not curate the reminders, but Facebook does, for example,[106] if you have shared on Facebook that you broke up with the person tagged in the picture, you will not be reminded of the event. Being presented with memories like this adds importance to them, making them

into events perhaps larger or more significant than they were at the time. In much the same way that people used to curate moments to look back upon in photo albums, wedding days, family celebrations, and so on, it facilitates a moment of remembering and a link to the past self. This continual looping back to the present-self as past-self can reinforce the notion of each post serving as a stepping stone in one's self-story. However, there appears to be a shift

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[105] (McAdams and McLean 2013)

[106] Automated reminders for friend's birthdays, collated photos of friends for you using facial recognition tools are fairly standard on social media platforms nowadays. They are framed in terms of reminders about the history of you and your friendship, designed to periodically pop up with photo reminders of 'one year ago today' and so on. Ironically, although these apps are not doing these things in any thinking sense but are reliant on algorithms, this inhumane, technologically focussed way of gathering data, leads to a more humane way for users to interact with one another. One is continually historically and relationally situated within one's context and this is part of living authentically.

in the way that people post when they are aware that they will be reminded in the future. It is almost as if they become aware of their future-self looking back on their present self. Before Facebook incorporated its own version of reminders, it was noted that those who had Timehop[107] were more active users of social media in the first 3-6 months following sign up to the application. They were using the 'checking in' facility more frequently and recording comments and likes on a variety of places and people's photos. There is an argument to suggest that people were doing this so that they could be reminded of all of these great things that they had been up to in the future. After all, for an app that reports to be "a time capsule of you" it would be rather depressing to find that capsule empty. The users of such are arguably creating not just abstract records of their activity, but fodder for future reminiscences that would automatically be retrieved in a year or so's time. Often the pictures were more carefully posed, with multiple takes so that everyone looked their best. In essence, they were shouting out to their future selves, writing notes into a visual online diary that would announce itself one year hence, to be read. This has been referred to as pre-stalgia, a state in which people are pre-emptively nostalgic, as they think about how they will look back at the event they are currently experiencing. However, because of this, the memory that is served up a few years later is affected. It becomes less candid and more curated,[108] with the moment being impacted by this pre-stalgic filter.[109] I shall return to the importance of this later in the chapter when discussing images more fully.

That said, it is also important to bear in mind that memory itself is not objective fact, so its intertwining with technological memories is interesting. Elkins (Elkins, 2001, p. 59) writes "Memories are lovely things because they are unstable. Each time you recall something, it changes a little, like a whispered secret that goes around a room and gradually changes into nonsense". It is important to question whether the actual material image and accuracy in its recall is the most valuable aspect of relating to an image, or whether the transmutation of a living image in the mind does not constitute just as important a part of the life of the image. This is highlighted to me by a memory of the moment I brought my son home after he was born. We have a lovely video of his sister being introduced to him. I am filming on my iPhone from just next to her head. She was 19 months old then, and now aged 18 she is certain that she remembers the moment in absolute clarity. We have watched the clip multiple times, so I am equally certain that what she is remembering is the video as opposed to the live event. However, it was filmed from directly next to her head, so her view would not have been different. I often catch myself wondering whose memory it is that she remembers. Mine

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[107] The creator of Timehop tapped in to the idea that we think of our future as a bundle of anticipated memories, which we then use to reaffirm ourselves.

[108] Keeping a teenage diary is a similar experience. It is intended as a space where thoughts, feeling and experiences can be poured on the pages with honesty, unfiltered in a way that reflects the intensity of the adolescent experience. However, amid all of this there remains a subtle awareness that the words will / may be read in the future. This awareness that the contents of the diary may well become a time capsule of someone's teenage self can have a profound impact upon the content and style of what is written. Sometimes this will result in self-censorship or self-editing, in order to present amore coherent or palatable version of themselves. They may write with an awareness of how they want to be perceived in the future, shaping their narrative accordingly. The self-consciousness that arises from this awareness of potential future readers adds a layer of complexity to their writing. It becomes a balance of crafting a ones narrative with a raw self-expression.

capturing the event, or hers? Yet, as I write this, and think about that moment now, I remember a view of my arm holding a phone and watching the event on the screen, but I did not have a smart phone with an integrated camera then. They had not reached the saturation point they are at now. I am sure that my memory has adjusted to incorporate the camera, because over time, the video clip ended up saved to the cloud, so I now have access to it on my phone. I am now remembering a hybrid of watching the video on my phone at a later date enmeshed with the emotion of the moment when I watched the scene unfold firsthand. I cannot trust my memory as a factual account of events. Yet, although fact of that moment is fuzzy in some of the details, however, they are not the ones that matter. The truth of the moment that is encapsulated is not about the visual aspect of it but of the care she took placing some toys in his crib. This is the important truth. One that is something quite different from a documentary photograph or a video. So, perhaps it is not as important to worry whether the visual represents an objective reality of a past event or simply provides a moment of connection to it, allowing it to serve as a dew drop on the spider's web.

Being faced with an external version of themselves to reabsorb or curate at which point there is a blurring of the boundary between literal and conceptual. "[A]n individual's perspective on his model, his idealised real figure, is originally externally presented, but it becomes internalised, becomes the internal model of self-representation"110 Considered in phenomenological terms it is not as if action and perception happen and then later self-presentation follows. Instead, they are entangled such that one cannot be said to precede the other. How people present themselves to others is fundamental to their conception of themselves, furthermore, by objectifying and externalising their moments and experiences it is possible to learn about themselves. We become who we are through the stories we tell ourselves and others. It seems that from the time of our birth we are immersed in a web of narratives of which we are both the author and the object, but both the author and the object are internalised. However, it is increasingly hard for society to say where digital life begins and ends, or indeed how it even differs from 'real life'. Every footstep is essentially live streamed on the way to 10,000 steps a day, and every calorie or change in blood sugar logged in the cloud, forming an ever evolving, multi-layered reality consisting of bits, bytes, code and matter.

Role play and "as if"

It has been suggested that young people share photos of themselves on social media as a way to crystalise the formation of self-identity to present to others [111](Drenton, 2021, p. 6). However, the idea of simply presenting a version of you to others as a way of sure-ing up who you are, seems to miss the way adolescents mimic/mirror others they encounter, be that by dressing similarly, using specific language, or adopting certain poses or attitudes. They derive affirmation and

Season 3, episode 1 The Simpsons

PINK?! I CAN'T WEAR A PINK SHIRT TO WORK. EVERYBODY WEARS WHITE SHIRTS. I'M NOT POPULAR ENOUGH TO BE DIFFERENT.

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110 Rorty (1986 p.84).
[111] This is discussed more fully by Jenna Drenten (Drenten, 2012)

approval from their friends' identical outfit choices and from mimicking their friend's appearances in much the same way a baby who is learning to babble feels sure-ed up every time its "goo goo goo" is met with its mother's identical and responsive "goo goo goo". Self-identity is formulated through this permeable ego boundary for many teenagers, where it is not clear where one teenage self ends, and another begins. Drawing upon this, it can be argued that going through the motions (genuinely and authentically) of borrowing aspects of others (consciously and unconsciously) is a way of learning to articulate who they are to themselves and others. This can be likened to a literary style referred to as "free indirect", in which the narrative discourse moves freely back and forth between the author's voice and the character's voice. "So, in the line, 'she tried not to be sad, so as not to be angry' it is as if the author is inside the mind of the protagonist" (Lodge, 2003 quoted in Hallam, 2011, pp. 82-83). In much the same way, on social media, teenagers move around as if they are inside the minds of others while also being their own audience and speculating what others might be thinking they mean. They may be their self, their other, the other, and a mixture of all three at various points online.

This in turn is evocative of Lacan's mirror phase[112], in which the person is, at first, so captivated by their external environment that it becomes their camouflage. In teenager terms, this can be seen as copying their admired peers so as to be exactly like them in order to fit in. They are chameleon like in terms of fitting in with the admired peer(s). The relation to the other in the act of photo sharing serves as a kind of collective mirror that helps the adolescent grapple with the question, "Who am I?" "Who do others say I am?". Initially they are reflecting the other, this then moves to being a situation in which they are reflecting themselves (to both others and themself) in chameleon form. This then gets transferred to the inner world, in essence moving from captivation to evolution. However, more than just acting as a reflection of who they are shone back at them, there is a sense in which this process can also be seen to scaffold the sense of self. There is arguably a double mirroring action taking place, as often the actions they choose to have mirrored back will be the ones they have seen others do. People observe those around them and identify personalities or aspects of them that they aspire to emulate.

TikTok[113] provided a basic framework for this. Do 'the' dance, learn 'the' moves. Although much of the content on TikTok has now moved on from simply dancing, it initially served for many as a way to participate in the in-crowd

https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/instead-of-this-try-this

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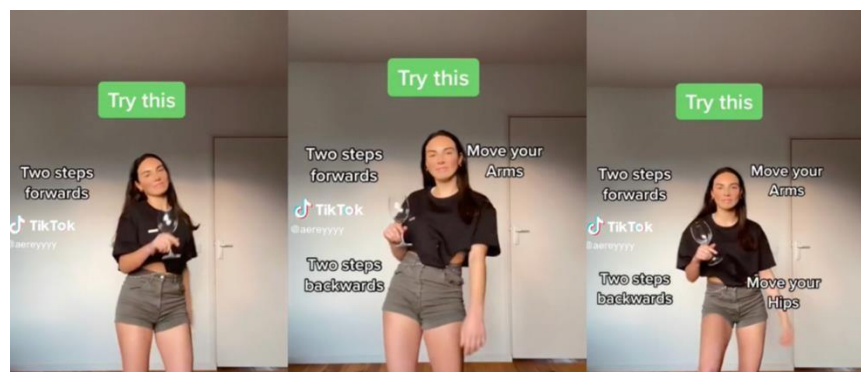
[112] This is outlined in (Lacan, 2006/ 1949)

[113] TikTok is a short-form, video-sharing app that allows users to create and share 15-second videos, on any topic. It sees a range of viral 'challenges' e.g. #tumbleweedchallenge in which users are encouraged to participate in a specific activity, film it and share it (in this case, roll like tumbleweed). The challenges are varied but users are essentially doing the same thing. There are viral dances and moves that also adopt the same format.

culture and to take on parts of others, emulating them.

The idea of mirroring and external confirmation as a way of bolstering ego in order to feel more confident is nothing new. However, it may be valuable to reframe this notion by considering the idea of "twinship" online as a form of self-scaffolding. If we apply "twinning" to adolescents mimicking and even adopting aspects of an admired peer, it can be seen as an attempt to align themselves with this idealised self-image. It is easy to see how *borrowing* aspects of a close friend / admired person might act as stepping stones or psychological scaffolding of self. The admired parts of the other have now become part of them; they feel they have attained the hoped for self by aligning with the admired "twin." Just as the mother is mirroring her baby's emotional development by encouraging, affirming, and responding ("goo goo goo"), a teenage peer finds acknowledgment and affirmation in the stepping-stones of "twinning" through borrowed aspects of the other. Once again, there is a blurring of the conceptual dimensions and literal actions of self. The literal copying is a scaffolded activity in which the individual can act "as if" their self-concept is a reality.

There is an interesting moment of liminality, where the external resided in a place of 'as if' for the first person. In which they are behaving 'as if'. In the literal presentation of this "as if" they are conceptualising those aspects from a second person perspective in the hope they will appear like X kind of a person. It is a version of autobiographical experience which Braude (1995)[114] describes as experiencing something as one's own but not being in a position (conceptually speaking) to believe it is one's own. It is not necessarily disingenuous, as it may well be they end up internalising these aspects.

For example, posting pictures of amazing banana bread, and wholesome home-schooling became popular at the start of lockdown 2019/2020 for many parents. It may be that these were aspects of themselves that many people desperately wanted to be, and we are in the process of a curious reformulation of Berkeley's "to be seen is to be"[115] (Berkeley 1710). At the same time as they are internalising an aspect of the other, they are externalising it and placing it on line, in order to watch it back. Initially, they are internal conceptual models externally literally represented, but this process is ultimately flipped on its head in a cycle of affirming self-scaffolding.

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[114] Discussed further in Stephen Braude's First Person Plural (Braude, 1995)

[115] e*sse est percipi (aut percipere)* - to be is to be perceived (or to perceive) is found in Part 1, Works 2:42-113 of Berkeley, G. (1948–1957). *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop (eds.). London: Thomas Nelson and Sons. 9 vols.

Reframing the virtual self to include an "as if" to scaffold self allows for a more positive understanding of the relationship between *real* and *unreal* online behaviour. Viewing the "as if" as rooted in playfulness and imagination suggests that a virtual self can be real and virtually real simultaneously. In the same way, there comes a point in a child's life where they know that Father Christmas is real but also know he is not real. They can hold these

> *Selfies are <u>self portraits</u>, a private ritual of performance and play. There is a thrill in seeing yourself as others see you. Trying on <u>all of</u> the different kinds of woman I was supposed to be. However, the pictures were an act of reclaiming myself, an act of autonomy*
> *(Tilly Lawless: Self Portrait Short Cuts Radio 4 podcast 27th August 2019)*

two opposing truths in their mind together. Likewise, when young children play "as if" they are riding on unicorns, those unicorns are not fake to the children, but nor are they real to them either. The exist in the realm of "real imagination". Virtual in an online context can mean "as if" and we, as observers, need to make sure we pay as much attention to the "as if", in terms of make believe, and trying on for size. This occurs in an enmeshed parallel with real life and is frequently undertaken genuinely rather than as a form of deception or , malicious trickery.

Furthermore, the term real also needs to be understood as having a broader definition than "in the documentary style". Being the "real you" is about the relationship between the conceptual and the literal. It does not mean they have to directly correlate or perfectly align. To assume that it would seems to be missing something essential about human self-articulation (not least as the lines between play and reality, story and documentary, self and other, online and offline, continue to blur within a world in which experience is described as "onlife" (Floridi, The Fourth Revolution: How the infosphere is shaping our reality, 2014)). The liminal space between reality, real, virtual, and fake is increasingly viscous, therefore, we need to pay attention to both factual and fictive understandings as they afford developmental space within the context of social media.

How can we identify, understand, and know a true self within the context of social media?

Identifying and understanding a true self within the context of social media is a complex and multifaceted process, and there is no real sense that it is possible to do more than reach for an answer. As has been seen, the relationship between real and virtual behaviour on social media requires a nuanced understanding and the "as if" nature of online interactions allows for a playful exploration of different aspects of identity. Social media can be seen to exemplify what Henri Cartier-Bresson (Cartier-Bresson, 1952) frequently suggests photography attempts, in that it seeks to capture a 'fleeting reality' (this is an idea that I will explore more fully in the chapter on Beauty). Therefore, identifying a true self can only ever be partial, for self is transient and constantly changing.

Furthermore, in just the same way as imagination play provides the opportunity for truth and reality to intersect and collide within the real world, the liminal space between a real and virtual world allows for the same. Social media therefore appears to offer a container in which it is possible for opposing truths to coexist, with people simultaneously recognising the authenticity and the fictional nature of their online experiences. We seem to understand such things in the same way as we approach a language of flirting, as here people deliberately play with meaning and purpose. The point of flirting is often to create a sense of intrigue, playfulness, and interest without directly revealing all of one's intentions. Things are said and left unsaid simultaneously, thriving on ambiguity and subtlety. Just like postings on social media, flirtatious phrases or actions that can have double meanings create an element of mystery, leaving the intention partly unexpressed precisely to keep the interaction engaging and to gauge the other person's response. The uncertainty and not-knowing is a major part of the appeal, with both social media and flirting deliberately conveying ambiguous intentions and truth differently. Just like a glance across a crowded room, knowing and/or self-knowing on social media is never secure. Supposed binaries seem to melt a little at the edges; therefore, we can only really say we flirt with identifying, understanding, and knowing a true self within the context of social media.

Having considered the language of flirting as being a helpful metaphor for understanding the relationship with self-knowledge on social media, it now seems wholly appropriate to move on to consider the importance of love and relationality with regards to the same.

84

Summary of Truth

TRUTH

So, this chapter challenges the idea that there's a clear line between what's real and what's virtual.

And it explores how we define terms like truth, reality, false, and oneself, when it comes to portraying ourselves on social media.

Facts have two surfaces. [...] because a fact is not merely an event in the world but the assertion of an event, the wording of the world' (Covell, 1992, p. 44).

It suggests that people use symbols, metaphors, and stories (on and off line) to make sense of show who they are need, and understand themselves better.

Be the real you
Be true to yourself

Part Two: Love

In this section, diverse perspectives on love and its connection to self-knowledge are examined. The focus extends to applying historical insights to the contemporary online environment, exploring how people seek self-knowledge through social media, via expressions of love, friendship, and relationality. It is important to note that this will not be an exhaustive study of the way humanity has thought about love and relationality, but a continuation of the interweaving, tearing out and placing alongside, of old and new conceptions that show up in the online world. The chapter delves into the correlation between self-knowledge and interpersonal relationships, drawing from contemporary society, social media, and philosophical insights. It examines the concept of love from Plato's Symposium, in which it is suggested that love unites fragmented individuals, applying this to examples of behaviour on social media (however, it is important to note that a comprehensive account of Plato's theory of love, a presentation of the controversies involved in interpreting it, or a discussion of the problems it creates, are all beyond the scope of this work, as I will be focussing specifically upon how love from the perspective of Platonism relates to self-understanding).[116] The chapter also considers Aristotle's perspective on friendship as a form of love contributing to personal growth and self-understanding, extending this with danah boyd's concept of online 'imagined audiences'. These ideas are then contrasted with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of failed love hindering self-knowledge, drawing upon contemporary cultural and social media examples. The chapter will illustrate how social and relational roles, as seen through the lens of online behaviour, can both positively and negatively impact self-knowledge.

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[116] Platonism is frequently associated with the concept of Platonic love, which is understood today as a non-sexual relationship between hetero sexual friends. However, as this definition is not really helpful in today's understanding, nor is it doing justice to Plato's complex theory of love, French scholars found it helpful to distinguish between amour platonique (the concept of non-sexual love) and amour platonicien (love according to Plato) (Gould, 1963)

This chapter draws on the work of these philosophers precisely because of their thinking about the role of the 'other'. All of them delve into the complexities of human existence, individuality, and the formation of self-identity. Their ideas on the importance of the "other" in shaping our self-concept and self-knowledge align in interesting ways with the relational nature of social media, and by using their philosophical frameworks, it is possible to examine how online interactions and digital relationships influence the potential for self-knowledge within the context of virtual interactions.

Relational Self knowledge

It is possible to place an entwined connection between the self and the other into four broad categories: knowing oneself as merged with the other, knowing oneself as defined by the other, mirroring the other, and self-inventing as if the other.

- Knowing oneself as merged with the other- this refers to a perspective where individuals define themselves through their relationships. Their identity becomes intertwined with the identity of their partner or significant other, and they may feel a sense of completion or wholeness through this merging of selves.
- Knowing oneself as the other perceives you to be- here the other is the active party in defining the self. Friends or society can ascribe roles or categories to people that define who they are, and these can be welcomed by the individual to a greater or lesser extent.
- Mirroring the other - involving individuals shaping their identity based on those around them. Their sense of self is heavily influenced by the reflections they give and receive through their social interactions.
- Self-inventing as if the other- implying that individuals construct their identity by taking on aspects or characteristics of the other. They may draw inspiration from others or idealise certain traits, incorporating them into their own sense of self.

I shall consider each of these, though not necessarily in turn, in the following pages.

"You complete me"

The line "you complete me" in the 1996 film Jerry Maguire (Crowe, 1996) not only epitomised a popular and common relationship ideal of the late 20th century, but one that has also been discussed by Ancient Greeks, existentialists, early modern, and contemporary, philosophers. It demonstrates a perspective in which it is believed that love will make us whole as individuals. Relationships are often portrayed as a search for one's "other half," and long-term partners are sometimes even colloquially referred to as one's "better half". This implies that people are somehow incomplete or lacking something when they are single, thereby positioning individuals as needing a partner to be whole.

This idea has its roots in Platonism which focuses upon the idea of love as a means to reunite individuals and restore a sense of wholeness. It presents some important images of love that are of particular interest when it comes to self-understanding, putting forward an understanding of love that implies self-knowledge and fulfilment can be achieved through union with another. The Symposium, sees Aristophanes explore the idea that love makes us

complete and whole as individuals. In this account of the origins of love, Aristophanes tells of early humans having both sets of sexual organs, two faces, four hands, and four legs. He describes how these humans were so powerful that the gods were concerned for their dominion, so Zeus decided to cut each in two, to weaken them. He then explains how Zeus commanded his son Apollo "to turn its face…towards the wound so that each person would see that he'd been cut and keep better order." "[Each] one longed for its other half, and so they would throw their arms about each other, weaving themselves together, wanting to grow together." The resulting humans were apparently so unhappy that Zeus, moved by pity, decided to turn their sexual organs to the front, so they might achieve some satisfaction in embracing, the boundaries between self and other melting away. Aristophanes' myth purports that love is essentially the human search for their alter ego and the part that will make them feel whole again.[117]

> "Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature. Each of us, then, is a 'matching half' of a human whole…and each of us is always seeking the half that matches him."

As Aristophanes depicts it, we may see love as the cure for the "wound of human nature", it is a remedy for an ancient wound inflicted on us by the gods, who divided us in two as a punishment for our arrogance. Since those primordial times, each of us has been only half of himself or herself, searching relentlessly for completion (Amir 2001). Aristophanes' presentation of love making us complete finds echoes in the modern digital age through various social media interactions within the context of relationships. Social media can be seen to serve as a potent tool for people to create a sense of identity within the context of their relationship, not least because it is through these (often visual) cues that some individuals seek to communicate not only their relationship status but also their sense of self within the context of the partnership. It is therefore worth considering this further, as social media platforms tend to be a space for self-expression where people curate their digital identities.
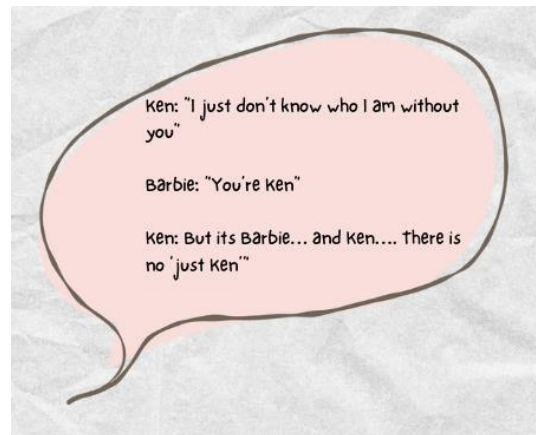
In contemporary dating culture, the act of officially indicating one's relationship on social media has become highly significant, so much so that it has earned its own informal term known as "going Facebook official". Social media has reshaped the way people announce and express their relationships, be that them beginning or ending, being presented to the world, or being constructed through social media (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Profile pictures, Relationship Status updates, and the use of shared photographs all

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[117] This can be related to the notion of ontological rootedness, as identified by May (2011). This is the sensation of our attempt to root our life in the here and now; to give existence solidity and validity; to deepen the sensation of being; to enable us to experience the reality of our life as indestructible (even if we also accept that our life is temporary and will end in death) (May 2011 p 38). "That is the essence of the joy of love, when it exists: we feel justified to exist"

play a role in communicating relationship status and dynamics, all have significance in terms of self-presentation and can be seen as an attempt to reach for self-articulation.

On social media, individuals make choices regarding personal and relational narratives, and in a way that is evocative of the Aristophanes myth, some choose to expand their representations of self actively portraying a merged self-image with their partner. This blurring of boundaries may be seen by an individual changing their profile picture to include both them and their partner, rather than just themselves.[118] By presenting themselves and their partners as a unified entity, there is at least a

Ken: "I just don't know who I am without you"

Barbie: "You're Ken"

Ken: But its Barbie... and Ken.... there is no 'just Ken'"

this loss of a sense of self is parodied in the Barbie movie (2023)

nod to, but perhaps a reinforcement of, the idea of being "one" or "complete" when together. Facebook's timeline, Stories, and "On this day" features are also important in modern relationships, serving to cement a sense of a journey travelled intertwined together (whereas Instagram offers alternative potential due to its different emphasis focussing upon the aesthetics rather than mundane realities (Schreiber, 2017). Images posted here seem to pose the rhetorical question, "Don't we look good together?"). Frequently, couples will actively participate in portraying and reinforcing this display of merged identities, illustrating joint activities and affectionate behaviour (Catalina, Choi, & Choi, 2015) through their curated narratives. For many, the notion of two lives being inextricably intertwined through shared histories, friends, and life events is a key aspect of social media self-presentation.

#couplegoals

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[118] Tagging, and liking the same pictures or one another's pictures is also used a way of declaring a relationship (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011) and the ability to widely share different aspects of the relationship is an important feature of social media, serving to maintain social connection and foster positive relationships (working a little like grooming does in the primate world).
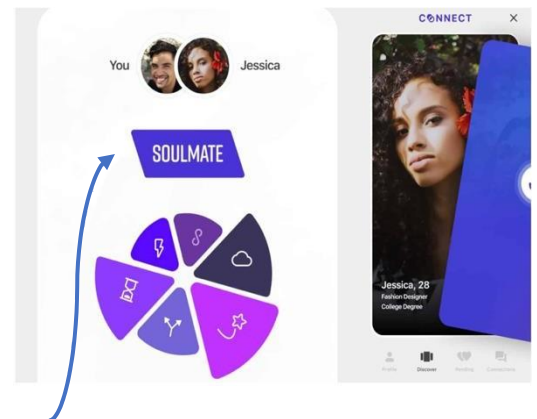
Relationship theorists have long noted that the success of romantic relationships depends in large part on couples' social environments. This social environment is now, invariably social media and as social norms dictate that SNS relationship communication is generally positive and life affirming (Toma & Hancock, 2013) it enables users to attract support for their relationship. As a result, online scalability (boyd, Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications, 2010) also seems to be an important feature in the sure-ing up of relationships as users say the ability to share meaningful relational events (days out, engagements, holidays abroad, meeting the parents etc) with a wide yet familiar audience of friends and family helps to state to others (and themselves) that the relationship is of a qualitatively different status. This is important as both online and offline the longevity of romantic relationships is affected by the extent to which friends and family are aware of and approve of them (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Ultimately, celebrating milestones, exciting outings, and shared memories with the wider network through social media can contribute to a greater understanding of themselves and their role in the relationship.

Although the idea of one person being completed by another has continued to be romanticised in various forms over the years, it is by no means an agreed universal. Not least because in this formulation, the notion of self-knowledge seems to be contingent on an understanding of oneself as an incomplete entity, emphasising the essential role of an other in achieving wholeness. This is problematic as it can lead to a loss of sense of self altogether.
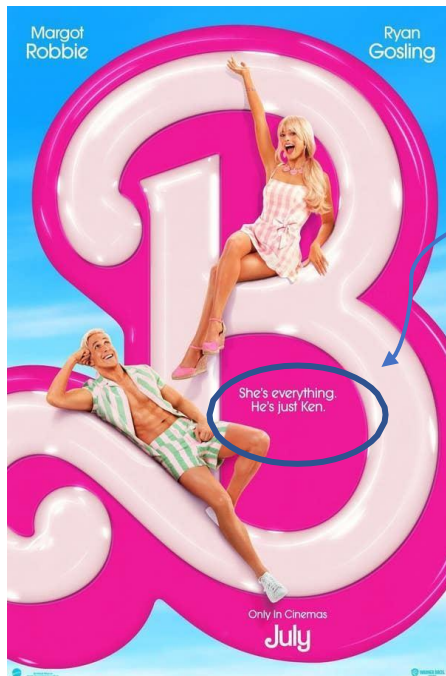
When one's sense of self is entirely intertwined with that of their partner, a person may struggle to establish their own values, interests, and boundaries as their decisions are primarily guided by the desire to maintain the relationship and fulfil the expectations of the partner.

Increasingly, there are competing narratives playing out with regards to finding an other half, in the branding ideals of the social media world of dating apps. For example, a decade ago, popular dating sites like Match.com, eHarmony, and others featured advertising containing smiling, happy couples, with quotes about how lucky they were to have found their soulmate. The concept of finding your 'one true love' was integral to these platforms. More recently though, the online world is reflecting a different turn. Although there are still some dating apps that push the notion of a soulmate – some even having you take a

personality test to reveal what percentage 'soulmate status' you and a potential first date might have- this narrative has definitely started to shift[119] This is, perhaps in part, due to the pressure that it placed upon users. Before online dating existed, it was impossible to connect with, or meet, such a high number of potential partners in such a short space of time (Tinder for example, claims to process a billion swipes per day (Bilton, 2014). Now people can be faced with a huge number which they need to accept or reject based on a short bio and a photograph.

However, it appears that when people are presented with more options, they are more likely to reject more people and feel less satisfied with those they do choose to match with. For some, the perception that there is an abundance of potential partners adds

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[119] Tinder and OKCupid, for example, have given up on the idea of advertising finding The One and their campaigns actively encourage their users to remain single. The notion of being whole in yourself is being pushed in the name of independence and sexual liberation.

pressure to find the perfect one[120] and they become almost paralysed by having to make a choice. Rather than reduce the number of users and choices available, it makes better business sense to push a different advertising narrative, and now messages of sexual liberation fuel repeat business for some dating sites[121] with the notion of "The One" waiting to complete you [122] being entirely rejected.

However, interestingly, this shift in narrative has meant that some now approach the process of online dating as a way to self-knowledge. "[…]you open yourself up to the idea that dating serves a greater purpose rather than ploughing through as many frogs as necessary to find your prince.." (Dack, 2022) This approach means that people pay more attention to themselves rather than their date, so rather than spending time to getting to know the other, it makes it a tool for noticing yourself and how you show up in that particular setting. Therefore, rather than looking to the other to see if they will complete you, it requires some form of self-reflection, "I learnt so much about myself and what I wanted that when I met my partner, I knew straight away I wanted to be with him" (Ahola quoted in Kelly (2023).

However, while this increased potential for self-reflection seems to be a positive, there is also a danger that this approach encourages us to think of other people as commodities to assist in self-discovery. It seems that the introduction of technology in facilitating this process has amplified the notion of efficiency. "They promise efficiency because you can sort through people speedily. So, it encourages us to try and create a real-life version of processing people quickly" (Weigel cited in Kelly, 2023). Efficiency is not something that is generally lauded in either relationships or self-knowledge. This is largely because an obsession with efficiency and productivity may lead to superficial reflection and a shallow understanding of self, or perhaps a prioritisation of external achievements (as these can be measured as KPI's as discussed previously in the section on Truth) over internal exploration. Added to this, even with this approach potentially raising individual agency, through its focus on control and choice, it can equally be said to increase the potential for selfishness as dating moves to become "all about me", rather than about getting to know others as ends in themselves. Therefore, as always, it is crucial to ensure that people are utilising technology as a tool for self-knowledge while also

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[120] This is discussed further by (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017) and (Schwartz B. , 2004)

[121] Another reason is that platforms benefit from users coming back and looking for something better rather than committing to one person and then deleting the app (Sharabi & Timmermans, 2020) It is simply not a good business model for them to have one-time users. Therefore, a change in narrative, one that taps into narratives of independence. An interesting change in user behaviour seems to have correlated with this change in advertising narrative. It seems that people slip into making romantic decisions in a similar way they would make consumer decisions when presented with a sense of abundant partner choice. It seems there is an attempt to apply a pseudo-rational lens to the decision process, thereby, viewing the profiles of potential partners as if it were a catalogue of products, asking the question "Which one is best suited to my needs?". This moves us further away from Aristophanes myth of the soulmate completing you, moving closer towards an economic exchange with associated costs and rewards. However, payoff from such an approach depends on a level of self-knowledge and people tend to face significant uncertainty (or opacity, about which I will speak more in Section Two: Love), with regards to their own abilities, preferences, states of mind.

[122] Much of this flies-in-the-face of the way in which educational establishments operate. There is a strong narrative within schools that suggests that everything is a step towards something else; GCSEs are a step towards A-Levels, which in turn are a step towards university. Every phase has a narrative of aspiration in which the present step is not enough and each previous one was simply preparation. However, this creates a cognitive tension of adolescence as being 'preparation for life' in which they are also simultaneously being told to be 'true to themselves'.

maintaining genuine connections with others, valuing the richness of human relationships beyond mere efficiency (as discussed in the section on Truth) or narcissism (as will be discussed further later in this chapter).

Others / Friends and Self Knowledge

While Aristophanes may portray being in a relationship as being one part of a whole, it is important to recognise that relationships can take various forms. Aristotle, like Aristophanes, sees the love of another as a fruitful means to self-knowledge, but he makes friendship rather than sexual love the supreme form. Aristotle takes the position that this seeking of mutual harmony is more conducive to personal flourishing than other forms of love. It is a reciprocal relationship of equals however, it is not a desire to merge to become whole or in any sense that suggests the other will complete you. This understanding is better understood in terms of the loved one being something akin to a version of you. It is essentially about loving oneself in another. Aristotle believes it is possible to have knowledge of ourselves emotionally, just as we can physically, but we need the help of mirrors, and these are provided in the form of

> Just as] when we wish to see our own face, we do so by looking into the mirror, in the same way when we wish to know ourselves, we can obtain that knowledge by looking at our friend. For the friend is, as we assert, a second self. If then it is pleasant to know oneself, and it is not possible to know this without having someone else for a friend, the self-sufficing man will require friendship in order to know himself.
>
> Aristotle MM 1213a20-6 p1974 Cf NE 1169b28-

our friends, someone who is just like us in their essential nature, a second self, whom we love.[123]

He held that by observing our reflections in the loved other, we learn about ourselves. By coming to know them as a second self, we come to know our own self, and by discovering them, we discover our own character and why we chose to act as we do. Mirroring by another person gives us a powerful sense of being validated and anchored in the world, and from the perspective of Aristotle, individual self-knowledge is therefore fundamentally relational.

Social media could be said to serve as a contemporary form of Aristotelean self-reflection, thereby opening up this potential for self-knowledge. The constant feedback and interactions with others on SNS platforms offer valuable insights into our own identities and how we navigate the online world. By observing the engagement and responses to their posts, individuals can gain insights into how their words and actions resonate with others. Social media can be said to function as a virtual mirror that reflects aspects of their lives and personalities to others and allows them to observe how they are perceived by their online connections. For instance, when individuals post content on social media, such as photos, status updates, or opinions, they are projecting a certain image of themselves to their audience. The interactions and reactions they receive from others serve as a form of feedback, providing glimpses into how they are perceived by their online community. They

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[123] Therefore, to perceive a friend must be in a way to perceive one's own self and to know a friend is to know oneself. Some scholars doubt that the Magna Moralia is really by Aristotle, but the passage cited here is typically Aristotelean.

may discover which aspects of their personality or interests are most appealing or influential to their audience, and this feedback loop creates a dynamic process of self-discovery.

However, boyd's notion of "imagined audience" can be seen to suggest that SNS actually takes things one stage further. At the same time as someone is engaging with an external other, they are also internalising them as an imagined audience. The term refers to the mental constructs or perceptions that users have of their potential audience when posting content online. When people share posts, photos, or updates on social media, they often have an idea of who their audience might be and this can encompass various groups, including friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, and even strangers. Users may adjust their online behaviour based on how they think these different groups will perceive them. Arguing we situate our actions in the minds of others ourselves, before they are mediated by any actual others in an online network (boyd (2007), cited in Balick (2014, p. 103), boyd moves the role of other from "external on line" to an "internal in mind". In effect, friends / others are moved from external relationships to internalised concepts and act as imaginary critical mirrors. The relational aspect of this interaction is interesting, as it is not clear where the line between self and other exists. It seems this form of interaction has disrupted our ability to be separate from others, as our contacts on SNS have become so embedded into one's psyche that they are, in effect, always there. Yet, this is different from Aristophanes' understanding of merged self, as in this context, the imagined audience does not serve to complete an individual in any sense, and the others are abstracted and imagined representations of potentials.

Furthermore, in addition to this, it is possible to argue that the others in this imagined audience are negotiated as a set of shared characteristics rather than as individuals. The specific voices of this person or that person cease to matter as they become categories of people who would approve of X or Y. There is a blurring between a sense of multiple relationalities and a relationship with a specific 'one'. For example, a person may be weighing up whether a potential post will come across as a humble-brag or a genuine expression of accomplishment, and in some instances, the imagined audience serves like an internalised Greek chorus[124]. It may contain multiple voices, but they are heard as one, and are experienced as a constant presence and disembodied judgement of one's actions. Therefore, although it has been suggested that many young people 'act [online] without thinking why they act' (Siegel,1988), quite often the opposite is true, and it is possible to argue that this could serve to foster critical self-awareness, thus enabling self-reflection.

Love and Belonging

Feeling loved or accepted, plays a crucial role in shaping our sense of self and understanding who we are. A sense of belonging, being liked, or included by others, is often described as a fundamental human need.[125] For many individuals, fitting in and being part of a group become essential motivators in developing their sense of self. Therefore, it becomes crucial to explore the concept of belonging and relational identity, particularly when examining self-knowledge. Understanding how these relationships impact their self-perception can provide valuable insights into their personal growth and identity formation.

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[124] In a Greek tragedy, the chorus has multiple voices that speak as one, acting as a bridge between the actors on stage and the audience.
[125] This is discussed in more detail by Baumeister and Leary (1995).

Gaining a sense of belonging with their peers is often a primary objective for many adolescents, and for some, if not all, it is more important than academic goals at one stage or another.[126] However, a sense of belonging relates as much to one's external portrayal of who one is (one's existence), as it does to one's internal sense of self (one's essence). Feeling like you fit in comes as much from within as from without. In school settings, however, often an internal and external self are portrayed as being in tension with one another, with the desire to fit in being portrayed as in direct opposition to being "the real you". Often from the teacher / adult's perspective, peer pressure is presented as a negative force, one that causes people to act in ways that are not aligned with their internal self. When positioned like this, there seems to be the nested implication that the external self is not necessarily a helpful indicator when it comes to self-knowledge. Added to this, many popular educational narratives that are simultaneously prevalent in schools focus on autonomy and self-sufficiency, grit, and growth mindset, and these can also serve to reinforce an individual as opposed to a relational approach to knowledge. This has the potential to become further entrenched as personalised and individually adaptive learning is set to become more commonplace in schools with the rise of augmented and artificially intelligent teaching tools. Love, relationality, care, and their role in learning and knowledge can sometimes appear to take a poor second place within a learning culture of this type and this in turn has the potential to influence an understanding of self-knowledge. It could (perhaps inadvertently) be implied, for example, that relationality would not lead to self-knowing, with introspection and individual reflection being the only way.

However, at this point it is worth returning to Sartre's extrospective "Look" as discussed in Part One. 'I now exist as myself' for I have been made into 'an object for the Other' following the experience of being caught at the keyhole. Sartre insists that the Other, through his or her "objectifying power teaches me who I am" (Sartre J. , 2003, p. 313) (Sartre J. , 1943, p. 298) 'The Look' at once reifies and individuates a person, holding ontological significance as it teaches others about themselves through the eyes of others, fostering reflective self- knowledge. "I can only know myself through the mediation of the other" (Sartre J. , 2003, p. 85) (Sartre J. , 1943, p. 74). This awareness is a singular event, and, as Dolezal (Dolezal, 2012) points out, one does not need to keep encountering others in order to be subjected to the Look and maintain self-awareness with the ability for self-reflection.

the ensuing permanence of the capacity for reflective self-consciousness is ensured because the presence of the other is actually an omnipresence.

(Sartre J. , 2003, p. 392)
(Sartre J. , 1943, p. 375)

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[126] There is a prevailing notion that the digital realm is often seen as a mindless distraction from the academic setting, one that could potentially detach students from cultivating a sense of belonging, both within their school and among their peers, as it appears that they lack emotional engagement within the school environment, with their focus shifting towards the virtual world. However, this perspective is overly simplistic. As Ethan Zuckerman, the director of civic media at MIT Media Lab, aptly pointed out in a BBC Radio 4 documentary, "The reason you were on the internet was probably because you didn't have a lot of use for the people you were physically closest to. It gets us out of localities that not all of us are happy in." (Cited in Mace, 2019). Recent research suggests that up to one in four children experience a sense of not belonging within their school (NEU, 2020 accessed on 20th September 2023), perceiving it as a place where they struggle to fit in. This is likely to have a profound impact on these young individuals as they contemplate their identity and their place in the world.

> By the mere appearance of the other I am put in a position of passing judgement on myself as object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other
>
> (Sartre J. , 2003, p. 260) (Sartre J. , 1943, p. 246).

Dolezal (2012) identifies three layers or aspects of the Look's impact:

- One is physically seen and observed by another person.
- The Other's perspective is imagined or absent, and individuals see themselves as if through the eyes of the Other.
- The Look serves as a symbolic awakening of reflective self-consciousness, enabling reflective self-knowledge, perpetuated by the ongoing "presence" of the Other.
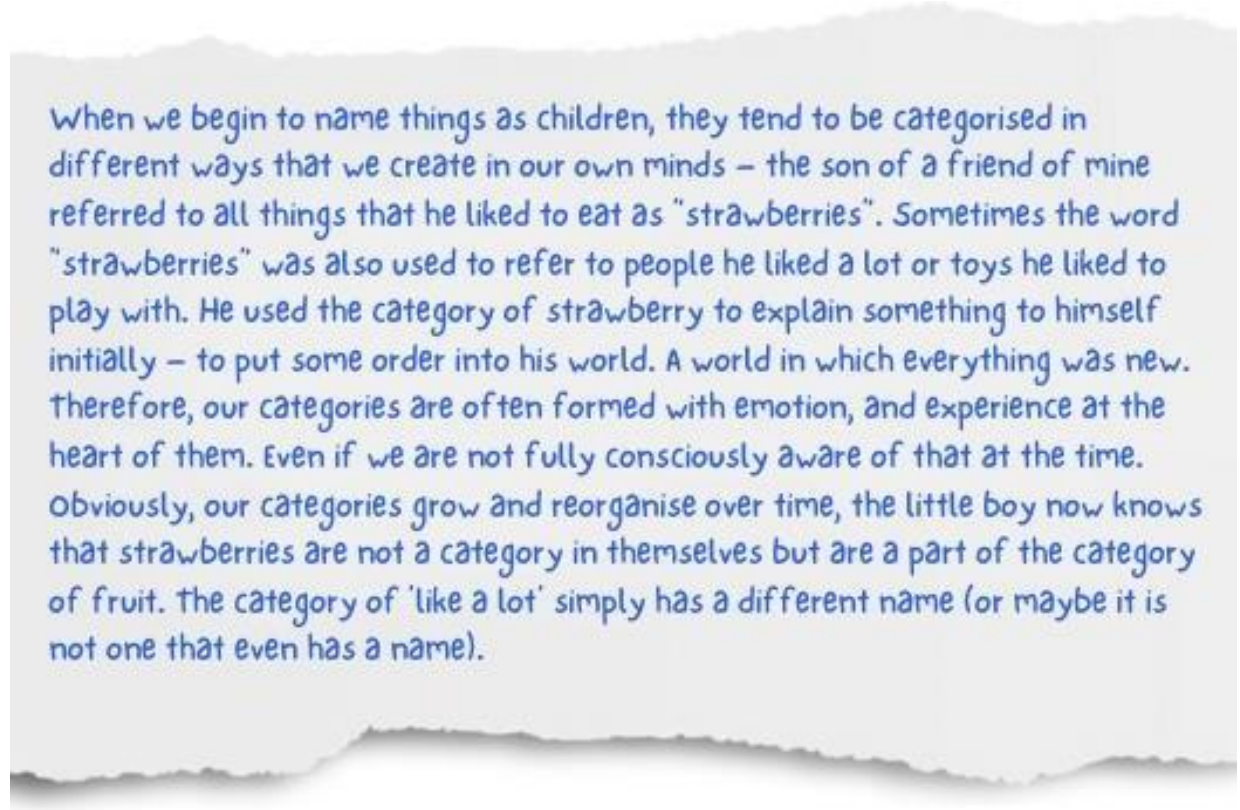
In the first, one is actually seen by another person and captured by the Look of an other. There is a sense in which they separate oneself from their activity and sees it and themselves as if through the eyes of the other. This ability to see oneself, having been seen by an other, makes it possible to gain self-knowledge – knowledge that was essentially unattainable through introspection alone up until that moment. But, to limit this potential of self-knowledge to being reliant on being caught in the act by an actual other seems to be unconvincing. Sartre asserts that "the Look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or the light movement of a curtain" (Sartre J. , 2003, p. 297) (Sartre J. , 1943, p. 281). He emphasises that the look involves a self-evaluative nature rather than an actual interaction.

In this way, the Other becomes a point of view or a place from which the world is apprehended, rather than an individualised being. Therefore, the Look can come from a concrete, individualised perspective belonging to an actual other, but it can also come from a more general collective point of view. Even when the Other is physically absent, their perspective is still present in one's mind, as they might be observing from somewhere else. This is very similar to the imagined audiences discussed above, and in both cases the omnipresence of the Other's perspective influences how we perceive ourselves and affects our self-awareness and potential for reflective self-knowledge. Sartre's Look, leads us to encounter two interpretations: a literal understanding where an actual other is required for its occurrence, and a symbolic or imagined perspective where the Look becomes ever-present and pervasive. The former may suggest that our enduring self-understanding relies on being perceived by others in each moment, leaving us dependent on external validation, whereas adopting the symbolic approach reveals that, in just the same way as imagined audiences behave, the Look's influence extends beyond concrete encounters with the presence of the Other being omnipresent.

Exploring the dynamic between the Voyeur and the observer makes clear the interconnectedness of self and other and this requires us to reflect on the intricate interplay between and the way others perceive us and our self-knowledge. This reminds me of the prose at the start of this thesis in which the writer refers to "a Wife, a mother, a teacher, a runner" – she is defined by how she is perceived by those around her rather than by her own introspection. In this instance, the external definition arguably serves as a form of scaffold of self, enabling a sense of security. Likewise, Eleni Lithari (Lithari, 2019) explores how pupils in a Primary School may have a similar experience of security through their identity being

attributed to them rather than through introspection. In this educational setting, many will usually have one class teacher, from whom they are likely to gain some sense of how they show up in the world. This impacts upon their self-perception (be that positively or negatively). Such a definition offers a constancy from which one can reach for self-knowledge. The relationship with the other (the teacher) adds something and creates something deeply fundamental to our being. Spade (1995) goes as far as to suggest that we are for others what we can never be for ourselves; "you try to be noble […] you try to be good. But you can never make yourself noble or good just like that. You can never define yourself in that way. But the other can do it for you […] He passes judgement, protects his values on things, including you. He sees you as you really are" (Spade 1995). Therefore, the other has an important role in the search for self-knowledge.

However, usually at the same point at which puberty causes a whole new level of personal and emotional confusion in relation to self-understanding[127], pupils will likely move to a Secondary School where lessons are taught by a range of different teachers, and they may well be placed into different streams or sets. Wortham (Wortham, 2006, p. 17) argued that "classrooms are strange social places, in part because of the discontinuity in relationships from year to year"; especially when starting the first year of secondary schooling when neither teachers nor students know each other. At this point, there are no strong models of identity established and this will lead both parties to use broader models or categories in order to interpret each other's behaviour.

When we begin to name things as children, they tend to be categorised in different ways that we create in our own minds – the son of a friend of mine referred to all things that he liked to eat as "strawberries". Sometimes the word "strawberries" was also used to refer to people he liked a lot or toys he liked to play with. He used the category of strawberry to explain something to himself initially – to put some order into his world. A world in which everything was new. Therefore, our categories are often formed with emotion, and experience at the heart of them. Even if we are not fully consciously aware of that at the time. Obviously, our categories grow and reorganise over time, the little boy now knows that strawberries are not a category in themselves but are a part of the category of fruit. The category of 'like a lot' simply has a different name (or maybe it is not one that even has a name).

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[127] Added to this, it is all overlaid by gendered, racial, religious, ability, class, age, and / or sexual preference as part of the historical narrative framing, with the internal and the external senses of self coming to crash into one another. This will be considered in more detail in Chapter on Beauty.

Categorising things and one another is not a totally new experience, as when we are growing up, we start to engage the world by placing things in categories and it is how we learn that something is this and not that, blue and not yellow, a dog and not a cat. We look for large categories, and then refine them. Sorting and categorisation is one way in which we can come to know something of the world. Although the experience is not the same for all pupils it seems that some find this difficult to navigate. Lithari (2019) argues that some students will feel the pressure to conform to each new classroom environment, possibly compromising their potential for self-knowledge as the constant need to navigate these varying contexts can lead to a fragmented or fractured identity[128].

Lithari (Lithari, 2019) uses an example in which Josephine describes moving up to Secondary School and finding that she never really knew what was expected of her. She talks about her experiences of being placed in different sets for different subjects as disorientating. She clearly excelled at some things but not others which meant her various teachers all viewed her slightly differently; she was categorised as "intelligent" in some subjects and as "not very good" in others. This impacted on how she viewed herself, as she was unsure whether she could describe herself as intelligent or stupid.

> *When I went there [secondary education], I was placed in the bottom division for maths and English. But they put me in the top division for the sciences and art […] and music. […] It was really disorienting, actually […] because I was never quite sure what was expected of me, you know, one minute they seemed to be expecting me to be intelligent and ok and the next minute they seem to think that I was really stupid and didn't know how to do things […] And that was another thing, which I found quite difficult.*
> (Josephine, 41 quoted in Lithari, 2019)

It seems that while external perspectives can offer a scaffold to some, helping a person to formulate a sense of self-knowledge, there is a balance to be had between it being helpfully defining and it becoming disorienting.

Furthermore, being too heavily defined by roles and identities, leaves one open to living as a being-in-itself.[129] Sartre refers to things that are not conscious, such as rocks, or can-openers, as a being-in-itself. Can-openers, for example, are defined by what they do (open cans), which in turn defines what they are. The defining property (i.e., essence) of a can-opener is that it is an object that opens cans. A rock, similarly, remains a rock regardless of what you do to it. These objects are fixed in their nature and cannot be changed. This logic could be applied to the "a wife, a runner, a teacher, a mother" – what she does defines who she is. However, it became challenging to cultivate a coherent and integrated understanding of herself when one

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[128] This is discussed in relation to dyslexic pupils in particular (Lithari, 2019).

[129] This is slightly different (although related) to bad faith. Living in bad faith occurs when individuals deny their own responsibility for their actions and instead blame external circumstances or forces for their choices. By doing so, they evade the true weight of their freedom and the consequences of their decisions. Sartre believed that people often adopt bad faith as a coping mechanism to alleviate existential anxiety and the sense of responsibility that comes with their freedom. Individuals may assume predefined roles assigned by society, such as being a dutiful spouse, or a compliant employee, and act solely according to these roles without questioning their authenticity or true desires. They become what society expects them to be, neglecting their individuality and freedom. However, bad faith implies there has been some thought and rejection of the role but then an antipathy with regards to changing things.

of these definitions was problematised, to the extent that it seemed to precipitate a collapse of self. Perhaps this is due to, as the writer of the recent Barbie movie (2023) refers to it, her being "constrained in multitudes"[130]. In the case of Barbie these multitudes are President Barbie, Ballerina Barbie, Astronaut Barbie etc. "[A]ll of these women are Barbie and Barbie is all of these women", whereas in the vignette it is a Wife, mother, teacher, runner. There is the sense that both Barbie and the anonymous author are continuous with their environment. Their surrounds and those in it have a symbiotic relationship, both make each other what they are. If you re-dress Astronaut Barbie as a Ballerina, who she is changes. "[T[here really is no internal life, at all. Because there is just no need to have an internal life." (Gerwig quoted in Moshakis 2023). This feels the same as the way the writer at the start states *"[...] I disappeared to myself at the same time as I disappeared from the world. I thought I must be the sum of my actions, but the sums equalled nothing. I disappeared inside myself, but I found nothing. I had no armour of existence, but neither did I have an essence".* Being entirely externally defined by role and other left a void.
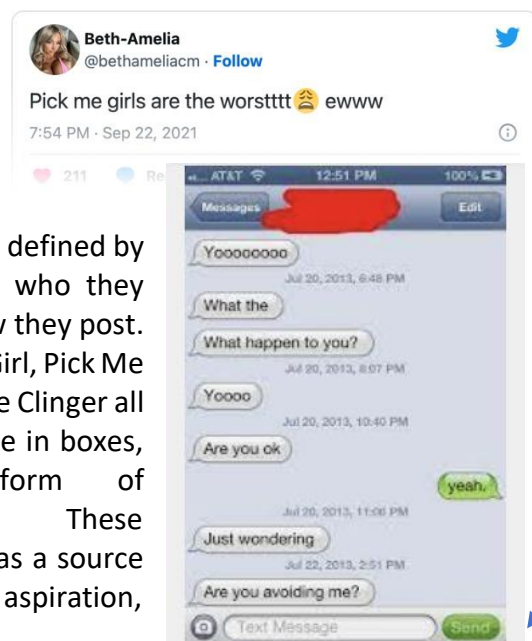
Yet, as individuals, Sartre argued that we are importantly a combination of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Being-for-itself signifies the distinctive capacity of humans to transcend their immediate existence and actively engage in self-conscious reflection and choice. A crucial aspect of being-for-itself is its freedom, and Sartre argued that human beings are fundamentally free, not only in their actions but also in their essence. This means that individuals are not bound by predetermined natures or fixed characteristics, instead, they have the autonomy to define their own essence through their actions. We can choose our purpose, what we stand for, and how we live our lives. Unlike beings-in-itself, we possess the autonomy to determine our essence. An essential characteristic of being-for-itself is the capacity for self-negation or negation of the present. This means that human consciousness can negate or go beyond what is immediately given. For instance, when faced with a particular situation, humans can imagine different possibilities, assess their options, and decide on a course of action that is not solely determined by external factors.

It is here that social media can become inherently useful, firstly, it offers the potential for categories with clearly defined roles to inhabit or ascribe, something to react against or to embrace. They seek to fit in to established social categories, in-crowds and out crowds, often defined by what they wear, who they are with, and how they post. Terms like Visco Girl, Pick Me girl, The Stage Five Clinger all serve to fit people in boxes, offering a form of scaffolding. These categories serve as a source of inspiration and aspiration,

https://www.seventeen.com/fashion/trends/a28710648/what-is-a-vsco-girl/

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[130] This is discussed further in Moshakis, 2023 (Retrieved July 17th 2023)

as people admire certain traits or qualities associated with these labels. These ready-made structures offer individuals a navigational tool to understand the diverse personalities they encounter, and they create a common language that facilitates communication and connection among users. A generation that appears to embrace viscosity, and a blurring of boundaries, therefore seems to proactively use social media to fit others / themselves into categories. While these categories provide scaffolding for self-discovery and social interactions, it is essential to remember that they are not rigid definitions of who individuals are. They are stepping stones in the journey of self-knowledge, allowing people to explore and the diverse aspects of their identity. They embrace them and reject them, flirt with the meaning of them, and ultimately use them to inform upon what they feel then can know of themselves.

https://www.exboyfriendrecovery.co
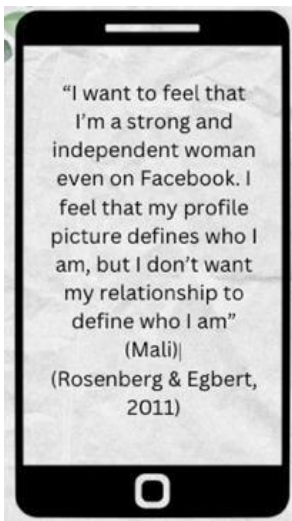m/how-to-make-your-ex-jealous-on-
facebook-and-instagram/

Secondly, it simultaneously offers space for individuals to step away from the immediate present. Social media platforms provide a virtual playground for individuals to witness diverse possibilities, albeit through the lives of others. Facebook friends and acquaintances can give imagined insight into the potential future, options, and outcomes. It is possible to see different possibilities play out in the form of other people's lives, almost like a form of 'let's pretend' but with real life consequences. The way SNS feeds are presented, often from a first-person perspective, allows for an intimate perspective, and such visceral exposure facilitates moments of self-reflection and self-assessment (both from the poster and the observer), thereby offering the potential for self-knowledge. It is as if social media articulates or makes obvious the immediate existence in order that people can actively engage in choice.

Love of no other

Having explored the concept of self-knowledge through love in relation to the other, it is equally important to examine an alternative perspective. The Platonic understanding of love, as portrayed in the Symposium, and Simone de Beauvoir's insights on love in The Second Sex, offer contrasting viewpoints on the nature of love and its connection to self-knowledge.

As seen in Platonism, love is envisioned as a means to reunite individuals and restore a sense of wholeness. The idea centres around the notion that love can bridge the gap between human beings, leading to a deeper understanding of oneself through the connection with another. De Beauvoir, on the other hand, delves into the societal narratives surrounding love, particularly concerning women, and how they impact self-knowledge. She critiques the romanticised ideals propagated in literature and the media that often condition women to believe their worth is contingent on being loved by men. Women have been disproportionately encouraged to see love as their destiny as the defining value of their lives. This has been framed as "living happily ever after" in many films and children's storybooks. These myths continue to be perpetuated now through endless Disney movies, rom-coms, and romance stories, with, one could argue much the same narrative, that one's true calling in life was love. Whether in marriage, motherhood or religious life, love was presented to women as their vocation, their supreme accomplishment. It presents a model of love residing solely in shared purpose, and self-forgetting, encouraging women to conceive of themselves as

being seen through the man's eyes and fulfil men's perceived fantasies. De Beauvoir argues that this seems to show women that their true calling in life was self-forgetting (and love); the exact opposite of self-knowledge.[131]

"I want to feel that I'm a strong and independent woman even on Facebook. I feel that my profile picture defines who I am, but I don't want my relationship to define who I am" (Mali) (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011)

As a result, for many, the existence of *two* individuals in a relationship, not *one* merged hybrid, is of utmost importance. Retaining a sense of one's self is therefore key, as is developing self-understanding and self-knowledge.

Simone De Beauvoir describes devotion and narcissism as failed forms of love in The Second Sex, as both revolve around a loss of individual self and fail to recognise the *two* vital for truly interpersonal love. Devotion, in her eyes, leads to the obliteration of self as the lovers' own consciousness is obliterated for the sake of their beloved. It is a form of self-abnegation and wholly fails to accommodate *two*. For example, the woman attempts to shape her behaviour, likes and dislikes, political views, musical tastes and so on, around her beloved. She may continually refer to "we" as if she and her partner behave as one person with the same opinions. However, in De Beauvoir's mind, losing individual agency in this way is "moral suicide" (De Beauvoir's student note books).

"I could think of nothing better in the world that being myself, and loving Zaza" (Beauvoir S., 2001, p. 96)

Beauvoir was committed to the view that because life cannot be understood forward, as we have no knowledge of what is to come, we feel anxiety about who we will become for ourselves and in the eyes of others. De Beauvoir was acutely aware of the tension between being the cause of herself and the product of others' making. To her conflict between our own desires and the desires/expectations of others raised questions about whether it is better to live a life seen or unseen by others.

Flowers – Song by Mylee Cyrus 2023

We were good, we were gold
Kinda dream that can't be sold
We were right 'til we weren't
Built a home and watched it burn
Mm, I didn't wanna leave you
I didn't wanna lie
Started to cry, but then remembered I
I can buy myself flowers
Write my name in the sand
Talk to myself for hours
Say things you don't understand
I can take myself dancing
And I can hold my own hand
Yeah, I can love me better than you can
Can love me better

Source: LyricFind
Songwriters: Gregory Aldae Hein / Michael Ross Pollack / Miley Ray Cyrus
Flowers lyrics © Concord Music Publishing LLC, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner Chappell Music, Inc

This song suggests that people can be complete and whole on their own- "they can buy their own flowers" and "hold their own hand" – they have come to know themselves well enough to know they do not need another 'half' to complete them.

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[131] Simone de Beauvoir wrote The Second Sex (1949) partly because she believed that both men and women underestimated the extent of the difficulty that women faced in this regard. She suggested that it was difficult for men to measure the extent of discrimination that seems so insignificant on the outside, "but whose moral and intellectual repercussions are so deep in women that they appear to spring from an original nature".

People must live their lives without knowing their future, craving a meaning that cannot be known in advance and only read meaning back into what has happened, continuously post-rationalising our existences.

No-one can be free alone, in her opinion, as other people will always shape our lives. She believed that to live well, people must be seen, but they must be seen in the right way, and asks "[b]etween the stories we tell ourselves, the stories we tell others, and the stories they tell about us, where is the truth?" (Kirkpatrick, 2020, p. 18). De Beauvoir aimed to show throughout her works how one's self is always shaped by others and related to others (Sanos, 2017, p. 118). She would suggest that hearing the call to freedom for ourselves without hearing it for others is a refusal that stultifies our own becoming, for it is only with others that we can bring certain aspects of our values, our projects, our selves into being. For Beauvoir this tension between freedom and constraint is central to becoming an ethical self, and yet it is hard to flourish when one is relentlessly defined from without. In order to be ethically free, you have to embrace the ties you have to others. In her mind, every human being longs for a life in which they are seen truly and matter not just because they are "a" life but because it is "their" life. This gives us meaning.

"A self is not a thing it is a progress [...]a living activity [...] a becoming that continues to change [...]"

(Henri Bergson, Time and Free Will: An essay in the immediate data of consciousness, New York, Dover 2001 p178).

Beauvoir stated that being a self involves a process of perpetual change with others who are also changing in a process of irreversible becoming. She wrote at 18 years old that is was impossible to truly put her life in order on paper' because it was a perpetual becoming; when read what she had written in her diary the day before, she said it was like reading "mummies of dead selves'" (cited in Jardine, 1985). This process of conceptual shift and change and cannot be plotted on a graph or quantified. One does not move towards a point at which one is "oneself". We are in the process of perpetual becoming. As a result, in Beauvoir's view we choose who we want to be not once and for all, but over and over again, "moment by moment for an entire lifetime" ((De Beauvoir, 1947, p. 40). Therefore, devotion to an other is, as stated above, failed love, as this sense of continual and perpetual becoming, alongside the lack of recognition of them as a whole individual, is obliterated for the sake of their beloved.

"I can love me better than you can"

However, as well as considering love and its relationship to self-knowledge in terms of the relational other, it is remains important to think about the possibilities of self-knowledge within the context of self-love. As mentioned earlier, some people approach dating as a way of learning more about themselves, thereby avoiding the issues of becoming a merged self. However, while this could prove enlightening, there is a danger that a lack of recognition of notion of *two* individuals in a relationship, instead obliterates the existence of the other as they simply serve as a means to an end – that being coming to a greater self knowledge.[132]

De Beauvoir's exploration of narcissism exemplifies this idea, where self-love dominates the relationship, overshadowing the value of the other's individuality. the exact opposite of self-obliteration. She defines narcissism as loving oneself and loving in the other, the love he has for you. This self-centred perspective may hinder genuine self-knowledge, and here is it possible to draw parallels to Ancient Greek mythology and the myth of Narcissus.

Figure 7: "Narcissus 2.0" (CRUDEOIL2.0, 2021)

An Italian digital artist, known on social media as CRUDEOIL 2.0, gave old paintings a new life as social satire. The 24-year-old artist reimagined famous classical paintings in the modern world, with a highlight on technology and social media, to poke fun at what's wrong with our world.

https://www.boíedpanda.com/famous-paintings-íeimagined-technology-social-media-cíudeoil20/?utm_souíce=google&utm_medium

Narcissus is known through mythology for his beauty but, more importantly, for falling in love with his own reflection to the exclusion of all else. Unable to leave the allure of his own image, he apparently melted away, dying of what he felt was unrequited love, or a love that could not materialise. However, it is important to note that the myth of Narcissus begins with Tiresias, the blind prophet of Apollo, telling Narcissus' parents that their son would only grow old if he never came to know himself, and it is from this point onward, self-knowledge and self-love become inextricably intertwined in the story. The dialectic between self-knowledge (or lack thereof) and self-obsession is compelling. In the instance of Narcissus, it seems that the more he contemplated himself, mistakenly believing his reflection to be someone else entirely, (quite literally an other) the more entrenched his lack of self-knowledge became. [133]

To see oneself in the mirror to identify oneself requires a mental operation by which the person is capable of objectifying himself, of separating what is outside from what is inside; This operation can be successful if the subject recognises the reflection as his own likeness

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[132] This type of existence is colloquially referred to as "main character syndrome" with those others featuring sometimes called "NPC's" (non=playable characters) whose role is to flesh out the main characters existence. This language is borrowed from gaming.

[133] This may become increasingly relevant as AI "friends" sit among young peoples human friends on social media apps (like they currently do on Snapchat)

and says "I am that of the other" (Melchior-Bonnet, 2006, p. 5). But Narcissus fails to see his image as other, nor does he recognise himself in that other. "The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 41) and Echo, who was only able to provide him with his own words, left him as "a closed system" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 41). Furthermore, Kristeva's reading of the myth suggests that Narcissus withdraws into a form of total self-sufficiency, seeking security by turning to himself alone, thereby resulting in his catatonic apathy of indifference, or a closure to experience, of the other (Kristeva, 1982). However, a question remains about the prediction of Tiresias as contrary to what his parents had been told, even though he seemed to have no self-knowledge, Narcissus still died young.

Solipsism leads naturally on from the myth of Narcissus as it can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the quality of being self-centred or selfish, and secondly, the view that the self is all there can be known to exist. It is the second of these I will be focussing upon. Solipsism, in this context is the philosophical position that only one's mind can be known to exist. Knowledge of anything outside of one's mind is unsure: other minds, for example, cannot be known and may not exist. Framing this in the context of self-knowledge means that the human mind has no valid ground for believing in the existence of anything but itself. "I cannot transcend experience, and experience must be my experience. From this it follows that nothing beyond my self exists; for what experience is it [the self] states" (Bradley, 1893). Solipsism suggests that given their reality of the outside world is contingent on the knower, it is an extreme form of subjective idealism which is based on the premise that nothing exists except minds and their perceptions. Berkeley formulates this proposition as "To be is to be perceived" which has particular resonance in an online context and to which I shall return in Section Two: Beauty. Placing oneself at the centre of the world in such a way is not dissimilar to the experience of Narcissus. The feedback loop that McLuhan refers to in relation to Narcissus seems to reverberate within this philosophy, and self-knowledge is left as a thing that we cannot need or seek, for self-love and self-reflection remain all there is.

The connection between the myth of Narcissus and solipsism in the context of social media is important. In a modern context, social media can perpetuate a form of digital solipsism, where individuals curate their online presence, creating an illusionary world centred around their thoughts, experiences, and desires. The constant reinforcement of one's own perspective and the echo-chamber effect of social media can lead to a skewed sense of reality, as users may primarily interact with content and viewpoints that align with their own beliefs. This self-centred digital existence can isolate individuals from diverse perspectives and hinder genuine understanding and empathy towards others. Love of another at least seems to give the sense that it is possible to know outside of our minds. Beauvoir argues that ethical love resides in equilibrium and reciprocity, one in which love of an other rather than subordination. It should be made up of self-giving without self-loss, a relationship in which each person supported the other to seek an independent and individual life. De Beauvoir did not see one as completing the other, or making the other whole, but instead recognised both as whole individuals already. Knowledge of a whole self, albeit partial or changing and constantly redefining over time, could be reached for as it was not contingent on an other.

"It's complicated"

However, having considered approaches to love as a way to self-knowledge, it is worth considering that perhaps we are (and remain) necessarily strangers to ourselves (Nietzsche, 1968, p. p451 (preface sect 1)). Rather than being completed, or positively reflected, by the other and thereby developing clear self-understanding, it is possible that our search for self-knowledge articulated through our friends / loves complicating our relationship with our self rather than complementing it. Nietzsche suggests that some level of self-knowledge, can develop from an initial response to our need to communicate with others. He proposes that humans have developed this notion of self-knowledge not because of some innate ability to perceive our nature but because we are social beings who rely on others. The human being "*needed* help and protection, he needed peers; he had to learn to express his distress and to make himself understood; and for all this, he needed 'consciousness' first, he needed to 'know' himself what distressed him, he needed to 'know' what he felt, he needed to know what he thought' (GS 354). Due to this relational motivation, Nietzsche has an "unconquerable mistrust of the *possibility* of self-knowledge [he has] a kind of aversion [...] to *believing* anything definite about myself" (BGE 281), doubting that we ever understand our own actions (D 116). He argues that if we gain access to ourselves only through the mediation of others then, we are likely to end up diverted from our real interests. It is therefore doubtful, according to Nietzsche, that friendships can offer us unique access or insight into who we are, but rather they complicate and problematise our relationship with our self and it is this that can lead to self-overcoming / self-creation. [134]

However, it is not knowledge of self per se that Nietzsche sees as key or even achievable, but rather self-overcoming or the need to understand that we are "importantly constituted by processes of change and development rather than as the logical or transcendental condition of such processes" (Harris, 2017, p. 246). In this, friends are important, not because they can bring about a place of augmented self-knowledge, but instead they "propel us on the particular path down which our development leads by making life seem worthwhile, and so making the process of self-creation, or creating our own lives, matter too" (Harris, 2017, p.

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[134] In The Blood of Others (De Beauvoir, 1945) if Jen was to share in the pain of Helene completely, he would be taking it over, somehow erasing it, and to all extent her as she exists being formed by it. There is in a way a level of violence in empathy like this – a denial of the individual as an agent in themselves – something close to aggression. A take-over. For Heidegger, the idea that you can bridge the gap between yourself and others by imagining them as a duplicate of you is a fantasy, however, de Beauvoir argues that this is something people genuinely feel in their daily lives as empathy involves putting yourself in someone else's shoes and pretending there is no emotional distance between you and them. Heidegger sees empathy as a deficient form of "being-with-others" because it can take away genuine care for the other person and replace it with an act, where you essentially take over their feelings and make it all about yourself, erasing their individuality in the process. In our relationships, we have the freedom to choose who we connect with, and it's our responsibility to create meaningful connections. We have the power to decide what holds significance for us. For Sartre, love is not just about feelings; it's about actions therefore love and freedom are intimately linked because choosing to love someone defines who we are, both in the present and the future. However, because we are free to choose to be in a relationship, we are also free to leave. This vulnerability is the paradox of love: we can not predict our future selves, and committing to love means limiting our future freedom. Sartre believed that existence without a reason was absurd, but existentialism tells us that life itself has no built-in meaning, so we must search for it. In love, we strive to connect with another person while also losing a part of ourselves. Existentialism suggests that our sense of self is continually redefined as we confront the meaninglessness and absurdity of the world.

247). Thus, for Nietzsche, self-knowledge is not some form of internal, retrospective reflection on our lives in order to answer the question 'Who am I?' but is instead more about a future looking process of self-creation. Friends help one attempt to grasp at this in the way that they might grasp at the specter or ghost (Gespenst) that runs ahead of me (Z I: "Neighbour"). Rather than friends making visible aspects of self that one is unable to see on one's own, Nietzsche, in line with Aristotle, sees the friend's role as one of a rough or imperfect mirror showing us things that are hard to grasp and unclear. However, rather than this being a positive experience, as Aristotle conceptualises it, Nietzsche frames it as something of a rude awakening. "The face of the friend is not a welcomed reflection of our own face; instead, it is one that "problematises [us], it calls us into question" (Harris, 2017, p. 249). Jarred by this, we acknowledge that our present self is something that must be overcome, and rather than looking backwards to gain an answer to the question "Who am I?" instead it ensures a different question is posed "Who can I become?". In this conception, friends serve to reflect/ show us our potentials and possibilities instead of revealing our identity as if it is largely achieved. Nietzsche focusses upon this progression of becoming in relation to self-knowledge, suggesting that fundamentally we are continual processes of change and development. There is no fixed point at which one has 'fully Become'.

It is my contention that we ought to be jarred by the dissimilarity between our views and those of our friends from time to time in order to develop real self-knowledge. A reflected self simply mirrors sameness, but an other necessarily confronts the self with difference. In this way, his sense of self is defined, not through introspection, but by an other and by an other's response or interaction: "I have seen it manifest itself in my relationship to my friends" (Sartre 1924/1990).[135] The importance of this is *being with the other*, rather than *being the other*. There must remain an alterity. In the case of social media, exposure to a wide range of views and worldviews that are different to, and sometimes in tension with one's own can support the development of self-knowledge. For existentialists, this notion of "existence precedes essence," means that, unlike in Platonism, there are no soulmates or other halves, not least because we are in a continual process of becoming. There is no fixed point of selfhood to attach another half to in order to achieve any sense of completion. In the extract below, it is clear that there is no one internal, essential self for Sartre, he reports finding his totality in the sum of the various relationships he has with others, declaring himself a "A collective soul" (1924/1990).

> "I have looked for my sense of self [mon moi]: I have seen it manifest itself in my relationship to my friends, to nature, to the women I have loved. I have found in myself a collective soul, a group soul, a soul of the earth, a soul of books. But any sense of self, as such, outside of human beings and of things, my real self [mon moi vrai], unconditioned, I have not found it. (Sartre J. , Ecrits de jeunesse, 1924/1990).

The suggestion that our individual identities and therefore self-knowledge cannot be fixed but are shaped and defined through our interactions with others, give the notion of a collective soul new significance when considered in relation to social media. The nature of

such spaces forces one to look at oneself as manifest through relationships with others, and in many ways, the collective soul can be thought of as reified through social media. It does this by providing a platform for individuals to construct and project their identities based on their social interactions. As users share their thoughts, engage in online conversations, and tag people, they are forming a self (and are having that self formed by others) that is reflective of their relationships.

This brings to mind the Mona Lisa image from Unflattening by Nick Sousanis that I shared at the start of this work.

This image shows a collection of partial perceptions being placed together to form an image. When viewed in their singularity as tiles they make little sense, but when placed in a certain order, they offer up a version that is comprehensible. This image is not complete, but it is possible to see the Mona Lisa forming. In the same way, it is possible to argue that each square could serve as a representation of one facet of one's collective soul. Multiple representations, when placed together, allow someone to come closer to perceiving self-knowledge, but they need to be placed in such a way as to avoid a tile-like formation. These tiles could be considered to be something akin to introspection; they make detailed sense of some aspects but cannot offer up enough of a broader overview of who we are forming into as a whole. It serves as "An incomplete picture riddled with gaps" (in the words of Sousanis 2015). In my mind the Sousanis image seems to suggest that in order to gain a better perspective we need "to encounter "the world outside ourselves" (Sousanis, 2015) and view the detailed introspective tiles in such a way that offers a broader extrospective, contextual view. This allows greater potential for self-knowledge.

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What has love got to do with it?

Love is therefore intricately connected to the discussion of self-knowledge and the interaction between external and internal, introspective perceptions of self. Within the context of relationships, love can profoundly impact how individuals see themselves and how they are seen by others, and this section has considered some of the narratives that swirl around our culture with regards to relationships and self-knowledge. With regards to the four broad categories of entwined connection between the self and the other that were outlined at the start of the chapter (knowing oneself as merged with the other, knowing oneself as defined by the other, mirroring the other, and self-inventing as if the other), it has been seen that love as depicted on social media provides a mirror, and a scaffold, but can also act as a filter through which individuals interpret external perceptions. It has also been discussed how

conceptions of love significantly influence how individuals depict themselves on SNS with regards to their loving partnerships, which in turn can play a significant role in shaping self-knowledge.

Our reaching for self-knowledge is being facilitated, amplified, and in some ways reified, through love (on social media). As a result, it is possible to suggest that much of the relationship between knowing the self in the current day and age is based on the interplay between externalisation and internalisation of the self. However, Doy (2005) suggests, externalisation and objectification of self, by which the subject must become an object and be perceived as such, is tautological (Doy, 2005, p. 36). In his opinion this is due to the subjective nature of the perceptive gaze. I can see myself as being seen, but I can never see myself seeing. However, although it is nigh on impossible to escape from our own positionality, and therefore can never really see us as others see us without the help of an (actual) other[136], social media blurs the boundaries between self and other sufficiently to bring us closer to this prospect. Through the specific medium of SNS, sharing allows others to glimpse into our lives, as well as offering glimpses of how they perceive us. It is as if we continually play with the who is looking through the viewfinder and who is in the photograph. We are both self and other simultaneously. This concept will be further examined in the upcoming chapter on "Beauty," where self-knowledge will be explored through photography, portraiture, and the phenomenon of selfies.

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[136] "When one looks at oneself in a mirror, one sees oneself either as seen or as seeing but never as both at the same time" (Derrida, 2010, p. 31)

Summary of Love

In this section, diverse perspectives on love and its connection to self-knowledge are examined.

The focus extends to applying historical insights to the contemporary online environment.

It explores self knowledge as approached through friendship and relationships

It draws the conclusion that that in order to gain a better perspective we need "to encounter "the world outside ourselves" (Sousanis, 2015)

Part Two: Beauty

Can a selfie be a source of knowledge?

There is no denying that we live in a visually saturated world with an unending "rainfall of images" showering down upon us daily from the moment we wake (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 21). People's interactions with the world are increasingly impacted by the *seeing* of potential images, *taking* images and/or *referencing* previous images, all of which is framed in relation to *sharing* these images. Yet, this raises questions regarding the cultural priorities of our visual attention. Where should our eyes be directed? What is worth seeing? What can we look at, and what can we ignore? Therefore, in looking to further understand the notion of self-knowledge as located in online visual self-(re)presentation, the section will initially explore the complex relationship between image, communication, and meaning, focussing upon the more general role of image on social media before moving on to consider the digital (re)presentation of beauty more specifically.

Beginning with an investigation of the role of images in our technological culture and the importance of visibility in shaping self-identity, it will argue that the advent of social media has further transformed the significance of images. Drawing upon philosophical perspectives, such as Deleuze's critique of dualism,[137] and Platonism,[138] the section acknowledges the complexity of the online/offline relationship and challenges the notion that online images are serving to simply point beyond themselves to the offline world. It will explore how shared pictures represent individual ideals and cultural value frameworks, serving an aesthetic of aspiration, as well as a tool of communication. Taking inspiration from the work of Winogrand

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[137] Gilles Deleuze, offered a critique of dualism, particularly in his work with Félix Guattari, in "Anti-Oedipus" and "A Thousand Plateaus." Deleuze challenged the traditional dualistic framework that divides the world into binary oppositions, such as mind/body, subject/object, or self/other. It is this break down of opposites that I will be drawing upon.

[138] Specifically, the Forms and the Allegory of Cave.

in highlighting the act of, and behaviour around, taking photos, the section will draw further attention to the potential decoupling of the images as artifacts themselves from their meaning or importance. It will consider the use of images on social media and their impact on self-presentation and the perception of reality in three ways; images as moments of possession and collection; images as self-presentation; and images as transient and fluid in significance. Finally, as there is no denying that (SNS) images suggest a simultaneous multiplicity of meaning and interpretation, this chapter will also highlight the coexisting yet competing truths / narratives that are inherent. It appears that implanted within the bits and bytes of these SNS pictures there remains a clash and discordance, with contradictory meanings and interpretations co-existing. As much as social media images may contribute to our understanding of the world and ourselves, potentially offering alternative perspectives on deliberately fleeting realities, the chapter will also argue that they can muddy the waters. The section therefore concludes by offering an alternative perspective, highlighting the playful, flirtatious nature of SNS content.

Images shaping the world & Visibility shaping self-identity

In the late 20th century interest in visual culture and a shift towards recognition of the importance of graphic representation in the modern world led to visual media playing an increasingly important role in shaping our understanding of the world and our place within it. The balance between verbal/textual and visual communication shifted[139] with a significant change in the way communication, previously heavily reliant on verbal/textual elements, now has a prominent visual element. There was "a major readjustment of the alphabet/image ratio in ordinary communication" (Lanham, 1993, p. 125) with visual elements becoming more prevalent in contemporary communication practices. The "Hope" poster during Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign is one example. The striking image, featuring Obama's portrait with the word "Hope" underneath, became synonymous with his campaign and seemed to sum up the sense of optimism and unity among his supporters. The poster used a single image to convey a powerful message during a significant political moment. Another example is found in the move evident in News and Sports reporting, as it had an increasing number of charts and graphs, allowing people to explore and analyse data in a dynamic and immersive way. Such visualisations provided a deeper understanding of things like electoral landscape, voter demographics, or players statistics regarding goals, times, or percentage of possession. The use of such visual storytelling techniques demonstrated a shift towards utilising visuals to enhance news reporting and engage audiences, creating more impactful and memorable experiences for viewers.

Thomas Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm (Boehm & Mitchell, 2009) dubbed this the Iconic / Pictorial/ Visual Turn, suggesting that it was in essence an acceptance of the proposition that images can speak and tell as much as they can show and represent. One poignant example of this is the use of visual storytelling in journalism, such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the Syrian child, Alan Kurdi, washed ashore in 2015. The powerful image captured global attention, leading to increased awareness and discussions about the refugee crisis, demonstrating the impact and influence of visuals in shaping public opinion and driving social change. This implies that while their visual appearance conveys meaningful, rich content from an aesthetic perspective, images also have a communicative power to express

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[139] This is in line with arguments made by Joan Schwartz (Schwartz J. , 2004)

ideas, emotions and, to an extent, punctuate stories. This particular image for example, meant people had to engage with it as active viewers, considering the social and political dimensions it conveyed. This in turn emphasises the notion that images possess the capacity to communicate just like written or spoken language and reflects a growing recognition of the power and impact of visual representations in shaping our understanding of the world and our cultural experiences.

This move from the alphabetic to the visual had a clear and significant impact on social media. The prevalence of visual content, visual storytelling, and the use of visual elements like images, videos, and symbols on social media platforms, exemplifying the visual turn, became especially evident from early 2000 onwards. The majority of successful sites after that time were built around the ability to share images rather than words. Myspace appeared in 2003, Facebook in 2004, and Youtube in 2005, all provided new ways to create, view, and share video and photographic images, giving users different ways to communicate through the images themselves. Since then, platforms like Pintrest and TikTok have become even more heavily focussed upon visual content, with users encouraged to share images and videos as a way of expressing themselves. This in turn has led to an increased emphasis on aesthetics and the visual presentation of self, with concern with the visual becoming so firmly embedded within our culture that it forms part of a whole climate of opinion.[140] Whether that be that in line with Christopher Lasch's "culture of narcissism" (Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, 1980)[141] where self-presentation takes precedence, or a narrative closer to that of freedom of expression, image influences how individuals shape their online presence and engage with others, reflecting the evolving dynamics of self-representation in contemporary society.

Visibility has become an increasingly important feature of our basic cultural, social, and personal contexts, and young people are part of a generation that have been subject to a level of social and public surveillance unknown in human history (Banet-Weiser, 2014, p. 87), living lives that are increasingly front facing. Digital footprints are frequently created on their behalf, be that by their families, friends, or schools and activities (sometimes without their consent or knowledge), and as a result, a child often becomes a visible self online long before they have any concept of a sense of self. For example, the average parent shares almost 1,500 images of their child before they are 5 years old and then continues to share roughly 10-12 photos of them a month as they get older (Bessant, 2022)[142]. Their ultrasound, their first

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[140] WH Auden uses these words about Freud in a poem entitled In Memory of Sigmund Freud *Another Time* by W. H. Auden, (Auden, 1940)

[141] Chris Lasch's "The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations" (Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, 1980) explored the social and cultural changes that took place in America during the 20th Century. He argued that American society had shifted from a focus on individual achievement and social progress to a focus on self-gratification, self-promotion, and instant gratification. Lasch described this culture of narcissism as a society obsessed with their own individual needs and desires, rather than working towards a common goal or sense of community. He also argued that this culture was perpetuated by the media which promoted an image of the perfect individual who was self-sufficient, independent, and successful. Lasch also believed this culture of narcissism was characterised by a lack of genuine relationships, a pre-occupation with material possessions and a focus upon personal appearance and image.

[142] Reflective of this trend, the term 'sharenting' fell into popular use in 2019. It refers to any time an adult in charge of a child's well-being, such as a parent or a teacher, transmits details or photographs about a child via digital channels (Plunkett, 2019).

bath, their first steps, all are recorded and shared on social media[143]. This visibility continues as they grow older, with aspects of them being shared, mistakes and triumphs all made a concrete part of the (digital) world. While we shape our environment and the things in it, it is also true to say that it simultaneously shapes us, therefore, having had the importance of visibility reinforced throughout childhood, it seems social media has become something of a natural platform through which young people cannot help but start to articulate and define themselves.

Noting this, I shall be discussing how selfie culture, emoji, and memes are used to punctuate and articulate self. This can be thought of as part of the development of the manifestation of the visual

We don't know how to exist anymore without imagining ourselves as a picture.

Amelia Jones, Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject, London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2006, p. XVII

turn on social media. This section will form part of an exploration of the way self-knowledge has increasingly become narrated by image. However, before considering the way that social media images can *speak and tell*, punctuating and storying the self in some way, I will first discuss the ways in which they are also used by many to *show and represent* (Boehm & Mitchell, 2009).

Show and Represent

It is possible to argue that the move towards a visually dominated social media appears to have affected something deeply structural in terms of the way people interact with the world. For example, many people have come to describe their actions as conceptualised in terms of "framed" images, and events thought of as "grammable moments".[144] "Pics or it didn't

happen," is a phrase frequently used, meaning if you did not take a photo of the particular event and post it on social media, then how does anyone know it actually happened?

However, even though the use of image on social media significantly shapes the everyday lives of a great many people and is increasingly essential to being, existence, and comprehension of their existence, many people pay inadequate

Despite wide disagreements over the effects and nature of "visual culture," it is not often noted that what makes twentieth-century culture so different from that of past centuries is not only the quantity of images, or their ostensible effects on literacy, but the kind of images we create and consume.

James Elkins, The Domain of Images (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

attention to the significance of the visual when placed within the context of SNSs. A lot is written about the works of art and photography created by named photographers, but much

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[143] It is not only parents that contribute to this visual traffic., but frequently schools also have a 'Consent To Share Images' document, or similar, that all students and parents are asked to sign in order that the school can post pictures of the child on various school-based social media platforms and in newsletters.

[144] Insta-Gram-mable moments are those worthy of posting on Instagram.

less is written, if anything at all, about those pictures created by anonymous or everyday "ordinary" people. This means that often the images on social media are afforded little positive attention because they seem to offer little significance in and of themselves. By and large, a prevalent narrative in popular media is that the images themselves are a distraction to the real business of existence.

Firstly, it is worth considering how images are increasingly viewed as moments of possession and collection, where their value lies in the act of capturing and accumulating visual experiences; secondly, discussing the role of images as a means of self-presentation, where individuals carefully curate and share images to shape their online identities; and lastly, through a reframing of the "pointless" image, this subsection will investigate the transient and fluid nature of image significance, as images can rapidly lose their original context and take on new interpretations within the digital realm. By exploring these aspects, we gain a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics between images, meaning, and our engagement with visual culture in the digital age.

"One for the Gram": collecting and Possessing Moments

All around us and within ourselves, the world is turned into an image of the world, and it is worth dwelling upon why many people, when faced with something noteworthy or beautiful, reach for their smartphone. This aesthetic form is often not about contemplative purpose but ends up governing the way that individuals experience the world. As such, images carry important social consequences, playing a role in shaping collective understandings, attitudes, and societal dynamics. In line with Lanham's (1993) suggestion that with the visual turn, the act of seeing became viewed as knowledge acquisition (implying that visual observation and interpretation were increasingly recognised as valid forms of understanding) and, to some extent, dominance or ownership of reality, one argument that can be put forward in relation to the seemingly insatiable drive for some to photograph everything is that there is a desire to collect moments as images. This is in order to possess them and understand them in some way and, perhaps related to a sense of (re) presentation of that moment as part of the selves, they are creating/ curating on SNS's.

I was surprised recently to find this echoed in my own reaction when rounding a corner near my home at sunset:

"The view was stunning, the sky looked to be on fire. However, my unthinking response was to remark to my son "Look at that picture". This took me aback somewhat as I too had fallen into the trap of viewing the world as a photograph rather than engaging with it as an unframed reality. Even having noted that moment, I then unthinkingly reached for my phone and took a photo, thereby attempting to capture the picture I had initially perceived it to be. I knew this image on my phone would never fully recreate the depth of colour, or sense of scale I could perceive with my own eyes, but I still had an urge to put in my pocket or incorporate it into my-self in some way.

Photographs can serve as tangible representations of our experiences, allowing us to freeze moments in time and preserve them as tangible reminders of past experiences. Such images serve as a visual archive, allowing us to hold onto and revisit moments. We are in essence capturing memories, a little like the BFG captured dreams,[145] ready to be released and shared when the time is right. Although working on an entirely different level to the average social media snap, Henri Cartier-Bresson is known for capturing such images in order to preserve moments. He believed in the concept of "the decisive moment," capturing fleeting moments that encapsulated the essence of a scene, or event, and his photographs often captured ordinary, everyday moments with extraordinary precision and composition, capturing the right moment, the right expression, and the right composition, and preserving those instants in a single frame. Through his photographs, Cartier-Bresson aimed to freeze and preserve ephemeral moments, allowing viewers to witness and connect with the emotions, stories, and realities of the captured scenes. Photography can therefore be seen to capture moments and serve as a visual record preserving moments that might otherwise fade and disappear. In this way, the average social media user could similarly be seen to try and capture or possess that which is depicted in the photograph[146].

While it might be possible to suggest that Instagram images are a little like a frozen meal, produced ready and waiting to be consumed, we should not ignore the way that the consumption of the image is not the end. Social media is indefatigable. Images may be thought to present moments, frozen in time, but on SNS, there is no real sense in which they remain static.[147] This can be clearly seen in the design of Instagram and Facebook's "endless scroll", with pictures posted forming part of a flow, or continuum.[148] The sensation is of a rolling present, not an archive of the past. Not only are new images continually posted, but the older ones have the potential to be reposted in perpetuity, each having a different meaning or possible interpretation and different framing. These images are anything but static or frozen. They can be seen as serving a purpose, as part of the orchestrated presentation of our lives. Just as basic needs are easily fulfilled in capitalist societies and commodities are often produced to enhance the staging of our lives rather than solely for

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[145] The BFG, or "Big Friendly Giant," is a fictional character created by British author Roald Dahl (Dahl, 1982). The BFG is a kind-hearted and benevolent giant who befriends a young girl named Sophie and takes her on various adventures in Giant Country. He and Sophie travel to Dream Country where dreams are created, and the BFG catches dreams as they float by using a specialised tool called a dream trumpet. The dreams are then stored in jars or bottles, carefully labelled and organised by the BFG. He keeps these dream-filled containers in his cave and uses them to bring good dreams to children while they sleep, blowing them into their bedrooms through the windows or down the chimneys.

[146] Images of people who have since died seem to have a particular poignancy in this regard.

[147] This can be seen in the image of the lady with her son on the walk to school in the previous section. The image itself is reposted shifting in meaning over time, it's poignancy changing as time progresses.

[148] On TikTok for example they serve as a continual river washing over you.

consumption, it is conceivable to argue that this "staging" effect also applies to images on social media.

Some images are used to suggest an impression of a person within a digital ecology,[149] one that is suggestive of their values and personality. In other words, the images are employed to create atmospheres and used to actively produce emotional colour and depth around a person, serving almost like a mood board[150] to be shared depicting what they are like. This is, as Sorapure observes, "an online diary, [in which] pieces of information about the self may be brought together in different configurations, signifying the multiple and shifting ways of understanding the self" (Sorapure, 2003, p. 8). The shifting and changing elements are the key focus here with the dynamic nature of the medium allowing for constant adjustment and continual character development. In line with this, Giddens states, our "identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor, important though this is, in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). This would imply that the content posted needs to remain in line with a specific self-narrative. She refers to images shared as 'perfect moments' that she can re-live at will and thus appreciate and understand her life. Giddens emphasises the agency and authorship individuals have in shaping their own identities. This implies that the content posted online should align with and contribute to the desired self-narrative. Sorapure's understanding adds depth to this idea, suggesting that these digital representations allow individuals to revisit and gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their lives through the lens of their self-narrative.

https://chelsea13faith.

Following this argument, it could be argued that much content only requires our reaction to what is on offer, as opposed to a critical approach to its veracity. Andrew Darley (2000), for example, suggests what we are seeing today is an aesthetic without depth whose chief characteristic is the predominance of style, appearance, form, ornament, and sensation rather than meaning and interpretation. Although he was referring more generally to society's relationship with art, it is also possible to interpret this thinking in relation to social

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[149] Although the term digital ecology is often understood as referring to a science about the interdependence of digital systems and the natural environment it seems appropriate to use it in this context to refer to the interrelatedness of all users and systems on a particular platform).

[150] A mood board is a visual tool used to capture and convey the overall mood, atmosphere, and aesthetic of a concept or project. It is typically a collage of images, textures, colours, patterns, and other visual elements that represent the desired look and feel. Mood boards can be physical or digital, created using materials such as magazine cut outs, photographs, fabric swatches, or through online platforms and design software. They serve as a source of inspiration and reference, helping to communicate ideas, evoke emotions, and guide the creative direction of a design, event, or branding project. Mood boards are widely used in industries such as fashion, interior design, advertising, and graphic design to visually communicate and explore concepts before they are brought to life.

media. However, this notion of social diffusion of aesthetics is not peculiar to the modern digital world and was previously addressed by Walter Benjamin[151] who used the phrase *aestheticization* to capture the idea that in capitalist societies sensation is gradually taking the place of information. Benjamin spoke of "the replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation" (1939, 1999, p. 155) holding that it reflected "the increasing atrophy of experience" (1939, 1999 p. 155)[152]. Here, I would suggest that knowledge on social media is the same in that it is frequently recounted through aestheticism rather than narrative. Therefore, it can equally be argued that self-knowledge as encountered through social media remains focussed upon sensation rather than contemplation, with self continually articulated.

Although not aiming at conveying self in the round, as it were, one example of this focus on aestheticism to stimulate narration through sensation, rather than information, is the "foodstagram" picture (in some cases referred to as foodporn)[154]. This style of image has become paradigmatic of sensation over narrative, failing to be novel in the information it conveys or its artistic merit. It is not intended as a visual recipe but instead as a record of feeling / experience/ atmosphere. The information contained within a food photograph is less important than the experience it is trying to put across. On its own, it fails at many things, and yet if it is placed within a stream or a series of other (food) photographs, it succeeds in some way as a communication of experiences. It is a part of the story with the pictures in aggregate serving to demonstrate part of one's existence.[155]

In many ways, social media image posts can be said to serve the same purpose as the choice of artifacts displayed in our homes, the clothes we wear, and music we listen to. They are not only moments from the past but offer up signals to others of our present. Using the things we collect and gather around ourselves we make choices about how we want to be thought of by others, choosing how we want to be seen, be that a via poster, a photograph or a duvet cover. When considering the things with which we surround ourselves, Baudrillard (1996, pp. 103-104) makes a distinction between "unalloyed accumulation" and "collecting proper". Collecting proper is the stuff you make a conscious point of gathering and curating, e.g., Art, stamps,

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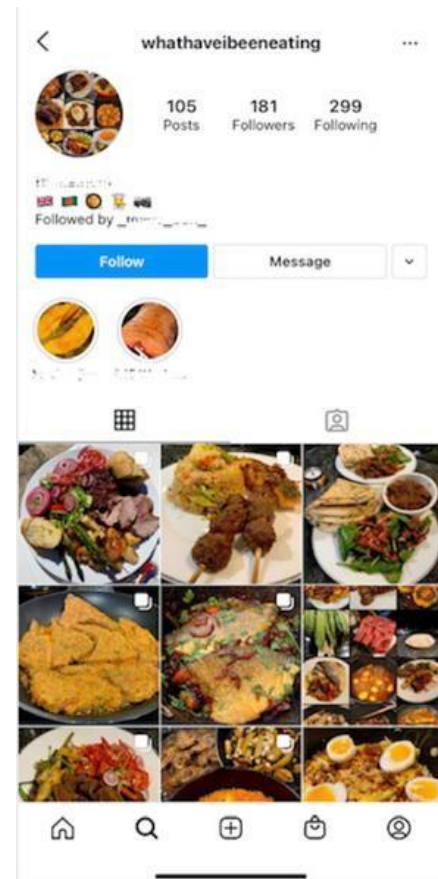
[151] (the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction 1999)

[152] This in turn relates to a number of central concepts in his work, like ennui, spleen and melancholy

[154] These terms are used to describe photographs taken by individuals showcasing their meals or culinary creations. Foodstagrams are often shared on social media platforms, particularly Instagram, where users capture and share visually appealing and appetizing images of food. The term "foodporn" is derived from the idea of visually indulging in tempting and delicious-looking food through photographs. It has become a popular trend in food culture, allowing people to share their dining experiences and culinary adventures with others.

[155] The linear nature of such would also seem to imply that if one waits long enough then the narrative will become clear, and characters will be formed.

records, memorabilia, or simply photographs and the things we set out on the mantel piece. Unalloyed collections, on the other hand, are made up of the things we have without really making an active choice to keep. I recently heard the economic term 'frontloading'[156] being used in relation to the way some people choose to put all of their expensive goods at the front of their houses as a form of status symbol. For example, parking their luxury car on the driveway as opposed to inside a garage, and having a large television clearly visible through the window from the road. Often those who choose to do this are using the goods to indicate to others a particular lifestyle or success in some form.[157] Yet, there is a sense in which our collected images on social media have also become things to be displayed, in effect 'frontloading' our social media pages. In the same way as parking a luxury car on the drive the pictures serve to demonstrate the value placed upon a particular lifestyle (whether you actually live like that or not). Some people's posts are effectively stage managed, with much careful thought going into both the context as the content in order to create the right aesthetic. The places depicted, the items in the background, the concert-selfie, all serve the myriad of decisions about which parts of a life to amplify and which parts to edit out of existence. The concept of ownership is also more fluid on social media so posting a picture of a supercar can add to the aesthetic you want to create, i.e., you value that level of wealth rather than suggesting you own it. The photos are in many senses talismanic, tied to their lives but not in physical existence. They perform in just the same way as so many of the digital things we have in our lives that we do not really own, be that music, newspapers, and everything we save in the Cloud. They are ours and form part of us, but they do not really exist in any tangible sense.

I have argued that the concept of deliberately chosen images creating sensation or an atmosphere can add nuance to our understanding of others and indeed ourselves, demonstrating the way social media images serve multiple and kaleidoscopic purposes. However, when considering the online SNS context we also need to pay attention to the unalloyed collections of images, as these can impact the digital atmosphere heavily. Such accumulations are made up of the things that a person owns purely by default - they are the things you just have because you did not get rid of them. Offline, it is the drawer where you just stuff the things that you do not know what to do with (batteries, an envelope, some string), but online, it is the photos on your feed that you were tagged in (possibly without realising), and / or the images you have posted in the past. In an online SNS context these contribute importantly to the atmosphere of the overall digital ecology as they may not accurately reflect the desired self-image or personal narrative you currently wish to project. There is an emotional and psychological impact stemming from the mere existence of these collections, as individuals may experience nostalgia, regret, or self-consciousness when confronted with past images or tagged photos that no longer align with their present selves.

These collections may serve as visual reminders of previous stages of their lives, relationships, or even beliefs that have evolved over time. People then must navigate the decision-making process of what to keep, hide, or delete. They may face dilemmas about preserving memories versus maintaining a desired image. For example, deleting or hiding certain images may be

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[156] This economic term means to distribute or allocate costs unevenly with the greater proportion at the beginning of the enterprise.

[157] Some hotels also do something similar – hiring super cars to park outside so they convey a certain ethos to their (targeted) clientele.

emotionally challenging if they represent significant moments or connections, even if they no longer align with the present self. This further highlights the complex interplay between an image's veracity or its atmosphere, the sensation over its narrative benefit, and the emotion it imbues, as opposed to a rational critical approach, with regards to self-knowledge. This online editing, cropping, and hiding is, to a certain extent, being used to reify an offline persona. It is perhaps possible, ten years on, to suggest that Floridi's (Floridi, The 4th revolution: How the infosphere is reshaping human reality. , 2016) recognition that we have moved beyond the traditional notion of the online world as a separate virtual realm, does not go far enough. Although his proposition that in the Onlife era, our identities, relationships, and social interactions are no longer confined to physical spaces but extend into the digital domain is borne out through these collections, the distinction between the digital and physical aspects of our lives has increasingly become blurred to the extent that to question whether something is IRL (In Real Life) or online is increasingly obsolete. Rather than experiences being made up of an intwined online and offline world, we now live merged and augmented existences, where the two aspects are overlaid and super imposed onto one another. Just as Baudrillard (1981) argued that in contemporary society, the line between reality and its representation becomes blurred, and we are immersed in a world of simulated experiences and images. This understanding of the online/offline interplay suggests that our experiences and perceptions are shaped by mediated representations.

It is therefore possible to view the use of image as behaving as a little like weather. The digital weather we might see on social media behaves a little like low- and high-pressure air masses in the atmosphere, forming fronts, which continually collide, interact, and move in response to passing weather systems. Similarly, opposing aspects of image on social media can be seen to collide, interact, and move. Minutiae and major crash up against one another on people's feeds, with images changing in meaning over time. For example, what may have been initially posted as a fun feel good photo of a party, may shift to become documentary evidence of an affair, then changing again over the years to serve as a moment of "look how far I have come". Just like colliding weather fronts in the atmosphere, this continual movement can result in positives, yet it can also fog people's understanding, and at its worst it creates hugely destructive waves. Therefore, although images present themselves initially as static and represented moments, produced to be owned and consumed, they are anything but. It is precisely because they are used in an ecological system that they become unstable and continually in flux in themselves. The images themselves participating in a more fluid process of meaning-making, simultaneously serving as documents, symbols, and in my view, aspirational play (to which I shall return to later in order to further develop the idea). As a result, there remains less of a requirement of either the photographer or the viewer to establish an essence of permanent truth in the

image as it is transient, often ephemeral, serving only to perform in the moment. They create atmospheres around people.

The new ways in which virtual experiences are brought to life no longer rely on a fixed representation of what already exists in the real world. Instead, these virtual experiences serve as actualised virtuality (Frankel & Krebs, 2022, p. 10) create entirely new forms of reality and provide a fresh and unique way of experiencing things. This challenges the traditional understanding that the virtual world is merely a copy or replication of the real world and as a result I would like to explore the 'show and represent' aspect of imagery a little further, considering the role of dualism in relation to image online.

"Images of images of images"

It has been argued that images increasingly serve to define the ways individuals experience the world[158] and precisely because the aesthetic and creative choices made regarding posts are such an important part of designing the self[159] the concept of reality and real-self is often focussed upon. Frequently, the online world is positioned as a poor imitation of the offline world, which is reminiscent of the dichotomy between falsehood and reality presented in the allegory of Plato's Cave. Now the digital world is the Cave, depriving us of knowledge of the so-called real world, and the shadows are poor imitations of reality. Therefore, in our self-presentation in these digital spaces, we become poor imitations as we retreat into the represented selves of our images and feeds. Rather than the internet offering freedom like the Prisoners were offered, we have been released from their chains only to retreat further into the Cave to become creators of statues and images, using them to stage our lives. Socrates holds our senses are inadequate to grasp the true nature of reality, and so the things we take for real are in fact mere images. Hence, the images we ourselves create – artistic images, stories, representations of any kind – are images of images. And so, in turn, the things we put on the internet are *images of images of images*, as they are edited, commented on, appropriated, and re-appropriated in their digital circulation. This is a strong narrative insinuating that social media hinders the acquisition of self-knowledge, fostering a narcissistic, superficial approach to life, a stunted creative imagination, and a foreclosed sense of identity with regards to self and one another[160]. Gardner and Davies, for example argue that young people now approach one another as they would an app[161], seeing one another as short cuts, as if they were icons for a type of person, much like the models in Plato's Cave[162].

However, to suggest that the images are somehow less than real is reliant on a version of Platonistic dualism, one that separates the world into two distinct and irreconcilable realms:

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[158] It can be argued that their self-fashioning becomes a regulative ideal. This is in line with the suggestion that the diffusion of aesthetics in everyday life has facilitated the entry of images of every object, individual, and event into the consumer world (Assouly, 2008) (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2013). (Debord, 2011) (Benjamin, 1999)

[159] Debord (2011) referred to aspects of this as 'aesthetic capitalism'. It can be further argued, in line with Debord (2011), that on social media people produce themselves in the process of production for consumption.

[160] (Gardner & Davies, 2014) and (Turkle S. , 1997) among others.

[161] Gardner and Davies refer to Gen Z as the "App Generation"

[162] To me, such a position fundamentally misunderstands a youth culture that seems be trying to step away from labelling and one-dimensional descriptions of who they are. Gender is one such example where this binary approach to labelling is being firmly held up for debate. The way in which image offers multiple interpretations yet contained with a unified symbol or picture seems to open more possibilities for creativity, doing the complete opposite to foreclosing identity.

the realm of the sensible and the realm of the intelligible. Gilles Deleuze (1990 and 1994), on the other hand, was critical of this understanding, believing it led to a hierarchical view of reality, where the real of the intelligible was considered superior to the realm of the sensible[163]. He argued that this dualism was problematic because it created an opposition between the two realms that did not allow for any intermediate or hybrid states. For Deleuze, the world is not divided into two distinct separate realms, but rather, it is a complex network of relations between different entities and forces. While this may seem reminiscent of the way in which Baudrillard's (1981) blurred line between reality and its representation, with the line between reality and its representation becoming increasingly blurred and indistinguishable, Deleuze's critique of dualism is based on his concept of difference. For Deleuze, the world is characterised by this difference, meaning that everything is constantly in the process of becoming and transformation. This process of becoming and transformation is not limited to the realm of the intelligible but is present in the sensible world as well. In contrast to both Platonistic dualism in which reality consists of two fundamentally separate and distinct realms: the physical/material world and the transcendent realm of Forms or Ideas, and Baudrillard's perspective that centres around a blurred distinction between reality and representation, Deleuze's philosophy embraces the idea of multiple and evolving realities, emphasising the importance of multiplicities and the creation of new possibilities. He emphasized the interconnectedness and immanence of all aspects of existence, advocating for a non-hierarchical understanding of the real in which he aimed to overcome the privileging of the intelligible over the sensible. However, such multiplicity and hybridity belong to a narrative that has only very recently started to become more recognised in relation to human relationship with technology. The majority to criticisms of online self-presentation rely on a false dichotomy, or a binary approach, more akin to either Baudrillard's hyperreal simulacrum, in which state of simulation that has replaced the real, or Platonistic ideas, considering what is 'real' as offline and anything online as having lower status.

From a Platonic, dualistic perspective of the online world, there can appear to be a sense in which we become something akin to "@ourselves", as if we are the models in the cave (or if we work from the perspective of Baudrillard's hyperreality, we have become simulcra ourselves). Both of these suggest a sense of detachment, with the depth and meaning of lived experiences are diminished or, overshadowed by the simulated and reduced to surface-level simulations. This reading of image on social media could perhaps be exemplified through the development and attempted popularisation of Yats in 2021. Yats [164] are a universal emoji user name,
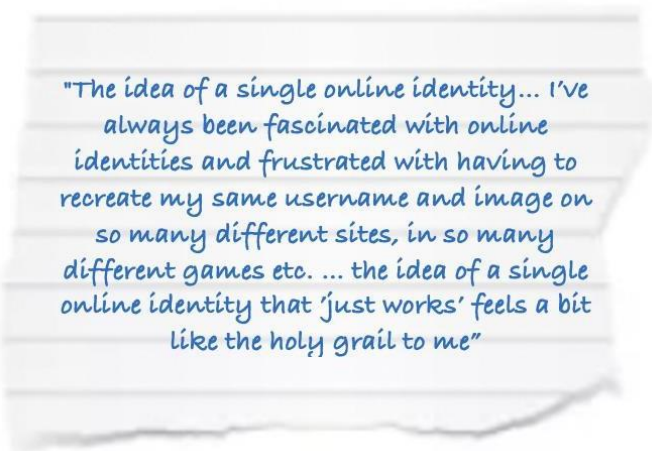

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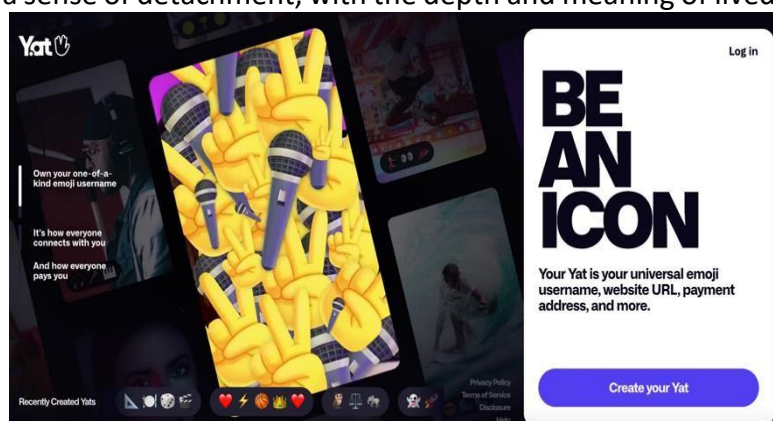
[163] This is discussed further in Deleuze, G. (1994) Difference and Repetition. London: Athlone Press and Deleuze, G. (1990). The Logic of Sense. New York: Columbia University Press.

[164] Times Feb 21, 2022, page 5

aimed at supplanting traditional online handles. They are marketed as adding more of an explanation of someone's personality than an @handle can. People can buy one to five emoji as a singular Yat, (Knowles, 2022, p. 5) with their selection designed to represent how they see themselves (or want to be seen). They were in many ways reifying Gardner and Davies' (Gardner & Davies, 2014) argument that young people were seeing one another as icons in one carefully selected combination of emoji. Someone who likes sports, music, and animals might buy a Yat that shows emojis of a runner, a music note and a dog. This customised string of emojis can be displayed on their social media page with an individual becoming known as 🏃 🎵 🐶 instead of @runmusiclady101, for example. Understood in this way, it is plausible that there would be a sense in which the Yat could foreclose creativity and knowledge of self and / or others.

Yet, this argument suggests a position in which people are only known as one thing and yet this is not ever the case. When we meet people, we generally understand they are different things to different people and perform in a variety of different ways according to different contexts. It is here that Deleuze's (1990, 1994) criticisms of Platonist binaries can be seen to have poignance. Just like a young child might be initially surprised that their teacher has a first name and an existence outside of school, in much the same way we come to realise that all people individuals that have lives outside of the specific role we encounter them in. While this is sometimes hard to come to terms with, it is part of growing up. To suggest that Yats or this form of handle reduces imagination or creativity oversimplifies and / or misapprehends the way in which we exist as well as the way image is being used in some contexts. Furthermore, emoji have a description in some sense that extends beyond the boundary of words, and the Yats were not supposed to be pronounced or spoken but meant to be used as a way to transcend a specific language, encapsulating all of the descriptions of the emoji in one. Therefore, there appears to be more space for creativity in interpretation. Not only can more be said in a shorter space (helpful when limited by character allocation on some platforms), but also emoji do not need to be translated into other languages, so they communicate across cultures.
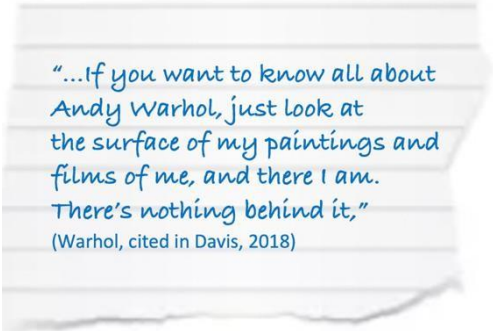
"The idea of a single online identity... I've always been fascinated with online identities and frustrated with having to recreate my same username and image on so many different sites, in so many different games etc. ... the idea of a single online identity that 'just works' feels a bit like the holy grail to me"

However, Yats do not appear to have particularly taken off, at one point, people were paying several thousand dollars to own these various emoji in a string. It is clear they offered something attractive to some people. It is therefore possible to argue that this was an (albeit ham fisted) attempt at articulating self, seeking to evoke something of who they felt they were. By eliminating the background noise and simplifying their characteristics into an image, there was an attempt to focus more

closely upon the sentiment expressed. The fact the image was a cartoon means it served more as a place holder or a marker for something else. It was clearly indexical. People approached the cartoon selves as the 2D images they were, not expecting them to offer any great depth of expression, but rather a visual depiction of the idea of that person/them. They added to an atmosphere of sorts, indicating a feeling or sensation of that individual.

However, there remains the point at which the superficiality of the emoji, or indeed the photograph, cannot be escaped. It is important to remember that sometimes there is nothing behind the image or, as it was put by the teenager cited in the section on Truth above, sometimes "it's just not that deep", or perhaps more eloquently by Andy Warhol "if you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films of me and there I am. There's nothing behind it" (Warhol cited in Davis, 2016).

It is here, as is so often the case on social media, that the tension between binaries comes to the fore. Therefore, I am not refuting that the surfaces of social media are frequently insufficient when exploring the content or structure of the appearances offered, and I remain wholly aware of

"…If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films of me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it,"
(Warhol, cited in Davis, 2018)

the danger of seeking to give significance by suggesting depths that are invisible in the medium itself. However, the superficiality of the cartoon image somehow expressing depth seems to nicely express the way social media frequently crashes superficial and meaningful up against one another in the atmosphere, within the (digital) ecological system. Added to this, and returning to the Platonist view, to understand images on social media as being little more than a glimpsed imitation of the truth is too simplistic a view of what is taking place, especially as often there is often no sense in which they are pointing beyond themselves. Frequently, they are "just not that deep", and they are not pointing towards a Form of self, as if windows into another realm. The reality represented through these images posted is deliberately fluid and in flux. Furthermore, treating image as a way to create an atmosphere means it has the potential to also be separated out from its semiotic function, as it is forming part of a wider ecosystem. It is simultaneously a meaningful artifact with depth, yet also a superficial cartoon. It could be a sign pointing beyond itself or simply a picture of the view as social media, in all its colliding and crashing up of alternative, simultaneous confluence of positions, offers a space in which it is possible for an image to be both. In this way, and as stated above, decoupling the image from its documentary status means there remains less of a requirement of either the photographer or the viewer to establish an essence of permanent truth in the image as it is transient, often ephemeral, serving to perform in the moment. Following on from the notion of decoupling the image and its meaning, thereby de-emphasising the contents of the image itself, there are a couple of trains of thought worth following.

1) The communicative aspect of image sharing is the important aspect.
2) The process and act of taking the photograph is the important aspect.

Therefore, having considered the contents of SNS image and the ways it is used to show and represent, I shall now turn to the use of image as visual language and consider the way in

which image serves as communication, rather than continuing to focus upon its aesthetic capacity.

Speak and Tell: communicative aspects of image

It is worth paying attention to the way communication appears to have become the primary function of domestic photography, rather than memory as it has been for previous generations.[165] In this vein, Nathan Jurgenson (Jurgenson, 2019) suggests that the confluence of smart phones and social media has created a new form of photography: about neither artistic merit nor documentation. He refers to this as social photography, that which is about routine communication, and it is as "under conceptualised as it is ubiquitous". Jurgenson argues that the vast majority of photographs taken today are a kind of "visual speaking" and are "as essential as gesture, as breath, or the "ums" and "ahs" of everyday speech (cited in Earle, 2020, p. 26). Using this sense of social media as 'visual speaking' to describe common life can be helpful when trying to understand what it means to 'be' in this day and age. These social photos show up clearly on Snapchat,[166] with many images showing nothing but a partial face or wall. They are deliberately disposable, being shared on an app in which all the content is ephemeral. The aim is to get people to respond to the act of contact, not the image itself. The images posted with this intention are in and of themselves frequently considered unimportant.

These are clear instances where it is important to reject the idea that by careful analysis of the social photograph used by an individual it is possible to unmask reality. Serving as a form of phatic communication, it indicates that those who attempt to interpret it need to reassess their understanding of what is going on. Instead of introspecting or asking what our words, actions, or indeed status updates, *really* mean, we should be looking at them as having intrinsic, descriptive value.[167] There is a dangerous temptation to privilege what is hidden beneath or behind the everyday yet, we should not be trying to dig through the surface of all SNS images to look for their true meaning. Treating what is hidden or lies beneath the surface as more "real" or "true"
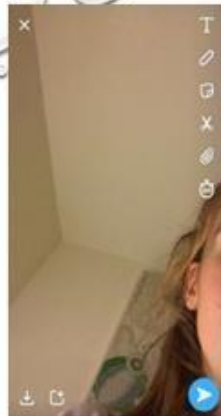

than the ordinary suggests the surface is as an obstacle which needs to be dug through or moved out of the way., Rather than trying to establish an image's hidden meaning, perhaps, in line with arguments made by Jurgenson (2019) and drawing on the work of Lobinger (2016), social media platforms have created a space in which images serve as a form of visual

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[165] This is discussed further in Sarvas & Frohlich (Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011).

[166] Permission kindly granted to reproduce these images taken for snapchat 22/01/2020

[167] This is reminiscent of Wittgenstein, who suggest it is describing this intrinsic value that can lift one's blindness to the ordinary. The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes (Wittgenstein, 1968)

speaking, with the focus upon the act of sharing and eliciting responses rather than the intrinsic value of the image itself.
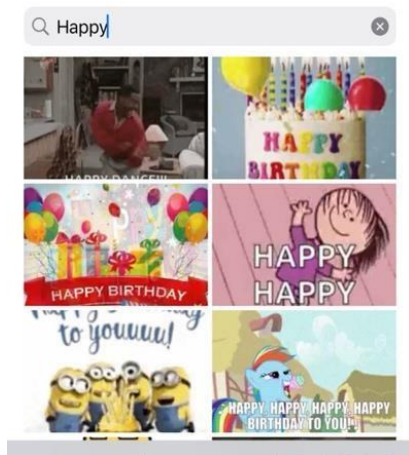
Understood as being used in this way, the images on social media do not have to be representative of documentary reality, and users frequently rely on memes and GIFs.[168] Using GIFs is a bit like using emojis and most social media platforms team up with image hosting sites to make sending GIFs as easy as possible. There are search options where users type in a word related to what they want to express and then it offers a range of GIFs to pick from. Users pick the GIF that is appropriate for the situation, the one that matches their mood, or the sentiment they want to express.[169] Often people lack the necessary photographic skills, the words, or the emotional vocabulary to adequately express a sentiment and being shown a variety of images that sit close to the desired internal feeling has opened up a new way to articulate one's self. The GIF has become not only a short cut in communication, but it is also often felt to meet the need of the individual trying to express themselves better than typed or verbal language would.
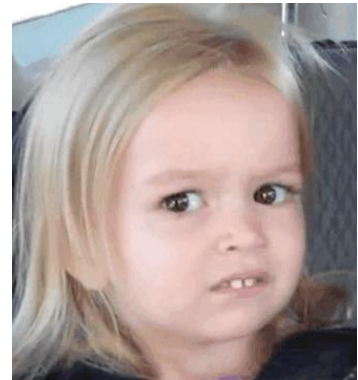
When communicating self to other, be they photographs, GIF's or emoji, images are expected to do a lot of the heavy lifting. The importance or otherwise of the documentary nature of these images has been discussed in the section on Truth, but in using emoji and GIF's users go one stage further. Images are used to communicate something of themselves in such a way the documentary nature of the image used is irrelevant, and indeed entirely decoupled from the sentiment expressed. Self-articulation is achieved, augmented, and punctuated through a variety of medium. There is no hard division between false and real, it is all punctuation and part of language and nuance. To suggest, therefore, that the use of social media prevents the acquisition of self-knowledge, and / or stunts creative imagination, does not seem to fit with the way that people are engaging with these far more creative uses of image as a means of self-articulation.

However, this could be said to be another example of a clashing discordance in relation to which people seem to happily toggle between opposite and incongruous meanings on rapid cycle. For example, the crashing up of images being intended as meaningless yet

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[168] GIF is short for Graphics Interchange Format. GIFs, unlike other image formats like emoji, are frequently animated. Animated GIFs are often used to express jokes or emotions by referencing memes or memorable moments from TV shows and movies.

[169] Sometimes I have found "words" for my mood when looking through GIF's. Sometimes there words do not really exist, or my emotional vocabulary is not developed enough to know what they might be.

simultaneously requiring some reflection on the part of the poster and engagement from the viewer. There is also collision evident in those images that focus entirely upon aesthetic value but are also somehow communicating and imbued with meaning. A fracture is apparent in those images that serve to create lasting meaning in terms of personal development and self-expression yet are ephemeral and posted with the express intention that they disappear. Discordance or juxtaposition is in evidence in both the taking of a photograph and the sharing of a photograph, as contradicting truths are apparently held in the same moment. Opposite interpretations seem to repel one another yet simultaneously attract and bleed into one another. It is therefore worth further exploring this notion of holding parallel yet seemingly incompatible truths simultaneously within the context of social media.

"Just take the picture": capturing this "fleeting reality"?

The suggestion that many of the images shared on SNS have no lasting value beyond their use for immediate communication[170] has allowed for the move away from any requirement for them to establish an essence of "truth". As stated previously, it is possible to argue that the process of taking the photograph is the important aspect. However, building on this decoupling of the image itself serving no lasting value, there is also a simultaneous, parallel argument that runs much in line with the attitude of photographer Garry Winogrand.[171] It is possible to suggest that taking an image actually enables people to consider the world itself in a more deliberate fashion. This is qualitatively different from the moment captured and possessed as described earlier, but instead one in which, the process of taking images can lead to a more intentional understanding of the world. In this way, they serve to freeze-frame the moment in order to hold it up for contemplation. Considering the world itself rather than the outcome of the photograph offers a different understanding of the ephemeral photograph. The purpose of this image is not communicative and relationship building moment of the "hey" but requires a response of a different kind. In this way Winogrand believed taking an image enabled people to consider the world itself in a more deliberate fashion. There is no suggestion that there is a need to reach beyond the photograph for meaning, because the photograph is positioned as being further in the background. Winogrand suggested that it was that by looking at the photographs of the world that meant he was able to think about what he was looking at, and therefore what the world is (Strecker, 2013). This thinking is especially worth considering in relation to image on social media.

"I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed".
Garry Winograd

Winogrand repeatedly stated throughout his career that his primary focus was not the photograph in and of itself and this seems to chime with the way many people use images on

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[170] This is discussed further in a review of photo-ecologies undertaken by Risto Sarvas and David Frohlich (Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011)

[171] It appears that towards the end of his life taking pictures became a kind of mania, with him leaving behind 6,500 rolls of unprocessed film.

social media. Here, it seems that some of the pictures people post take on meaning not for their content but for the way they are turned into content to be responded to. In line with this, to suggest the purpose of an image is other than the artifact of the photograph allows for a level of reflection on that moment, rather than the picture. It is therefore possible to suggest that many people are doing exactly this on their smart phones, sharing images across the various genres and plethora of sharing platforms. Their pictures are seeking to capture "who we are and how we feel" (Rubenstein, 2013 referring to the work of Winogrand) in the moment of taking them, rather than looking at them afterwards to decipher some kind of code. We are pausing moments of significance to note that they are significant. The image is a by-product.

Social media images could similarly be positioned as somehow essential to being, existence, and comprehension of with our existence and everything around us in the world.[172] The idea that image can offer this perspective is not new. Henri Cartier-Bresson *(Cartier-Bresson, 1952)* for example, suggested that taking photographs is a means of understanding the world. He made frequent references to the idea of 'fleeting reality' as captured in an image[173].

> *To "give a meaning" to the world, one has to feel oneself involved in what one frames through the viewfinder." (Cartier-Bresson, Images à la Sauvette)*

Understanding photography as something that can clarify and condense activity that appears to be jumbled or chaotic, gives us time to examine the substance of the situation and arrange our thoughts and feelings around it. In the same way the ordering of the jumbled and chaotic content of the world is held within the Instagram tiles. The containment offers order and calm[174]. However, de Beauvoir (1948) suggests that the aesthetic attitude constitutes a negative approach to experiencing life, one that would result in a withdrawal of human interaction[175]. Rather than being essential to being, she held it was something that must be avoided. Characterising it in the way that human beings live together but do so while keeping

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[172] It is possible that therefore social media can be conceptualized as closer to an environment for being John Durham Peters notes that "once communication is understood not only as sending messages…but also as providing the conditions for existence, media cease to be only studios and stations, messages and channels and become infrastructures and forms of life" (Peters, 2016, p. 14). He further emphasizes the idea that media as infrastructure when he writes, "media are out infrastructures of being, the habitats and materials through which we act and are" (Peters, 2016, p. 15).

[173] Cartier Bresson frequently refers to "The Decisive Moment" – the moment when the visual and psychological elements of people in a real-life scene spontaneously and briefly come together in perfect resonance to express the essence of that situation. Some people believe that the unique purpose of photography, as compared to other visual arts, is to capture this fleeting, quintessential, and holistic instant in the flow of life (Suler, 2012).

[174] The way in which multiple tiles on Instagram seem to offer something more than a single image alone can brings to mind Larkins "'The Large Cool Store', in which he examines the quasi-tragic gap between the world as it is and the world we aspire to. The way image is negotiated, curated and arranged on social media seems to do much the same. Arranging multiple items that have a shared colour tone or theme together, offers a more ordered sense than just one on its own.

[175] She does this in the first section of part III of The Ethics, "The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity" (EA74)

themselves "at a distance" from events, interacting with one another only with "detached joy".

> "We may call this attitude aesthetic because the one who adopts it claims to have no other relation with the world than that of detached contemplation ; outside of time and far from men, he faces history, which he thinks he does not belong to, like a pure beholding ; this impersonal version equalises all situations; it apprehends them only in the indifference of their differences; it excludes any preference".
> (Simone de Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity 74-5)

Taking into account both de Beauvoir and Cartier- Bresson one cannot escape the importance of the frame. Images excludes certain elements and includes others. There is a sense of both de Beauvoir's understanding of distancing and Cartier-Bresson's belief of immediacy conveyed through the framing of an image. It is still important therefore to note that photography (and shared imaged) is a system of "visual editing"; photographs isolate and focus our attention on fragments of things, they are extracted from a visual field, acting as a kind of "excision in space… This 'cut' extracts a portion of space, while suggesting there it is a fragment of a much larger field of view" (Edwards, 2006) (Edwards, 2006, p. 105). The frame is important as it often imposes aesthetic order on chaos only allowing us to see what "takes shape in the photograph" (Edwards, 2006, p. 105).

I took this image in 2018 straight after a race I had completed. I was incredibly happy and loving the moment with my friends. The moment was chaotic in many ways – the adrenaline of the race, the thrill at the finish, followed by the mad dash to the car to get ready for the evening out. I wanted to pause that feeling of joy as I had not felt it in a while, so I took the photograph, and it has stayed on my camera reel, unshared, ever since. This photo has nothing to do with the contents of the image itself (especially as most of it is out of focus), but taking it provided me with a brief moment of respite from overwhelming emotions. It allowed me to momentarily step back and view my current situation from a distance, with a greater sense of intention. I felt the need to briefly create space between myself and the immediate moment, acknowledging its significance and observing it from a slightly detached perspective, before immersing myself back into the actual experience.

(deliberately) Pointless

Criticism is often levelled at people taking photographs of things rather than "living in the moment", yet as I have argued, sometimes an image is facilitating us to experience a moment more fully by allowing It some space and order. I have also discussed the way in which taking photographs for the "gram" is considered by some as shallow and meaningless, yet

simultaneously criticised for being deeply negatively affective. Likewise, image taking for social media is frequently described in popular media as pointless and a distracting waste of time. I would argue, however, that while it is possible to describe social media images as pointless, meaning without point or lacking purpose, it is also possible to understand the term pointless to mean being without one point or having multiple points. Both interpretations challenge the concepts of generative and purposeful content. Both can be approached positively.

Initially, pointless, as in "without point" sounds as if it feeds into a narrative of navel gazing and narcissism, however, it could equally be used as a challenge to a society that places huge value on productivity as opposed to 'being'. Doing something purely because it is fun does not closely tie to the marketing and management narratives we often hear (and are discussed in the section on Truth) for here aspects of efficiency and performance indicators are high on the agenda. However, if you watch a group of young people spending time together offline, they will often be punctuating their conversation with online content. They will be talking about TikToks, or memes, watching content together or trying to recreate them, and taking pictures, showing them to each other before posting. Arguably, there is no point to any of this. There is no purpose, it cannot be measured, and their behaviour is not focussed on efficiency or productivity. It is purely recreational and could be (and is by many) thought of as pointless. However, I frame that in the positive sense. Play is not meant to be purposeful or have a point.[176]
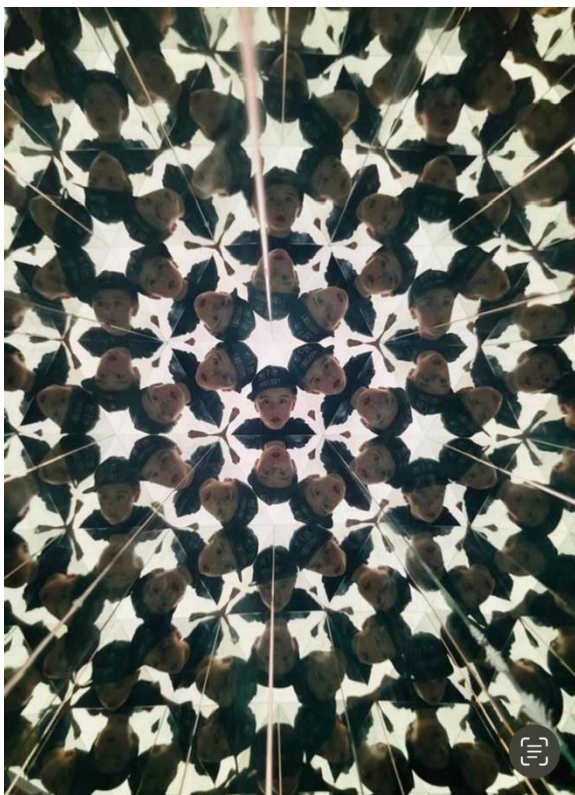

The other interpretation of pointless that I drew attention to also has great relevance here. Pointless in that there are multiple aspects that are taking place, but no one end game. Dhillon Pradeep (Pradeep & Standish, 2000) speaks eloquently of this using the metaphor of a caress to explain further. He presents how a hand can be used to type, paying attention to the QWERTY keyboard and the document it produces, juxtaposed with it being used to drag "backwards and upside down, up the forearm" (2000 p. 245) of a lover. "Unlike the typing fingers the caressing hand welcomes every sensation [...] Caressing is pointless, not because it has no point but because involved in myriad points." (2000 p. 245). Posting online could be seen as also involved in myriad points and the kaleidoscopic understanding of image on social media comes into play.[177] The multiple and changing interpretations, intentions,

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[176] I discuss play in relation to self-knowledge in the final section more fully, but it relates back to the discussion in the chapter on Truth as well.

[177] Not only are the images on social media pointless but Kaleidoscopes themselves are pointless. For example, for Victorian scientists the kaleidoscope offered a tool to understand how optics functioned, others

functions, and meanings of images on social media constantly change.

The metaphor is unintentionally reified on the Instagram Kaleidoscope filter (Image from Larson, 2015/2021). In this filter, you can take up to nine photographs from your camera reel and add them together to create one "hypnotic collage" (Larson 2015/2021). The images are pointless, but positively so. Here once again, the crashing up of opposites can be seen. On the one hand, there is the generative and endless productivity of technology, designed with purpose of creating frictionless existence in a capitalistic society, and on the other, posting images on social media remains endlessly pointless. This is both positive and negative in the same moment. Furthermore, the images posted are often posted in imaginative and playful ways, they are playful yet representative, documentary, and whimsical all at once. The images also shift and change in meaning as life continues. They represent different things and play different roles in the backstory that is created. The kaleidoscope of surfaces they sit on continues to move.
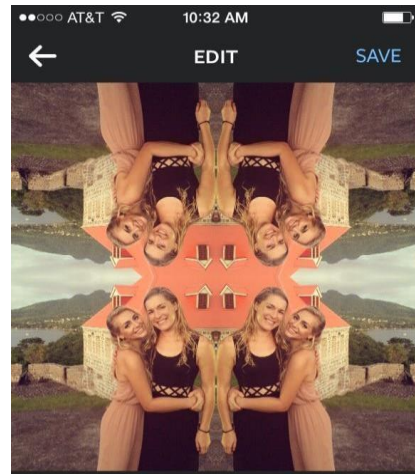
Self(ie) as Pointless Image

Given the ubiquity of the smart phone, individuals are increasingly able to take their own pictures, using them to tell their own stories, and play their games and it is therefore worth moving on to consider the ubiquitous Selfie more specifically. Although initially it seemed that such images were closer to a representative or documentary style, they soon became augmented with filters and airbrushing, and selfies became something akin to discursive formations, with their powers exceeding the visually discernible. As discussed above in the section on Truth, this creative expression is also seen in the way play allows for imagination and storytelling to become concrete in some form. For example, playing with Barbies or Bears provides a space for ideas to become tangible, children are literally playing-out the ideas in

"There is, in my opinion, only one conclusion that may be drawn from the idea that the self is not given to us: we must create ourselves as works of art"
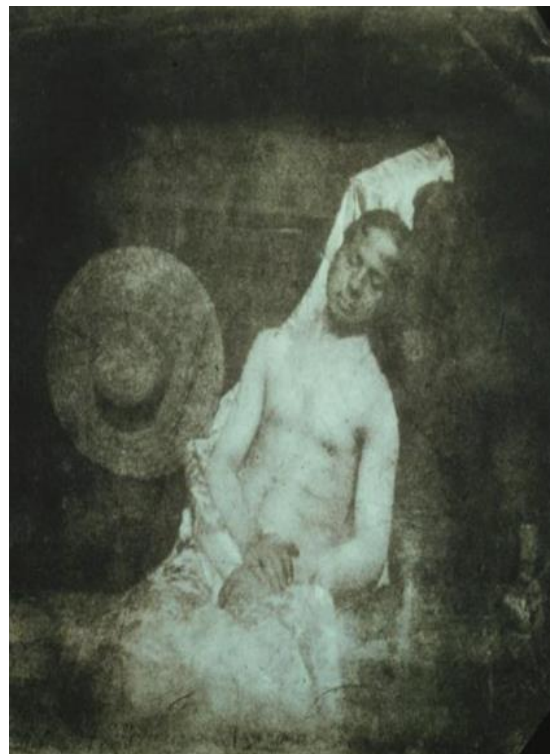*(Foucault, 1963)*

used it as a tool to visualise massive numbers as the possible variations produced by a single kaleidoscope were unprecedented. In addition to scientific utility, the kaleidoscope also held aesthetic and industrial utility. The nearly infinite varieties created by the kaleidoscope, which were produced symmetrically, were used for patterns on china, paper, carpets, floorcloths, and other fabrics. It is also interesting to note that in 1816 when they were released, they were considered in many of the same terms as the iPhone is today. That is a distraction from reality, offering up falsehoods and according to an article by Jason Farman (2015) "[a] person couldn't walk down a street in London without seeing people staring into these tubes and walking into walls from being so immersed in the new invention" (Farman, 2015) Many people of the era argued that giving attention to the patterns was a waste of time when true beauty was all around. All a kaleidoscope viewer had to do was put down the instrument of false beauty and look up at real beauty in nature.

their heads. It allows for exploration of and experimentation with these ideas without a requirement to commit to them. They express one of the facets of the kaleidoscope, but this can easily be changed to form a different impression.

The self-portrait has become increasingly part of our norm, with social media sites presenting the self-portrait as an essential part of online communications. However, the first selfie was the portrait by Hippolyte Bayard (1801-87), entitled *"Self Portrait as a Drowned Man"* (1840). The photograph depicts Bayard as a victim of suicide, having drowned himself because of the French authority's refusal to officially recognise his discoveries in photography as equal to those of Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre (1787-1851)[178]. This photograph has continued to be something of a touchstone for those engaging with more formal self-portraiture and therefore seems an important picture to reference, not least because it is self-referential, focussing upon a conceptual presentation of the artists persona, as well as referencing the nebulous concept of the location of the self in a self-portrait. In this instance, it is an impossible image, as it is set up as if the artist could never see what is depicted, the self is presented as an 'other'.

Historically, the self in self-portrait has come to mean "a representation of emotions, an outward expression of an inner feeling, penetrating self-analysis, and self-contemplation that might bestow an immortality of sorts upon the artist" (Bright, 2010, p. 8). It can be understood as something indexical, indicating there is no 'true' self. Following this line of thinking, it is easy to suggest that the self "splits, merges, fractures, and becomes so performed and so constructed that nothing authentic remains: it becomes and "every" man or "no" man, and ultimately a true self is nothing but a fabrication and a void" (Bright, 2010, p. 9). Added to this is the complication that the self is a subjective rendering by the author. According to Bright, "[w]hen we look at a photographic self-portrait we do not see an individual or visual depiction of an inner existential being, but rather a display of 'self-regard, self-preservation, self-revelation, and self-creation' open to any interpretation imposed upon on it by each individual viewer" (Bright, 2010, p. 9). Like Bright, many contemporary artists shun the notion of a unified, authentic self, focussing more upon breaking the identity down into multiple elements to discern what remains of an objective self. A dialogue around what the tangible element might be is encouraged and explored. I
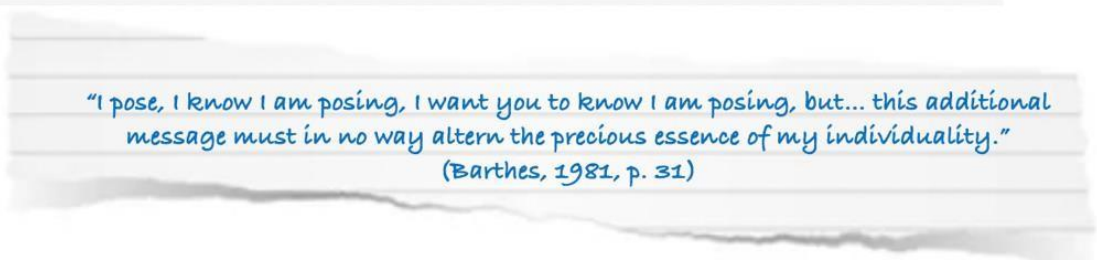
"Just as Frida Kahlo painted self-portraits, our selfies construct a small part of who we are" (Fang, 2019) opening a space for people to reflect upon what it is to 'be'.

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[36]The daguerreotype is commonly understood to be the first photographic process in France.

would argue the same is true in the more superficially seeming selfie's we find on social media.

As Bright highlights, an important consideration in any analysis of self-portraiture is its ubiquity. "It is a compulsion for almost anyone with a camera, artist or not, to turn it on themselves" (Bright, 2010, p. 9). However, it is important to consider to what extent the selfie can be considered a self-portrait, or simply a picture people take of themselves.[179] The notion of presenting the self as other is something that is almost tangibly played with in the selfie.

> "I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know I am posing, but... this additional message must in no way altern the precious essence of my individuality."
> (Barthes, 1981, p. 31)

The element of performance can be seen in the image, with pouting, hair, clothing and so on all done for the benefits of the image that will be posted. However, it could be argued that all self-portraiture uses elements of impersonation, or invention. Some, artists or not, choose to extend this mimicry beyond the moment of the photograph, choosing to live out the impersonation, perhaps using the photograph simply as evidence of this existence. The goal here may not be to consider the relationship between the self and the other, as is often the intention in a self-portrait, but to let the other take over the self and become a part of their real life for a (protracted) period. It is possible to consider identity as a culturally constructed concept, one that sometimes has a malleable and playful aspect. The images on a social media feed can capture the changing nature of a self through the shifting identities and alter egos.

The human desire to "airbrush" stories, inflate or reduce certain elements, telling white lies, and omitting details is unremarkable. The camera can be said to be doing the same when it comes to the autobiographic nature of the social-medic self. There is an interesting juxtaposition that we, as viewer, are posed with, in that photography is still perceived by many as an agent of truth. As a result, we seem to hold pictures to high standards in terms of our expectations of authenticity. Higher than we do in the case of the written word. Some of this comes from the way the photos are framed / posed. Selfies are presented in a way that adopts the aesthetics of a casual snapshot, even though they may have been highly edited and constructed. Furthermore, the language of many selfies is often confessional and messy, amplifying the intimacy that the virtual space seems to offer. And yet, the process is highly edited and reveals only what the author wants to reveal, or accept, about themselves.

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[179] Bright, S. (2010) points out that there is perhaps an argument to be made for avatars that people create for themselves in virtual world or games are also a form of self-portrait.

Just as it is common for writers and poets to make sense of personal tragedy or difficult times through words or memoirs, and photographers/ artists often create a visual record. For every day people, those who may not identify as artists, however, I would argue that periods of selfie taking seems to correlate with those who are creating a sense of independent identity. Age seems less relevant, but people who are going through divorce, breakup, rites of passage, teenage existence seem to take proportionally more selfies than those who are not. It can be argued that personal struggles resonate beyond an individual self to a more universal level, fostering a sense of belonging. The self they reveal is not necessarily a coherent unified self but can just as easily reveal a variety of different versions of the self.

Beauty emerges in situations in which subject and object are juxtaposed and connected.

Crispin Sartwell (Sartwell, Six Names of Beauty, 2004) attributes beauty neither exclusively to the subject nor to the object, but to the relation between them, and even more widely also to the situation or environment in which they are both embedded. His approach resonates with the context of online self-presentation. He points out that when we attribute beauty to the night sky, for instance, we do not take ourselves simply to be reporting a state of pleasure in ourselves; we are turned outward toward it. In this way, his arguments can also apply more generally online, for example, one could argue that when someone posts an image of a beautiful sunset, they are reporting not only their own state but simultaneously turning towards, and locating themselves in, the world. The subject and object are both juxtaposed and connected. In a similar way, the social mediac self can be seen to be both subject and object simultaneously. People engage with social media as a subject in terms of creating their media trails, and as an object by seeing themselves as external other depicted in their traces. They post for themselves but are also turned out towards the world- the two aspects juxtaposed yet connected. However, with the ubiquity of image sharing that social media has afforded, the visual element of self-reflection has become increasingly prominent.

> "once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image"
> (Barthes, Camera Lucida: Relections on Photography, 1981, pp. 10-11).

However, arguably, the juxtaposition to which Sartwell refers, has been muddied. Setting aside debates about whether links are correlative or causal, it seems that much of the work in schools and popularist media around social media and declining adolescent mental health is still associated with the ills of unrealistic, fake, and aspirational posts that Social Media Sites (SMS) are reported to encourage. It stems from and argument presented by some that "[T]here is a push towards an overall packaged sense of self" (Gardner and Davies 2014, p. 61), which is increasingly externalised, containing the edited highlights and focusing upon the 'sorted' and polished elements rather than any weaknesses or idiosyncrasies.[180] This line of thinking easily lends itself in support of the idea that we are living an age of narcissistic, subjectivity, with self-expression rather than self-examination being at the centre of all we do. Therefore, embedded within this is the suggestion that young people are not affording themselves the opportunity to have deep self-knowledge or live an authentic existence. For example, Turkle (2012) warned of the social ills of living a "like life" rather than a real life, with value being assessed in terms of "likes" and "follows", based on how one appears to be. She went on to suggest that Descartes' famous dictum "I think therefore I am" has been eclipsed by "I share therefore I am" (Turkle, 2012), thereby amounting to a curiously updated version of Berkeley's dictum "to be is to be perceived". If one were to follow this line of thinking then being perceived on SNS arguably comes in the quantifiable form of 'likes' and 'follows' and, as Pattinson suggests, a (mis)understanding "of 'being' in terms of 'beings'" (Pattinson, 2000, p. 16). Here, the value of being is quantified in terms of use or functionality, with both the perceived and the perceiver serve a purpose or utility to the other, be that in the form of numerical value ('a like') or as entertainment. It is utilitarian in the sense that neither group have a sense of intrinsic value in and of themselves, for they could easily be replaced by any number of alternatives. In this interpretation, users are caused to see themselves online as an object, brought into existence both because of, and for the purpose of, being seen. This object becomes consumable, and as a result many argue that the self that is presented is one designed to be desirable. Something akin to a product or a brand rather than a person.

However, it seems that people are rapidly maturing with their use of social media, and while there is no denying that some people do use aspirational posts on social media as a way of

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[180] Research undertaken by Chou and Edge (Chou & Edge, 2012)(2012) examined the impact of using Facebook on people's perceptions of others' lives and noted that FB users tended to attribute more positive content posted to others' personality rather than situational factors (correspondence bias), especially for those they did not know personally. Furthermore, their research indicated that those who used Facebook for longer each week agreed more that others were happier than them and had better lives.

developing a "brand-me", eg kimkardashian[181] , there is an increasing prevalence of content that does nothing of the sort. For example, the instagram accounts womenIRL, Supermarkettour, coffeeshopsoftheworld, everydayprk, #fridgepics, #mundane_matters, @onionringsworldwide present pictures of ordinary, everyday, mundane things that people do; be that the school run or their television viewing. The popularist views regarding the "Perfect Me" posts creating unrealistic and impossible ideals for people to live up to, are becoming increasingly outdated. boyd (2014) and Gosling (2009) for example, argue that there is no gap between the presentation of an ideal self on social media sites and the In Real Life (IRL) self-offline. Yet, rather than this being in the blurred sense of Baudrillard, in which there is no distinction between the real and unreal as discussed above, Gosling's research suggests that online social network profiles convey a reasonably accurate sense of the profile owners (Gosling 2009). It appears that people are exploring new identities and utilising the space that has been opened up by social media in order to come to greater self-knowledge. The vast majority of social media posts are actually not aspirational, but they may be framed in such a way as to carry a message about lifestyle, but the actual content for the vast majority seeks to be relatable.

It seems that in many ways, social media is steeped in a postmodern narrative in which the concept of image and ultimately beauty, as I shall now go on to discuss, is often viewed as attainable and ordinary. While it was initially formulated in online spaces as something perfectable, it is possible to argue that we are now moving towards a space in which the mundane and ordinary is given a space, thereby challenging traditional notions of idealised beauty. Just as Postmodern thinkers emphasise the idea that beauty is subjective and culturally constructed, social media users seem to be increasingly exploring existence through everyday objects, experiences, and individuals. Likewise, just as Postmodernism celebrates the ordinary and mundane, suggesting that beauty can be found in the commonplace and overlooked aspects of life, this is a popular genre of posting. It could be argued that the way image is used on social media is increasingly positioning people to sometimes look beyond superficial appearances and delve into the complexities of their identities, thereby leading to a more nuanced self-awareness.

Beauty (re)presented

As stated at the outset, rather than trying to define Beauty or identify what is beautiful, in the next part it is my intention to consider the (re)presentation of beauty within social media. Therefore, this section will address the emergent paradoxical landscape, looking at the intertwined relationship of beauty, ubiquity, and obscenity. It will consider the spaces where coexisting yet competing truths reside. Drawing a connection to Warhol's artwork as a point of departure, it emphasises the shift from the traditional understanding of beauty as something exclusive and rarefied to a more subjective and commonplace interpretation influenced by the pervasive consumer culture. The discussion centres on the impact of social media platforms on the perception of beauty, highlighting the prevalence of airbrushed and filtered images that adhere to specific ideals and tropes. It explores the idea that social media has both expanded and flattened beauty aesthetics, blurring the boundary between

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[181] Kim Kardashian stars in a reality show in America. She uses her Instagram posts to connect with her fans and market various products that she is in collaboration with or produces herself e.g. clothing lines and perfumes.

meaningful communication and surface-level self-presentation. Furthermore, it delves into the notion of images conforming to recognizable types and becoming consumable entities losing their uniqueness in the process, touching upon the concept of hyperreality and revisiting the potential for signs and meanings become detached. Finally, the influence of dominant discourses and power structures on subjective perceptions of beauty is discussed, highlighting the cultural and historical variability of beauty standards.

Beauty and aestheticization on social media

Warhol's 'Thirty Are Better Than One' seems to be a good place to start, as the Mona Lisa is often described as an example of timeless facial beauty, and the image has become something akin to iconic with regards to beauty. Warhol reproduces the Mona Lisa image thirty times in black-and-white rows, reducing it to something closer to a stereotype of the *Mona Lisa*.

Reproduction, repetition, and normalisation are major themes in most of Warhol's work, and these ideas seem especially pertinent today in light of social media. In contrast to the Platonic claims that beauty is something exclusive or rarefied, found not in material objects but rather in the perfect and unchanging realm of Forms, Warhol believed that beauty could be found in the most commonplace and everyday aspects of modern life. His conception of beauty, as evidenced by his artistic practise, specifically emphasises the beauty of commonplace items and consumer culture. Warhol's conception of beauty is entirely based on the subjectivity of personal experience. Similarly, while Platonism suggests that beauty is an objective and transcendent reality that exists independently of human perception, social media focusses specifically upon these elements of context and subjectivity. In this way, perception is an especially vital part.

In Platonism, the everyday experience of beauty is imperfect, it is a copy, and Warhol can be seen as playing on this, drawing specific attention to the notion of copy. However, in this instance, the notion of a copy is a simulacrum, as opposed to something that is somehow less good or imperfect. This idea can be seen replicated on social media. For example, the social media version of beauty is not Platonist in that it is something that is hidden or mysterious, nor is it a thing that waits to be revealed. Instead, it is presented as something that is not only achievable and ubiquitous if one follows the correct steps. It is completely copy-able, with people presented almost as if they themselves are simulacra. The idea of what is beauty/ beautiful has become a description of a particular style, one is made up of tropes, makeup hacks, body ideals, and most importantly, celebrity culture. People are, in turn, expected to present themselves as having achieved this state in and through the images they post. Often, these are airbrushed and filtered, to achieve the expected norm of beauty.[182] Furthermore, rather than beauty being presented as something ethereal and otherworldly, this economy of desire has simultaneously made beauty something to be coveted and entirely achievable, yet also something that is perceived as trivial and expendable.

It is possible to argue that modern aestheticization has caused both a quantitative expansion and a qualitative flattening of the aesthetic of beauty. In a similar vein to postmodern art, the aestheticised attractiveness we encounter on SNS images resemble the glossy surface of advertising, remaining superficial and in many ways created to be replicated. This notion of replication is crucial when recognising that most images seem to confirm to familiar types, e.g., Snaps, Foodstagram, the Selfie, Outfit of the Day (OOTD), or Fitspo pics. Essentially, images are cultural representations that follow codes and conventions of "available cultural forms of representation" (Dyer, 2002). Styles of images often reference other images or image styles, creating trends or fashions on various platforms. Unfortunately, they then tend to be generalised into one, so their details and specificity are suppressed (Pattinson 2007 p. 74). Styles of image become almost meme-like, constantly referencing other images or styles of image. There are clear trends or fashions on various SNS platforms that seem to bubble up e.g., the not sharing one's whole face, the selfie, the nude. In this way, generalisation overrides specificity; for example, despite a selfie being a representation of a specific person, the proliferation of this genre of images makes it challenging to distinguish one selfie from

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[182] Although this phrase is in itself somewhat oxymoronic, it does have links with the notion of Fibonacci numbers and the golden ratio. The mathematical definition of beauty is 1.6180339887. The ratio (a+b) is the pattern behind many shapes we find pleasing, be it architecture, form, or people; all seem to be close to this ratio when regarded as beautiful. It was first written down by Euclid and was first discovered by the Pythagorean mathematicians, who kept seeing this ratio in things regarded as beautiful. Because it has been described, its proximity seems measurable and therefore ultimately more or less achievable.

another. The individuals become actors in the image, where different people take on the role without significantly altering the superficial meaning of the image, often represented as X was here. Individuals blend into a sea of generalised and interchangeable content.

There is an inherently postmodern quality to this presentation of beauty, and it is interesting to note that the alignment of the times on an Instagram account mirrors the repetition of Marilyn's face in Warhol's "Marilyn's" series. Warhol explored themes of mass production, beauty, consumerism, and the notion of fame as a manufactured and transient concept by depicting Monroe's image in this way, and these narratives continue to hold much significance in the current experience of social media images.

By repeating her likeness, Warhol draws attention to the mechanical reproduction and reproducibility of Monroe's image, echoing the mass-produced nature of consumer goods in contemporary society. Warhol's "Marilyns" invites viewers to critically engage with the concepts of beauty, mass media, consumerism, and the construction of identity, raising questions about proliferation, ubiquity, repetition, commodification,

Marilyn Diptych 1962 Andy Warhol 1

and the impact of media representation on our perception of the/ an individual. These are all themes that persist as ongoing discussion in the realm of social media, highlighting the complex dynamics at play in how individuals are perceived and represented in the digital age. With the ease of sharing and disseminating images, social media enables the proliferation of content to an unprecedented extent. This constant flow of content contributes to the sense of ubiquity, where individuals and their representations become ever-present in the online realm, and this has several implications. Firstly, it contributes to the sense of constant exposure, where individuals and their visual representations become ever-present in the online sphere. This constant stream of images can shape our perception of individuals, as we are repeatedly exposed to their curated online personas, experiences, and visual narratives. The repetitive nature of encountering these images can lead to familiarity and a sense of connection or identification with the individuals portrayed.

For example, through their videos, Vloggers often provide glimpses into their personal lives, thoughts, and experiences, creating a perception of intimacy and authenticity. Vloggers often share personal anecdotes, challenges, and triumphs, thereby creating a narrative that viewers can follow and emotionally invest in. This gives the sense that they truly know the vloggers on a personal level (even though the relationship is primarily one-sided). They appear to develop a sense of familiarity and connection that transcends the virtual realm through their videos, evoking emotions, and creating a sense of community. An example of someone who

achieved this strong sense of connection with their audience is Casey Neistat. Casey gained immense popularity on YouTube through his daily vlogs, where he documented his life, creating a fan base of people who felt a deep sense of connection with him. His viewers often expressed how they felt like they were a part of Casey's life and shared in his experiences, forming a virtual bond with him. This sense of familiarity with vloggers like Casey Neistat seems to arise from the perceived transparency and access to their personal lives offered through their videos. Consistent exposure to the vlogger's thoughts, emotions, and daily activities fosters a sense of shared experiences and understanding. As such, the ubiquity of social media images blurs the boundaries between private and public spaces. Personal moments and intimate experiences are often shared on social media platforms, making them accessible to a vast audience. This applies not only to those who Vlog, but all users have the potential to share this abundance of information, thoughts, and images.

It could be argued that many of these pictures specifically seem to be encouraging people to make the average, everydayness of their existence apparent,[183] and this constant flood of communication can be seen as excessive and lacking in restraint. For example, such relentless exposure and accessibility can be said to align with Baudrillard's notion of obscenity, where the boundaries between what should be hidden or kept private are erased, and everything becomes a spectacle for consumption. He argued that in a hyperreal world, where signs and simulations dominate, there is a constant bombardment of images and information that can lead to a sense of overexposure and desensitisation. Within this framework, discussions of obscenity emerge as a consequence of the overwhelming presence and proliferation of images in the media landscape.

Ubiquity and Obscenity

In contrast to the Platonist metaphysical ideal of the form of Beauty as transcendent, and almost inaccessible, we are presented with the notion of ubiquitous beauty on social media. It is therefore important to consider the potential this has to tip towards Baudrillard's description of obscenity as the extreme reality[184], where everything is exposed, and nothing is concealed. In line with this perspective, social media can be seen as potentially obscene due to its excessive and relentless nature. Posting images of everything on line or running a live stream of your day is considered by some as oversharing, yet it blurs the line between banality and obscenity, especially as it is possible to argue that there is an absence of meaningful content and a focus on self-presentation and staging rather than genuine connection. "[It] does not help us to deal with our deep inner needs or halt the inexorable trend towards ephemerality and disposability that characterise consumption (Pattinson 2007). However, it does not have to be viewed like that, as Sontag, for example, argues against the idea that the revelation of everything leads to obscenity. In contrast to Baudrillard's view, her perspective suggests a more nuanced understanding of obscenity as a complete interplay of various factors beyond mere revelation ("The Pornographic Imagination"[185]). She suggests that obscenity is not solely about the exposure or revelation of content but lies in the intent and context of the representation. She highlights that the

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[183] There has been work done on social media as a phenomenon in itself "becoming ordinary" and ubiquitous (Marvin, 1988), (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Karnowski, 2013), with studies undertaken demonstrating that SNS content is ordinary more often than not.

[184] This is discussed more fully in (Baudrillard, Ecstasy of Communication, 1988)

[185] (Sontag, The Pornographic Imagination, 1962)

meaning and impact of a work depend on how it is presented, received, and understood within a cultural and social framework. Therefore, Sontag argues that the designation of obscenity should not be solely based on the degree of revelation but should consider the underlying motives and effects on individuals and society. Similarly, on social media, the interpretation and intention of content can vary widely among users, with different individuals perceiving the same post differently based on their personal beliefs, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Understanding this diversity in reception helps to recognise this multiplicity of meanings.

Consumption and production

While social media images have the potential to provoke thought and reflection, their ubiquity and the nature of the platforms on which they are shared often prioritise (or invite) consumption over depth or contemplation. The perceived mystery and ethereal quality to which beauty has been philosophically ascribed is impacted by its ubiquitous presentation, and it is possible to argue that on social media, beauty appears to have become dominated by narratives of both consumption and possession (significant themes also present in Warhol's Marilyn's). If, as seems to be the case for some, individuals' images (and identities) are turned into marketable assets in order to attract consumers, the drive for likes, followers, and validation can lead to the commodification of one's self-presentation for social and economic gain. This commodification can distort our perception of individuals as their online presence becomes shaped by market forces and strategic self-presentation. Following this line of argument, there is a danger that social media approaches beauty in a gluttonous way, with it being presented as something to be devoured rather than savoured (this links back to the metaphor used earlier regarding image as a frozen ready meal).

However, the concepts of "devouring beauty" and "possessing beauty" are related in the sense that they both involve a relationship of ownership or control over beauty, but they approach this relationship from different perspectives. "Devouring beauty" typically refers to an attitude where beauty is seen as something to be consumed or used for personal gratification. It can be associated with a desire for immediate pleasure without deeper appreciation or understanding. In this context, beauty is treated as a commodity to be consumed and discarded, leading to a superficial engagement with aesthetic experiences. "Possessing beauty" on the other hand, relates to the idea of ownership or possession of beauty, implying a desire to have control or dominance over beauty, whether it be through physical objects, individuals, or even certain ideals of beauty. The emphasis here is on ownership, and this notion is discussed by Crispin Sartwell (Sartwell, Six Names of Beauty , 2004) and Alexander Nehamas (Nehamas, 2007). They suggest that in more recent times we have shifted the sensory correlate of beauty away from pleasure and toward love or longing (which are not always completely joyful experiences). Sartwell defines beauty as "the object of longing" and characterises longing as intense and unfulfilled desire, referring to it as a fundamental condition of a finite being in time, one where we are always in the process of losing whatever we have and are thus irremediably in a state of longing. "I think of beauty as the emblem of what we lack, the mark of an art that speaks to our desire…" (Nehamas 2007, 77). Therefore, while both devouring and possessing beauty involve a certain relationship with beauty, they represent different attitudes and approaches. "Devouring beauty" focuses on immediate consumption and gratification, often lacking depth or contemplation, while "possessing beauty" could be positioned differently. "Beautiful things don't stand aloof but

direct our attention and our desire to everything else we must learn or acquire in order to understand and possess, and they quicken the sense of life, giving it new shape and direction" (Nehamas 2007, 77). Beauty can therefore be seen to be requiring a response. This refers back to Sartwell's argument referred to previously, regarding the image of a beautiful sunset. In this, people are not only reporting their own state but simultaneously turning towards and locating themselves in the world. The image is shared with the subject and object, both juxtaposed and connected, and Roger Scruton (Scruton, 2009), when talking about beauty, also questions the distinction between the subjective and objective (like Nehamas 2007 and Sartwell 2004). He likens experiencing beauty to receiving a kiss. Kissing someone you love is more than just putting one body part on another; but a move from one self towards another (Scruton 2009, 48). In this context, beauty becomes more than a simple aesthetic experience; it becomes a transcendent moment that bridges the gap between subjectivity and objectivity, intertwining the perceiver's emotions and the perceived object's qualities in a profound way (Scruton, 2009, p. 48).

Therefore, although both notions of consumption and possession can be seen as reflections of consumerist and superficial tendencies within society, where beauty is often reduced to a commodity or a means for personal gain rather than being appreciated for its intrinsic value or deeper significance, it is also possible to see its presentation on social media as something that also simultaneously requires something from us in a relational and contemplative way. Once again, the discordance of the seemingly conflicting narratives being held together in one space on social media can be seen. Beauty is held together with the banal and the potentially obscene, simultaneously presenting us with a narrative of superficial, gluttonous, objective consumption and yet also akin to the relational and contemplative action of a kiss.

This notion of conflicting yet parallel truth can be seen again and again in relation to beauty and image on social media.

Conflicting yet parallel truths

There appear to be many parallel yet seemingly conflicting interpretations / narratives regarding the meaning of images posted in social media. On the one hand, there is a superficial approach, in which the image contains no hidden depths, the focus is entirely on the aesthetic or surface level presentation. It is suggested that we move from one picture to the next and from there to ever new and forever recycled pictures. Depictions of beauty are reached for, observed multiple times in multiple guises, then cast aside and dispensed with. We inhabit them, in effect trying them on for size only to dispose of them shortly afterwards, like Fast Fashion. For example, this can be seen on TikTok, with its constant tsunami of content. The oceanic flood of images are not intended to stick, but simply to wash over the viewer, be briefly interacted with, and then dispensed. Content producers know their interactions will be fleeting. Contemporary society in this guise appears unconcerned with a depth of memory or engagement with images. However, on the other, for some there does appear to be a subtext or meaning. The person posting will frequently intend for an image to serve as a sign of something deeper. As I have talked about in the previous section on truth the subtext of the image itself, or the curation of the image in the context of others that have been posted, bring much meaning to an image. However, once an image appears on social media then these two understandings often seem to co-exist as parallel truths, intertwined but not ever quite meeting, with one not needing to cancel the other out.

In a similar vein, it should be noted that adolescents are also frequently told to be careful what they post because images can last forever on the internet, and they will have no control over where they are shared once they are posted. Yet equally, teenagers also experience things just 'disappearing' in a technological environment. Whether that is in the form of homework that did not save properly, a forgotten password, an Instagram account being locked or even deleted by Facebook, or Posts being taken down, or the intended impermanence of ephemeral content on Snapchat. As much as people back up things or download them in an attempt to keep them, there is always the possibility, indeed the (sad) expectation, that they will disappear one day. Not stolen, simply gone. We exist holding these opposing truths in our minds that things last forever but do not really, and that we possess digital things but also do not really. A narrative of ephemeral-permanence exists in relation to the digital elements of our lives, a little like the Duck-Rabbit[186], presenting users with conflicting truths, held up next to one another, that we toggle between[187], once again one truth need not cancel the other out.

An Aesthetic of Aspiration

Such ambiguous intentions are evident in the (re)presentation of beautiful bodies on social media. Image has become the default way people describe themselves on social media. Increasingly, people have shaped their identities around their image. Images considered to be beautiful will often be posted as though part of a stream of consciousness, posed as if they have involved no reflective thought at all, but equally, they may have been posted after many hours of anguish and retake. Yet on other platforms, the process of posting is more important than what is posted. People toggle between the various approaches.

However, as mentioned above, often what is posted is closer to an imaginary best-self. An airbrushed, or digitally augmented, more beautiful version. When coupled with the way morality, happiness, and a flourishing life have long been depicted in film via beauty (slim, traditional westernised version of attractive, Disney Princesses vs. the fat, wart covered,

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[186] An ambiguous figure in which the brain switches between seeing a rabbit and a duck. The duck-rabbit was "originally noted" by American psychologist Joseph Jastrow with the earliest known version being an unattributed drawing from the 23 October 1892 issue of a German magazine called Fliegende Blatter.
The image was made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein who included it in Philosophical Investigations.

[187] This is reminiscent of that which is brought to attention in John Berger's 1972 BBC series Ways of Seeing. The series sees Berger talk about the way we look at art, and why it matters. He presents the idea that the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled and the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. Every image embodies a way of seeing. "This is how this picture looks, but it doesn't have to be. This is the government we have, but it doesn't have to be. This is the way we use technology, but it doesn't have to be" (Tom Overton talking on Episode 3 of BBC podcast "Viewfinders: Ways of Seeing at 50 - A Self Portrait by John Berger). Each moment captures another, an alternative for people to toggle between.

wicked witches, spring to mind) it is not a huge leap to see a similar association becoming apparent in a more day-to-day context. Therefore, in the image-based culture of social media, beauty seems to have become a moral imperative, with the notion of the good life seeming to be centred on physical representation. In some ways, elevated beauty to a moral pedestal, thereby distorting the perception of a good life to mean a beautiful life. Adhering to beauty ideals is not only desirable but also indicative of one's virtue and discipline, and bodies have become representative of an entire self. In short, a better body is a better self, with the perfect body positioned as obtainable if one works hard enough at it. However, it is important,

to recognise that the beauty of such bodies lies, not in their being copies of actual bodies, but rather in their being ideals, purified of contingent finitude[188].

In many ways, the focus is now frequently upon an individual as object rather than as subject situated in relation to the world. As such, beauty has developed a formula, or a desired ubiquity. There is a look that is to be replicated[189] – be that fake tan, eyelashes, or well-toned abs, and a mullet haircut. In such an understanding it is reduced to an object thereby, making it achievable and, when applied to self-image, perfectible.[190] We seek to present the ideal or perceived norm in our objectified version and require 'work' to move closer to this. Although there has

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[188] In order to consider how ideals are embroiled in an understanding of social media as a technology of the self, especially in relation to beauty, it is worth referencing the Platonic ideals. Plato argued that there were two worlds, the physical world and a world of "forms". These forms were non-physical essences, or archetypes, and the physical world is made up of imitations or examples of these. Plato locates beauty itself in the realm of the Forms, and the beauty of particular objects in their participation in the Form. Therefore, beauty itself is objective and thus, not in the eye of the beholder or that of subjective experience, beauty exists beyond our senses, and exists regardless of whether anyone is around to sense it. Plato saw the changing physical world as a poor, decaying copy of a perfect, rational, eternal, and changeless original. The beauty of a flower, or a sunset, a piece of music or a love affair, is an imperfect copy of Beauty Itself. In this world of changing appearances, while you might catch a glimpse of that ravishing perfection, it will always fade. It is just a pointer to the perfect beauty of the eternal. This said, it is also important to note that an understanding of beauty as an external conception, based upon appearance has not always been the norm. Plato, for example, also talks of beauty as an internal state, connected to the soul and the ideals of truth and love. Plato's discussions of beauty in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* connects beauty to love and desire. As discussed in the section above, love is portrayed as an absence that seeks its own fulfilment in beauty. Love is therefore always in a state of lack and hence of desire: the desire to possess the beautiful[188]. The *Symposium* particularly expresses an aspiration toward beauty as perfect unity. "Beauty … makes of man a whole, complete in himself" (Symposium 1795, 59–60, 86).

189 The "Love Island look" is one such example, this refers to a specific aesthetic popularized by the reality TV show "Love Island." Contestants on the show often embody this style, which includes tanned and toned bodies achieved through workouts and sunbathing. Female contestants wear glamorous makeup with bold contouring, false lashes, and dramatic eye makeup, enhancing their facial features for the cameras. The Love Island look has not only gained popularity among viewers but also on social media platforms, where fans and influencers seek to emulate the style.

[190] Humphreys (Qualified self) uses Joshua Meyrowitz's example of a wedding home video to demonstrate that we see things in our media traces that we do not (and cannot) see in real time, this results in a focus upon the object-ness of people. "We might go to a wedding and experience it as a beautiful and lovely event. However, when we see the home video, of it we see sweaty people, awkward dancing, people talking with food in their mouths, and the inevitable drunk relative" (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Karnowski, 2013)

always been a sense in which bodies have been an extension of fashion, having particular styles or shapes move in and out of popularity, social media has encouraged people to view themselves and others through a lens of improvement, essentially becoming a technology of the self[191] (filters play an important role in this, as was seen in the chapter on Truth). However, although this initially sits well with the aesthetic or surface level of understanding what might be going on in an image posted. The parallel yet opposed truths sit side by side, as it is also the case that working on oneself has come to be perceived as linked to a moral dimension, reflective of one's values, to the extent that those who were overweight, had poor dental work, or chose not to wear make-up, were positioned as suggesting to the world that they had something lacking in their character. In some ways, people are expected to work on themselves to create better versions of themselves. This 'better version' largely came to be centred on the external self[192]. Kardashian's bodies became hyper augmented and there was a 76% global rise in Brazilian buttlift surgery as women's bodies especially came to be consumerised. Fillers, Botox, and liposuction are becoming more popular, with many non-invasive procedures available on the high street. Invasive procedures, such as a breast augmentation or rhinoplasty, have become normalised, possibly through the popularity of reality TV. Self seems to be formed increasingly for external approval and in line with external body fashion. Expression of self extends beyond a look created through a certain clothing line but to the very makeup of bodies.

Often, this visible self is simultaneously evaluated and encouraged via online presence, with self- "worth" taking on a new context and "likes" adding value. Economies of visibility are coming to form a large part of the context in which people are constructing their identities; they are a " process of corporeal inscription [...a] wholly visible affair" (Weigman, 1995, p. 8) and as a result, there is a danger that selves become narrative commodities, understood without nuance. Decisions are made as 'either / or' choices. The Disney Film *Bad Hair Day* (2015) picks up upon this notion of the economy of visibility and sees the lead, Ashley, running polls on every aspect of her life as a matter of course. She builds websites that mean people vote on every decision she is faced with, asking for audience feedback in order to create a better version of herself. She has polls on her hairstyle, her outfits, her shoes, who she should date, and which college she should attend. The film makes it clear that Ashley does all of this in the quest to become 'perfect'. Perfect in this instance is clearly the most marketable version of herself, one entirely formed from the way other people want her to be.

Ashley: I build these websites, that are little online surveys that people weigh in on my decisions.
Liz: Oh cuz heaven forbid you get the wrong sunglasses...?
Ashley: Hey, its marketing 101. I mean, these little choices are important, people are either going to accept you or reject you based on first impressions.
Liz: or you could just be yourself and not really care what other people think.
(*Bad Hair Day* 27:46)

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[191] Media scholars like Jill Walker Rettberg (Walker Rettberg, 2014) have long argued that social media are kinds of technologies of the self, enabling us to view ourselves so that we might "improve" ourselves towards normative expectations or ideals.

[192] while at the same time somewhat ironically society fixated upon a narrative of "authenticity" and "reality".

As much as *Bad Hair Day* is a teen movie with a predictable story line, it seems to reflect something of a broader culture. Twenty years before the film, there were those referring to online communities as "identity workshops" (Bruckman 1992, cited in Roberts and Parks 2001 p. 268) where people were constructing and reconstructing various versions of themselves, in order to reach a 'better' version. McGee referred to the notion of self-improvement as a "design studio for reinventing one's most marketable self" (McGee, 2005, p. 22). The film, *Bad Hair Day*, seems to have picked up on this aspect of the way the internet had given people a huge amount of freedom for experimenting and testing various aspects of their identity. Ashley, much like many other teenagers, tended to accentuate those aspects of herself that corresponded to the norms and ideals of the group she wished to belong to. Online impression management became formulated as an ever-present worry of needing to perform appropriately, as well as the simultaneous need to be constantly evaluated as acceptable, or simply ok, in the context of her peers. Her performances would be modified according to the feedback, in the form of likes, comments, and reshares. Constantly updated comments encouraged others to invest in Ashley's body/image and turn her into the most marketable version of herself.

Ashley seeks to reconstruct and perfect herself in line with the wishes of others, believing it will please them and therefore make her popular. However, although the others co-create Ashley, in both positive and negative ways, the film somewhat predictably sees Ashley coming to the realisation that it is not possible to be perfect and please everybody all of the time. Rather than switching between her real / ideal / ought identity in quick succession in an attempt to convey an impression to others, she learns to begin to let go of her ought self and lives happily ever after (because it was written by Disney!).

It is worth noting that the opinions of others have always been an important aspect of adolescence, and it is not technology specific, however, these opinions seem to become more concrete and visible in the case of online commenting. Rather than being restricted to playground cat calls, or whispers, this visibility seems to elevate the role, and to an extent the credibility, of the other. For example, in the film *Bad Hair Day,* the others' views of Ashley were directly translated into who Ashley felt she was. Their thoughts and opinions directly impacted upon her perceived self-knowledge. Although the ideas that others hold are often mostly based on stereotype, categorisation, and assumption, they can, and do, end up being accepted by an individual, becoming an integral part of self-concept and understanding. It is almost as if it is a short cut version of reification – an app version, if you will. [193] For example, in 2010, a YouTube video posted by sgal901 entitled "Am I pretty or ugly" attracted the attention of the US National media. It was posted by a 12-year-old girl who "just wanted to make a random video to ask if I am ugly or not?", the video received over 7 million views and

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[193] Recognising the place of images in creating the ideals which women strive for as symbols of the selves they want to be, rather than realistic images, is crucial to understanding the demands of beauty. If a woman has adopted beauty as her moral framework and judges herself morally with regard to how well she succeeds or fails in beauty then knowing that beauty ideals are unreal and unattainable does nothing to reduce the wish to attain such ideals. It is this emotional commitment and investment in the ideal (manifested in the extent to which we judge ourselves and others by it) that helps to explain why the images which present us with instances of the perfect ideal do not lose their power simply because we know they are digitally retouched. Our imaginings of our perfect – or improved or better or good enough – self, the end point of the beauty ideal to which we are striving, has very little to do with what is actually achievable or likely to be achieved.

generated thousands of comments.[194] There was clearly an expectation that she would receive a definitive, truthful answer to her question. Her own opinion of her looks did not feature, others would get the final say. This "Am I pretty or ugly?" video formed part of what was soon to be dubbed a new genre of social media post, featuring predominantly white, teen or tween girls, speaking into a webcam, displaying photos of themselves, and requesting audience feedback to the question "Am I pretty or ugly?" (Banet-Weiser, 2014, p. 84). Some comments are affirmative and encouraging to the video author, others are deeply critical. These video authors do not seem to have introspective self-searching at the forefront of their minds. The sense of who, and how, they should be is placed in the hands of others. It is clear the other plays an important role in self formation.

The "Am I pretty or ugly" videos reminded me of an exhibition entitled "Mary's Room" that I attended at a school I was working at.

Mary's Room

Created by a 6th form artist, Mary's Room' was an interactive art installation designed to challenge the position of social media amongst young people[195]. Central to the exhibition was the candle lit shrine to the iPhone.

"Symbolic of the pinnacle of mobile technology the iPhone is held up on its own candle lit shrine to be worshipped and praised as the best conduit for social media expression"
(Alex Cove)

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[194] The existence of these videos causes moral outrage, and they are frequently cited as a cultural ill, symbolic of young girls dwindling self-esteem. The idea that the girls should be so dependent on others to dictate who they are, or to formulate such a large part of their sense of self, does not sit easily. On the other hand, many frame the debate around self-esteem issues being a normal part of adolescence. "This is just an extreme version of something that is very normal…. Another piece of that's normal is impulsivity. Give them a medium that is so accessible and so potent, and you get the problem that we're seeing" (cited in Banet-Weiser, 2014, p. 85). Either way, the role of the other, at the expense of the individual, seems to be perceived as a problem. And yet, as Banet-Weiser points out, this creates a false dichotomy and distracts from broader, more important issues around gender, performance, presentation, and the visibility economy. "Casting these videos as expressions of self-esteem positions them as discrete, individual expressions and problems of girls, in a context in which self-esteem is understood as a normal problem of all girls, part of adolescent development. However, the move to characterise these videos as expressions of the so-called problem of self-esteem among young girls in the US encourages a distraction from other critical structural factors" (Banet-Weiser, 2014, p. 85)

[195] **https://www.cheltenhamcollege.org/news/2018-09-14/Exhibition-challenges-social-media-use-amongst-Generation-Z**

The installation was spread over two floors, with every bit of wall space being filled with Instagram pictures and social media postings. The walls were filled with screenshots of "Mary's" social media, and there were images of "Mary" pasted all over the walls like wallpaper – her face staring down at fairly ubiquitous elements of a teenage bedroom. However, upon closer inspection the seemingly safe and secure aspects such as the bed or the cuddly toys hid an edge or offered up something more complicated with regards to teenage existence. For example, the soft toys seemed to have a sexualised relationship, the bathroom mirror was shattered, and under the bed were stacked up boxes of pills for self-confidence. At the top of the bathroom mirror was a CCTV camera and the bathroom creams had the titles "Self Self Self Wash", "Confidence", "Self Esteem" and so on. The interactive nature of this exhibition also meant that people were invited to comment and write the sort of things that they thought when they got up in the morning directly on the shattered glass of the mirror. Comments included "Wear more Makeup" and "you are ugly".

One of things that was brought to the fore in this exhibition was the gap between authentic engagement with life for "Mary" and how it was actually experienced. For example, certain aspects of teenage existence were being either played out by toys, depicted in images, or artificially created through the application of creams or taking of pills.

Although the work builds upon previous pieces created by Alex Cove involving 'Mary" over a number of years, it is not without irony that this exhibition is entitled "Mary's Room" as Mary's Room is a well-known philosophical thought experiment (Jackson, 1982). In this, "Mary" lives her entire life in a room devoid of colour—she has never directly experienced colour in her entire life, though she is capable of it. Through black-and-white books and other media, she is educated on neuroscience to the point where she becomes an expert on the subject. Mary learns everything there is to know about the perception of colour in the brain, as well as the physical facts about how light works in order to create the different colour

wavelengths. It can be said that Mary is aware of all physical facts about colour and colour perception. After Mary's studies on colour perception in the brain are complete, she exits the room and experiences, for the very first time, direct colour perception. She sees the colour red for the very first time, and learns something new about it — namely, *what red looks like*.

Arguably, there are many parallels with this thought experiment and life online; and it is this, (as well as making a negative comment on social media as a whole) that the exhibition highlights. It is possible to experience much via social media without having a direct, personal engagement as such. For example, it is possible to feel as if one is in a close relationship with someone else without having ever met them. As seen above, the position of the lens is such that one can be led to believe that one has experienced something, even though at best this is vicariously, and at worst it is no more than voyeurism. By studying the social media accounts of others, it is possible to feel as if one has a level of knowledge or intimacy with that person, as if you have been a part of their life in some way, and yet in many ways, this is only an intellectual understanding of things rather than a real relationship, you cannot have experienced the "colour: of their existence, however hard they will have tried to create an atmosphere around themselves.

Following on from this it also seems entirely possible that this does not only apply to other people, but also for an individual to feel as if they "know thyself" from only having encountered a social media, closed environment version of themselves (akin to the back and white room of Mary's early existence). As seen in the previous chapter, using Fitbits, data tracking devices can lead one to believe that one has a good handle on the quantified self, but this is potentially comparable to the point at which Mary has excellent knowledge about colour without ever having experienced it firsthand. Presenting an atmosphere of oneself is offering up something adjacent to who you are, potentially even providing what exam boards might refer to as indicative content, but it does not mean that it can provide self-knowledge. Likewise, introspection or intellectual thinking about one's *true* self does not necessarily lead to self-discovery. *I think therefore I am* may indicate existence, but it does not mean that one knows <u>who</u> one actually is. One of the many things that this exhibition aimed to highlight is that the amount of content produced about oneself online via social media does not really tell anyone anything about the reality of that person, not even the person themselves.

The exhibition brings to mind the Mona Lisa image from Unflattening by Nick Sousanis, once again. Its collection of partial perceptions being placed together to form an image serve knowledge in the same way as Mary's Room. The exhibition also suggested that social media images serve as "An incomplete picture riddled with gaps" (Sousanis 2015). It seems that external influences intricately shape the way we engage and interpret both ourselves and the world around us through the medium of social media. Just as the Sousanis graphic seemed to suggest that in order to gain a better perspective we need to encounter "the world outside ourselves" (Sousanis, 2015), the Mary's Room exhibition is pointing to the same.

This returns us to the delicate threads of a spider's web mentioned at the start. "Spiders make their webs, which are nearly invisible until the dew drops fall on them. They are made with threads stronger than steel and take their shape from the surrounding circumstances and the spider herself (Griffiths, 2003, p. 2)
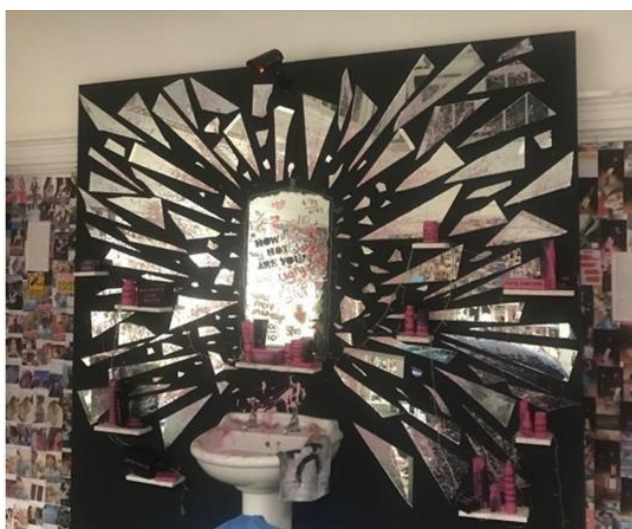
It is by serving as a container for conflicting truths, social media can simultaneously shatter individuals, turn them invisible, isolate them, and make them unknowable, while at the same time providing them with a means to be coherent, show up in the world, relational, and knowable albeit as a fleeting reality. There is a delicate balance of vulnerability and empowerment, self-awareness and self-opacity, beauty and obscenity, belonging and isolation, held within each posting.

What now?

It is time to tie together some of the threads that have been spun. As the themes of Truth, Love, and Beauty have demonstrated, "each node is connected to any other" (Deleuze, 1987) and aspects have connected to one another, with ideas resurfacing in multiple sections. As stated at the start this thesis is not posing the question "how should one come to know oneself?" in an attempt to come to a definitive answer, but instead is more interested in considering the attempts that are made as we reach to try and "know thyself" in a world dominated by social media. For it is through endeavouring to come to know a thing that we learn the most. The final section will therefore return to the other Sousanis image I shared at the start as a means to draw everything together.
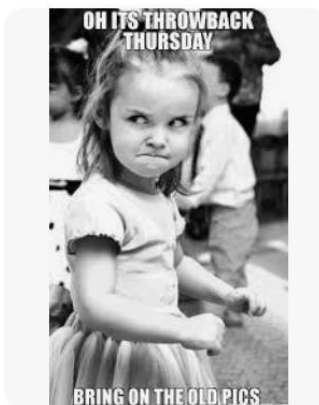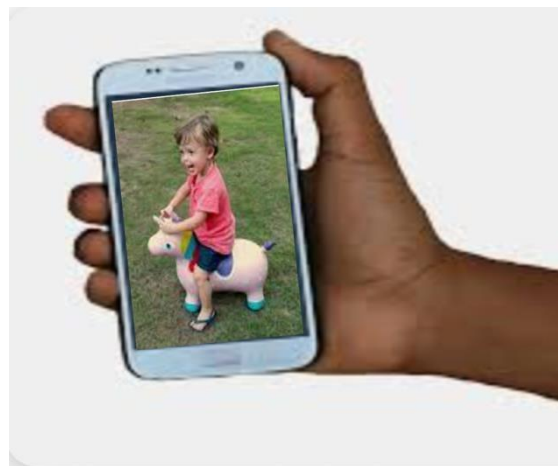
Summary of Beauty

PART THREE

Part Three: KnowThyself@selfiegeneration

#TBT (Throw Back Thesis): A review of the ground covered

As stated at the outset, this thesis has not attempted to answer the question, "How should one come to know oneself?" but has instead been more interested in considering the attempts that are made to "know thyself" in a world dominated by social media. A shift in our understanding of the questions regarding self-knowledge might be required as a result. I have put forward the idea that we are reaching for an answer that is closer to ontology (the study of being and existence) rather than epistemology (how we know things)[196]. The subject matter has "compel[ed] us to travel over a wide field of thought, [and] criss-cross in every direction" (Wittgenstein PI Preface). Part One was largely descriptive: revealing some of the territory regarding the concept of self and the notion of self-knowledge. It drew out themes of introspection and extrospection as a way to develop self-knowledge, before

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[196] This is very much in line with the work of Victor Krebs and Richard Frankel (Frankel & Krebs , 2021, p. 270/271).

moving beyond epistemology to explore the way emotion and experience impact upon knowing. Emphasis was placed upon the experience of coming to know, highlighting the relationship between the knower and what is known, and as a result, a relational way of knowing was settled upon suggesting that one could say that the emotional connection with the idea that we know who we are functions as a touchstone, rather than as a sense in which one possesses self-knowledge. Part Two, built upon this and further developed some of these themes, arranging itself, with a nod to Plato's Forms, under the headings of Truth, Love, and Beauty. Having focussed upon attempts to pin "me" down in an evidential, documentable form, then moving on to consider something more akin to examples of "me" that hint at the Platonic Form of "Me", and finally considering the attempts to know our aspirational selves from the exemplars we post, this thesis advocated for a broader definition of "real" on social media. Acknowledging the fluidity between reality, virtuality, and fiction in shaping human self-expression, it suggested that social media is frequently used as a playground for role play, and storytelling. "As if" scenarios were put forward, often serving to shape self-identity and help users to navigate the blend between reality and make-believe, and the real and virtually real aspects of their online actions.

The importance of a relational aspect within self-knowing is reiterated in both the chapters on Love and Beauty. The suggestion that we often show up to ourselves and others as "An incomplete picture riddled with gaps" (in the words of Sousanis, 2015) was put forward, suggesting that in order to gain a better perspective of who we might be, we need "to encounter "the world outside ourselves" (Sousanis, 2015) and view the detailed introspective moments of our self-image in such a way that offers a broader extrospective, contextual view. However, the notion of an ever shifting, never settled, kaleidoscopic experience of self-knowledge, was emphasised by paying attention to the way parallel yet seemingly incompatible truths appear to sit next to each other quite happily on social media. The duck--rabbit puzzle-picture was used to highlight the way simultaneous and conflicting truths can be held within the context of social media, with users toggling rapidly between multiple understandings and interpretations, sometimes so rapidly they become blurred. The very unsteadiness of social media was offered up as its appeal, precisely because nothing is ever spelled out beyond doubt.

The thesis focuses its attention upon the way social media is used as people reach for self-knowledge, as opposed to looking at what such digital platforms may or may not do. This focus, rather than consideration of direct impact, is akin to John Berger's BBC series from 1972, "Ways of Seeing". In this series, Berger explores how we perceive and interpret art, highlighting the dynamic relationship between what we see and what we know or believe. He emphasises that our understanding of images is influenced by our existing knowledge and perspectives. Each image encapsulates a particular way of seeing, but Berger suggests that these perspectives are not fixed; they can be challenged and altered. For instance, an image may present a certain reality, but it does not have to be the only interpretation. Similarly, the way we use technology or engage with social media can be subject to change and re-evaluation. Both underscore the malleable nature of perception and understanding and highlight that by acknowledging that what we see is not the only way to perceive things, we open ourselves to different perspectives and possibilities. Just as Berger invites us to question the representations in art, this thesis has considered social media in the same way: it may look this way or that, it may appear to do this or that… but it doesn't have to". We can

question the narratives presented on social media and consider the multiplicity of meanings they may hold. "This is how this picture looks, but it doesn't have to be. This is the government we have, but it doesn't have to be. This is the way we use technology, but it doesn't have to be".[197]

This reflection can lead to a deeper understanding of social media's impact on our lives and how we can navigate this ever-changing landscape in a more critical and informed manner. Throughout this work, I have reiterated the discordance or juxtaposition in evidence when considering image on social media. This sense of a splintered unity and part-to-whole relationship has featured heavily throughout. There has been a deliberate crashing up of, yet connecting with, the 'minutiae' of social media (the silly and the humorous) and the 'immense' of human existence (relationality and being confronted with one's own self) and examining online/offline blurring, interaction, disintegration, and reintegration, has facilitated a deeper understanding of the ways social media is used as a space for self-articulation, and how it influences our understanding of the question "who am I?". Afterall, It is not only high theory that elucidates the life experience, but 'trash' culture that reveals much about that which is reflected, accentuated, and experienced within the webs of our online and offline existence. For, while high theory offered profound insight, the "trash culture" of social media, with its Gifs, memes, and apparent pointlessness, provides a window into the collective imagination and cultural norms of society. Drawing on the ways in which people negotiate their identity and form a self-concept, philosophical and educational theory offered conceptual tools throughout the thesis to analyse the ways in which humans reach to know themselves, however trash/ popular culture provided further insight into the prevailing social norms and expectations that shape self-identity and self-presentation. Integrating both in this thesis has provided space to observe the interplay between the abstract and theoretical concepts of identity and then everyday expressions of what it means to be an "I" in the digital realm.

However, the structure of my work not only developed a clash between grand classical philosophy with trash culture, but also played upon the juxtaposition of a vast, sprawling, high tech, World Wide Web connected social media, with the diminutive, containing, natural web of the spider, encouraging a further sense of mismatch between metaphors drawn from nature and the technological world. Therefore, in this final section I will attempt to weave all of the thinking more tightly together.

"What meaning does the Delphic Injunction to Know thyself have in an age dominated by social media?"

In an age dominated by social media, the Delphic Injunction to "Know thyself" takes on new dimensions, intertwining with the multifaceted nature of self-representation on digital platforms. It is my contention that these new possibilities of expression make a small but significant alteration of the question that was posed by the Greeks.

Our lives are now lived through social media, for many there is no real separation between online and offline life. However, this is in contrast to many of the traditional narratives that have informed upon our existence, as these have largely revolved around the notion of the

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[197] Tom Overton talking on Episode 3 of BBC podcast "Viewfinders: Ways of Seeing at 50.

isolated human being separating themselves from the world in order to self-search. For example, Socrates is often portrayed as someone who would withdraw and spend time alone for introspection and contemplation, taking time away from social interactions to engage in deep thought and introspection. Likewise, the Abrahamic faiths all have significant moments in which key people spend time alone, e.g.; according to Islamic tradition, Muhammad (PBUH), spent a significant period of time in solitude and contemplation in the desert before receiving his first revelation from Allah through the angel Gabriel (Surah 96); Jesus' forty days alone in the desert immediately following his baptism which is seen as a period of deep spiritual reflection, self-discipline, and resistance to temptation (Matthew 4: 1-14); Moses spends forty days in solitude and prayer at the top of Mount Sinai before receiving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 24:18). There are many non-religious examples too with many creative individuals seeking solitude to enhance their artistic pursuits e.g., Marcel Proust, was known for his deep exploration of solitude and introspection in his literary works, particularly in *In Search of Lost Time* (Proust & Sturrock, 2003). Solitude, both as a physical state and as a psychological experience, plays a significant role in Proust's writing, reflecting his own personal struggles and philosophical inquiries. Henry David Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond is another example, his book recounts the two years he spent seeking solitude and introspection, living in a secluded cabin contemplating nature, and the essence of life *Walden* (Thoreau, 2016).

Yet, the wilderness does not exist anymore and the opportunities for solitude are vastly reduced. So the command to Know Thyself has become rearticulated in an outwards facing facing: our lives are endlessly described, if not by us then by those around us. Being tracked and charted is the very element of our existence and we are compelled to participate. Even if someone actively chooses not to have their own social media account their friends and relatives more than likely will. A "them shaped hole" will exist in the online world, whether they like it or not, and they will be trackable and traceable in much the same way as those around them. Potentially they will show up in negative, evident from their absences or inadvertent data leaks. One example of this, reported in 2018, was the location of extremely sensitive information regarding Camp Bastion and other military bases, being inadvertently given away by a subset of Strava users: military personnel on active service. "In locations like Afghanistan, Djibouti and Syria, the users of Strava seem to be almost exclusively foreign military personnel, meaning that bases stand out brightly. In Helmand province, Afghanistan, for instance, the locations of forward operating bases can be clearly seen, glowing white against the black map." (Nathan Ruser, quoted in Hern, 2018). Other less dramatic examples of people having their location or activities shared without their explicit say so can come from something as simple as being in

> Being connected is becoming less and less of a choice, so even if someone wanted to disconnect, they would not realistically be able to, any more than people 20 years ago could stop driving, using the telephone or having a bank account. Too much of modern life is dependent on having near-constant internet access.
> Christopher Owens,
> Professor at Columbus State Community College, Ohio,
> quoted in Pew Research Centre, June 2017
> THE INTERNET OF THINGS CONNECTIVITY BINGE: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

a car or on holiday with someone who has the Snap Maps[198] setting, or Facebook "Check-in's" turned on. [199]

Throughout this thesis, social media can be seen to have served as a container[200] for conflicting truths, one where individuals can simultaneously appear shattered and coherent, invisible and relational. It also provides a space where people can play, experiment, and articulate their self-identity in novel ways, blurring the lines between imagination and reality, individual and society. Social media therefore offers a unique opportunity for self-articulation, allowing individuals to engage in new forms of cultural expression without the need for an extended period of initiation, as required in traditional artistic pursuits like poetry or painting. By embracing social media as we reach for self-knowledge, we acknowledge it offers a way to encounter ourselves, not just as passive spectators but as active participants in shaping and presenting our multifaceted selves. The fluidity of social media can therefore be said to allow for a dynamic representation of the self in a more concrete way than has previously been available to those who exist for the most part as spectators to the world of art or literature. This recognition challenges the notion that social media is trivial or superficial, as it provides a new arena for exploration and reflection.

Social media provides the opportunity to scatter fragments of ourselves on the web like dewdroplets. These take the form of moments, check-ins, or photographs. These digital droplets momentarily reveal the interconnected web of our existence. Social media serves as a digital canvas where individuals can continuously add more dewdrops of existence by photographing their narratives, writing their stories, and creatively playing with their reality. They can also imagine their past, present, and future in ways that align with their current reality and aspirations. In doing so, these digital dewdrops accumulate and make visible the web of their lives, offering the, albeit temporary, suggestion of a sense of unity and coherence. Therefore, the concept of "hyperhybrid" emerges, serving as a means of articulating the multifaceted nature of this new form of expression facilitated by social media.

> "All images are polysemic" (Barthes 1977 p38-9) They are generative and dynamic, entering into relationships with human viewers and interpreters, but they are also slippery and elusive, shimmering before us and within us.
> "They are intriguing, but also frustrate attempts to understand them. They may draw us on, and in, but ultimately they withhold their essense and are hidden as well as manifest. This hiddenness may, in fact, contribute to their power and attraction"
> (Pattinson 2007 p80)

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[198] Snap Maps is a feature on SnapChat that allows others to view your exact location down to the street address as well as calculating how long it will take to drive to the destination.

[199] This is discussed at further in Rainie & Anderson (2017).

[200] Container in this sense is used with reference to the work of Bion (1962). Bions theory of containment originates from the notion that an infant projects distressing or painful emotions onto its mother. The mother, then reacting absorbs and transforms these emotions before returning them to the child in a modified and manageable manner. This enables the child to reclaim and integrate the emotion as their own.

Although the term does not have a commonly accepted definition in any particular field, it suggests a blending and integration of diverse elements. In the context of art, "hyper-hybrid art"[201] tends to defy traditional categorisation by combining various media, styles, and cultural influences to create a new hybrid form of expression. It blurs the boundaries between different media and genres, creating works that are difficult to classify within traditional art categories. . One of the key features of hyper-hybrid art is its use of juxtaposition and contrast. Therefore, the term seems entirely appropriate to describe the selves that are encountered on and through social media.

Artists working in this style often combine elements that are seemingly disparate or even contradictory, such as traditional and modern, East, and West, or high and low culture. These contrasts create a tension that draws the viewer in and invites them to engage with the work in new and unexpected ways. The work below by Petr Dub (Hyper-hybrids, 2013) could be described in such a way as it becomes a metaphor for social media. For example, there are

some very distinct moments that are articulated on the canvas, and yet, as definite as they seem, the more you look at them, the less clear they appear. These could be considered to be like the photo-moments on someone's SNS feed. They might offer what looks like a definite moment in the photo, but the more you think about it the less clear it is to ascertain what that moment is articulating. Furthermore, in the piece above, there seems to be a more coherent, unified, and concrete structure behind the canvas. However, once again, it is not clear what that is, or whether it is indeed only one. The bits that are pushing through suggest something, but they go no further. In the same way, the multiple images that people share on SNS might indicate a coherent message behind the platform, but then again it is entirely possible that they might not. Additionally, the frame or edges of the piece depicted above are not clearly defined and it is not clear where the picture frame starts and ends. In the same way, it can be said that social media and life bleed into one another with apparent boundaries but ones that seem to be transgressed very easily.

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[201] The Hyper hybrids distinguish themselves against painting, yet their content level is based, above all, on the dialogue with the whole "group" of art, not necessarily merely on distinguishing against figurative or abstract painting. The Hyper hybrids structurally integrate their physical frame and acquire an industrial character of "designer products without a clearly determined function" (Dub, 2013)(Dub, P. 2013). They explore the dual nature of representation and abstraction, questioning the objectivity of modern interpretation methods.

What does this mean for self-knowledge?

A shift in our understanding of the questions regarding self-knowledge in the social media world is required (Frankel & Krebs , 2021, p. 270/271). Moving away from an exclusive emphasis on epistemology, where self-knowledge is sought through introspection and reflection, to a focus on ontology, which explores the nature of being and existence, invites us to embrace the complexity and richness of self-expression in the digital age. In the context of a social media world, this shift becomes relevant as virtual experiences offer new and unique ways of understanding and expressing the self. Likewise, a hyper-hybrid approach to self-knowledge represents a dynamic and inclusive approach to understanding oneself and recognises that the virtual realm offers a multifaceted landscape for exploring and understanding the diverse dimensions of the self. Reaching for self-knowledge on social media demonstrates/ reifies a more recent cultural recognition that identity is not fixed or singular, but rather is made up of multiple and intersecting elements that are constantly in flux, because people are complex and multifaceted. This approach acknowledges that self-knowledge is not static or fixed but is constantly evolving as individuals encounter new experiences and information. Hyper-hybrid self-knowledge also emphasises the importance of recognising and engaging with the larger social and cultural contexts that shape individual experiences and identities. It encourages individuals to embrace their complexity and diversity, and to engage with diverse perspectives and experiences in order to deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Therefore, in answer to the question, "What meaning does the Delphic Injunction to Know Thyself have in an age dominated by social media?" it is my contention that it has provided people with unprecedented opportunities for self-expression, with more people articulating and sharing aspects of themselves than ever before. This means we have the potential to engage and articulate who we are to ourselves and others in a hyper hybrid way. Social media, as a hyper hybrid tool can encourage us to explore the multifaceted nature of our digital identities as "each node […] connected to any other" (Deleuze and Guattari cited in the image) and from which a larger, hopefully, coherent narrative emerges. The nodes/representations/ dewdrops of our existence all connect to others and the kaleidoscopic views referred to by Sousanis (in relation to the work of Bakhtin), are apparent through the constantly turning kaleidoscope of our SNS platforms, serving to produce new views of self-knowledge in relation to social media.

Nodes / selfies/ dewdrops of our existence show up in much the same way as panels in Sousanis' depiction of the Mona Lisa. The overall image is deconstructed and set out in such a way that individual elements are expressed out of context and in a logical, although incomprehensible, order. Focussing upon individual aspects make little sense when viewed linearly in this way. However, when each is placed in context, as per the image underneath,

suggesting a view 'in the round', they offer detail and clarity to certain aspects of the whole. However, as Sousanis makes clear, we must still use our imagination to fill in the less clear elements of the image. The same can be argued for social media. We can gain knowledge of the self in some very acute and specific ways – qualified and quantified – from and through social media, but only when we appreciate the importance of creative imagination that unifies our understanding of the image will be in a position that offers the potential for self-knowledge.

However, while the drive to be heard, seen, and understood on social media is strong, it is also important to note that people might not always be fully aware of the significance of their actions or recognise this as a conscious effort to know themselves better. It might be it is "just not that deep". Therefore, the importance and meaning of the Delphic Injunction remains, as it always has, in the journey of reaching to know oneself rather than arriving at what might be described as a destination of self-knowledge. It is through endeavouring to come to know a thing that we learn the most, and by serving as a vehicle for process of expression and reaching for self-understanding social media shows itself to be a valuable tool in the modern articulation of a search for self-knowledge.

Therefore, we ought to fully recognise the fluidity of our representations of self therefore by placing emphasis upon the experience of coming to know and highlighting the relationship between the knower and that which is known, rather than attempting to identify a tangible and consistent truth in relation to self- knowledge, we have a greater chance of navigating/ engaging with our conflicting truths. Ultimately, embracing the opportunities that social media offers to encounter ourselves and reach for self-knowledge opens new pathways to understanding the evolving dynamics of identity in the digital age. However, amidst the opportunities for self-discovery, social media also continues to present challenges, and it remains important to bear the concept of lubricity in mind when thinking about self-knowledge. Often, both knowledge and a sense of self can slip through our fingers when we clutch at it hardest[202] and the way social media blurs boundaries between truth and fiction, and reality and imagination, calls for critical engagement and discernment as a result.

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[202] This was inspired by Emerson - "this evanescence and lubricity of all objects […] lets them slip through our fingers […] when we clutch hardest…" (Emerson, 1909)

The wo/man, the myth, the legend

Every culture is trying to understand itself, and every culture comes up with its own understanding of life, its own customised version of mythology. The customised myth in our age is dominated and, to an extent, reified by social media.

On social media, we can be seen to act as modern-day storytellers, weaving together diverse narratives. Yet, the dichotomy of SNS lies in its capacity to simultaneously fragment and construct identities, presenting a paradoxical landscape where individuals grapple with the complexities of self-presentation and the search for meaningful connections. However, the fragmentation and construction of identities creates a rich narrative tension, much like the conflicting forces often found in mythological tales.

To further understand the notion of selves that we are seeing reified on social media, it is worth therefore, considering a story from Indian mythology. Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, and his brother, the athletic warlord, Kartikeya, decided to go on a race, three times around the world. Kartikeya leapt on his peacock and flew around the continents and the mountains and the oceans. He went around once, he went around twice, he went around thrice. But his brother, Ganesha, simply walked around his parents once, twice, thrice, and said, "I won". "How come?" said Kartikeya. "You went around 'the world.' I went around 'my world", replied Ganesha.

I would argue that the myth of Ganesha and Kartikeya echoes the relationship between "The" world and "My" world, as well as "The" self and "My" self. 'The' world is objective, logical, universal, factual, scientific, and by extension 'The' self is measurable, comparable, logical, and provable, perhaps described using neuroscience and data. 'The world' tells us how the world functions, how the sun rises, how we are born. However, 'My' world is the belief system that we carry and the myth that we live in, yet while 'My' world attempts to suggest why we were born, and asking to be known it continues to remain lubricous. My self is subjective, emotional and personal, coming from perceptions, thoughts, feelings, dreams and 'My' self contextual, relational, and often illogical. Therefore, in just the same way as Ganesha highlights the difference between "The" world and "my world, we ought to be focussing upon myself, yourself, ourselves" and rather than attempting to adopt a linear understanding of The self we need to consider ourselves as networked.

In just the same way as we ourselves have been shown to be non- linear, but instead a networked constellation of selves that change, grow, recede, and shift, I would suggest that there is not one single conclusion to the question of What meaning does the Delphic Injunction to Know thyself have in an age dominated by social media?". I have suggested the Delphic Injunction to "Know thyself" takes on new dimensions in the age dominated by social media, with social media offering new opportunities for self-articulation. It is significant because "[t]he very status of what it means

> The very status of what it means to be a human being will change. Even the most elementary things, like speaking language, emotional sense and so on will be affected. Nothing should be taken for granted and it would be inconsequent to be either optimistic or pessimistic.
>
> (Žižek and Daly as cited in Frankel & Krebs, 2021, p. 12)

to be a human being will change. Even the most elementary things, like speaking language, emotional sense and so on will be affected. Nothing should be taken for granted and it would be inconsequent to be either optimistic or pessimistic. (Žižek and Daly as cited in Frankel & Krebs, 2021, p. 12). I have also put forward that embracing the notion that social media allows us to embrace a form of hyper-hybrid self-knowledge, allowing us a containing space that facilitates our blending and integration of diverse, multiple, constantly evolving, and intersecting elements of self-understanding. Added to this I have reiterated the importance of imaginative engagement and emphasised the role of creative imagination in unifying our understanding of self as we reach for self-knowledge, suggesting that social media serves as a sort of kaleidoscope of self-knowledge - suggesting that our sense of self is not fixed or singular but comprises various elements, perspectives, and experiences that interact and shift, much like the changing patterns in a kaleidoscope.

However, I would also suggest, to echo John Berger once more, that "it may look this way or that, it may appear to do this or that… but it doesn't have to" for it is through endeavouring to come to know a thing that we learn the most.

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Status Update

Writing about the phenomenon of social media in the same way as one writes a thesis has been an interesting exercise. As much as I have tried to retain a linear argument the subject matter has in many instances defied this approach. This same defiance can be seen echoed through organisational choices made

by users of social media, for example, although the earlier SNS platforms, such as Facebook, presented themselves in terms of ordered and sequential timelines, users seem to prefer a non-linear, although organised, approach to their posts. The structure of my thesis can be described similarly – nonlinear, although organised – and this has allowed connections to present themselves in different ways. Although I have tried to lead the reader through, I have come to appreciate that there are points where my style has ended up as reflective of the immersion (or perhaps fusion) we all have with an online world. For example, as stated at the beginning, footnotes seemed to contain arguments, larger points became bracketed, and backstories seemed to foreground themselves. Therefore, in many ways serendipity and osmosis have come to form as much a part of my research method as the more traditional approaches. However, in all chapters of this thesis, the same ideas of collapsing dichotomies, fluidity, and viscosity of self, intermixed, with various aspects resurfacing across multiple sections and it becomes evident that the chapter divisions of Truth, Love, and Beauty, merely serve as windows, with "each node […] connected to any other" (Deleuze and Guattari cited in the image) and from which a larger (hopefully) coherent narrative emerges.
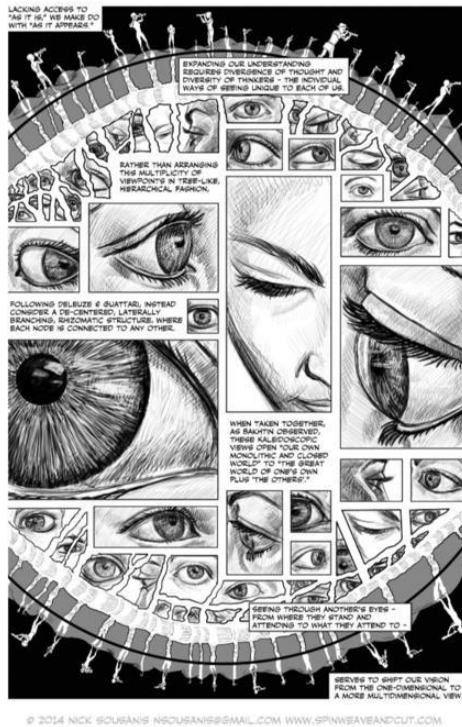
This particular image by Nick Sousanis (2014) has been invaluable, coming to represent the underlying framework for my entire thesis through its structure and interconnected approach. In the same way as people on social media seek to create visually appealing collections of pictures, forming an aesthetic whole without the constraint of a temporal progression, I also desired my thesis to provide a similar experience. Images inform the direction of learning, thereby opening up new ways of organising thinking, and I wanted to allow space for rabbit holes of exploration, deviations, and delightful distractions, rather than solely adhering to logical, linear, and rational arguments.

Summary of Part Three

The Delphic Injunction to "Know thyself" finds meaning in the age of social media by providing unprecedented opportunities for self-expression, with more people sharing aspects of themselves than ever before.

Social media encourages exploration of the multifaceted nature of digital identities, connected like nodes in a kaleidoscope of self-knowledge, enabling a hyper-hybrid way of engaging with self and others.

People may not always be fully aware of the significance of their actions on social media or recognise it as a conscious effort to know themselves better, but the journey of self-discovery remains important.

Embracing the fluidity and lubricity of self-knowledge and emphasising the journey of self-knowledge enhances our ability to understand the evolving dynamics of identity in the digital age.

Social media serves as a valuable tool for modern self-articulation and should not be dismissed as trivial in understanding "Who am I?".

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