Becoming Your “Authentic” Self: How Social Media Influences Youth’s Visual Transitions

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Abstract
By focusing attention on the ways that the media manifold fosters visual practices of presentational work for Generation Z, this article examines the active and relational nature of youth’s engagement with visual self-images during the transition between high school and university. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 35 youth between the ages of 15–22, the analysis examines how the relational contexts of family, school, and peers, alongside the socioeconomic and gendered dimensions of young people’s everyday lives work to shape the different ways that youth engage in visual processes of becoming; in terms of becoming who they are and who they want themselves to be. Findings reveal that although youth’s visual self-performances parallel contemporary theorizations of mediatization, self-identity, and visuality, I argue that more attention should be paid to the nuances of transitional moments among young people, and the precise ways in which they navigate practices of “looking,” which are tightly bound up with heightened expectations around visual performance and projection of the self.

Keywords
authenticity, identity, social media, visual images, youth

Introduction: Generation Z, Parents, and Technology
What sets Gen Z apart from the Millennial Generation is that social media technologies have been an important component of their lives from the time that they were born. Gen Z is defined as anyone born in the year 1997 and later and tends to “be connected yet isolated, savvy but anxious, indulged yet stressed” (Barr, 2016). Digital devices and personal data are often closely integrated with adolescents’ lives. Personal data blur social and cultural boundaries, cutting across both private and public domains and shaping people’s conception of themselves, education, careers, relationships with others, and understandings of social processes (Humphries, 2018; Lupton, 2019; Papacharissi, 2018). Unlike for other generations, social media technologies largely aid in the processes of becoming that children go through in order to mature (Turkle, 2005, p. 134; Valentine & Holloway, 2002). However, more critically, it is important to recognize that although this might be true for some constituting Generation Z, this is not true for all. Rather, Generation Z is multifaceted and cannot solely be distinguished by their technological abilities (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). As many scholars explain, there are more differences—including socioeconomic status, gender, technological access, educational attainment, and technological abilities—within Generation Z than between it and others (boyd, 2014; Hepp, 2020; Lange, 2014; Livingstone, 2009; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Shanahan, 2000).

As new media technologies and people’s engagement with social media platforms can now be understood as cultural practices embedded within their daily lives and relationships, teen’s technology and social media use are highly contested topics, especially for parents. Are smartphones allowed at the dinner table; must smart devices be left in a separate room before bedtime; is screen time monitored or restricted? These are all questions that parents must contend with when practicing what Yardi and Bruckman (2011) term “technoparenting,” or the parenting of teens’ social media use. For many youth, technoparenting practices result in an anticipated parental gaze where young people attempt to imagine which images might be parent approved and which
go against parental rules and require, what I call, strategic “visual work” to mitigate consequences such as creating separate social media profiles for parents and family members or not posting certain images. As a result, tensions often arise between teens and parents regarding how young people’s visual practices are understood. This article explores how technology rules might be set by parents, only to be renegotiated or abandoned by teens when old enough to transition into a different phase of life. Through analyzing youth going through the transition from high school to university, this article demonstrates that retrospective processes of looking (looking and judging visual images) are not passive practices, but active components of identity work that are nuanced, layered, reflective, reflexive, and occur throughout time.

While previous studies regarding youth’s visual self-development in social media often focus on the analysis of single images (Bayer et al., 2015; Lobinger & Brantner, 2015; Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2017), I argue that people’s visual practices cannot be fully understood by analyzing singular visual images because so much of young people’s visual work—which includes scrolling through, looking at, thinking about and judging visual images—is hidden and not visible to others on the platform. A large part of the significance of visual practices is bound up with practices of looking, in which people’s multiple social forms, conventions, and modalities must be taken into consideration (Atkinson, 2016). This cannot be done by analyzing singular images, largely because as researchers, we do not have access to the images that are captured and deleted, did not “make the cut” to be posted, or the thoughts going through one’s mind while scrolling through social media. In this sense, a picture is not worth a thousand words, as the popular adage would have us believe. Looking at images without context or background behind motivations for the image and understanding of one’s thoughts and feelings at the time does not provide a complete understanding of how looking practices is situated within the larger media manifold where the “composite environment within which each media [and it’s use] is defined relationally to all other media” (Madianou, 2014, p. 330). Instead, images must be analyzed contextually and in relation to the stories that are told about them to understand what they mean to the individual and how they are being used to construct visual self-representations.

Rather than examining singular images, I use a mixed qualitative approach that combines a platform analysis of participant images and in-depth interviews. The platform analysis involved asking participants to add me as a “friend” to their used social media platforms. Prior to the interviews, I analyzed the posted images across platforms separately from the participants to gain a contextual understanding of their social media use. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized to participants and participants were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. This approach was combined with open-ended in-depth interviews as a basis for understanding participant’s subjective experiences, understandings, and accounts of their “visual self” in social media platforms. Using this approach, I analyze how the current embeddedness of digital media in everyday life constitutes a key context or frame for young people’s visual practices of becoming who they are, and who they want to be in moments of transition. I argue that “new visibilities” emerge with routine social media use, requiring various forms of “presentational work” that extend beyond but are not entirely divorced from face-to-face encounters.

**Selfies and Social Media: Capturing and Showing an “Authentic” Self**

In contemporary society, young people in particular are thought to live increasingly mediated lives where visual social media now provide the context for the most basic forms of self-understanding and sociality. As a result, a particularly prevalent form of visual self-representation is the “selfie” (Lawrence & Cambre, 2020; Lobinger & Brantner, 2015; Marwick, 2015; Serafinelli, 2018; Tiidenberg, 2018; Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018). The selfie is difficult to define because what makes a selfie different from a portrait or a group portrait? According to Zhao and Zappavigna (2018), it is the gestural foregrounding of the photographer’s perspective, which inscribes the body as a figure for mediation (Frosh, 2015, p. 1611). One common definition of the selfie is as a visual representation of the photographer including the photographer’s face, or other body parts used as a means of visual communication and self-representation (Nemer & Freeman, 2015; Walker-Rettberg, 2005). Although some contemporary journalism and popular literature suggests that youth are solipsistic and selfie obsessed, much academic literature suggest that the variety of different platforms available for producing and reproducing personal images are useful tools for empowerment and self-change (Albury, 2015; Marwick, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2018; Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018). As Gunther (2015) and Hess (2015) explain, selfies are best understood as “bouquets of practices” involving “entanglements of subjectivities” and are a primary form of visual self-presentation used among young people. Selfies are uniquely “situated within the larger transmedia, transhistorical, and transnational systems of seeing and knowing” and as such, facilitate a shift into a new visual paradigm characterized by dynamic looking relations where the power between the object of looking and the looking subject are disrupted (Pham, 2015, p. 1740, 232). Selfies have become increasingly popular among youth in part because they are a way for young people to engage in self-expression and explore their relationship with “places, space, and different cultural identities” (Douglas, 2020, p. 395). Coupled with the “low tech” snapshot photographic techniques required to take a selfie and the ubiquity of visual images via smartphones and social media, selfies are a primary means of self-representation and a common form of visual communication used among youth (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015).
However, the authenticity of self-representation—or the choices users make to appear “real” or authentic online, that shapes perception of how accurate an image is to what one really looks like—portrayed in the selfie is highly debatable (Abidin, 2018). Capturing an “authentic” selfie and representing an “authentic” self is a difficult, tedious, and an often-gendered process where material technologies encourage certain types of gendered self-representation (appropriate angles, lighting, body language, facial expressions, and photo-editing) (Ellison et al., 2006; Lüders & Brandtzæg, 2014; Riley et al., 2016; Warfield, 2017). As van Dijck (2013) explains, increasingly young people share photographs as experiences rather than as objects. This means that the “thingness” of everyday photographs—the what and how of a selfie—is not as important as the why (Jurgenson, 2019, p. 35). Many young people spend a significant amount of time selecting, editing, filtering—essentially molding their self-representation to be uploaded to the platform—using feedback and approval from their audiences as “sufficient reward” for their authenticity work, or the visual work put into the construction of an image that fosters reliability, and “realness” with the audience. It is important to understand the looking practices that are integral to the construction of the visual self-identities involved in the negotiation and production of a visual self that must pass as authentic (edited enough), but not too authentic (too real) (Douglas, 2020; Gabriel, 2014; Hou, 2019; Lavrence & Cambre, 2020; Lobinger & Brantner, 2015, p. 1855; Marwick, 2015, p. 142). Another important connection is the association between authenticity work and increased anxiety, especially for youth. Rather than practices of taking, sharing, and showing of selfies being considered narcissistic (Maguire, 2018), I argue that authenticity work surrounding the pressure to perform an authentic self in narrowly accepted ways is a major source of anxiety for youth. What commonly emerges is the notion that continual access to new media technologies is a “double-edged sword” because as such technologies afford highly desired contact with others, being consistently open to contact is disliked among many. This is because perpetual mediated contact to others may lead to practices of “hyper-coordination” and media entrapment, which is the feeling of anxiety and dependence regarding the pervasive communication abilities offered by new media technologies (Hall & Baym, 2011, p. 317). For example, it may be difficult for some people to avoid the beckoning chime of an incoming message, one may feel bombarded by the prompt to scroll through social media, view, and compare other’s images. However, what tends to be focused on when analyzing these authenticity pressures that youth face are practices of posting. What is missing from the scholarly literature is a focus on the complexity of practices of looking that youth engage in and the multidimensional compulsory factors weaved into this. It is important to understand how the very ordinary practice of, for example, taking a selfie might relate to the changing characteristics of social media platforms, and that might also involve a change in the site of the self that then needs to be reflected upon or managed.

**Mediatization, Self-Identity, and Visuality**

I situate this study in relation to dominant literature exploring the interconnections between mediatization, self-identity, and visuality. Given the pervasiveness of digital visual technologies, it is important to consider how their uses are multiply situated within a range of everyday contexts and the texture of people’s lives. From a mediatization approach, new media is best understood as an interlocking and dynamic process of mediation, rather than as discrete objects encountered (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 1). Mediation is an ongoing process of being-in-the-world and in this way, media have “vitality” or “liveness,” in that they are durable, transmittable, and embedded within a state of “flow” (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 23). They are in the background of practices that are considered ordinary and everyday and as such, they shape the conditions and expectations that people have for both their selves and their technologies. Our social world is molded by computed output and people’s individuality and social identity is tightly bound to their technological practices (van Dijck, 2013). Couldry and Hepp’s (2017) approach to understanding media-related practices through deep-mediatization is useful here as it articulates how media processes have become more interrelated at every level of society, implicating the most basic forms of communication and self-understanding with complex systems of communication across the globe. In contemporary society, even practices that are not directly related to the use of media are tangentially related to media in some ways because almost all individual practices take place within a social world where media are the fundamental reference and resource (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 15). Young people’s highly image-based practices are not only a result of the changing technologies, but people’s practices with and around digital media technologies, where media resources and media-based reflection constitute ordinary growing up and being in the world (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 152). Engagement with media devices in people’s everyday lives is not optional; rather it is a necessary component to producing a recognizable self. While the majority of the literature often takes the self to be relatively stable, with media then enabling potential projections of that self and impositions on that self, processes of deep-mediatization seem fundamentally different than this. The self is now fully entangled in complex media processes, which are also part of broader-level constraints, affordances, and power-relations (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 7).

In late modernity, self-identity has been theorized in terms of an ongoing process or performance. Exploring how this has been intensified through ubiquitous media, and how an emphasis on self-presentation to understand the implications of visual social media for contemporary self-identities is necessary for
understanding young people’s mediated identity development. In the contexts of globalization, increasing mediatization and consumer culture, the intimate aspects of personal lives change in that the self and society become interrelated in a global milieu based on mediated technological experiences (Giddens, 1991, p. 33). The emphasis here is how the “lifting out” of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across endless spans of time-space (Giddens, 1990, p. 21) means that people are becoming caught up in dispersed relationships via new media technologies. This causes a restructuring of daily practices and allows interactions to take a new form. With this it is not only our interactions that take new forms, so do our practices, and thus our sense of self. Goffman’s (1959) work on self-identity as a social phenomenon is particularly helpful for exploring mediated self-identity as he conceptualizes the self as set within the context of performances occurring as a routine component of everyday life. Goffman emphasizes the importance of considering social interactions and the resultant identity co-constitution as a process of inference in that people must constantly navigate social scenes where all actors are attempting to present a fragmented and pre-conceptualized aspect of their identity. As demonstrated in the analysis of this article, this approach to the self in everyday life extends to understanding interactions on social media platforms as young people conceptualize their identity formation using a variety of different symbolic techniques (i.e., impression management, performances, and stigma). Although youth’s presentational conventions are mediated, they can still be understood as components of identity work that are embedded with meaning in an effort to present an idealized self to the public through smartphone applications (Leong, 2016; Murthy, 2012; Uski & Lampinen, 2016).

As discussed above, images saturate contemporary culture to such an extent that the act of looking—especially at and through screens—has become an unavoidable practice (Howells & Negreiros, 2019; Mirzoeff, 2016; Rose, 2016). In terms of deep-mediatization and the implications for the self, the media materials being used as resources for self-construction and self-narration are now primarily visual. This means that there is more visual content, that more aspects of people’s lives are made visible, and that people are engaged in media practices of looking, seeing and being seen, showing and being shown, in increasingly complex ways (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Lister, 2013; Sturken & Cartwright, 2017). This reconceptualization of the nature of photographic images in the context of digital information flows focuses directly on how the entanglement of visual representations, technologies, and practices are being incorporated into everyday life (Hand, 2012; Heywood & Sandywell, 2011; Kember & Zylinska, 2012; Larsen & Sandbye, 2014; Van House, 2011). This is important in contemporary society because young people are contending with visuality in a networked sense—the self is now re-workable as images are connected through a variety of networked practices. For example, chatting with friends is now a largely image-based practice. This has enabled the emergence of a “networked sociality” where images fuse people’s everyday lives through entanglement with new media technologies within visual contexts. Photos used in interaction have become a common means of communication because through visual representation people can convey their emotions in more direct and authentic ways, making image exchanges an ideal form of intimate communication (Giannoulis & Wilde, 2020; Venema & Lobinger, 2017). Images hold significant power in that they are often understood as highly expressive components in social interactions. For some, they can be viewed as more real than text because images can represent a visceral moment in time and provide richer insight into people’s everyday emotional realities (Van House, 2011, pp. 131–132). Photographs can then be conceived as meaningful aspects of people’s social relationships in that the practices of making, showing, viewing, and talking about images are processes of self-representation and contribute to the enactment of both the individual and collective self, while also working to reproduce social formations and norms (Van House, 2011, p. 131).

To understand the digital visual practices among Gen Z and gain a concrete understanding of this media generation, I situate these practices in the frame of the new interrelatedness of mediatization, self-identity, and visuality where the socialization in which the self develops is not static, but always in process over the life course (Hepp, 2020, p. 167). Because of the increasingly complex, visual nature of the self, I argue that a more extensive understanding of looking practices—which include the different ways of looking at, talking, and thinking about images and the screens on which they are encountered—be developed.

Data and Methods

The findings reported in this article are part of a larger project focusing on the interconnections between youth and their digital visual practices. Data for the study was collected from April 2017 to March 2018 using a mixed-qualitative approach that employed (1) an analysis of a compilation of Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat posts, photos, and videos created by a selection of participants and (2) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with all participants. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants that reflect the broader demographics of different neighborhoods. The recruited participants in this study were high school students (n=14) and undergraduate students (n=21) living in a small Canadian city. This analysis focuses on youth in a point of transition, or in a point of approaching transition (youth in grades 10–12, and university undergraduates). I posted advertisements in numerous locations around the city that specifically target the age demographic, including shopping malls, grocery stores, universities, and neighborhood gathering spots in each location. It was possible to identify the socioeconomic
status of high school students from the neighborhoods that they live in, but this was not possible in quite the same way for the university students as many university students had primary residence in other cities. Instead, I approximated this information either from their parent’s occupations, or which neighborhood they grew up in and still consider “home.” In this sample, 30 of the participants were women and five were men. The higher number of women results from young women being more interested in using and discussing social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 4988; Levine, 2015).

I used social media as a preliminary tool to gain a glimpse into or snapshot of people’s everyday visual practices and representations. Most participants (n = 32) allowed me to access their social media feeds, where I was added, under a pseudonym as to not be personally identifiable, as a “friend” to their network (Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, VSCO, etc.). I analyzed the images and videos that they posted daily (Instagram posts and stories, Facebook posts, and Snapchat stores) for the 2-week duration before the in-depth interview. Connections were deleted after completion of the study. As I was looking for context into participant’s routine social media use, the 2-week duration was chosen to understand the participant’s daily social media use. I used these images and videos to gain knowledge about people’s understandings of the platforms that are a component of their daily practices and as a foundation for learning how digital media technologies may be shaping their engagement with visual culture. However, photos taken in isolation do not provide a narrative for action. To gain a more complete understanding of young people’s behavior in mediated contexts, I used images as support to the language and dialogue used to discuss visual practices (Tiidenberg, 2015). The images provided an inside understanding as to what sorts of things people are doing on a daily basis, what they perceive to be photo-worthy, and what the presentation of a self might look like. This framed and enriched the interview data and provided a contextualized understanding of the participant’s daily visual practices within the larger media manifold. The reason that I do not include visual images in this article speaks to the article’s overall contribution. As visual images are intricately embedded in people’s daily lives, it is imperative to incorporate images when attempting to understand young people’s experiences in visual contexts (Hine, 2015; Marres, 2017; Tiidenberg, 2015). However, teen’s visual practices are complex and should not be understood exclusively as published visual images, but as multi-modal practices that include introspective practices of looking. Within the 2-week data collection period, participants seldomly posted images or videos that were accessible to public view within one’s friend network. This is a result of the self-identification of many participants as “lookers” rather than “posters.” Because of this, I was not able to capture any visual data in some cases. However, rather than this being considered a limitation, I urge readers to conceptualize these manifestations as evidence of the priority of looking practices rather than posting among the demographic.

For this article, data from 35 in-depth interviews are used to gain a detailed understanding of people’s conceptualizations of their often taken for granted, routinized digital visual practices. Informed consent was obtained from both parents and youth. In the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on their larger technological practices (devices owned, typical uses), everyday visualities (images looked at, captured, sent), and sense of self (display of images, experiences online). Each interview was approximately 1–1.5 hr in length and all names are pseudonyms. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and manually coded using a focused coding approach to allow for the building and clarification of concepts through rigorous examination of the data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This explorative analysis focuses on teen’s processes of mediated self-identity development in times of significant life transition.

Mediated Transitions

In this section, I analyze the different spheres and textures of experiences of participants’ lives, focusing specifically on their reflections on transitions between these, to show that the shifts in context—transitioning between schools, settings, parental rules, devices, and peer groups can significantly influence practices of visual self-presentation and identity management. On one hand, the presence of visual social media introduces new aspects to those transitions (they become visible to self and others), and on the other hand, young people develop strategies for managing and altering their visual self during these transitions.

Becoming a University Student—Navigating Parental Boundaries and Peer Groups

Within the contexts of deepening mediatization, “the self faces new pressures to perform itself online in order just to function as a social being” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 160). But functioning as a social being means quite different things at different times of life. Starting a university degree is a time of considerable change for teens, involving concrete shifts in their practical lives alongside modifications in how they understand and visually document their experiences (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). These changes are characterized by key transitions such as altering their friendship groups, daily routines, activities in and outside the classroom, and living situations. In terms of social media, one of the most commonly discussed transitions in interviews was the shift in autonomy resulting in a newfound freedom from their parents but also childhood. In this sense, the newfound freedom is being visually articulated as a rite of passage where the mediation rules set by parents are often left behind (Leong, 2016; Livingstone, 2009). Some participants explained that their parents took a precautionary and mistrustful stance toward their child’s social
media use, by practicing restrictive mediation, and attempting to limit usage (as it is often conceptualized as wasted time) or suggest other activities. For example, as Jenny (age 17) explains, “for me, social media is social and that’s why I’m doing it”; however, her parents think otherwise and are suspicious of her social media use. Here, it is evident that there is a disconnection between what Jenny is actually doing (using social media socially and productively) and what her parents believe she is doing (using social media unproductively). As a result, Jenny expressed excitement at the prospect of going away to university, having a “fresh start” with which to express herself online, and having less restrictions placed on her social media use. This ideation of a “fresh start” seems to come from a comparison to how others are visually reinventing themselves on social media during transition from high school to university. For example, Georgia, (age 21) who is a self-proclaimed looker rather than poster, explains that as she scrolls through pictures on social media, people’s visual transformation stands out to her.

So [I see] pictures like my cousin’s, she’s in her first year in university and she just has such a different experience than I do so I really like looking at the pictures that she posts, they’re generally all of her partying but if that’s how she wants to spend her first year, then kudos to her. It’s just really interesting to see what other people did with their university experience versus mine. (Georgia, age 21)

Like Jenny, Georgia explained that her social media use is “governed by a lot of people who care about me.” She said, “If I’ve posted anything particularly provocative or promiscuous, I get my aunt or my neighbour or somebody telling my dad that ‘Georgia just posted this picture, maybe she shouldn’t have it online.’” As a result, Georgia explained that there were almost always consequences like being reprimanded and having to remove the picture. To comply, Georgia spent a significant amount of time looking at, scrutinizing, and imagining all the possible opinions of audiences looking at her images. Not necessarily for the purposes of aesthetics, but to try her best to ensure that she would not be forced to remove her photos. But transitioning into adulthood resulted in less “governance” and less compliance with the parental gaze. Based on young people’s recounting of their parent’s beliefs and understandings of their social media use, parents seem to struggle with their child’s time spent on social media. This often results in an attempt to restrict time spent with devices and attempt to monitor their child’s behavior on social media. Here, the self as an entity to be watched and edited in order to become who they want to be or shape how others see them was common among participants. This is done in an effort to contend with the changing site of the self and construct a desired visual self to present across different audiences.

Helen (age 19), Adam (age 19), Serena (age 16), and Sharon (age 16) expressed a similar sentiment to Jenny (age 17), that it is social media that provide them with a “clean slate” when transitioning from high school to university, where one could become “who they want to be” (Helen) or that the self in social media is “editable,” allowing them to “make sense of who you are now” by “pushing away” (editing) the past (Adam). Adam revealed that that as he transitioned from high school to university he had . . . a little bit of anxiety [about the photos he posted and what they looked like to others] in the sense that the photos that I would post, or anyone would post, wasn’t really like communicating like the experience that you were having.

While Serena explained that as she transitions from high school to university, she expects to post more images, depending on who she is friends with but with the most drastic change being that she will be able to post bikini pictures, which is not permitted while she is living at home. She imagines that when she looks through her posted photos, they will more clearly reflect herself rather than a construction of what her parent(s) want her to be. The transition from high school to university was largely structured by socioeconomic status and class for the subset of teens coming from a working-class neighborhood like Adam and Serena. I found that this subset of teens uses the (visual) affordances offered by social media as a self-conscious means of imagining growth or positive transition and as a lifting out of their socioeconomic contexts. Adam expressed a considered appreciation for the images he was capturing and posting to social media because he “worked hard to be in that moment” and have that experience; therefore, the image signified something special to him and there was a desire to “do the experience justice” and visually represent it “correctly.” When Adam compares the differences between using social media in high school and university, he describes his experience of posting to social media in high school as goal-oriented where the content of the post can bleed into daily life and “people may even ask about it in the hallway.” The role of visual posts appeared to have a greater impact in this sense, designed to illicit a face-to-face response among peers and family members. Whereas in university, it seemed to be more formalized because “you’re like doing more things that are more mature on some levels.” Whereas Serena foresees that this visual representation of being “comfortable with herself” arises from the fact that she will be away from her parents and their traditional gender ideals coming from their class and social position. She foresees that she will be able to be her authentic self through social media, and not have to hide social media content or censor her visual self-representations because her mother is “very Portuguese,” concerned with the constant questioning of “what would people think” if she portrayed herself in a certain way.

Along with shifting locations and parental relations, changing peer groups because of the transition from high school to university is another significant factor that several
participants identified as encouraging a form of visual self-transformation and impression management that extends to both general social media use, and the composition of images. For instance, Georgia (age 21) explained that she did a complete “overhaul” of her friend group from high school to university. She said that when she entered university her peer group changed a lot. Georgia explained, “I am no longer in contact with anybody I went to high school with and that definitely has influenced how I identify with myself because I feel like it just provided a clean slate.” Nora (age 21) described this process as “restarting” her Instagram, and here she is using social media as an expression of transition or growth into the new self she imagines becoming or having in a university context. Sharon had recently transferred high schools and she expressed that she underwent a similar cleansing process. Sharon explained that she deleted pictures of friends that she “has lost touch with.” Instead, posting pictures that feature new friends and activities and removing images that “no longer fit.” Here, the self is conceptualized as an entity that always must be monitored and managed through visual work to get the idealized presentation just right. Social media acts as a platform that can be wiped clean to present a new self to be either credited or discredited by judging peer groups (Goffman, 1959). It is evident that these young people are engaging in intricate practices of self-presentation to manage and maintain coherence between the visual content that they post to social media and the anticipated judgment of parents and others by adjusting their behavior according to a perceived gaze. Not only is the self now in a constant state of flux in which self-identity changes in tandem with larger life transitions, but the self is now visible or exposed, enabling and perhaps requiring young people to share their lives with others, connect with people in their networks, and receive instantaneous feedback regarding their self-image (Marwick, 2015, p. 142). As Couldry and Hepp (2017) put it, “Anything less than performing itself in the connected archived space of the web amounts, it seems, to a failure of the self” (p. 145; original emphasis). Because of this, teens and young adults’ social media use can be initially conceptualized as self-focused but where the expectation is that one should always be in a process of change and transition, to become their ideal visual selves for the approval of others.

Anxieties of Looking and Liking

The notion of a release from the social pressures associated with high school was commonly expressed. It is important to note that what this release entails was conceptualized differently across the sample. Some from upper to middle socio-economic status, like April (age 19), explained that once she came to university, she did not feel any more pressure about posting images, specifically selfies, on social media. This is because she “naturally” started taking pictures more frequently and across a more diverse range of contexts, as she can now drink legally, attend more events at previously unavailable spaces (e.g., nightclubs), and has a larger social circle. As well as enabling her to expand her visual repertoire, she also explains that she has “nicer clothes and accessories” required for these new social activities, allowing for more “aesthetically pleasing” photographs. Josie (age 18) also tended to post pictures with friends or at university parties, to show that she is having fun and participating in an “ideal” university experience. Here we can see the self is articulated and presented to changing audiences; in this case, as with others, and always having experiences. While there are expected individual differences, there are several interesting ways in which entering university prompts shifts in visual communication, self-presentation, and associated visual practices. For some, there is a decline in the volume of selfies posted. For others, we see a change in the composition of selfies—or in line with Tidtenberg (2018), an indication that selfies are more wide-ranging than generally thought, especially in their construction of the self-with-others. There are new experiences that can now be legitimately visualized (e.g., drinking alcohol), and the real or imagined differences in who is looking, liking, and potentially judging.

Connected to the theme of presenting and showing an authentic self, which emerged as common among young women, I found a theme of desired authenticity and labor tied to achieving the legitimacy required to produce a successful visual self-representation (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Lavrence & Cambre, 2020; Warfield, 2017; Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018). Reflecting the theme of gendered authenticity, Sally (age 21) explains that she edits for “an aesthetic” (better lighting/better setting) but not to change the way that her face or body look because,

It doesn’t really make sense to me because you’re going to present yourself one way, but it doesn’t matter because you’re still going to look the same way. And I usually wear makeup and that’s one thing, but I wouldn’t, I don’t change the blemishes on my face when I’m posting a picture because I can make myself look whatever way I want to look like on social media, but I’m still going to go to school the next day and look the way that I do. So, I’d rather just be myself.

In this case, the production of a particular kind of authenticity is important with significant emphasis placed on perceived cohesion between one’s real self and visual self. Sally goes on to explain that the “raw” aesthetic for photos “happens to be in fashion” now and for her, it makes the most sense to embrace “how she looks” because it is not something that she can escape. She elaborates on this by saying, “If you edit the hell out of a picture and then you look at it and you’re like ‘wow that’s not myself’ you’re not going to feel good about it.” Warfield (2017) explains that this form of self-reflection regarding body image is particularly applicable to young women because the camera is not an inanimate object; rather it encourages certain types of gendered self-representation.
What is striking about this constructed, commodified authenticity is that the work or the construction must be hidden to pull off a successful and believable authentic visual self-image. Warfield (2017) explains that when people take a selfie, “the technology is used as an intimate device of self-reflection and self-presentation where corporeal glitches like misplaced hair and imperfect makeup are immediately managed and fixed, and in the moment of catered perfection snapped and preserved” (p. 83). Leslie (age 20) reveals that for her it is because, “I want to make it look authentic it’s the idea that I want to make it look like this is what it actually looks like and not like I’ve manipulated it, which I totally have.” April (age 19) also explains, “I just find that takes a lot of [hidden] work just to make sure ‘okay does it look natural,’ ‘does it look too much edited,’ those are the things I think of.” Carol (age 18) elaborates on this as she explains that she purchased Facetune, a popular photo-editing application, to “be fake” and whiten the appearance of her teeth in photos. Carol describes this as a “commitment to being fake,” but it is something that almost everyone does and is therefore legitimated. This suggests that there are rules or conventions surrounding the production of authentic visual representations in social media, and there is presumably labor that goes into creating believable, authentic self-representation. Warfield (2017) also cited “affective authenticity” as an important component of presenting valid selfie-representations where it was important that women’s selfies portrayed reality and did not look fake. It was not enough to simply copy conventions to portray an authentic and believable image, it must be conjured in a way that uses a “combination of representationally gendered tropes and affective relationality—it had to look good but also feel authentic” (Warfield, 2017, p. 85). It is here that the gendered norms embedded within the technology of the camera and visual forms of self-representation are evident, when various strategies to avoid the “glitch” are employed, people are engaging in practices that are shaped by the historically gendered functions of the technology that are performed by the body and negotiated alongside the affectively influenced sense of self.

These young women are aware that their self-image in social media, along with others, is always editable and thus almost certainly edited. But it remains important that the work of editing is not visible to others, follow the implicit norms guiding appropriate visual conduct online, and it must happen in the background and not brought forward because this could result in ridicule, judgment, and stigmatization. For most participants who identified as women, it is thought necessary to maintain this coherent, real, yet idealized self-image across different platforms as doing otherwise is often perceived as “bad form.” These rules act as a form of surveillance when considering which images should and can be posted. Helen (age 19) elaborates on this point and explained that there are a series of rules that one should follow when posting a photo to Instagram, and she was an “expert” on these rules. According to Helen, her friends would routinely ask her opinion regarding the best time of day to post a photo, the most aesthetically pleasing poses, and which editing techniques and filters to use that are likely to gain the most “likes.” She goes on to explain that social media is “a reward system—if you don’t get the likes, then why would you feel inclined to do it?” One must put in the visual work to get the reward. For the participants in my study, an acceptable presentation of a visual self in social media emerged as something that must be constructed and meticulously worked upon (examined, thought about, edited, and polished). Visual presence in social media invites looks and likes (Meeus et al., 2019) and as youth’s identities are constructed within the social contexts afforded by digital technologies, findings indicate that there is a considerable amount of thought and at times, anxiety associated with the visual processes of looking and liking.

It is important not to disregard power dynamics when considering the ways that visibility affects and alters the construction of an authentic self because although some men, like Michael (age 19) and Adam (age 19), indicated that they felt “pressures” regarding self-authenticity, they are not confronted with the daily demands in quite the same ways. For instance, Michael explained that he felt “agitated” if someone posted a picture displaying happiness when he “knows that they are sad” and having a bad day because they are not being “authentic.” While Adam expressed,

I’m trying to make it [images posted to social media] more of an authentic presentation but knowing that social media is kind of a front. But I don’t know if you can ever really like reach what that authenticity is because in a way, like, you’re always going to have to curate and manage your social media feed. So, there’s no way that you can really make it in a way that addresses who you are in person or what your belief system is because you’re always like, managing it.

Although these young men did express some larger concern surrounding the constant curation and presentation of their visual self-images, particularly in a university context, they did not express the same sorts of lived-in and apparently inescapable stressors that young women conveyed regarding the constant visibility of their bodies and visual selves. As above, it is evident that within networked environments the feminine body becomes an object of attention and scrutiny that does not apply to men in quite the same way (Slater, 2016, p. 2734). While some teens may be experiencing the demands of visibility in terms of providing avenues for considered self-reflection and “personal growth,” others seem to find heightened visibility reinforcing certain anxieties and stressors already induced by the networked nature of their lives. Kara (age 15) explained that everyone (her age) is aware that there are “rules” or common behavioral tropes over social media to look and/or act a certain way, for instance, having a “big butt” and “white teeth,” that causes a considerable amount of pressure in her daily life. Similarly, the theme of Instagram “bringing you down” or somehow causing “sadness” was
common among this group of teens. Michael (age 19) explains that for him, Instagram acts as a façade in which others show off an idealized version of themselves. He says,

I feel like you just want to show everyone that you’re having more fun than they are and that you’re happier than they are, which I don’t think is really helpful. I’ve kind of realized that it is very artificial and so I’ve kind of realized what social media really is but I feel like a lot of people get wrapped up and get really anxious and “this person looks better than me” but there’s always going to be someone who looks better than you but now we’re constantly comparing ourselves right?

This can be a slippery slope for some because Instagram often acts as the “highlight reel” (Rebecca age 20) of one’s life and it can be difficult to see the “reality of other’s lives.” Teens who experience social media in terms of anxieties tend to feel inadequate or, as Rebecca expresses, she is always caught: “looking at other people and thinking ‘wow I’m not good enough.’” She explains that she often feels worse and compares herself more when she is viewing someone that she knows versus an Instagram celebrity because this makes her feel like she’s “not pushing hard enough” or “obtaining the same level of being a person.” Here we see the key concern being an appeal to audiences in terms of getting likes or positive comments, rather than considered self-expression or identity-construction indicating that social media is a controlling force in some people’s lives. This mirrors literature surrounding self-regulation and “digital detox,” where people are individually tasked with balancing risks, pressures, and anxieties associated with constructing and presenting authentic representations (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Some young people, like Michael (age 19) and Erin (age 15), combated this anxiety by “detoxing,” “cleansing,” or taking “breaks” from social media. For instance, after the school year Michael enjoyed spending summers at his cottage without WIFI as a “break” to “reset” and Erin enjoyed traveling to Europe in the summers with her family to “cleanse” of and disconnect from her social media use. This connects to capital in that those who have the ability to “disconnect” and “detox” are those with a certain level of economic and cultural capital who can afford an alternate world or experiences. This presents youth with new opportunities and problems or opportunities for self-management and self-transformation (editing, anticipating, cleansing, etc.) often as a response to parental mediation rules and anticipated parental repercussions. Here liking—or not liking—and unfollowing on social media work as a relationship status indicator, a visual form of friendship management that some take very seriously.

To combat these multiple anxieties, a desire that some youth expressed was for more education and information surrounding practical ways to disengage, or detox, from social media use. Either a temporary “break” or as a longer-term lifestyle change as a tangible way to more effectively balance their mediated connections and manage the expectations that come along with constant connectivity because feelings of being overwhelmed by social media tend to emerge as digital visual practices require one to be always looking.

**Conclusion**

I suggest visuality is a priority among Generation Z and platforms play an increasingly important role in the infrastructure of youth’s everyday relationships. Authenticity and coherence are not new ideas—but the contexts of moving from high school to university are significant. In conclusion, it seems evident that for some young people, visuality amplifies the existing anxieties and pressures experienced in their daily lives. People have always had to adjust themselves in this way, but now they are adjusting their previous, current, and future selves, across multiplying spheres of visibility. The self is being monitored and reconstructed to represent an idealized visual self that is consistent across both platforms and daily life. First, in relation to contemporary theories of identity, we see that the self may be an unstable phenomenon, and this now becomes manifest in visual social media, where the self is extended or exposed over time and space. This presents youth with new problems or opportunities for self-management and self-transformation (editing, anticipating, cleansing, etc.) often as a response to parental mediation rules and anticipated parental perceptions where the transition to university acts as a social media reset, as a time to cleanse one’s social media identity. This is surprising given how much social media encourages continuities of the self where the dedication to authenticity work and looking practices to ensure that one’s visual self is interpreted as authentic by parents, friends, or imagined others is overwritten by detoxes or cleanses at life course transitions further speaks to the malleability of the visual self. However, the perceived malleability of the visual self does not mean that gendered or classed expectations have disappeared. Perhaps
unsurprisingly, findings reveal that women must perform more than men to look appealing and present an authentic self. Although men do not necessarily feel the same gendered pressures surrounding physical appearance, they do feel the anxiety of connection in much the same ways. Second, in terms of the mediatization of social relations, social media have become the frame through which people see each other as many participants are adjusting their visual self-presentations in accordance with established gender expectations, the institutional contexts they belong to and likely audiences. In this context, I found that visuality adds a new layer to ongoing processes of identity management and practices of self-negotiation in networked settings, which often evokes considerable anxiety.

These findings indicate that mobile visual technologies are changing how youth think about self-image, data circulation, and the visibility of life online. Visuality is a priority among this generation and platforms play an increasingly important role in the infrastructure of youth’s everyday relationships. As demonstrated in this article, youth are not always on and always posting; they are more accurately always looking. The visual processes of looking are far more extensive than merely posting activities: it occurs in the different ways that youth look, talk, and think about visual images and how these activities become interwoven into their daily lives. Although one does not regularly post their images on social media, it does not necessarily mean that they are not scrolling through others’ feeds, commenting on images, and liking (or not liking) photographs. These processes extend to visual, verbal, and textual, which indicates the significance of understanding how we live and act in a modern context that is co-constituted and intertwined with “digital technologies, content, presence, and communication” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 1), revealing the multiple and complex ways that visuality acts as a primary media practice for young people.

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