

Beyond Synthetic Realness: An Updated Glossary of Reality Drift Concepts

This glossary is part of an ongoing independent research project exploring how generative AI is reshaping culture, meaning, and perception in the 2020s.

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Introduction

As the core Reality Drift framework has gained traction—built around concepts like Reality Drift itself, Synthetic Realness, the Optimization Trap, Filter Fatigue, and Semantic Fidelity—its language is increasingly being used to make sense of today’s cultural disorientation. What began as an analysis of algorithmic feeds and digital mediation is now appearing in mainstream discussions of politics, art, healthcare, wellness, education, work, and media. News outlets, cultural critics, and everyday users alike are reaching for these terms to describe the confusion and flattening they feel in the age of generative AI.

With generative systems reshaping communication, aesthetics, and meaning at unprecedented speed, there is a need for additional vocabulary to map the subtle consequences. The following glossary extends the Reality Drift framework by naming emergent conditions of 2025—phenomena like ambient loneliness, synthetic intimacy, cultural homogenization, and generative starvation. These terms help articulate how AI mediation is not only altering what we see online but transforming how culture itself is produced, consumed, and experienced.

Core Vocabulary Additions

Ambient Loneliness

A pervasive sense of disconnection that persists even in hyper-connected digital environments. Unlike traditional loneliness, which comes from isolation, ambient loneliness arises from constant shallow interaction.

Example: Scrolling through group chats and comment sections all night but feeling no closer to anyone.

Synthetic Intimacy

The illusion of closeness generated by algorithms and digital interfaces. It mimics emotional connection without the depth of attunement.

Example: A dating app’s push notifications that simulate affection (“We miss you!”) without any real relationship behind them.

Aesthetic Fatigue

Exhaustion caused by the endless recycling of design tropes, styles, and trends in digital spaces.

Example: Opening Instagram and seeing the same pastel color palette, the same houseplants, the same “authentic” work-from-home setups, across thousands of accounts.

Engineered Authenticity

Deliberately crafted moments or personas designed to look natural and sincere, but optimized for engagement.

Example: A TikTok influencer crying on camera, later revealed to be a planned content strategy.

Cultural Homogenization

The flattening of cultural variation as algorithmic feeds promote the same formats, jokes, and aesthetics globally.

Example: Teenagers in Tokyo and Texas using the same audio clips, memes, and dances within days of each other.

Algorithmic Mediation

The process by which algorithms filter, prioritize, and reframe our experiences of reality.

Example: A newsfeed that decides what “today’s events” look like for you based on engagement potential, not importance.

Mediated Reality

A lived condition where direct experience is always filtered through technology, platforms, or algorithms.

Example: Seeing a concert mainly through the lens of your phone camera instead of directly watching the stage.

Collapse of Deep Culture

The erosion of long-standing traditions, values, and practices under pressure from viral, surface-level digital culture.

Example: Sacred rituals or community gatherings losing relevance as meme culture and trends replace them in attention space.

Meme Culture

A culture organized around endlessly remixable, short-form symbols and jokes that spread virally.

Example: A political issue being reduced to a catchphrase or image macro that circulates faster than substantive debate.

Narrative Capital

The social power and influence someone accrues by owning or shaping a story that others adopt.

Example: A startup founder whose origin story is retold in interviews, blog posts, and pitch decks, becoming part of their market identity.

Generative Starvation

A phenomenon where AI systems produce content that is polished but shallow, leading to cultural stagnation.

Example: AI-written blog posts that sound fluent but recycle clichés, leaving fewer genuinely new ideas in circulation.

Curated Self

The version of identity carefully arranged for online display, optimized for perception rather than lived reality.

Example: A LinkedIn profile projecting tireless productivity while hiding burnout and ambivalence.

Performative Authenticity

The paradox of publicly displaying sincerity in ways that are themselves staged or optimized.

Example: Influencers posting “no makeup selfies” that actually involve lighting, filters, and planning.

Optimization Culture

A cultural orientation where every aspect of life—work, leisure, health, even relationships—is treated as something to be systematized and hacked.

Example: People tracking their sleep scores, workout metrics, and meditation minutes until rest itself becomes another form of labor.

Ambient Anxiety

A background hum of unease fueled by constant digital notifications, news alerts, and algorithmic unpredictability.

Example: Feeling restless all day without any particular crisis—just the drip feed of headlines, reminders, and pings.

AI Mediation

The increasing role of AI systems in shaping what we see, hear, and think—subtly reframing reality through automated curation.

Example: Reading an AI-generated summary of a news story instead of the story itself, then forming opinions on the compressed version.