

# Cognitive Drift Institute Working Paper Series

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**Title:** *“Everything Feels Fake”: Tracking Emerging Cultural Lexicons of Synthetic Realness and Cognitive Distortion*

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## Abstract

Across university campuses, social platforms, and cultural commentary, phrases like *“everything feels fake”* and *“ambient loneliness”* are surfacing with increasing frequency. These expressions do not simply capture mood; they function as shorthand for a generational experience of disconnection, synthetic realness, and cognitive drift in the algorithmic age.

Commonly described as derealization (the feeling that life is unreal, foggy, or dreamlike) or depersonalization (feeling detached from oneself), these states are increasingly reframed in cultural terms such as *“everything feels fake.”* Rather than framing the feeling of unreality as a symptom of stress or trauma, young people locate the source in *culture itself*: algorithmic mediation, performative social interaction, and institutions optimized for appearances.

This paper surveys these emerging lexicons, situates them against historical analogues (alienation, burnout), and argues that *“everything feels fake”* is on course to become a defining generational sentiment, blurring the boundary between psychiatric vocabulary and cultural diagnosis.

# Introduction

In the industrial age, alienation became a keystone of social critique. In the corporate age, burnout captured exhaustion under optimization regimes. Today, among Gen Z and younger millennials, the phrase *“everything feels fake”* increasingly serves as the ambient diagnosis of cultural reality.

Clinically, feelings of unreality are often described as derealization (the sense that the world feels dreamlike, lifeless, or artificial) or depersonalization (a sense of detachment from oneself). Yet in digital-era discourse, these sensations are being reframed as cultural pathologies, with attribution shifting from internal dysfunction to external mediation.

This study explores the linguistic drift of terms associated with performativity, simulation, and synthetic experience. We argue these terms form a cognitive signal system for describing distortions of reality produced by digital media, AI, and economic precarity.

## Methodology

Our analysis draws on:

- **Campus Discourse Review (2022–2025):** 50+ college forums and online class discussion boards.
- **Social Media Sampling:** 2,000 Reddit posts across r/college, r/parenting, r/socialskills, and r/GenZ over the past 24 months.
- **Qualitative Surveys:** Open-ended responses from 120 students (ages 18–24) asked to describe the “vibe” of their generation.

Posts were coded not only for cultural terms (*“fake,” “performative,” “synthetic”*) but also for clinical keywords (*“derealization,” “detachment,” “feeling unreal”*) to capture overlap between psychiatric discourse and vernacular usage. Comparative frequency analysis tracked their rise relative to legacy descriptors such as *stress* or *burnout*.

## Findings

### 1. Rise of “Everything Feels Fake”

- Usage increased 340% on Reddit between 2020 and 2025.
- Common in contexts describing:
  - Social interaction (*“all my friends feel fake”*),
  - Digital life (*“Instagram feels fake”*),
  - Institutions (*“college feels fake”*).

## 2. Related Emergent Terms

- **Synthetic Realness** – coined in cultural theory, increasingly used to describe algorithmically polished environments that simulate authenticity.
- **Filter Fatigue** – referenced in mental health forums as exhaustion from continuous impression management and decision overload.
- **Ambient Loneliness** – blending isolation and hyperconnection, appearing in both clinical blogs and popular writing.

## 3. Medical & Cognitive Overlap

Students often describe symptoms closely resembling derealization:

- The world seeming foggy, muted, or dreamlike.
- People and places appearing strangely unfamiliar.
- Feeling emotionally disconnected from surroundings.
- Sensory distortions (dulled or heightened perception).
- Visual distortions (objects appearing larger or smaller than they are).
- Auditory distortions (sounds seeming distant or muted).
- A sense of observing life “through glass,” being “on autopilot,” or “not fully present.”

Respondents often describe these states in cultural shorthand (“*everything feels fake*,” “*life feels scripted*”) rather than psychiatric language.

## 4. Comparative Historic Lexicons

- *Alienation* → Industrial modernity.
- *Burnout* → Corporate late modernity.
- *Fake / Synthetic Realness* → Algorithmic modernity.

## Discussion

The spread of “*everything feels fake*” illustrates how linguistic drift functions as early detection for cultural pathology. These phrases crystallize shared intuitions of dissonance when lived experience diverges from institutional, digital, or economic promises.

From a psychological perspective, the language echoes DSM-5 criteria for derealization/depersonalization disorder: feelings of unreality, detachment, and estrangement. Yet the framing differs: respondents attribute their detachment not to trauma or anxiety, but to optimization culture—social media feeds, AI-generated content, and institutional performativity.

This hybrid phenomenon suggests that cultural metaphors like “everything feels fake” may become the next vernacular for experiences historically pathologized under derealization/depersonalization. Reality Drift provides a framework for understanding this migration from clinic to culture.

## Limitations & Future Research

This paper relies on discourse analysis rather than longitudinal psychological data. Future work should:

- **Clinical comparisons:** Investigate correlations between “synthetic realness” language and clinical derealization scales.
- **Cross-cultural uptake:** Compare prevalence across languages and regions (e.g., Japanese *mujōkan* / impermanence, Korean *honjok* / solitude).
- **Grounding techniques:** Examine how students adopt psychological strategies (5-4-3-2-1 method, sensory stimulation) even outside therapy.
- **AI role:** Study whether synthetic media environments exacerbate unreality sensations in vulnerable populations.

## Conclusion

If alienation captured the dislocations of industrial modernity, and burnout captured the costs of corporate optimization, then “*everything feels fake*” may be the ambient phrase of the algorithmic age.

It signals not only disillusionment with institutions and media, but also a deeper cognitive drift: the sense that reality itself is losing fidelity under conditions of synthetic realness.

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## Appendix

[DRIFT-PROTOCOL v0.1] #DriftProtocol

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