Efficiently Using the Internet

Our identity is special, and it should be one of the most crucial factors in our social life. In modern context, a significance part of our identity is rooted within technology. We learn from the internet by following coding tutorials on YouTube. We criticize the internet on the subreddit r/AmITheA\*shole. We create different identities from the internet by creating multiple Instagram accounts. As individuals who surround ourselves with the newest technology, it's important to learn how to use technology effectively as the internet is messy. That is to say, using technology as a tool to integrate into our identity. Generation Z appear heavily influenced and involved as good chunk of them swear by the internet, as Haley Nahman, the author of *Always Watching*, notes that “TikTok is full of self-conscious teens who want, just once, to feel like the protagonist, like something more than just themselves” (5). The idea of having filters and memes is to help document our lives, making our lives more fun and providing efficient socialization. It sounds nice, but there are many people too hyperfixated with showing themselves in a consumable identity, purely for the internet. People will deviate to trends they don’t enjoy or follow famous celebrities to fit in. As a result, identities infused with the internet aren’t as true, “But you can’t just walk around and be visible on the internet – for anyone to see you, you have to *act*,” as Jia Tolentino wrote in *The ‘I’ in the Internet* (8). With so much acting, won’t it be difficult to develop meaningful relationships? Some of us got along with each other because we acted to become a slightly different version of ourselves. Of course, you can’t carter to everyone, so the quest of becoming friends with everyone inevitably fails, even with the power of the internet. I once tried to befriend everyone in ninth grade as I had friend groups at Kentwood and Kentridge high school. Naturally, I could not spend time with everyone equally and I deviate to just one group of friends at Kentwood. Thankfully, I stopped caring a year later because falling into the trap of “collecting” friends is draining and can make you a professional people pleaser for geometry homework.

As I used to think, the Hawthorne effect, the idea of acting differently when being watched, doesn’t necessarily apply to just naturalistic observation. With our cameras and the ability to store thousands of files, we document ourselves often in a technology-driven world. The Hawthorne effect applies there too, where we act for the camera. On TikTok, the FreezeFrame filter captures a moment in time in a video where “Users are meant to give a ‘real’ laugh while filming themselves and freeze the frame right when they do it so they can see what they look like when they laugh” (Nahman 4). Moderately, documenting your life with technology is great as you won’t be able to visually see it as well with pen and paper. It allows us to gain a perspective on ourselves that we can’t find otherwise. One time I was recording myself in The Great Gatsby rhetorical analysis presentation for AP English and after attempt 50-something, I decided to take a break by using my phone to talk to friends. About 20 minutes later, I realized that I was still recording. Looking at the footage, it was so weird to see myself because this was not how I imagined I would act. I was licking my lips as they were dry from the speaking and I sat weirdly, sometimes with one foot up like an iPad kid. I’d still have to watch myself act in public though, because this was just my room. Occurrences when you realize that you were being watched without knowing (or recording yourself without knowing) brings the best opportunity for learning a new perspective. The Hawthorne effect is completely eliminated in this case and self-reflection would be at its peak. Although, this feels difficult to replicate. How would you make it so that you’re being watched or recorded without knowing consistently? One idea could be to have your friends record you at random at times without you knowing. The Hawthorne effect would still be there (albeit just a little, as you know you *could* be watched oftentimes), but it will be interesting to see extra insight. The idea of being watched ties similarly in Genres: Shapes of Meaning by Catherine McDonald. Genres in McDonald’s piece are defined as patterns of social situations. The big idea of different genres is acting. For example, the way you act in a private, sarcastic Communist Discord server with your homies is informal, silly, and idiotic, which is different from an academic coding Discord for learning web development by collaboration. People film themselves to see different outlooks, which is a genre itself as they communicate differently with a camera. This is an extremely powerful tool where one can expect to understand heuristics based on their environment and themselves as “Genres draw a person to act out approved social roles, to exhibit the values that people held when they forged that genre in the first place” (McDonald 6). Perspectives can be learned more efficiently with cameras as long as the Hawthorne effect is minimized by keeping the camera out of sight. I’m the Key Club Webmaster and the Chess Club President. Sometimes when part of the yearbook team comes in to take photos, it’s nice to gain insight into my possibly nervous presentation state or chess thinking position despite the Hawthorne effect being slightly there.

           Most of us have had our fair share of conformity versus individuality and social media has only amplified that. To make our lives more efficient with technology, learning the downsides is helpful to avoid wasting time on internet discussions or posing the internet as a distraction in work. As someone who is interested in studying computer science, I have to acknowledge the many flaws the internet has provided. The internet is a temporary life, where people are allowed to be whoever they want. But it’s also quite toxic, in fact, a bird named Nigel died next to a concrete decoy bird, and “An outraged writer tweeted, ‘Even concrete birds do not owe you affection, Nigel,’ and wrote a long Facebook post arguing that Nigel’s courtship of the fake bird exemplified… rape culture” (Tolentino 9). Why is it that people hate on a bird who has done no objective harm to society? The social polarization on X, formerly Twitter, has skyrocketed, especially after Elon Musk obtained it. The power to have temporary identities on the internet is something people should not take for granted. While it is true that the internet has shown both more good and bad in the world, humans are more likely to remember negative events over positive ones due to our nature. The commenter on Nigel is sad because it is simply an outlet for one’s identity or perhaps “artificial identity.” We want to be able to use this very cool technology for our identities. We just need to be diligent about the toxicity and accept it as fact. People enjoy talking and creating on the internet because they want to be someone else or rather someone they cannot be in person. This was a significant reason why the internet was created; it sounds good, but people have set unrealistic expectations about their artificial identity, like in the case of the angry Nigel hater who tweeted again stating she was willing to write the feminist perspective on Nigel for a price, “which received more than a thousand likes” (9). The Nigel hater is seen as an advocate for feminism with such a strange take. For those who attend community college or work, you rarely see this kind of language. You see it a bunch on the internet, though. This is similar to teenagers on TikTok “who want, just once, to feel like the protagonist,” such as performing for likes and followers, curating to an identity the audience enjoys (Nahman 5). In many ways, the Nigel hater was a protagonist in her own world with the people who supported her. There is a very fine line between creating a performance and doing something for the sake of passion. Take MrBeast, one of YouTube’s largest content creators, for example, who has helped numerous people with their vision and hearing problems. You may pose this sounds good; why would anyone dislike this? But MrBeast was hated on for documenting himself helping people because people think helping others should not be documented. MrBeast himself does enjoy helping people just as I enjoy documenting my computer science journey for the sake of loving computer theory. And while I realize that people think he is creating those types of videos for clicks, they appear genuine and passion. There should not be any problems with documenting to show what you enjoy doing, but people will be criticized for it on the internet - to a large magnitude at that. And well, it makes sense. Anonymity is fun and powerful, but the risk is meeting with the internet itself. In cases of meeting interesting people, you do conveniently gain a perspective on ignorance, especially watching political parties fight each other on X. Of course, most people on the internet should be taken with a grain of salt, but rapidly gaining perspectives is fun.

           One of the perks of the internet is being able to have multiple identities despite meeting some interesting people. You could be a noble learner on Discord servers for your French class or a businessman trading items in Animal Crossing: New Horizons. Subreddit communities such as r/calculus and r/csMajors are helpful for talking about your calculus struggles or computer science nerd identity. And of course, there has been a significant emphasis on race, gender, and sexuality with the internet. In our modern world, we look for labels and ways to identify ourselves such as using pronouns in the Instagram biography or Discord About Me. For the labels concerning transgender people and sexuality, when the time is more normalized for people to be transgender and LGBTQ, would those labels have the same value? I would be inclined to think so. It wasn’t until middle school I noticed the importance of these values. Growing up with Asian relatives from Vietnam, I was taught that gay people were “stupid” and that my dad would kill himself if I was “half boy and half girl”. Social media and friends educated me on this manner; I shouldn’t discriminate over race and gender. At the time, it didn’t feel “normal” to me to treat queer and other races the same. However, over time, I find that it’s pretty normal to be friends with queer people and different races than you. The concept of time is really interesting to me and while I don’t have any predictions of what will become “normal” in the future, it seems to get more and more normal across time. In any case, to people searching for their identity, they can appreciate how simple or complex identities can be. In What We Believe About Identity, Julia Alvarez, a Dominican ethnic writer, has written works that helped Latinas integrate into unfamiliar societies. As she immigrated to the United States, she felt like both an American and an immigrant at the same time. She started writing about stories about her identity and how later “We all needed vocabularies, stories and testimonials, and over the 50-year stretch of my writing and publishing life, I’ve increasingly seen those needs satisfied” (2). In many ways, Alvarez is a pioneer, just like how Larry Page and Sergey Bin founded the Google search engine. Google has paved pathways for people to join communities and create identities. Alvarez’s writing promotes new identities to those unfamiliar with the environment. The internet does the same, with the twist of reaching everyone virtually, promoting internet slang and stories you can scroll through within seconds on the news or social media. Our multiple identities are only possible thanks to influential people, yet we seem to take them for granted. For example, Gamergate is an organization of misogynists who are against feminism in the video game industry. Particularly at one point, they targeted a female game designer who was thought to have slept with a journalist for biased coverage. The Gamergaters targeted “a female game designer perceived to be sleeping with a journalist for favorable coverage. She, along with a set of feminist game critics and writers, received an onslaught of rape threats, death threats, and other forms of harassment” (Tolentino 10). Regurgitating Alvarez’s idea of needing a language, it becomes incredibly difficult to find belonging on the internet as people are always out to cause verbal harm. Social media has a block feature, but there’s nothing stopping people from creating new accounts to harass users. A solution could be to create a new social media account altogether or take a break from the social internet for a few days. To emphasize, when I finished freshman year, I was beat from comparing myself constantly with peers regarding grades and skills. I deleted my social media apps for the summer and focused on myself, and I then found a new skill (coding) that’s a significant part of my identity today. Basically, the internet can be so simulating that you need to take breaks from it now and then.

Given the internet, it is clear it requires time and skill to efficiently use those technologies. But there is kind of a pattern here: software that stems from the internet (social media) also requires time and skill. Naturally, another tool, artificial intelligence (AI), follows this same pattern. While I won’t dive into how to use AI effectively, there is an intuition it’s a tool that can’t be overused and that it’s possibly efficient to add in our lives. Whatever buzzword for technology comes next, it’s important to consider the perspective(s) of the piece, harmful downsides, and the courage to take a break.

Works Cited

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