

MA Collaborative Dialogues: Textiles

Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)

How does Amalia Ulman's '*Excellences and Perfections*' highlight social media's influence on identity?

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This essay will look closely at the work produced by Amalia Ulman in her social experiment *Excellences and Perfections*. It will explore how Ulman has highlighted key influences that social media has on identity. The discourse will explore identity in several ways, including physical appearance, lifestyle and personality, whilst also linking in key theories and theorist's perspectives on identity.

Firstly, this essay will explore how in one of Ulman's posts, she emphasises the susceptibility of society, when it comes to copying an influencer's online identity. Ulman questions the effects that this has on our collective identities, and the potential loss of uniqueness. The discourse will continue to explore how, in Western societies, our identities have now become a consumable. This has all been heightened by the ability that the social media influencers have in selling their online identities. The essay will briefly look at an example of where social media influencers have created a platform, which is not about buying physical commodities, however, it is still influential enough to change a person's perspective and potentially their identity. This underlines the control influencers have when it comes to influencing identities. This is then followed up by providing examples of posts that Ulman created highlighting this issue. Continuing to explore Ulman's choice to use social media, particularly Instagram, for her social experiment. Exploring the origins of Instagram and the evolution of photography, alongside the rise of accessible photo editing tools now available on smartphones. Drawing on social studies who analyse and examine the use of these editing apps, and their significant role in creating perfect versions of people's identities. In addition, the essay will explore and question what an identity is and how society desires to achieve perfect versions of ourselves, and how social media influencers feed into this. This essay will then conclude by arguing that social media has a range of influences when it comes to identity, not only on the person being influenced, but also on the person influencing and, in the process, individualism and uniqueness gets forgotten in an aim for conformity and sameness.

At a point in time where the media of Western society is heavily dominated by online influencers, the idea of identity can often get overlooked. Many who consume this influential media, may find themselves unknowingly influenced to change their own identities in order to align with the perceived identities or personas of social media influencers. Although the concept of identity is not itself a postmodern concept, the way in which we think about and analyse identity has been significantly influenced by postmodern thinking. According to Foucault (MrSociology 2024), the concept of identity is not a natural thing, but instead is constructed through power dynamics. People view social media influencer identities, that have been constructed online, which display a certain level of wealth. People

who do not currently have such wealth, desire what the influencers have, and in the process, they create a new identity that has been socially constructed and is no longer individually unique to said individual. Jean-Francois Lyotard (MrSociology 2024) argues that a process such as this is oppressive and marginalizing as it produces a universal sense of sameness.

The theory of *Symbolic Interactionism*, developed by Erving Goffman, argues that our identities evolve from public displays of constant social conversations. These conversations have now moved into the discourse of social media (Griffin 2012 p.62). Goffman continues by arguing that identities are a type of dramaturgical performance (Griffin 2012 p.62) of a public persona that is separate to one's private persona. Ulman successfully explores this concept through *Excellences and Perfections*, by displaying a variety of influential content, through the dramatized persona of a social media influencer. The content that Ulman uploaded blurs the lines between what is a public persona and what is a private persona. The audience tends to believe that the content is Ulman's authentic self, however, taking into consideration *symbolic interactionism*, it becomes very difficult for the audience to decipher if the identity that they are viewing is the public one or the private one. Additionally, Ulman is highlighting the pressures of maintaining online identities of social media influencers, and the expectations there are to display a certain narrative. One that portrays a wealthy, social, and successful lifestyle.

Building upon this concept, Joan Emerson suggests a real-life example of the idea of identities being dramatized. Emerson explains that a "doctor and nurse enact their roles in a medical setting to assure patients" (Griffin 2012 pg.62). In a medical setting, people would not question the way that doctors and nurses would act. In an online setting, people also do not question the way that social media influencers act. By maintaining an identity that is perceived as normal, in an online setting, Ulman demonstrates how easy it is as an audience to get captivated into thinking that online identities and personas are real by successfully creating a believable, but still fictional narrative, that mirrors the performance nature of roles in society, as described by Emerson.

Identity Theory suggests that a person's social identity is when an individual has an understanding of social groups, and the types of identities that are typically categorized in them (Stets, Burke 2000 pg. 224–237). The online identity that Ulman carefully curated throughout *Excellences and Perfections* portrays a lifestyle that is plush with designer clothes, luxury products and is all based in Downtown LA. Clearly creating an identity that is linked to a particular social group, that is deemed as successful and wealthy. Those who are not already, but desire to be part of the same social group that Ulman's persona is perceived to be in, will change their current identity to match with the one that they see online. Further demonstrating how online influence is creating a society that no longer desires to be

different, but would rather desire to be wealthy and successful, and is willing to become part of a social group whose identity is all the same. Highlighting that there is a huge desire to fit in with society.

To illustrate how Western society has become increasingly susceptible to online influence, particularly through social media and, more specifically, online influencers, Amalia Ulman would frequently upload posts where the viewer could purchase the items of clothing that she was wearing. [Figure 1] By offering discount codes in the bios of her posts, Ulman provided her viewers the chance to purchase the clothes she wore. Ulman allowed her audience to acquire a piece of the glamorous lifestyle and the LA 'it girl' persona that she had carefully curated and projected online. This highlights the power of online influence and its ability to shape our consumer behaviour. Our personal individuality is diminished as online influencers now take up the roles of dictating current trends. Consumers want what influencers have, as they project what is desirable and as a result, the unique identity of consumers is increasingly lost.



[Figure 1] Amalia Ulman (*Instagram Update, @amaliaulman 1st June 2014*)

The saturation of social media influencers is ever increasing, which ensures that now there appears to be an influencer for every niche area of interest there is. Mingwei Zhu declares that individuality has been “Capitalized by the arguable mechanization of social media”, whereby the idea of ‘identity’ has been “converted into a form of *consumables*” (2024 p.16). Perhaps it is no surprise then that Marx argues how ‘desire’ cannot be separated from commodity. And that a Capitalist society “turns the desires of individuals into commodities” (Pfeifer 2017 p. 256). As Ulman exposes, in order for the viewer to achieve the ‘desired’ LA ‘it girl’ lifestyle, that Ulman fabricated online, the viewer is required to purchase physical objects. This suggests that identities have become a commodity that can now be purchased, rather than being something which is personal and has unique qualities to individuals.

Of course, it is important to note that not all influencers are solely about influencing us to consume products. Some influencers influence their audiences to campaign for good causes, such as environmentally conscious Instagram influencer Lauren Singer. Who, in November of 2023, posted images of her and her friends protesting about climate change outside City Hall in New York. [Figure 2] The images show her friends smiling and enjoying themselves, creating the impression that that they are genuinely having a good time. Singer’s audience could be influenced to attend such protest conventions moving forward, as Singer has portrayed them online as being a ‘joyful’ experience. Unlike Ulman’s posts, no products were tagged in the post, and no discount codes were linked in her bio either. None the less, Singer can still influence, and although no one is buying a product promoted by her, some may feel that they want to have the same lifestyle as Singer. Once influenced, one may change their whole identity to fit with the ethos that Singer promotes online. Unknown to Singer and other influencers for that matter, they have more influence over identity than originally intended. Ulman’s agenda for *‘Excellences and Perfections’* was to expose multiple sides of influencers, with a strong focus on the consumerism side, which arguably, is the most popular way that influencer’s function. Referring to Joan Emerson (Griffin 2012) and the concept of dramatized identities, influencers like Singer, although are using their platform to promote and influence positive causes, such as climate change, it cannot be assumed that it is entirely authentic. It is possible that she is displaying what Emerson calls her ‘public persona’, while using activism as an aesthetic or trend, rather than a genuine reflection of her private persona’s genuine beliefs and values.



[Figure 2] Lauren Singer (*Instagram Update, @trashisfortossers 30th November 2023*) Climate Change protest with friends outside City Hall

Compared to previous generations, where Hollywood actors and Western pop stars were the main influencers for consumables, consumer insight Blake Drosch argues that more recent generations have found SMI, social media influencers, to be “more popular than traditional celebrities amongst younger generations” (2020). Paired with the rapid rise in accessibility of influencer content, with platforms like TikTok and Instagram being a tap away, it is no surprise that social media influencers have grown in popularity. This contrasts with the more traditional forms of media consumption, where purchasing a physical magazine was required for consumers to consume content. Ulman uses this accessibility to create a consumption discourse around perfumes.

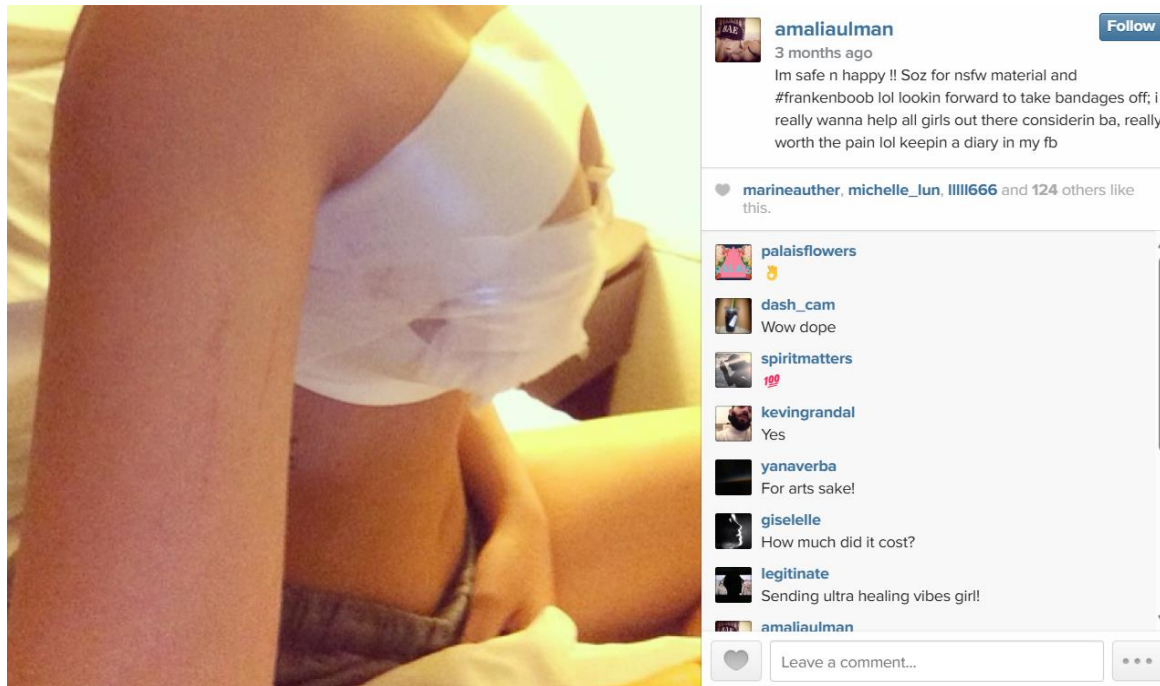
On the 14th of October 2014, Ulman posted a picture containing many perfume products from Chanel. In the caption of the image [figure 3] she expresses that she has “run out of my fav perfume. Whats your favourite fragrance?” Although this caption may seem unassuming, there is more than one example of influence happening. Firstly, Ulman’s use of the Chanel perfumes in the image instantly influences and informs her viewers, what perfume Ulman likes to wear. For fans who want to essentially become the identity that Ulman has created online, they can now assume they know what perfume she uses, as she states that it is her “fav perfume”. Fans then know what perfume they need to go and buy in order to smell like Ulman. Secondly, where Ulman asks “Whats your favourite fragrance?”, it creates a discourse around perfumes, which are additional to the Chanel ones seen in the photo. This is clever in two ways. Firstly, it creates more interaction with her post. Increasing the possibility of more people discovering Ulman’s account and in a sense, making Ulman’s account even more popular. Secondly, it means that other perfume brands are being mentioned in the comments, which furthers the possibility for viewers to be influenced to buy one of these mentioned perfumes.



[Figure 3] Amalia Ulman (*Instagram Update, @amaliaulman*), Designer
Chanel perfume bottles and perfume discourse.

All of this influence to buy into a fabricated identity through certain products, that the user may or may not even like, but feels compelled to buy, can result in impulse buying. Essentially, what Ulman has created through her Instagram page is what Jean Baudrillard would argue is a 'Simulation'. Whereby, the viewer of Ulman's content is captivated by the products seen in the images and can no longer separate the content from reality. In essence, Ulman has advertised the products in her posts, to her viewers, without them knowing. Baudrillard (1981 p. 92) expands on this idea, explaining that "the exaltation of buying and of consumption through the sumptuary spending of advertising" (1981 p.92), which backs up the idea that through Ulman's influencer content, she has been able to elevate her platform and gain more attention for her content. Through her use of 'advertising', she can continue to post more influencer type media. As long as Ulman's viewers are under what Baudrillard calls the "illusion of an actuality" (1981 pg. 40), then her audience will continue to consume Ulman's online identity and remain entertained. In effect, Ulman has created a platform where she can sell the identity of her fabricated lifestyle, while her viewers remain unaware that it is fake and for the most part, unattainable. However, the viewers still desire to buy into the identity, whereby Ulman had been able to generate a method of selling her identity to others without them realising it.

Ulman continues the exploration of identity, through the accessibility of social media influencers, by bringing attention to the impact social media can have on body image. In one post, Ulman stages a narrative that she has undergone cosmetic breast enlargement surgery. She posts an image of herself, posing sideways with the bandages wrapped around her torso. [Figure 4]. One must consider what messages a post of this nature can send to an audience and what influence it can have. For this post, the influence is evident in the comment section, where user 'giselelle' comments, "How much did it cost?". Clearly this shows that the post has at least made one viewer influenced enough to want to know how much this cosmetic procedure costs. It is more than possible that a person viewing content such as this could go away and undergo cosmetic surgery, all because they have been influenced to do so. Therefore, changing their physical identity permanently.



[Figure 4] Amalia Ulman (*Instagram Update, @amaliaulman*), post breast surgery (staged).

A study was conducted in 2023, for the European Journal of Plastic Surgery, that explored the relationship between online identity and real-life cosmetic surgery. The study found that people, who were often “seeing imaginative and frequently idealised images of themselves and others” felt that there was an “increased pressure to meet these often-unrealistic standards in the real world” (European Journal of Plastic Surgery 2023). The study implies that people feel that cosmetic surgery is the tool that can bridge the gap between the body images that they consume through online media, and the physical bodies that they have in the real world. Clearly, the way that body image is perceived online, is influential and damaging enough to convince someone to get cosmetic surgery. Again, demonstrating that the identities of online influencers has become a “commodity” that people can buy, even if this means undertaking a surgical procedure.

However, as the study also highlights, the body expectations, inspired by online content, that people want to emulate in real life, are “often-unrealistic” (European Journal of Plastic Surgery 2023). Which highlights that online influencers have unrestricted access to editing tools, such as photoshop, to further create the façade of their online body. A separate study was carried out to investigate what amount of people who post pictures of themselves online, edit their pictures. It was found that a staggering 81% of the participants edited before they uploaded their photos. (Agrawal H., Agrawal S. 2021). It is safe to assume that with technology advancements and easy access to editing apps, that

the percentage could easily increase. In [figure 4], although it is unclear whether or not Ulman has used Photoshop to edit her photos, she has physically altered her appearance to distort her perceived reality. This ability to create a narrative that is different from one's real-life identity further illustrates how Ulman is highlighting how powerful the content that one consumes on social media can have on shaping one's identity. However, even Ulman herself said "Funny how people want to believe. And they'd believe anything, believe me!" (Ulman 2018), which suggests that she might in fact have edited her photos, but as an audience, we have perceived these images as 'real'. Further demonstrating how Ulman has used "the freedom to "play" with identity in an online realm" (Turtle 2011). It can be assumed that most online influencers present an edited version of themselves, one that does not reflect their identity in real life. Through this, Ulman raises an important question about how easily we are influenced by individuals who are projecting an unrealistic version, or a completely different version of their identity online.

Technically, although Ulman has used social media as a platform to explore identity, she has also explored the relationship between photography and social media and how identity plays a role in this relationship. According to historian Hannah Moase, historically, photography was a way visually documenting real-life events. (2024) With smartphones now offering widespread accessibility to photography, as well as editing tools, one could argue that photography has become unreliable. Ulman not only explores identity through humans, but also highlights the more recent changes in the identity of photography itself.

It is important to recognize that photo editing is not a new concept in photography. Well before technology allowed accessibility for people to edit images on their phones, Victorians were already manually altering their photographs. According to the BBC, for ladies during the Victorian times it was the fashion to wear "constricting corsets and large skirts" (Abrams 2001) and in order to achieve the smallest waist possible in these tight corsets, photographs would manually edited using techniques that "involved scraping, drawing, and painting directly on the negative" (Settje 2017). The result left the subject of the photo with the visual illusion of a smaller waist, when in reality, the size of the subject's waist remained the same. This highlights that the idea of editing images, to appeal to the standards of others, is not a new concept. However, the significant difference between the Victorian's editing photos, and what Ulman is trying to highlight, is the different societal expectations of these eras. During the Victorian era, society did not expect people to view these images and suddenly desire plastic surgery. Images that documented post-surgery were also restricted to medical documents, and were not included in easy to consume, influential media. Unlike today, people during the Victorian era did not have the access to social media, where they could endlessly scroll through countless images that display changes in physical identities. Ulman's post [figure 4] shows how people can now casually

post images of this nature and influence people into thinking that this is what a person should physically look like.

Ulman often explored the documenting of herself, in the form of a self-portrait or 'selfie'. Interestingly, the platform that Ulman chose for *Excellences and Perfections* is Instagram. Originally, Instagram was designed for sharing photography online with other users. The very first Instagram image that was ever uploaded was titled 'Test' [Figure 5] and showed an image of a stray dog on the streets of Mexico. A much more meaningful piece of photography that documents authentic everyday life. A stark contrast from the narratives of over consumption and self-branding seen in the selfies that Ulman copies from today's influencers on the platform. Even the original identity of Instagram has evolved. Additionally, the choice to not choose a gallery, or a more traditional platform to showcase her experiment is also significant. The use of Instagram brings together the components of popular culture and high art, creating a new discourse around what can be classified as art in a modern world filled with social media and constantly evolving digital technology.



[Figure 5] *First Ever Instagram Post, "Test" @kevin, Mexican Street Dog.*

The application of selfies online allows outsiders to view a small glimpse into a person's life, regardless of whether it is perceived as real or not. They display the 'perfect' version of that person but pass it off as their authentic self. Will Storr argues that even if one does not consider themselves to be a perfectionist, it is likely that a person will at least "have an idea of the person... you feel you ought to be" (2017) and suggests that a person will still feel a pang when they do not measure up to those standards. Social media influencers propose what is trendy and therefore, in terms of identity, what a perfect person should act like, dress like and what lifestyle they should have, all through the power of an individual selfie. For the viewer, who has been influenced, they then strive to emulate the identity of these influencers, and to conform to the latest trends, one could argue that they are losing their true self in the process.

Those who are influenced by social media influencers, display a sense of desire, or a longing to want to fit in and be seen as desirable. This is summed up by Will Storr (2017) as the natural desire for status. In the Western world, we often measure a person's success by the assets and the lifestyle that they can afford. For many, having the means to afford these so-called successful identities, is often out of reach. However, through the power of the selfie, for a moment, one is able to stage that lifestyle. For those viewing these selfies, it becomes difficult to decipher if the identity portrayed in the image is real or not. Ulman highlights this display of 'success' throughout the duration of *Excellences and Perfections* but demonstrates that it is not just about displaying physical objects, such as the previously mentioned designer perfume bottles in selfies, but it is also about displaying the type of lifestyle that one supposedly lives. As seen in one of Ulman's posts, [Figure 6], Ulman provides an insight into her staged 'LA lifestyle'. She is seen wearing a full outfit of trendy clothes while posing outside a building. Through the clothes that she wears, and the confidence displayed in her posing Ulman showcases the persona of a confident independent individual, whose life is successful enough to allow her the ability to go shopping in downtown LA.



[Figure 6]. Amalia Ulman (*Instagram Update, @amaliaulman*), Posing in downtown LA

In conclusion, Amalia Ulman's *Excellences and Perfections* challenges our perception of identity, and the role that social media and particularly social media influencers, play in shaping an individual's identity. Ulman brings to light the question of whether or not social media influencers' identities portrayed online are real or not. She showcases that, as a western society, we should not be so quick to assume that influencers are being completely truthful. As Ulman demonstrates, she was not being completely truthful throughout the execution of her highly dramatized online identity. However, most of her audience were quick to believe that she was being an authentic self. This was particularly prevalent during her plastic surgery stint, where many of the comments in the post were asking about the surgery, rather than questioning whether it was real or not. This only further exposes how vulnerable society is, with followers far too open to accept the suggestion that something is real, when it is not.

People have a desire to fit in with what is popular. Ulman brings to our attention that, social media provides people with the ability to bridge the gap between their current identity and the one that they desire based off societal expectations and assumptions. Posts of social media influencers provide an insight into the lifestyle that people desire. Visually, people are provided with the type of clothes, lifestyle, commodities that one needs to buy, in order to achieve the desired identity. Through the

example of posting expensive designer products, Ulman highlights how identities have become a commodity for people buy into, and that it is just another expansion of the Western Capitalist society.

How Western society views success, combined with the desire to conform to specific identities can cause a loss of individualism and uniqueness. As a result, this creates a sense of sameness. The online identity that Ulman chose to showcase, throughout *Excellences and Perfections*, is perceived as a successful one. Being able to afford to live in LA, afford cosmetic procedures and being able to buy expensive designer perfumes, in Western society, these suggest a certain level of success. For those whose desire it is to become “successful”, they can buy into this fabricated lifestyle. They can come as close as they possibly can to their desired identity. Changing their own identities, in order to fit within these social groups.

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Images

[Figure 1] Ulman, Amalia (2014). *“Excellences and Perfections”* [online] Available at: [Archived Page: amaliaulman on Instagram](#) (Accessed: 28/12/2024)

[Figure 2] Singer, Lauren (2023). [online] Available at: [Lauren Singer \(@trashisfortossers\) • Instagram photos and videos](#) (Accessed 28/12/2024)

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