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SOCIAL MEDIA, IDENTITY, AND MENTAL HEALTH IN SALLY ROONEY'S BEAUTIFUL WORLD, WHERE ARE YOU

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ABSTRACT

Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) presents a nuanced exploration of contemporary identity formation, the psychological impact of social media, and the intersection of digital culture with mental health. Through its protagonists, the novel interrogates the alienation, performativity, and anxieties that accompany life in the digital age. This paper examines how Rooney critiques the role of social media in shaping identity and explores the mental health struggles of her characters through the lens of contemporary psychological and sociological theories. Engaging with theorists such as Sherry Turkle, Jean Baudrillard, and Byung-Chul Han, this paper argues that Rooney's novel offers a critical reflection on the fragmented self in the age of online hyper-connectivity.

Keywords: Social Media, Identity, Mental Health, Sally Rooney, Digital Culture, Alienation, Performative Self

Introduction

Sally Rooney's novels frequently center on the intimate, often tumultuous lives of young people navigating relationships, career ambitions, and selfhood in a rapidly shifting digital landscape. *Beautiful World, Where Are You* expands on these themes, particularly emphasizing how social media affects identity and mental health. The novel's protagonists—Alice, a successful novelist struggling with fame and depression, and Eileen, her longtime friend caught between romantic yearning and existential uncertainty—serve as case studies of how digital culture exacerbates contemporary psychological crises.

This paper examines how Rooney's characters experience selfhood in a hyper-mediated world, highlighting the impact of social media on self-perception and emotional well-being. Drawing from sociological and psychological theories, it explores the ways in which Rooney critiques modern digital identity and its role in mental health struggles.

The Fragmented Self in the Digital Age

In *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, social media functions as both a space of connection and a mechanism of alienation. Sherry Turkle, in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), argues that digital spaces encourage a fragmented self, where individuals curate idealized online personas that

often contradict their offline realities. This tension is evident in Eileen's compulsive scrolling through social media, which amplifies her insecurities and sense of inadequacy. She compares herself to others, reinforcing an internalized sense of failure:

"It was possible she had once been an interesting person, but now she mostly looked at her phone" (Rooney, 86).

Eileen's self-doubt reflects the phenomenon of online performativity, a concept explored by sociologist Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). Goffman argues that social interactions involve constant self-performance, a notion that is intensified by digital platforms where users meticulously curate their identities. Eileen's dissatisfaction underscores the anxiety that arises when one's authentic self and online self fail to align.

Jean Baudrillard and the Hyperreal Identity

Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal, as explored in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), is pertinent to Rooney's critique of social media. Baudrillard posits that in a media-saturated world, the distinction between reality and representation collapses, leading individuals to engage with simulations rather than actual experiences. Alice, as a public figure, grapples with this hyperreality: her online persona, constructed through interviews and social media engagement, often feels more real to others than her private self. This dissonance fuels her mental distress, leading her to retreat into isolation: "People wanted her to have opinions. But what if she didn't have any opinions? What if she only wanted to be left alone?" (Rooney, 112).

Alice's struggle illustrates the alienation that arises when identity becomes commodified within digital capitalism. Her reluctance to engage with the public persona imposed upon her echoes Baudrillard's notion that the hyperreal erodes individuality, replacing genuine experience with media spectacle.

Byung-Chul Han and Digital Fatigue

Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* (2015) provides another theoretical framework for understanding the exhaustion experienced by Rooney's characters. Han critiques the neoliberal demand for constant productivity and self-optimization, arguing that digital culture intensifies these pressures. Eileen, for instance, experiences a pervasive sense of fatigue, exacerbated by her reliance on social media as both a distraction and a source of validation: "She couldn't remember the last time she had read a book properly, without stopping to check her messages" (Rooney, 178).

Han's theory suggests that this kind of digital exhaustion results from the blurring of boundaries between leisure and labor. Social media, while ostensibly recreational, becomes an extension of social and professional obligations, leaving users in a perpetual state of mental overexertion. Rooney's novel encapsulates this phenomenon, portraying characters who, despite their intelligence and awareness, struggle to break free from the digital cycle of anxiety and self-comparison.

Mental Health and the Search for Authentic Connection

Despite the alienation fostered by social media, *Beautiful World, Where Are You* suggests that authentic relationships remain a vital source of solace. Alice and Eileen's email exchanges, which form a significant portion of the novel, contrast with the

shallowness of online interactions. Their deeply introspective correspondence allows them to express vulnerabilities that social media discourages, reaffirming the need for sincere human connection.

Rooney's novel implies that while digital culture amplifies loneliness, it also exposes the fundamental human yearning for intimacy. This tension reflects the dual nature of social media as both an isolating force and a potential avenue for meaningful dialogue. However, the novel ultimately leans toward skepticism, suggesting that true connection requires stepping beyond the performative realm of the internet.

Conclusion

Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* offers a compelling examination of social media's impact on identity and mental health. Through the experiences of Alice and Eileen, Rooney critiques the alienation and performativity inherent in digital culture, drawing on theories from Turkle, Baudrillard, and Han. The novel highlights the psychological costs of living in an era where selfhood is constantly mediated through screens, yet it also gestures toward the enduring importance of authentic relationships. As digital culture continues to shape human experience, literature like Rooney's serves as a crucial lens for understanding the complexities of contemporary identity and mental well-being.

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