

Digital Selves and Fragmented Identity in Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*

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Abstract

Digital selves refer to the online identities people develop through digital communication and interaction. Today, in social, cultural, psychological, and literary debates, this idea has become more complex, closely tied to widespread manipulation of online presence. This paper, therefore, explores how digital selves are constructed and depicted in Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021). Using psychoanalytic theories, especially Freudian and Lacanian approaches, it examines how digital spaces influence self-identity and lead to psychological fragmentation. The analysis finds that online platforms encourage fluid, performative, and often disembodied personas. It also shows that the novel highlights the mental effects of digital immersion, where identity becomes a curated, unstable construct shaped by algorithmic visibility and posthuman dynamics. Ultimately, the paper argues that digital culture creates new forms of selfhood while also inducing pervasive feelings of alienation and internal division.

Keywords: Digital Selves, fragmented identity, simulation, digitalspace, psychoanalysis.

1.1 Introduction

The notion of digital selves has become a discourse formation in contemporary scholarship. Initially viewed as a technical and administrative issue, it has

evolved into a complex social, psychological, and cultural phenomenon, reflecting broader shifts in how identity is understood and expressed in digital environments. The emergence of the World Wide Web in the early '90s marked a turning point in the development of the digital self. Online forums, chat rooms, and bulletin board systems (BBS) allowed users to adopt pseudonymous or anonymous identities, creating new ways of self-representation. As a result, Kathrine Hayles sees digital technology as transforming human identity from a stable, embodied self to a distributed system of code, interface, and machine (13). Additionally, in her foundational work *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle notes that users on platforms like MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) could create multiple avatars and interact in ways that let them explore fragmented and experimental selves because “in the online world, identity is fluid. You are who you pretend to be” (212). Turkle views the “digital space as a new frontier that shows the decline of language in favor of the growing dominance of media affordances” (“Alone Together” 40). She argues that digital space has become “a powerful projective medium” (*Second Self* 185), where individuals “explore different aspects of themselves, including the ability to play with their identity and try new ones” (391). Therefore, today, people not only reveal their roles in society but also their “imagined roles conjured up in digital space” (391), highlighting the complexities involved in constructing human identity.

Katia Hildebrandt and Alec Couros also emphasize the complexity of understanding and embracing the digital self. They contend that the digital world has become so intertwined with the physical world that identities have become public by default, which can have disastrous consequences for those whose digital identities are deemed socially unacceptable (“Digital Selves, Digital Scholars”). Against this backdrop, Shoshana Zuboff has come up with the idea of “surveillance capitalism” and “behavioral surplus”, where identity is commodified for predictive analytics (94). For her, digital identity today is

shaped not just by user intent but by algorithms that sort, categorize, and recommend content based on one's digital footprint. Scholars like David Lyon also argue that "surveillance capitalism" produces "algorithmic identities", which may diverge from one's self-conception but still define access to services and visibility online (Lyon 33). For Mohamed Belamghari, "glocalization" has expanded this visibility, causing modern identities to become an interplay of territorial, deterritorial, global, and local influences. Consequently, identities are no longer based on shared rationales; they have become products to be used temporarily and discarded when no longer needed (7). Overall, digital theorists believe that the constant need to perform, update, and manage identities can lead to fragmentation fatigue, where individuals struggle to integrate their multiple digital selves into a coherent narrative. According to Zygmunt Bauman, this makes identity a task rather than a given—a perpetual project requiring continuous effort (32). This paradox of digital identity reveals that while it offers freedom from fixed categories, it also demands ongoing self-curation. The fluid self, while empowering, may lack stability, leading to feelings of alienation or psychological strain. The efforts of literary writers to incorporate digital space into their narratives have enabled the study of the relationship between digital media and identity formation. Thus, using Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*, this paper explores how the self, mediated by digital platforms, projects identities that are fragmented, unstable, and vulnerable to psychological rupture. We argue that the text reveals the anxieties of digital fragmentation and the epistemological borders shaping human identity in the 21st century.

Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This* has attracted a wide range of critical studies since its publication. However, these studies seem to focus mainly on the narrative techniques and the narrator's obsession with the portal. For example, Heller McAlpin maintains that Lockwood masterfully captures the spirit of the time through the portal "with its vapid, mind numbing, addictive

culture” (“You Actually Will Be”) Similarly, Lindsay Clarke sees the novel as “an internet themed book”, distinguished by “ambiguous, poetic snippets” which mirror our contemporary dilemma (“No One”). Mark O’Connell also applauds the novel in this regard, highlighting Lockwood’s effort in representing “the horror and absurdity of being extremely online” (“No One Is Talking About”). However, drawing on Dean’s “Affect and Drive” model, Viktoria Herold, in her paper: *(Dis) attending to the Other: Contemporary Fictions of Empathy* (2022), examines the novel as social fiction that penetrates the essence of empathy in online presence (211-249). This social leaning makes Hadley Freeman to describe the novel as “extraordinarily original” for it not only captures “the interplay between the online and real world” but also represent a “social media timeline” where issues such as “abortion rights, pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood” (“Patricia Lockwood: “That’s What’s so Attractive”) are confronted. Accordingly, she acknowledges Lockwood’s artistic vision in creating the intersection of feminist identity and digital technology. While these critical perspectives provide valuable insights into Lockwood’s novel, they remain silent on how the novel’s digital spaces mediate the struggles of some of the characters in their creation and perception of selves that appear fragmented and unstable. This paper examines the dynamics of these struggles, using Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic models. It focuses on key characters’ experiences in digital environments of the novel, highlighting the tension between the idea of the unified subject and the digital selves.

1.2 Sigmund Freud and the Fragmentation of Self

The idea that the human self is unified and coherent has been fundamentally challenged by psychoanalyses, especially by Sigmund Freud’s work. Freud’s theories of the unconscious, repression, and internal conflicts reveal the self not as a single entity but as a site of division and contradiction. This fragmentation is key to understanding the complexity of human behavior, identity formation, and

subjectivity. In an age increasingly marked by psychological crises and social disintegration, Freud's concept of a fragmented self remains highly relevant. Freud argues that much of human behavior comes from unconscious desires and conflicts (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 605). This unconscious realm contains repressed wishes and traumatic memories that keep influencing the ego. As a result, the self does not have full control over its intentions, illustrating an inner division that challenges the Enlightenment idea of the rational, unified subject. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud formalized his structural model of the psyche, dividing it into three interacting parts: the id, ego, and superego. The id is the reservoir of primal instincts and desires, operating on the pleasure principle. The ego represents the rational self that mediates between the id and the outside world, while the superego internalizes societal norms and moral ideals (15-19). This model suggests that the ego is constantly balancing opposing forces—libidinal drives from the id, moral imperatives from the superego, and the demands of reality. This mediation often results in anxiety, repression, and neurosis, as the ego struggles to maintain coherence (*New Introductory Lectures* 104). In this view, the self isn't the master of itself but rather a conflicted subject shaped by forces beyond conscious control.

In the digital age the multiplication of selves across various online platforms, therefore, isn't new; it has roots in Freud's psychoanalyses. Freud's theory of a divided self—shaped by unconscious desires, internal conflicts, and repression—prefigures how digital selves are built and fractured. The ongoing negotiation between visibility, anonymity, desire, and social norms online echoes Freud's structural model of the psyche, where the ego mediates between the chaotic id and the moralistic superego (*The Ego and the Id* 17). Online platforms amplify these psychic components. The id appears in impulsive, desire-driven behaviors such as memes, explicit content, or anonymous comments. The ego, guided by the reality principle, shows itself in curated social media profiles like

LinkedIn or Instagram, where users manage their public image by balancing their desires and what society accepts. The superego, internalized from social norms and digital etiquette, manifests in self-censorship—deleting tweets, revising captions, or tailoring content for likes and approval. This dynamic mirrors Freud’s idea that the ego isn’t the master in its own house, as it’s often overruled by unconscious desires and external pressures (*A General Introduction* 285). In digital spaces, this is literal—users feel torn between being authentic, performing socially, and censoring themselves internally. Freud’s concept of repression—banning unacceptable desires from conscious awareness—fits with how users hide or suppress parts of themselves online. They might maintain different identities—one professional on LinkedIn, a humorous or political one on Twitter, and an aesthetic-focused persona on Instagram. This multiplicity isn’t just playful; it indicates a deeper fragmentation of identity. Each digital self may repress traits of the others. For example, a politically outspoken Twitter user might avoid posting controversial opinions on Facebook where family or employers are present. Freud notes that repressed parts don’t disappear but re-emerge in disguised forms such as dreams or neuroses (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 607). In the digital world, this appears as sudden outbursts, contradictory posts, or anonymous activity that exposes repressed impulses. Additionally, Freud’s idea of the uncanny—the return of the familiar in an unfamiliar context—can explain the strange, unsettling feeling online. The self is constantly confronted by algorithmic reflections: recommended content, targeted ads, and AI-generated predictions. These moments feel “uncanny” because they reveal more about the self than the user consciously expects, echoing Freud’s insight that the unconscious always leaves traces (Freud, *The Uncanny* 54). This adds to digital anxiety, as users are haunted by their own footprints and face the instability of their identity. The carefully crafted digital persona rarely fully aligns with the unconscious self, creating a psychological gap that leads to

feelings of alienation, confusion about identity, and potential mental distress. Thus, Freud's psychoanalysis shows that the self is never truly unified; it's a battleground of hidden desires, social rules, and conscious thoughts. Online, this psychic division is made external and more intense. The id, ego, and superego find new spaces in social media; repression becomes curation and anonymity; and the unconscious leaves its traces in digital archives.

1.3 Jacques Lacan and Digital Self-Recognition

Like Freud's, Lacan's psychoanalytic model also challenges the idea that the image of the self is unified. Lacan believes that the individual's identity formation passes through three stages/registers: the mirror/imaginary, the symbolic and the Real, and each plays a dominant role at various times. The mirror stage marks the moment when an infant first identifies with its reflection and recognizes an image that appears whole, coherent, and unified. This identification is a misrecognition because the image represents an idealized, external version of the self. Through this misrecognition, the ego is born as a fiction, constructed through the gaze and identification with the other. In digital culture, the mirror stage finds a powerful analogue in the user's engagement with their online image. Profile pictures, avatars, curated biographies, and social media feeds function as digital mirrors through which individuals construct and recognize their identities. Like the infant before the mirror, the digital subject sees an idealized self; beautified, filtered, or carefully edited- and identifies with this projection. The act of posting selfies, updating profiles, and monitoring likes or followers becomes a ritual of self-recognition, mirroring the process of ego formation. Yet, this recognition conceals a deeper alienation: the user identifies not with the real self, but with an image mediated through digital technology (Evans 115). Thus, the digital mirror creates not unity but multiplicity; a proliferation of virtual selves that destabilize the integrity of the subject.

For Lacan, the Symbolic order represents the realm of language, culture, and social law; the structure through which meaning and subjectivity are produced. Within this order resides the Big Other, the abstract authority that governs recognition, validates speech, and anchors the subject within the social world. In the digital space, the Big Other manifests as the algorithmic gaze- the invisible system that regulates visibility, engagement, and validation. Algorithms decide what content is amplified or ignored, shaping not only digital discourse but also individual identity. The subject's desire for recognition, which Lacan locates within the dynamics of the Symbolic, is now directed toward this algorithmic Other. Users seek validation through likes, shares, and comments, performing their identities in anticipation of algorithmic approval. Yet, this approval is never guaranteed; it operates through an opaque system that constantly shifts the criteria of visibility and success.

Lacan's Real represents that which resists symbolization; the raw, unspeakable dimension of experience that escapes representation. In the context of digital selves, the Real appears in the moments when the façade of online coherence collapses; when a private truth leaks into the public sphere, when digital burnouts set in, or when the illusion of connection gives way to profound isolation. These ruptures expose the gap between the digital image and the lived self- the absence at the core of the subject. They also profoundly reveal that beneath the glowing surface of digital connectivity lies the enduring truth of the divided subject – forever seeking coherence in a world of mirrors. Thus, both Freud's idea of the fragmented self and Lacan's developmental models provide a useful framework for studying the formation of digital subjectivity in Lockwood's novel. We argue that behind each digital self lies a deeper, divided psyche struggling to find coherence in a fractured world.

1.4 Digital Selves and Fragmented Identity in Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*.

Lockwood's debut novel, *No One Is Talking About This* (hereafter *No One*), has drawn significant attention for its innovative portrayal of digital culture and its impact on character identity. Published by Riverhead Books, the novel made the final list for the 2021 Booker Prize and was featured on *The New York Times*' "10 Best Books of 2021." The story centers on an unnamed protagonist's deep engagement with social media, referred to as "the portal." The novel's structure is fragmented, mimicking the style of social media posts, and divided into two parts: the first immerses readers in the protagonist's digital life, while the second shifts focus to a family emergency involving her niece's birth. Her constant engagement with the portal illustrates how the digital world influences personal identity and self-perception.

In the first half of the novel, Lockwood depicts her protagonist as someone who uses the portal to craft her persona through ironic posts, memes, and commentary. This existence is characterized by "performative detachment," where affect and sincerity are replaced by virality and absurdity. As the protagonist observes: "Every day their attention must turn, like the shine on a school of fish, all at once, toward a new person to hate" (*No One* 18). This sentence captures the internet's collective fragmentation—a swarm of selfhoods reacting as one yet rooted in individual alienation. She also describes the portal as a place of simulation, mimicking real-world processes through curated models, asking rhetorically: "Isn't this proof? Proof that we're living in a simulation" (66). In this simulated space, individuals present different versions of themselves online compared to who they are in real life. Lockwood dramatizes this through language and form, with the novel's first half composed of fragmented paragraphs, tweets, and aphoristic lines. The syntax imitates the rhythm of scrolling, suggesting the protagonist's consciousness is shaped by the digital

interface. This stylistic fragmentation parallels her psychological fragmentation, as we read: “She had recently been told that her brain was not built to withstand the amount of simulation it was receiving” (44). In other words, overstimulation and fragmented attention seem to lead to a dissolution of her coherent identity. Digital selves challenge traditional notions of “identity,” as the internet dramatizes larger cultural trends that encourage viewing identity as multiple and flexible. This is shown in the novel when we read: “A twenty-three-year-old influencer sat next to her on the couch and spoke of the feeling of being a public body; his skin seemed to have no pores whatsoever... that they were exactly, and happily and hopelessly, the same amount of time online” (111). This suggests that in the digital space, identity is no longer unified or stable but constructed through social interactions and performance. The self becomes multiple, distributed across various roles, directly challenging the traditional psychological model of a single, consistent self—a concept more aligned with Freud’s fragmented self. The protagonist’s inner state when she tries to disconnect from the portal further confirms this: “When she was away from it, it was not just like being away from a body, but a warm body that wanted her. The way, when she was gone from it, she thought so longingly of ... information” (90). Lockwood portrays her as a character who is, as Lacan suggested, in conflict with her digital environment and with her own self, which she externalizes through the digital ideal-ego— “a warm body.” She becomes an “embattled subject,” who “neither loves its image nor is loved by it, but rather loves that which exceeds the image’ (Lacan 257). Yet Lacan emphasizes that love for the ideal-ego never fully satisfies the subject. Throughout the novel, the protagonist’s struggle with disembodiment and alienation persists, even as she cares for her sick sister. Her eventual reflection on the conflicted nature of the digital world is revealing: “It had also once been the place where you sounded like yourself. Gradually, it had become the place where we sounded like each other, through some erosion of

wind or water on a self not nearly as firm as stone...At times it disintegrated into lists of diseases. But worth remembering: the mind had been, in its childhood, a place of play” (*No One* 70).

Furthermore, in *No One*, the internet functions as a contemporary mirror stage: a digital surface where subjects recognize, construct, and misrecognize themselves. The protagonist’s existence within the “portal” is a constant process of self-recognition and self-display. She posts viral content, gauges her worth through likes and retweets, and curates an image that seems coherent only through others’ feedback. Lockwood describes this dynamic as both addictive and alienating: “She was inside the portal, where nothing was ever forgotten, and everything was visible” (5). Her identification with her digital image mirrors Lacan’s idea of the ego as an illusion of wholeness. The “portal” provides an endless mirror in which she encounters idealized versions of herself—clever, relevant, witty—yet this reflection masks her inner fragmentation. Like a child before a mirror, she feels joy at seeing herself as whole, but this image is fundamentally external, mediated through the digital gaze. The mirror stage thus re-enacts itself in the digital realm, creating a fragile and performative self that depends on recognition from the Other. Hence, Lockwood’s protagonist exists in a digital space—a field of images and affective performances—where meaning is created through juxtaposition, irony, and immediacy rather than reflection. The narrator notes that “The people who lived in the portal were changing each other’s minds, a few words at a time” (10). This fragmented language, short and meme-like, reveals how digital communication privileges image and affect over depth, reducing subjectivity to surface-level exchanges. Within this imaginary, her ego relies on the continuous reinforcement of her online persona. Hence, she cannot help but be pulled back into the portal. As the narrator observes, “When she set the portal down, the thread tugged her back towards it. She could not help following it. This might be the one that connected everything, that would knit her

to an indestructible coherence” (95). In other words, the protagonist’s digital self is apparently idealized and perpetually visible.

However, Dylan Evans notes, “The ego is not the true self but an imaginary construct, formed by identification with an external image” (56). This precisely describes Lockwood’s protagonist, whose sense of self dissolves when she leaves the portal to face her sister’s tragedy. Deprived of online validation, she confronts her real limits—the reality that the digital ego cannot contain. The portal, like Lacan’s mirror, is seductive but deceptive: it offers the illusion of connection and coherence while deepening psychic fragmentation. Lacan’s concept of the split subject—divided between the conscious ego and the unconscious structured by language—is central to understanding her experience. Outside the portal, she encounters grief, love, and mortality—experiences that resist digital mediation. When her sister’s child is born with a severe genetic condition, her language begins to break down. This confrontation with the Real—the unsymbolizable truth of death and suffering—is the collapse of the digital order. According to the narrator, “She was moved to a separate place, outside the portal. She could see the world again, and it was made of flesh” (*No One* 124). Here, the Real intrudes on the protagonist’s digital space, which no longer contains the enormity of loss. The coherence promised by the portal dissolves, revealing the underlying fragmentation. As Lacan suggests, the subject is always haunted by lack—something beyond language and image that resists representation (69). In the novel, this “lack” manifests through grief: the digital self crumbles under the weight of the unspeakable, and she faces the limits of both technology and language.

The rise of hyperreality, as theorized by Jean Baudrillard, indicates that the boundary between reality and simulation is becoming increasingly blurred. Our digital lives often seem more real than the physical ones, raising key philosophical questions about authenticity and the nature of the self in this age

(6-7). In the digital realm, the self emerges not as a unified entity but as a collection of various online personas, each tailored to fit different environments, resulting in a fragmented, multifaceted identity that may bear little resemblance to the real person behind the screen. Constant navigation in digital space can lead to a sense of fragmentation, making it difficult to maintain a cohesive sense of self across different contexts. This is evident when the protagonist discusses her brother's comment about a guy making an offensive remark online. He says, "A bad guy has terrible internet poisoning. And the other day he says to me, saw my daughter's tits on the ultrasound. Looked pretty good, and I was like, Damn, dude, really? And he just gazed far off into the distance and said, I don't know how to act. I've been this way so long, I don't know how to be anymore" (*No One* 74). The statement—"I don't know how to be anymore"—can be seen as this unnamed guy's confession of confusion about his true identity. In his case, the digital space has blurred the lines between the real self and the virtual self. Overall, we see some of Lockwood's characters try to recreate and curate their identities, editing messages and profiles, all in pursuit of an ideal self. Others build their sense of self based on what they see online, often unaware it's a curated lifestyle. Thus, her narrative presents a digital world—a space for projecting and exploring of self. In this world, personas shift across "real life," eroding the boundary between virtual and physical spaces and creating fluid, unstable identities.

1.5 Conclusion

The study of Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* reveals that the digital world complicates and fragments human identity. The text demonstrates how characters create multiple selves across social media platforms, balancing the pressure to perform, the longing for authenticity, and the conflicting demands of digital visibility. Using psychoanalytic frameworks—especially Freud's idea of the divided psyche and Lacan's three developmental stages—the study suggests

that the fragmentation of the self in digital spaces is a modern kind of psychological conflict. As Lockwood depicts, the digital self is both freeing and burdensome, fluid yet fractured. In a world increasingly shaped by screens, her narrative reveals that our sense of self is no longer single or stable but spread across interfaces, curated timelines, and performative masks. Digital subjectivity, therefore, exists not as a fixed essence but as an ongoing process of negotiation, influenced by technologies that blur the line between the real and the simulated, the self and the other.

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