Deconstructive Feedback

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My pointer finger slides up on the notification feed on my Instagram, anxiously waiting for someone to double-tap my image. The lights are off, my head peeking out of the covers, eyes glued on the bright light provided by my phone screen. I have been waiting a couple of days to post this picture. I edited it, making sure that it had a blue hue. I watched a video on how to get more likes on Instagram, and it recommended to do so. I even texted it to all of my friends so that I could fix any mistake that they might find in the image. Three likes roll in, a few seconds apart, three likes in two minutes. The image was posted at prime hours: how could I only get three likes so far? Is the photo not good enough? Do I look bad? Is my caption boring?

I tap the image that I posted: I’m smiling inside the Royal Palace of Madrid, sunglasses pushing back my long curly locks, a floral sleeveless dress complimenting my body shape, my arms lying behind me on a bannister. A large painting is on the wall behind me with several statues on the floor below.

“You look like a rat.” A notification pops up on my screen from an anonymous feedback app called Sarahah. I press on the notification, reading every single word over and over again. My gut feels disgusting; I feel like crying. It’s hard to take criticism well when it’s through social media, when you can’t confront the perpetrator face-to-face, when you can’t ask, “How can you help me not look like a rat? Does everyone think this?” I go back to the image I posted, ignoring the large number of likes and complementary comments I received while I wasn’t on the app. I delete the image. Pull the cover over my face. Sleep.

Olivia Laing, writer, novelist, and cultural critic, claims in her essay “The Future of Loneliness” that people are allowed to express themselves in any way they choose on the Internet. They have the option either to hide themselves or to express themselves, since they are not experiencing face-to-face interactions. She declares that “the screen acts as a kind of protective membrane, a scrim that allows invisibility and transformation” (3). Laing explains that the Internet serves as a way to transform yourself; you are able to edit yourself on the Internet—edit who you are, your interests, your values, everything that is you. She finds this to
be dangerous, as it makes you feel “unsafe to reveal mistakes and imperfections” (3). Laing’s statement resonates with me because, after receiving the comment, I reacted quickly, deleting the photo from Instagram instead of ignoring the supposed flaws of the image. I felt unsafe leaving the post up because I imagined that everyone thought similarly about the photo as the anonymous commenter did. The costs of using anonymous feedback apps is feeling the need to delete the “mistakes” and “imperfections” that people comment on.

As I dive further into Laing’s essay, she discusses her experience with social media, and how, when she became addicted to it, she felt as if she was “tracked by invisible eyes” (5). Those eyes watch her every post and are able to comment whatever they please without embarrassment, due to their anonymity on the Internet. Comments can either be positive, negative, or neutral; they can affect someone’s thoughts or feelings on a certain topic, or in this case, about themselves. The mission statement of Sarahah is to help “you in receiving constructive honest feedback while maintaining privacy.” The creators of the app intended to help others become aware of easily changeable flaws through anonymous feedback, to help create a positive workplace environment. Though it was meant for the workplace, the app ended up becoming extremely popular among teenagers because it is an add-on to the widely used app Snapchat. Not only were coworkers able to critique another’s performance, but teenagers also could now express their opinions to anyone on the app. The end result differed extremely from the app’s intentions: teenagers are now sending hate to others on Sarahah. This appeal of sending criticism or praise to another teen is caused by the app’s anonymity, which permits no consequences for hate or for feelings of embarrassment. Why do we crave anonymous feedback, although we know that it can hurt our self-esteem?

A fictional character, Lacie, from the episode “Nosedive” on the show Black Mirror, does everything in her path to avoid a side eye, judgmental stares, awkward conversations, and, of course, a bad online review. The dystopia she lives in ranks every individual (and every social interaction) on the scale of 1-5 stars. Lacie longs to have a rating of 4.5 stars so that she can receive special treatment and discounts. To reach this score, she doesn’t act like herself, creating a fake persona to avoid any negative interactions. Lacie takes pictures of herself and what she is doing constantly, updating the friends, family, and acquaintances who follow her on social media.
At the beginning of the episode, Lacie stands in front of her mirror, wrapped in a light blue bathrobe, a towel, swathed around her orange locks, and she practices her laugh. Sighing, she tries again, stopping herself once she finds a flaw in her laughter. It begins to sound manic, forced, her abdomen pushing out the ups and downs of a giggle that is starting to sound like a villain’s cackle. Her eye reflects a social media feed as her rating of 4.2 out of 5 stars appears. Throughout the episode, Lacie changes her personality to become someone that she believes would be cherished by the online community.

I can see my past self through Lacie when I continuously yearned for comments on my Sarahah. I was obsessed with changing myself to suit others based on the feedback I received anonymously, with how I would pretend to be somebody else online, so that I could secure the approval that Lacie too desires. Lacie allows me to see how social media can control someone’s existence, becoming so reliant on online criticism and praise that she cannot live without constant feedback. Lacie changed her personality, appearance, and mannerisms according to the way she wants to be seen and to see herself. Her polished character seems to impress her peers due to the high ratings she receives when she acts in a certain way. Her peers promote her “perfect” image. For Lacie, being overly self-conscious is a part of her daily routine: she cannot simply turn off her rating system because she has allowed it to control her life.

Laing explains how the new era of social media makes users self-conscious about everything they post online. In her essay, Laing discusses how “hypervigilance” makes an individual hyperalert to rejection. This keeps social media users tense and on guard about any like, comment, and, in Lacie’s case, rating that can affect them. But the anonymous feedback that we crave influences the way that we present ourselves online and in-person, so that “hypervigilance” shrinks the distance between life on and off the screen. Before posting an image on Instagram, I too imagine the comments and impressions I could receive. If I find them to be negative, I may edit the photo or not post it at all.

Dylan Marron, a content creator, does not edit himself online to impress others. He shows his actual self online while expressing his political and social beliefs. Marron creates videos on topics such as “Unboxing Gun Violence,” “Unboxing Privilege,” and “Unboxing Police Brutality.” In these videos, he takes items out of a box to educate his viewers on a specific topic. These videos, racking over a million views on the Internet, are bound to receive hate comments. These
comments not only criticize the concept of the video, but also make judgements on Marron’s appearance and his values. In his TED Talk, “How I turn negative online comments into positive offline conversations,” Marron shares rude comments that he has received online. The insults in these comments have ranged from “beta” to “snowflake” to “cuck.” He explains how messages like these can affect someone’s confidence, especially if they do not know the person in real life. Marron took a step that most victims don’t take: he clicked onto commenters’ profiles and found out about their lives by looking through their posts, pictures, what they have shared, and photos they have been tagged in. By doing this, he realized that these comments were from real people, with real lives, sitting at home spending the time to criticize Marron.

When anyone is denounced, it can lower their self-esteem, making them feel as if there were a need to change something about themselves. Instead of letting these comments leave him with dissatisfaction, Marron chose a different approach. He had discussions on the phone with the people who attacked him on social media. This contact broke the barrier between video and comment. It allowed both parties to express their opinions in order to reach an understanding. Although the hate comments that Marron received hurt his self-esteem in the beginning, he ended up not feeling the need to change himself to receive approval, as I did.

After watching Marron’s TED Talk, I gave thought to how, maybe if I knew who posted these anonymous hate comments, I too could figure out why they felt a need to send them. Marron was able to respond to his comments because they were either on Facebook or YouTube, but Sarahah only lets you favorite messages, not respond to them. Although I and over 300 million users are unable to defend ourselves (not including the number of users on multiple other anonymous feedback apps), Marron shows us that there are positives to online hate: how you can remove assumptions about the hater and reach an understanding about why they commented hatefully, and maybe even form a bond with them.

I don’t use anonymous apps anymore. I was pulled too deep into the pits of self-doubt from constantly thinking about the hate I received. I wanted to change myself to the point where I would not be sent any critical comments, to the point where I would only be complimented. Realizing this is impossible, I disabled Sarahah a few months after I deleted the Instagram photo. You can’t live up to everyone’s expectations. I longed to better my online and in-person persona to
please others, and I was drawn to these apps. The appeal of anonymous feedback is wanting to know what people think about you, and I have decided that I am more interested in my own thoughts about myself.

WORKS CITED