"It seems obviously true that we are consuming images continually, that the cameras and screens we carry with us import 'framing effects' everywhere, and that this generalizes a kind of touristic attitude toward life. We're equipped with devices that impel us to document our lives as a means of shaping and substantiating them, of grounding their 'reality' in series of images. Self-documentation extends the status-seeking of tourism to all of life; every representable moment has stakes for our sense of social status. Every moment is a chance to assert a claim of 'firstness' about something, to show off access or a particularly privileged point of view. 'Touristy' is not an empirical description that can be applied to a place but an attitude we inhabit and that's afforded by our technology. Social media platforms give us the tourist gaze on demand, ours and others, and all the social judgment that comes with that." — Rob Horning, "Command Performance"

"'Branding' is a fitting word for this work, as it underlines what the millennial self becomes: a product. And as in childhood, the work of optimizing that brand blurs whatever boundaries remained between work and play. There is no 'off the clock' when at all hours you could be documenting your on-brand experiences or tweeting your on-brand observations. The rise of smartphones makes these behaviors frictionless and thus more pervasive, more standardized. In the early days of Facebook, you had to take pictures with your digital camera, upload them to your computer, and post them in albums. Now, your phone is a sophisticated camera, always ready to document every component of your life — in easily manipulated photos, in short video bursts, in constant updates to Instagram Stories — and to facilitate the labor of performing the self for public consumption." Anne Helen Petersen, "How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation"

"A man's Social Self is the recognition which he gets from his mates. We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favorably, by our kind. No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead,' and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all." — William James, *Principles of Psychology*

"The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them, ... was all about: How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?' … And that means that we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that's going to get you to contribute more content, and that's going to get you ... more likes and comments … It's a social-validation feedback loop ... exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology … The inventors, creators — it's me, it's Mark [Zuckerberg], it's Kevin Systrom on Instagram, it's all of these people — understood this consciously. And we did it anyway." — Sean Parker, Facebook's founding president

C. S. Lewis, eloquent as per usual, writes: “We should hardly dare to ask that any notice be taken of ourselves. But we pine. The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret.” Among Facebook’s more worrisome aspects, in my estimation, is the manner in which the platform exploits this desire with rather calculated ferocity. That little red notifications icon is our own version of Gatsby’s green light.

“… human subjects are vanishingly small beneath the tsunami of likes, views, clicks and other metrics that is currently transforming selves into financialized vectors of data. This financialization is complete, one might suppose, when the algorithms make the leap from machines originally meant only to assist human subjects, into the way these human subjects constitute themselves and think about themselves, their tastes and values, and their relations with others.” — Justin E. H. Smith, “It’s All Over"

Examples of Digitally Enabled Optimization

Elementary school photo packages that include Basic and Premium Retouching packages (removes blemishes, whitens teeth, evens out skin tone)

Diet trackers
Nursing trackers
Track your periods
Track your sleep
Track your heart rate
Track your expenditures
Track your

Netflix testing variable playback speeds including 1.5x speed

More from Petersen:

> It wasn't until after college that I began to see the results of those attitudes in action. Four years postgraduation, alumni would complain that the school had filled with nerds: No one even parties on a Tuesday! I laughed at the eternal refrain — These younger kids, what dorks, we were way cooler — but not until I returned to campus years later as a professor did I realize just how fundamentally different those students' orientation to school was. There were still obnoxious frat boys and fancy sorority girls, but they were far more studious than my peers had been. They skipped fewer classes. They religiously attended office hours. They emailed at all hours. But they were also anxious grade grubbers, paralyzed at the thought of graduating, and regularly stymied by assignments that called for creativity. They'd been guided closely all their lives, and they wanted me to guide them as well. They were, in a word, scared.
> Every graduating senior is scared, to some degree, of the future, but this was on a different level. When my class left our liberal arts experience, we scattered to temporary gigs: I worked at a dude ranch; another friend nannied for the summer; one got a job on a farm in New Zealand; others became raft guides and transitioned to ski instructors. We didn't think our first job was important; it was just a job and would eventually, meanderingly lead to The Job.
> But these students were convinced that their first job out of college would not only determine their career trajectory, but also their intrinsic value for the rest of their lives. I told one student, whose dozens of internship and fellowship applications yielded no results, that she should move somewhere fun, get any job, and figure out what interests her and what kind of work she doesn't want to do — a suggestion that prompted wailing. "But what'll I tell my parents?" she said. "I want a cool job I'm passionate about!"
>
> Those expectations encapsulate the millennial rearing project, in which students internalize the need to find employment that reflects well on their parents (steady, decently paying, recognizable as a "good job") that's also impressive to their peers (at a "cool" company) and fulfills what they've been told has been the end goal of all of this childhood optimization: doing work that you're passionate about. Whether that job is as a

professional sports player, a Patagonia social media manager, a programmer at a startup, or a partner at a law firm seems to matter less than checking all of those boxes.

…

I don't have a plan of action, other than to be more honest with myself about what I am and am not doing and why, and to try to disentangle myself from the idea that everything good is bad and everything bad is good. This isn't a task to complete or a line on a to-do list, or even a New Year's resolution. It's a way of thinking about life, and what joy and meaning we can derive not just from optimizing it, but living it. Which is another way of saying: It's life's actual work.