

## Are you Beautiful (Enough?): An Internal Monologue with Your Average High School Teenage Girl

By: Amelia Rhodes

I woke up this morning to the piercing sound of my alarm clock. 6:45 AM...I remember when that time used to feel normal. With summer giving into the school year so suddenly, it was just way, way too early. I rubbed sleep out of my eyes and threw my legs over my cool, comfy sheets. Funny how they were twisted around me last night in discomfort. Last night...I had been on my phone so late again. I had spent hours scrolling through Instagram, then Tik Tok, then Snapchat. Despite leaving me on open, my crush, Jake Elridge, the blonde, beautiful lacrosse player, had clearly been snapchatting other people today as suggested by his ever-increasing snap score. Sometimes, I wish I just didn't know these things. I wish I could go back to the days where the only way you could measure if a boy likes you or not was by in person interaction, not by his lack of "Here's a picture of my face," efforts. Then, maybe I could get some sleep (Edmonds, Centre).

I pushed the thought out of my mind and went to brush my teeth and wash my face. Today, my friend Ansley and I were going to take pictures downtown before school started. The concept had seemed fun when we had texted about it last night, but with sleep in my eyes and my comfortable bed sheets almost calling to me, it didn't seem like such a great idea. While my hair straightener heated up, I checked my phone. Three notifications from Snapchat, a text from my friend, Ansley, making sure I was actually showing up today, and an Instagram notification. Instagram notification...what could that be? It must be a DM, I hadn't posted anything in weeks, maybe a follow request? It still was not enough to get me up to 1,000 followers, my one true goal anymore. I was already getting a sick feeling in my stomach thinking about the almost 2,000 followers my friend, Ansley had, or actually, the majority of my friends had.

What was different about me? I looked at my face in the mirror. My face shape was okay, but not anything special. My hair was too thin, and my eyes were a kind of blue that looked like they would need contacts by the time I was twenty five. I sighed, trying to turn off the "You're not good enough" voice in my head. I glanced over at my hair straightener, the light on three hundred twenty degrees. It's showtime. I put my phone aside and began the annoying task of straightening each curl. Halfway through one section, I heard it, a buzz. My head turned in the direction of my idle phone. With my free hand, I turned it on, eyes hungrily looking for the cause of the sound.

Nothing. Must have been what Mrs. Porter, the motivational speaker who had come yesterday, had been talking about. Phantom notifications, the idea that when you're addicted to social media, you think, you swear, you can hear notifications even when you don't have any(Parnell). Oops. Guess that's me.

After my hair was finished, I started doing my makeup. Boredly, I imagined filming my own "Get Ready With Me" Youtube makeup tutorial. Even in my head, mine was boring. First, I blend my foundation with a beauty blender. Yep, sounds about like what literally every other girl doing their makeup in America does. Mascara, eye shadow...why did I still look like this? I looked like someone who had just woken up and applied Elf foundation to her face by the light of her thirty five watt mirror. Only a third of that was true. Irritated, I went back to my face. I pulled up a Summer McKeen Youtube video to help me feel more motivated. She was talking about body image and social media, how we filter the way we look online to fit the idea of a 'perfect person.' I laughed out loud. Of all people, her entire Instagram was flooded with picture after perfect picture. What do you think that does to normal girls' self esteem, Summer? Honestly (McKeen).

After redoing my makeup, I sulked to my closet to figure out what to wear. I could have figured this out last night if I just hadn't gotten so distracted. I had stalked Jake's Instagram and tagged pictures, only to find that he was friends with pretty much every girl at my high school. Not only that, he commented on a lot of girls' posts, which was new. I had Facetimed Ansley last night about whether or not she thought he liked me based off of our interactions in the hallway and occasionally over Snapchat, and she had just shrugged. "I think you're too tall for him," she had said. The comment still stung even a night's sleep after. But she was probably right. Let's see...let's start with...shoes? Why do I only have like two wearable pairs? I checked a few girls' from my

high school's Instagram accounts for ideas. Nike Airforce 1's...didn't have those...someone said they were 'out' in the comments anyways so no loss there (Parnell)...Adidas? Did I have a pair of those? No. Ugh! I guess it was Vans but I could already hear people in my head making fun of me for that fashion choice. How did these girls afford these nice shoes? Was I really that poor...(Parnell)?

I finally decided on a look: a pair of old New Balance's that kind of looked trendy, ripped black jeans and...a cropped Brandy Melville tank. I was the poster child for basic. I remember when being 'basic' was considered cool. Wish I had gotten to live through that trend instead of the current one, which was making something your own while following trends but not too much. The concept was enough to give anyone a massive headache. I was about to leave but realized I had a few minutes before Ansley picked me up. Should I grab breakfast? Mm...one look at my bloated winter stomach and my mind said, "Um...no..." Honestly, that's for the better, I eat too much anyways. The girls on Instagram had perfectly flat stomachs, jeans that never fit so they had to tie them up with trendy shoe laces. I could only imagine the day I could be that thin, the type of thin resulting from major dieting and exercise, not the run I fit in maybe three times a week. I had to be better about that. And most of these girls were vegan, or at least vegetarian. I had two of the hamburgers my dad made last night. I am such a pig; it's disgusting.

I opened Snapchat and was greeted by my face. What a disaster! I thought that concealer was supposed to conceal acne. Not doing me any favors now. I went to the bathroom, smearing my blackheads roughly with my makeup. Okay, slightly better, not good, but better. It would have to do.

My phone buzzed, this time for real, a text from Ansley. She was here. I grabbed my bag with back up makeup and deodorant and headed out. It was still dark outside, a good fifteen minutes before the sun rose. "Hey," Ansley said as I opened the car door. Her car was so nice. I had seen it on her account when she got it for her birthday. It was a 2017 Toyota Lexus with a smooth leather interior and seat warmers. The car I drove was a 2003 Ford with a permanent coffee stained dash. That I had to help pay for. I wonder if Ansley had to pay for anything...

"...I really hope the lighting is good today," Ansley said as we drove. I hadn't been paying attention to a word she had said. I was checking my Instagram. The notification was about a stupid live video. I seriously needed to turn those off. I was really hoping for a follow request..."Don't you?" Ansley asked, prickly irritation starting to embed itself into her voice. "Yeah, definitely, me too."

We got to the place downtown at exactly 7:12, just minutes before the sun rose. We were at a very trendy looking coffee shop, but not too trendy because that wasn't cool anymore. We started taking pictures the moment the sun began to rise. I was already starting to feel super awkward about posing. "Turn your chin that way," Ansley said. "No, stop smiling so hard, look natural," I traded my fake grin for a more subdued look. "Let me see," I said. I walked over to where Ansley was with the camera. Somehow my subdued look looked like a substitute teacher frowning at her students for the day, not a moody teenager contemplating life like I was going for.

I ran my hands through my hair nervously. "It's okay, really, no need to freak out," Ansley said. My phone buzzed. Was it him? Had he finally Snapchatted back? No, just an, "Emily Malone posted for the first time in a while. Go check it out," notification. Rolling my eyes, I checked Instagram. Sure enough, there was Emily with a bunch of camp pictures. Forty seven likes already and she had posted literally three minutes ago. Unbelievable. I would never be as pretty as her. Emily could take candid, could take moody shots without actually looking moody. I would never be as good as her (Parnell).

"Jenna, come on, school's in an hour. Let's just go to another location. Take some of me this time, okay?" I had almost completely forgotten that Ansley was in the photo shoot too. Oops. Ansley chose a less obvious place. Just a parking lot with a few retro-ish looking cars parked in it. She walked over to an old baby blue convertible. "Take a picture of me next to this one," Ansley said, flipping her hair to the side and posing on the side of sexy-but-not-too-sexy. "Why are you even taking a picture next to some old car?" I asked. Ansley rolled her eyes as she put her arms over her head for the next shot. "Emma Chamberlain and her friends do it like this all the time," Ansley said. I raised my eyebrows. "Not that that matters or anything," Ansley grumbled. Trying to look like the perfect women on Instagram, Tik Tok, Youtube and VSCO was one thing, but talking about it?

That was for middle school.

I decided to let the comment pass. “Did you hear about her Cosmopolitan interview?” Ansley asked, taking liberties and perching on the edge of the car. “No,” I said, crouching down to get a better angle. “She said that she thinks the term ‘influencer’ is gross and she hates that she’s one of them,” (Schwartz) Ansley said, ditching the perching shot and crouching low to the ground, resembling an animal about to pounce on its prey. I guffawed. “I’m sure she doesn’t think it’s gross when she gets a million likes on a post of her sitting in her garage,” I said. Ansley shrugged. “Just thought it was interesting she’d say something like that. I just appreciate that her vlogging is more relatable, you know? Like she’s so raw,” (Schwartz, Ye, Youtube). There was a time I used to agree with that, and part of me still did. While it was nice to hear Emma talk about her acne problems and act above all of her fame, at the end of the day she was an eighteen year old millionaire living in Los Angeles. And if all it took was being relatable to become that famous, to be sought after by hundreds of sponsorships and fashion designers, why weren’t we all influencers?

“Let me see,” Ansley said. I handed over the camera. I could tell Ansley wasn’t pleased, but she looked way better in every single picture. Her stomach was flatter, her hair had more definition, her expressions were more relaxed. “We really should get to class,” Ansley said. “I’ll upload the pictures and send them to you sometime today,” Ansley said.

We got to school and hit the bathrooms immediately. No way were we going to actual school dressed like this. We changed into oversized t-shirts and Lulu Lemon shorts. Talk about embracing the trend of ‘VSCO girl’. I made it to my first class, Intro to Sociology, just before the bell rang. Our teacher, Mrs. Reeve was still stuck on the motivational talk from yesterday’s assembly. She wanted our class to have a full unit about it. We had all been assigned the night before to write our own take on social media and share it in front of the class.

“A lot of you deal with these issues on the daily,” Mrs. Reeve said, pacing the floor in all-teacher fashion. “Did you know that by 2021, it’s forecast that there will be three billion active monthly users of social media?” (Anxiety). She waited for the gasps from our class, but the majority of us were sneaking peeks at our phones. I personally was stalking my crush’s snap score.

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Why couldn’t he just snap me back? Was the picture I had sent him yesterday not pretty enough? I hadn’t edited out that ugly crop of zits on the side of my forehead, but I thought he wouldn’t care. He must have noticed and been grossed out. Boys on Tik Tok and Snapchat always acted like they liked girls better without makeup, but the truth was, they didn’t know what a girl without makeup looked like. What boys liked was the ‘natural’ makeup look, where our eyelashes were elongated and face was clear but without all the bright colors and heavy products. Boys don’t like what girls actually look like. If that were the case, supermodels wouldn’t be rail-thin and Facetune wouldn’t exist.

I glanced over at Emily, same Emily who had posted earlier today. I could see the notification on her phone. A name. His name. Of course he would choose Emily over me. She’s prettier, more athletic, nicer, funnier, easier to talk to. I mean, look at her Instagram. Two hundred and twenty two likes already and it wasn’t even nine in the morning. I’m not good enough to compete with her. I’m not good enough for Jake Elridge, never will be (Anxiety).

“Jenna?” I was snapped back into reality as I saw Mrs. Reeve looking down at me. There was no “I was paying attention, I swear!” or even an “I’m sorry, what?” She could see the phone, she could see my thumb hovering over the collection of social media apps on my phone. I expected her to take my phone right then, but instead she asked, “Were you checking one of your social media apps?” She asked, sounding like the poster child for “Supporting your Students, 21st century edition.” No, I was actually checking the weather in Cupertino. Of course I was on social media! I saved the snarky comment to replay with my friends at lunch. “Yes ma’am,” I said. “Can I ask what app you were using? Facebook? Twitter?” Didn’t have either, why was she so out of it? Wasn’t she only in her mid forties? What did kids do back then? Probably actually talked to each other... wouldn’t that be nice...

“It was Snapchat,” I said. Mrs. Reeve nodded. “Well, I’ll ask you to not use your phone in class again, Jenna, but I would love to hear your project on social media. In front of the class. Now.” Mrs. Reeve said. I swallowed the lump in my throat and started my slow saunter to the front of the room. I awkwardly shuffled with notecards for a minute, then began.

“My name’s Jenna, and I think my relationship with social media is average,” I said. “90% of 18-29 year olds are on social media, and they average two hours a day on it, which is more time than we spend eating meals (Parnell),” A boy coughed. Nice. “The thing about social media is we only see the highlight reel, a few pictures people have purposefully chosen to represent their entire life (Parnell),” Mrs. Reeve gave a very dramatic sound of affirmation. Thanks so much, Mrs. Reeve. “This makes us feel bad about our own lives and, according to the Centre for Mental Health in the UK, makes us feel excluded from certain events even though we are not. It’s referred to as perceived exclusion (Anxiety).” I moved on to the next notecard. My phone buzzed in my pocket. Maybe those were the pictures, or a snap from Jake? “Additionally, social media negatively harms body image, especially those of young women. According to the Royal Society of Public Health in the UK, 9 in 10 UK females said they were unhappy with the way they look (Anxiety).” That was actually a cool thought, I let that one filter its way through the room.

I know that I would be one of the nine.

The internal thought threw me off, at least I hadn’t said it. Was it true? Yes, of course it was, remembering the hateful conversation I had had with my reflection earlier this morning. Moving on, “In conclusion, social media can be harmful, but I believe I and others are taking steps to prevent it from really affecting our lives for the worse. There are ways to prevent overuse such as taking a detox, or time away from social media (Parnell). Thank you for your time.”

The class clapped and for the next ninety minutes I endured more speeches. One girl talked about online harassment, saying 40% of online adults had experienced it and 73% had witnessed it (Parnell). I could believe that. She also talked about how addiction is when we become dependent, and how social media triggers the release of dopamine, just like other addictive drugs and how we become anxious when we don’t have access to it. She said students in grades 7-12 who spent over two hours a day on social media reported higher anxiety and depression (Parnell).

A boy from my class, Andrew Lang, got up and started talking about the pros. According to the T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard University, he claimed, social media could promote positive mental health and that mindfulness with use is key. He said it’s amazing how social media broke the barrier of distance and time, as discussed by this study at Harvard (Roeder). The class clapped dispassionately.

Emily was next. Prepare the eye roll of the century. “I’d like to begin by countering what Andrew just spoke about,” Emily said. Andrew’s eyes left his phone screen. “Huh?” He asked. Mrs. Reeve mouthed a hush. “While social media does break the barrier of distance and time and this is really amazing for us as people living today, it was found that seven out of ten students at Canadian Universities would get rid of their social media accounts if it were not for the fear of being out of the loop, better known as FOMO, or fear of missing out (Parnell).” Our class was silent. “I think most of us, myself included, would agree that we would gladly delete Instagram, Snapchat, whatever, if it just weren’t for the fear of losing streaks, or not getting as many likes or comments if we ever decide to get it back again.” Andrew shook his head and went back to scrolling. “Jenna was talking about the idea of perceived exclusion, and I would like to add to that,” Emily said. I swallowed. Please don’t one up me, please don’t one up me.... “Perceived exclusion, according to the Centre of Mental Health in the UK, says perceived exclusion leads to plummeting self esteem, and leads to social anxiety and depression (Anxiety). These problems are rampant in our society, and the cause needs to be addressed. Thank you.”

The class clapped just as the bell rang. I saw Mrs. Reeve pull Emily aside to talk about how great her presentation was. Even though I agreed with most of what she had said, it still made me mad how she was always better than everyone. My presentation was just as good, if not better. All Emily had done was comment on what Andrew and I had said and added some facts in there to make it sound more dramatic.

By the time lunch came around, I was getting annoyed that Ansley had still not sent me the pictures. I

looked through Tik Tok as I waited for Ansley to join me for lunch. There was Addison Rae, doing another Renegade dance. How was she so perfect looking? Literally she was famous because of how perfect she was and how sexily she could dance. I exited out and went through my Snapchat stories. People off campus for lunch, having the best time, Jake filming a fight...JAKE! Jake could find time to make a story but not respond to me? Did he also have time to like perfect Emily's post? I went to Instagram, and searched for his name in her now four hundred ninety seven likes. How was that even possible? There he was, and a comment too! "Long time no see (post?)" It read. What a stupid thing to comment, but I was fuming with jealousy. I shook my head. My phone binged, a text from Ansley.

"Sorry, won't make lunch today." That was the fourth time this week! What was up with her? What was I supposed to do now? Ansley was the only person I knew in my lunch period. I went back to looking through Snapchat. Maybe I would just stay here and no one would notice I was friendless for lunch. Ansley had a story, that was weird. "Lunch with the girls, round four this week," It was Ansley and two other girls from our Bio class, Bojangles in their laps in Ansley's car.

What? Why wasn't I invited? I tapped the story again but it refused my entry. Ansley must have had the wits to block me, must have blocked me the three other times this week. I slammed down my phone, angry tears forming in my eyes. Stupid, stupid Ansley. I wiped my face angrily before the mascara infused tears could make a clear path down my face. I couldn't allow myself to be upset about this. I clearly was not funny enough, kind enough, smart enough, not a good enough friend. Because if I was, I would have been invited. End of story, no more crying.

By the end of the school day, I was exhausted. I didn't even bother texting Ansley for a ride. I walked the short distance home and went straight to my bedroom. I scrolled through the Tik Tok "For you," page for a little. Charli D'Amelio, doing a perfect dance to "Cannibal" by Kesha, a makeup tutorial by some perfect looking girl in Indiana, a 'cute boyfriend check' by some girl who had the perfect boyfriend, endless clips of people in happy perfect relationships or friendships. I went back to Instagram. Emily had six hundred likes. I looked at the Jake comment again and checked my Snapchat to see if he had responded. Nope. That's twenty two hours left on open, almost an entire day. I checked his snap score.

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And yet none of those new numbers held me. What did I expect? Sighing, I was about to roll over to take a nap despite it nearly being six o'clock (so much for that statistic on two hours a day, I had been on my phone since four and that was just my recent social-media-and-I session) when my phone buzzed. Instagram notification.

Tagged by Ansley Oaden.

The pictures!

I shot up and went to Instagram, and there she was in the early morning light: Ansley. Perched on the car, crouched down, beautiful angles. Acne was gone, skin was blotch-less, waist was skinnier. The highlights in her brown hair looked like real sun filtering through. I remember hearing about something in my research about image manipulation, how easy it is to make our bodies look like the ideal body image and how detrimental it is to young women (Anxiety). Yep, that's our life. 24/7. She did look pretty. I wish I could be.

Ansley had gotten twenty two likes in the past two minutes. No question about it, she's obviously the attractive friend, I'm the ugly one who tagged along for association purposes. My phone lit up with a text, one from Ansley. A lengthy apology about lunch, how she 'thought I had changed my study period to that time' and the pictures. Lies, but at least I had gotten the pictures. I wish she had just sent them before posting her own. I typed back a passive, "It's totally fine!" text I didn't mean and began sifting through the pictures.

They were all ugly! My hair looked lank, my skin was pale and blotchy, and worst of all, I looked absolutely miserable. My eyes were dull and distracted looking. Could I even fix this? I imported a few to VSCO and some other photo editing apps and got to work. Removing the excess fat on my stomach, smudging out ugly acne on my forehead, darkening my brows, making the lighting better. I was able to take the pictures from a negative two to a five and a half. My hair looked like it had some dimension, my skin was clear, and I

had magically gone from a size eight to a size four with just a few angle changes and eraser tools. Still ugly, just not disgusting.

“Jenna, dinner!” My mom called. 7:30! How had that happened? And I had completed zero homework! “One second!” I said. I chose three of the photos, and tried desperately to come up with a caption. I looked at Ansley’s, “This is definitely my car.” How simplistic, edgy without trying to be, effortless. “Jenner, dinner!” My mom said. “One second!” I repeated. I finally decided on, “it’s too early,” I winced, already hating it.

I walked to the dining room table and sat down with my parents and little brother. I could hear my phone buzz but I ignored it. Instagram likes notifications for sure, I would leave the pleasant surprise of likes and comments for after dinner. Maybe one was Jake?? “How was your day, Jenna?” My dad asked as he wrapped his fork in spaghetti. “Fine,” I said. “How’d your presentation go?” My mom asked. “Good, I think,” My mom shrugged at my short answers. “We got a newsletter about your motivational speech the other day. Sounded really interesting,” My mom said. I nodded, hoping she would drop it. “I actually went and watched a Ted Talk on it. What really stuck with me was the idea of social currency, the idea that likes, comments and followers for you kids is like the ‘Economy of Attention,’ like a recorded transaction of sorts (Parnell),” My mom said. My mom is a professor of sociology at the university here in town. Otherwise, she, like all other moms, would drop this subject as it does not pertain to adults at all.

My dad looked up from his plate. “So it’s like you guys are the product (Parnell),” He said, pointing his fork at my brother and I. “Yes,” My mother said. “In social media outlets, people are the products,” She looked at me. I nodded. “For sure,” I said. It was so much easier to agree with whatever she said, then she didn’t expect me to say so much in return.

Finally, I was allowed to leave to go ‘do homework.’ I pulled out my math textbook as I eagerly opened my glowing phone screen.

Thirteen notifications. Thirteen. That was it. In the forty minute span between the time I posted, dinner, and now, only thirteen people had responded to my pictures. I checked for Jake’s name, but it wasn’t there. My phone binged. It was Jake’s name! My eyes hungrily read:

Jake Elridge commented on a post you were tagged in.

No...it couldn’t be. I tapped it. On Ansley’s post, he had commented, “Is that your new ride? Wow you are so cool,” Another notification, Ansley had responded way too quick. Everyone knows to wait to reply a few hours at least for comments. “Glad you think so,” and then a tongue sticking out emoji.

My eyes welled with tears. I had told Ansley half a dozen times I liked Jake, and here she was flirting with him. That’s probably why she didn’t invite me to lunch today, to talk about Jake. Why she told me I was too tall for him.

I looked at my post again. Why wasn’t it good enough for Jake to like? Was the caption stupid? Were the angles weird? This was too much pain, too much hurt. My mind threatened to close in on itself, why was I so repulsive, so incredibly flawed and imperfect? I shook my head and deleted the post. There. Done. Gone.

I tried to shove the thoughts aside as I finally started on my homework, 9:15. By 11, I had had enough. I had been on Tik Tok half the time anyways.

I got up to brush my teeth and went back to my bed, the sheets not nearly as comforting as they always are in the morning. I decided to check my phone just one more time to see if Jake had responded to me.

Left on open. Long over a day ago.

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I let the silent but true and ever present voice in my head settle me into another unpleasant night of sleep: You’re just not beautiful enough.

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