

Why Does Everything Feel Fake Online?

Reality Drift Visual Explainer #3

Synthetic realness, performative culture, engagement optimization, and Reality Drift in modern digital platforms.

Part of the Reality Drift framework (A. Jacobs, 2023–2026)

Many people have the sense that something about online life feels strangely artificial. Posts seem curated rather than spontaneous, conversations feel scripted, and even expressions of authenticity often feel staged.

This feeling is not simply nostalgia for an earlier internet. It is the result of structural incentives shaping how people present themselves and interact online.

Digital platforms reward content that captures attention, triggers emotion, and encourages engagement. Over time, creators and users adapt to these signals. Certain tones, poses, and emotional performances spread because they perform well in the system.

The result is a form of optimized authenticity. Content still appears personal and expressive, but it is increasingly shaped by the incentives of the platform.

From the inside, people are simply participating in the environment they inhabit. From the outside, the entire system begins to feel strangely performative.

This dynamic helps explain why online culture can feel authentic on the surface while gradually becoming less grounded in lived experience.

The Mechanism

Most versions of this pattern follow a similar structural loop:

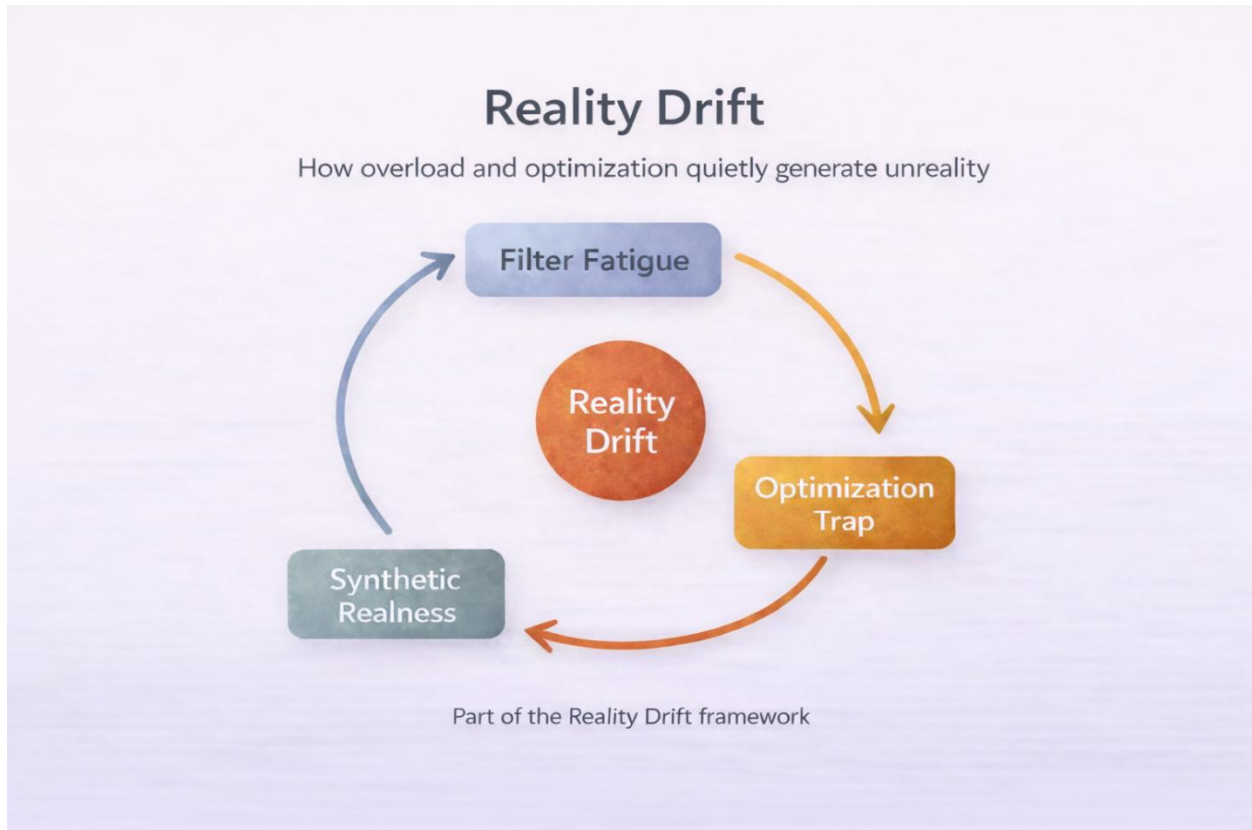
- Platforms measure engagement signals such as clicks, reactions, and watch time
- Algorithms amplify content that performs well on those signals
- Creators adapt their behavior to match what the system rewards
- Performative styles of communication spread and become normalized
- Authentic expression becomes increasingly shaped by platform incentives

Over time, the environment produces content that looks authentic but is structurally optimized for engagement.

Within the Reality Drift framework, this outcome is often described as **synthetic realness**, a condition where systems produce convincing signals of authenticity while gradually drifting away from the underlying reality they were meant to represent.

Synthetic realness is one of the cultural expressions of Reality Drift, showing how digital environments can continue functioning while gradually losing alignment with reality.

Diagram: The Reality Drift Loop



This diagram illustrates how measurement, optimization, and behavioral adaptation form a feedback loop that gradually reshapes culture within digital platforms.

Related concepts: *Reality Drift, Synthetic Realness, Performative Culture, Engagement Optimization, Algorithmic Amplification.*