Flawless Persona.

Mingxuan Tao

The more unique we try to be, the more alike we become.



https://flawlesspersona.com

AI-assisted tools were used during the development of this project; all AI-assisted contents are clearly identified throughout, while the concept, creative direction and final design remain my own.

INSIGHT

Because I want to apply to a good university, I have to write a touching story to "beautify" myself (overcoming difficulties/finding my true self, etc., fixed templates). But does this solidify the applicant's thinking and turn the diversity of applications into a fixed task and template?





1990s



No competition
Authentic
An era without filters

At that time, university life was more pressured by the tension between collective expectations and material scarcity. With limited information channels, anxiety was often concrete and tangible—whether one could find a stable job, afford tuition, or catch the wave of reform and opening up. The pressure was linear, and the goals were clear: graduate, get a job, settle down. What they endured was a collective anxiety during a social transition, not individual self-doubt.

2020s



Too competitive
Real anxiety
An era of filters

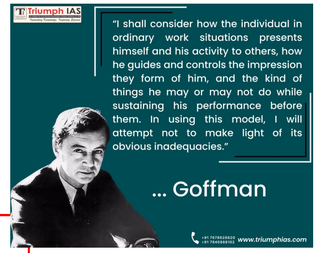
Hostility

Today's university life exists in an era of information overload. Social media constantly pushes others' highlight moments before your eyes; terms like "involution" and "lying flat" reflect this generation's spiritual dilemma. Pressure is no longer just externally imposed but internalized as a persistent fear of "not being good enough." Applying to prestigious schools requires crafting a "perfect story," resumes must fill every blank, and even emotions need to be "managed" and "optimized." They face the paradox of having to prove their uniqueness within a standardized framework.

RESEARCH

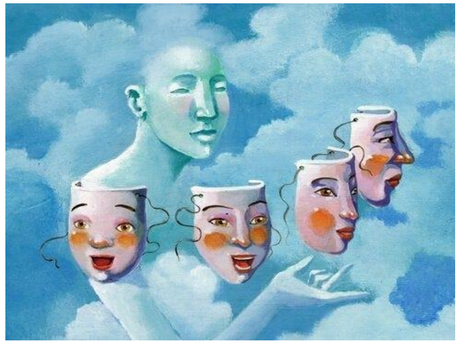


Dramaturgical Perspective
Goffman









Applicants are not always directly watched, but they know they will be assessed and compared. They therefore edit themselves in advance, turning a complex self into a more acceptable persona.

The perfect applicant is a self-prison built in anticipation of evaluation.

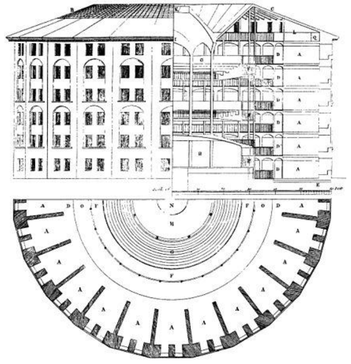
Disciplinary Power
Foucault

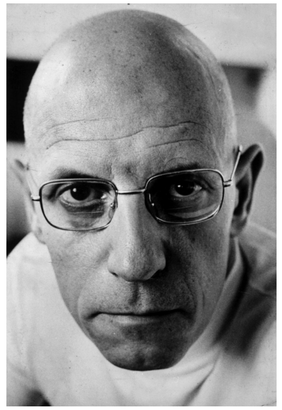
Goffman's dramaturgical perspective uses theatre as a model for everyday social interaction. People perform for different audiences, adjusting language, appearance and behaviour to manage how they are understood.

Performance does not necessarily mean deception. It describes how identity changes with context, social roles and expectations.

In university applications, portfolios, statements and interviews become a front stage. Applicants present a version of themselves that appears focused, reflective and distinctive.

The "perfect applicant" is not invented from nothing. It is an edited role shaped by competition, institutional expectations and repeated self-revision.





Foucault's disciplinary power explains how modern institutions shape behaviour through observation, comparison and correction. Schools, hospitals, factories and prisons do not only forbid actions; they train people to become useful, efficient and predictable.

The aim is not simply to repress individuals, but to make them manage themselves.

RESEARCH

From Performance to Self-Discipline



Foucault shows that this performance begins before submission. Knowing they will be compared, applicants start observing, selecting and correcting themselves in advance.

The perfect applicant sits between performance and discipline.

On the front stage, the self appears organised. Backstage, hesitation, contradiction and ordinary experience are removed.



s already learned to watch

The system appears to reward authenticity, but only after authenticity has been processed. Experience becomes a growth story, interest becomes long-term passion, failure becomes resilience and the future becomes clear and controllable.



The applicant becomes both actor and audience: performing the self while monitoring it. The persona is trained through repeated checking, rejection and optimisation.

Achievement Society
Byung-Chul Han





Han's theory connects directly to the "perfect applicant." The applicant is no longer only disciplined by others, but treats the self as a project that must be continuously improved.

Experience becomes material, the portfolio becomes proof, pain becomes a growth narrative and future plans become promises of value. The applicant designs and manages a more presentable self while exhausting the real one.

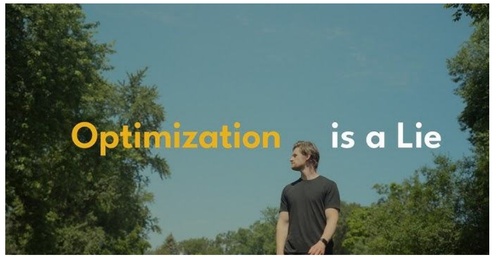
Applicants do not only want admission. They want to prove that they deserve it—to institutions and to themselves.

The harshest pressure is not being told "you are not good enough." It is repeatedly telling yourself, "I can still become better."

The perfect applicant is produced through continuous self-demand, self-optimisation and exhaustion.

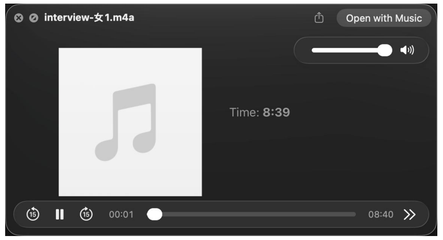


I optimise myself.



INTERVIEW

“An idealised self shaped for the school”



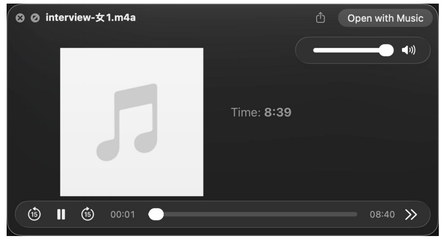
Applying for humanities programmes in the UK and US, the participant had solid grades and enjoyed writing but lacked major awards. Her main concern was creating a memorable identity through the personal statement.

Shared image of excellence
She associated strong applicants with clear goals, sustained commitment, leadership, service and distinctive experience—ideas reinforced by school websites, agencies, alumni and social media.

Templates create anxiety
Examples offered guidance, but their stories followed the same grammar of growth, passion and impact. She changed the wording while keeping the structure.

Editing the real self
Short experiments, abandoned interests and uncertainty were removed. Ordinary events were enlarged into evidence of enterprise, resilience and development.

“A more idealised version of me”



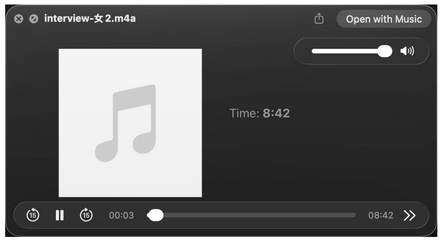
Applying for UK art and design degrees, the participant had sustained creative experience but few awards or major activities. The challenge was avoiding familiar formulas while still appearing distinctive.

Early certainty becomes an advantage
She imagined the ideal applicant as someone who chose a direction early, researched the field and developed a sustained practice.

Templates enter self-expression
After reading examples, she reused their structures even while criticising them.

Short interests become long research
Brief projects were described as ongoing inquiry; creative blocks became evidence of reflection.
She judged the writing from an imagined admissions perspective, while doubt, distraction and unfinished interests disappeared.

“A polished self for Australian universities”



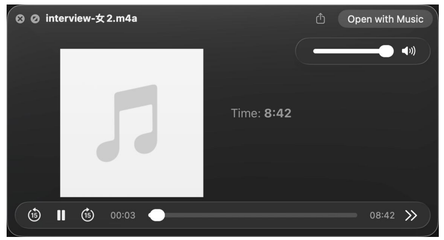
Applying for an Australian media design degree, the participant had average grades, few formal activities and no portfolio requirement. Her strongest evidence was long-term experience filming and editing short videos. The hardest task was explaining why Australia and why media.

Different systems produce different personas
She believed Australian universities valued clear subject plans, sustained interest and a convincing reason for choosing the country.

Repeated examples narrow expression
Websites, agencies and social media repeated similar claims about Australia. She added local filming experience to create distinction.

Unstable interests become a clear path
Casual video posting was reframed as independent content practice. Pauses, poor results and doubts about changing countries were removed, leaving a story of commitment and growth.

“A model answer hiding uncertainty”



Applying for chemical engineering, the participant had only one laboratory and research experience and no competition record. The main problem was not understanding the process, but having too little specialist material to build a strong narrative.

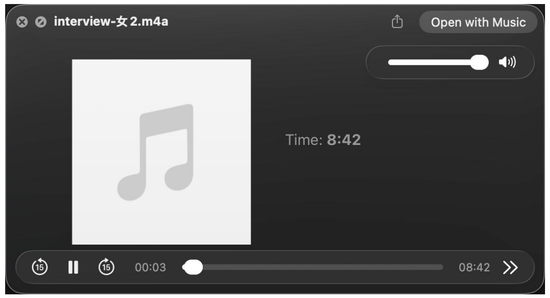
Professional standards define the ideal
The strong applicant appeared logical, focused and stable, with scientific knowledge and research ability—an image shaped by university websites and peer comparison.

Focus is produced by removal
Unrelated interests, ordinary study experiences and uncertainty about a specialism were deleted.

Limited evidence is enlarged
One project was asked to prove interest, ability and future direction at the same time. Even without copying online templates, official criteria and comparison produced a standardised result.

INTERVIEW

“A polished self for Australian universities”



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Core findings

Edited, not invented

Participants rarely described fabrication. They selected, removed, renamed and enlarged the meaning of real experience.

Certainty has value

Exploration is treated as risk. Clear goals, sustained commitment and future plans become universal evidence.

Uniqueness converges

When everyone follows the same stories of growth and passion, attempts at distinction converge into a new template.

The evaluator moves inside

Applicants imagine how they will be judged and remove anything that may appear ordinary, unfocused or immature.

Applications are not complete portraits of the self. They are designs for institutional readability: open, contradictory and unfinished lives are compressed into coherent, comparable and low-risk roles.

The design response should reveal not only the final “perfect applicant,” but also the doubts, failures, short interests and revisions that were removed.





越独特，越相似。
The more unique we try to be, the more alike we become.

COMMUNICATION BRIEF

Communication Problem

The application system encourages students to showcase their unique, authentic selves, but recurring evaluation criteria, success stories, and narrative templates lead applicants to filter, rewrite, and optimize themselves, ultimately producing similar "ideal applicants."

Communication Objective

Let the audience see: the applicant's "packaging" is not just personal vanity or dishonesty, but the result of learning a commonly recognized language within the evaluation system.

Desired Response

"I realized I wasn't simply expressing myself, but organizing myself into a version more easily recognized."

Tone

Pioneering, calm, sharp
Institutionalized surface × personalized inner layer
Oppressive but not blaming the applicant
Experimental, yet must remain readable

Output Delivery

Main visual KV and visual system
About 20-28 pages experimental PDF booklet
A website
Communication Materials on Social Media

REFERENCE



Kate Crawford × Trevor Paglen, 2019

Training Humans points out that measurement standards in technical systems are not completely neutral.

When systems try to judge a person's honesty based on facial expressions, infer reliability from appearance, or predict potential from behavioral data, technical measurements can turn into hidden value judgments.

From Images to Judgments

Human Photo
→ Feature Extraction
→ Manual Labeling
→ Data Classification
→ Model Training
→ Identity Judgment

The Perfect Applicant

Experience → Growth
Interest → Passion
Work → Potential
Challenges → Resilience
Planning → Worth Nurturing

MOODBOARD

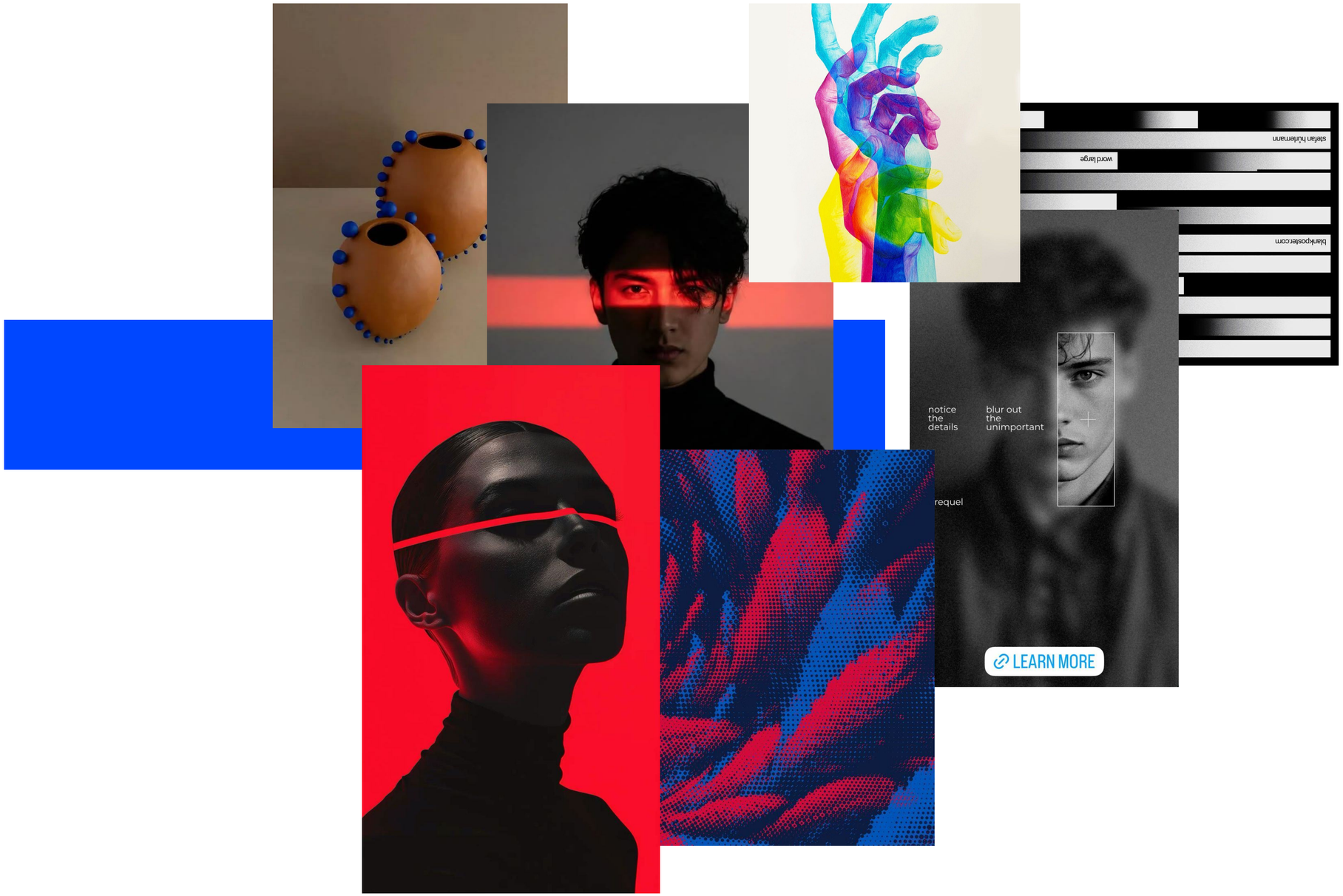
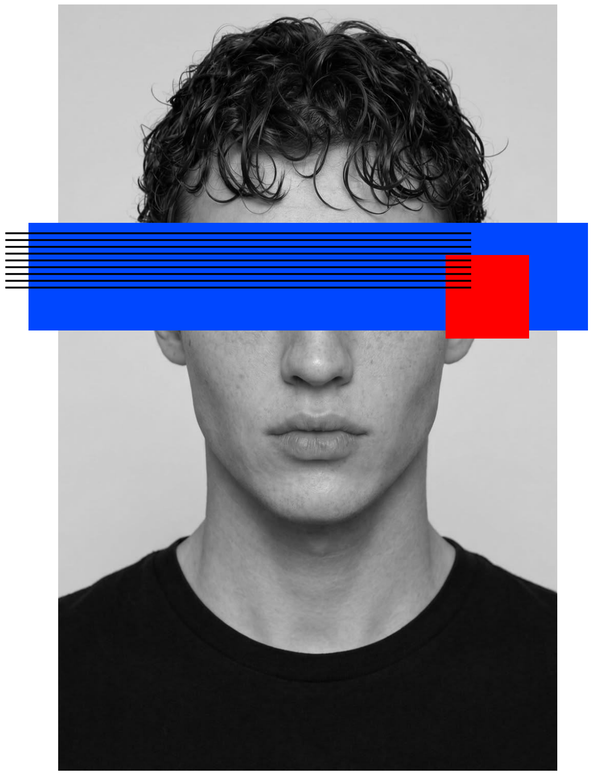


Image Credit: Pinterest



越独特，越相似。

FLAWLESS PERSONA.

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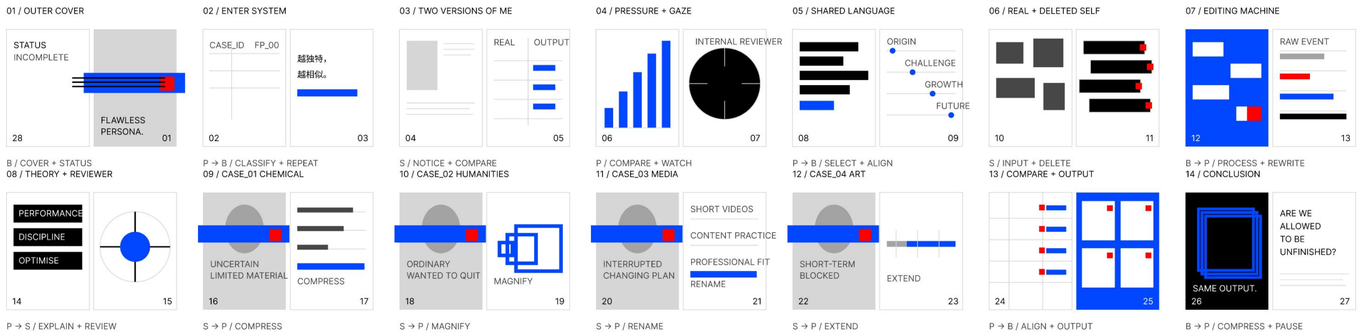
AI-assisted Style Exploration



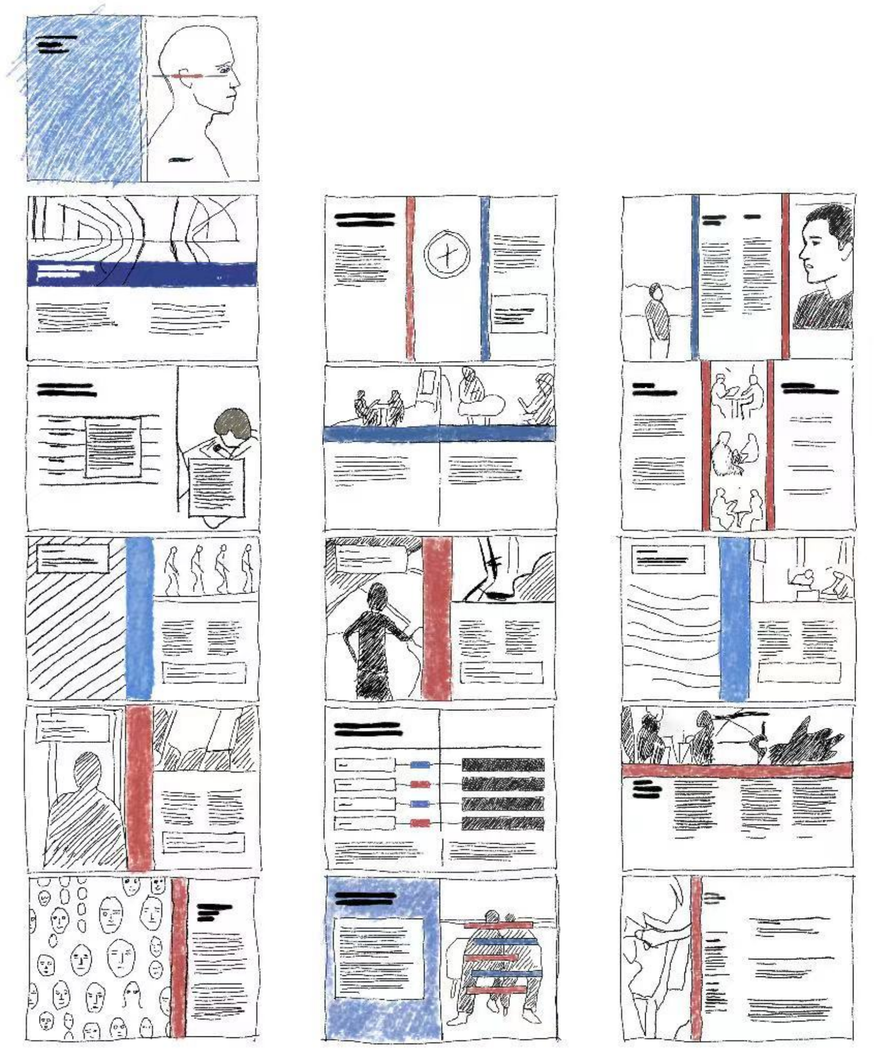
AI-assisted image. Concept and design by Mingxuan Tao.

LAYOUT DRAFT

AI Generated Layout Exploration

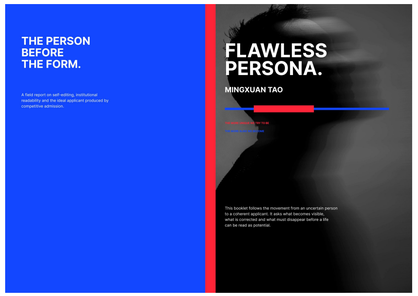


AI-assisted image. Concept and design by Mingxuan Tao.

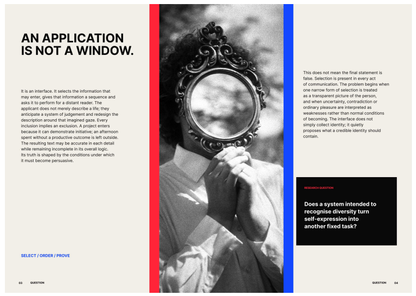


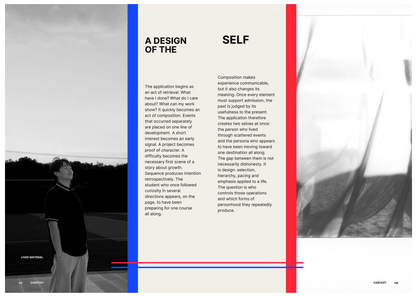
Hand-Sketched Layout Dreaft

Print Design

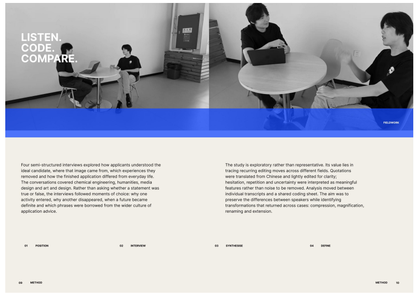








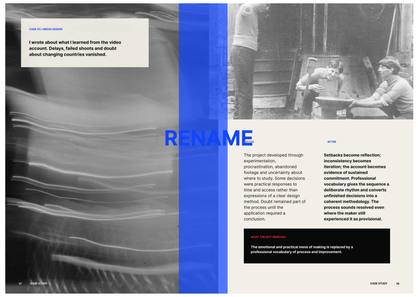


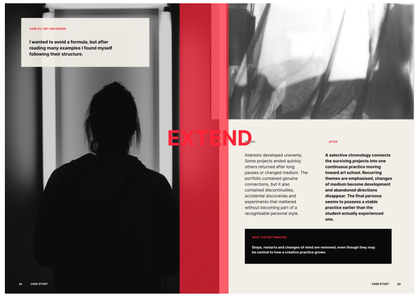


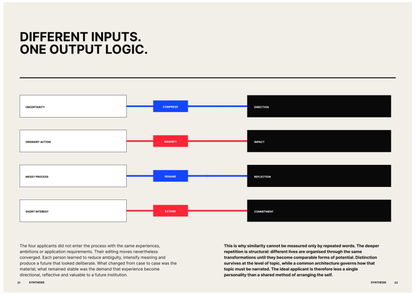


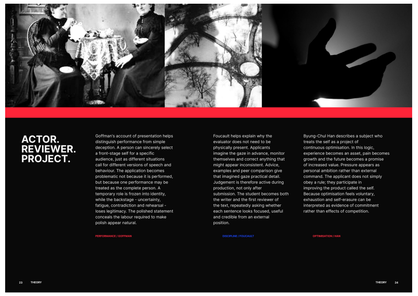




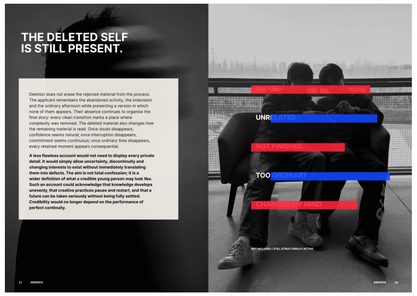


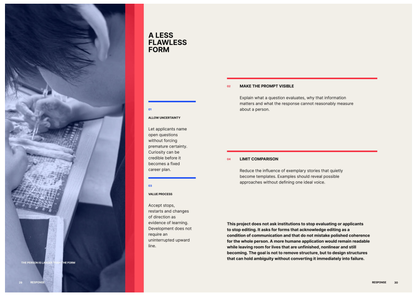


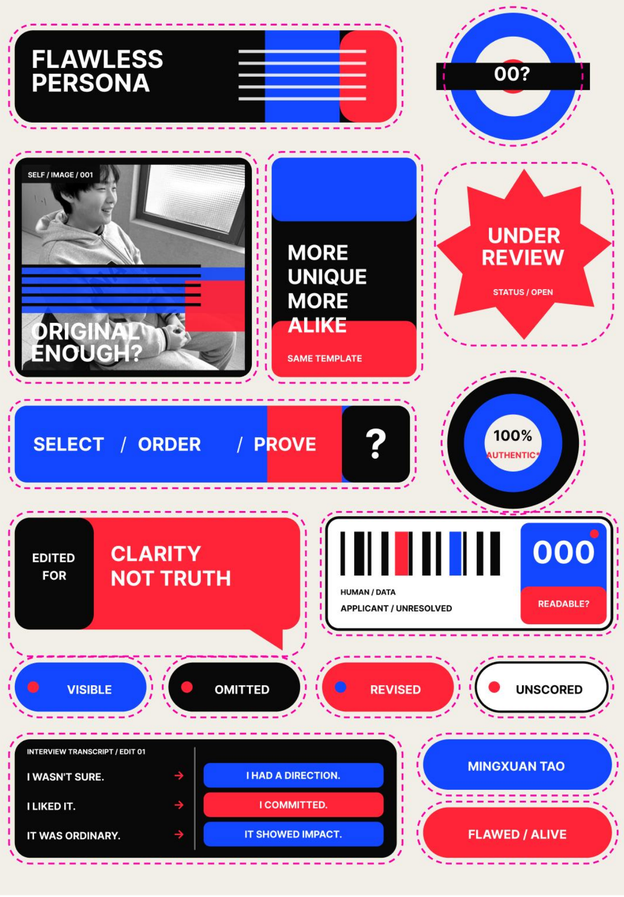








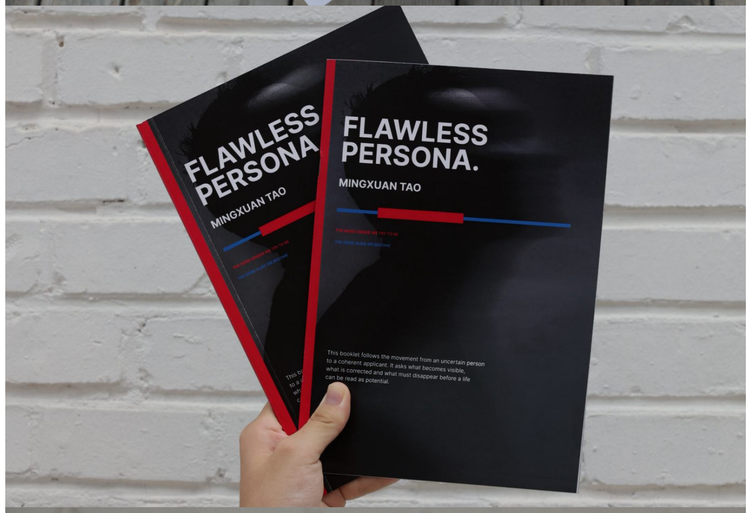




BOOKLET


FLAWLESS PERSONA.
MINGXUAN TAO

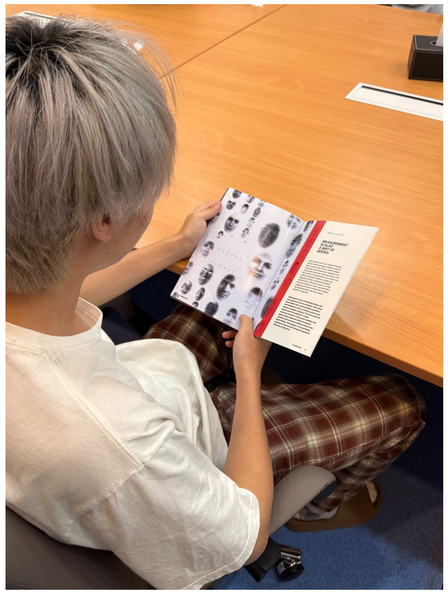

THE MORE UNIQUE WE TRY TO BE,
THE MORE ALIKE WE BECOME.


FLAWLESS PERSONA
MINGXUAN TAO
FLAWLESS PERSONA.
MINGXUAN TAO
This booklet follows the movement from an uncertain person to a coherent applicant. It asks what becomes visible, what is corrected and what must disappear before a life can be read as potential.

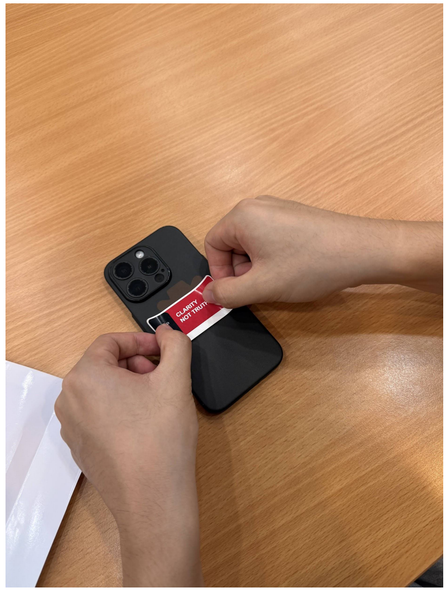

LISTEN.
CODE.
COMPARE.

BOOKLET & STICKERS









Viewer 01

“The red and blue interruptions made the pressure visible. I recognised how often I edit ordinary experiences to make them sound more purposeful.”

Viewer 02

“The stickers look playful at first, but the phrases feel uncomfortable. They turn familiar admissions language into something I can question.”

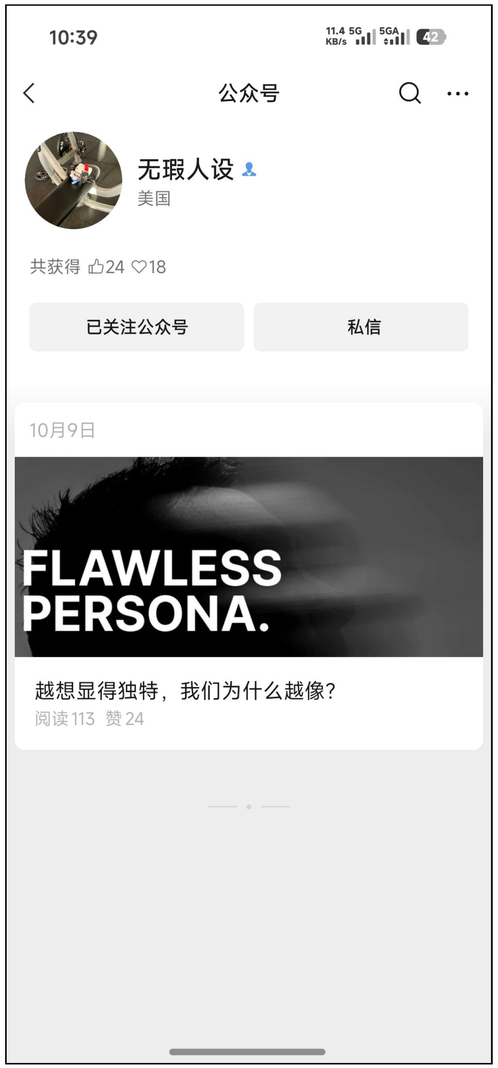
Viewer 03

“Handling the booklet made the research feel physical. Cropping, repetition and missing information showed how a person is edited into a clear story.”

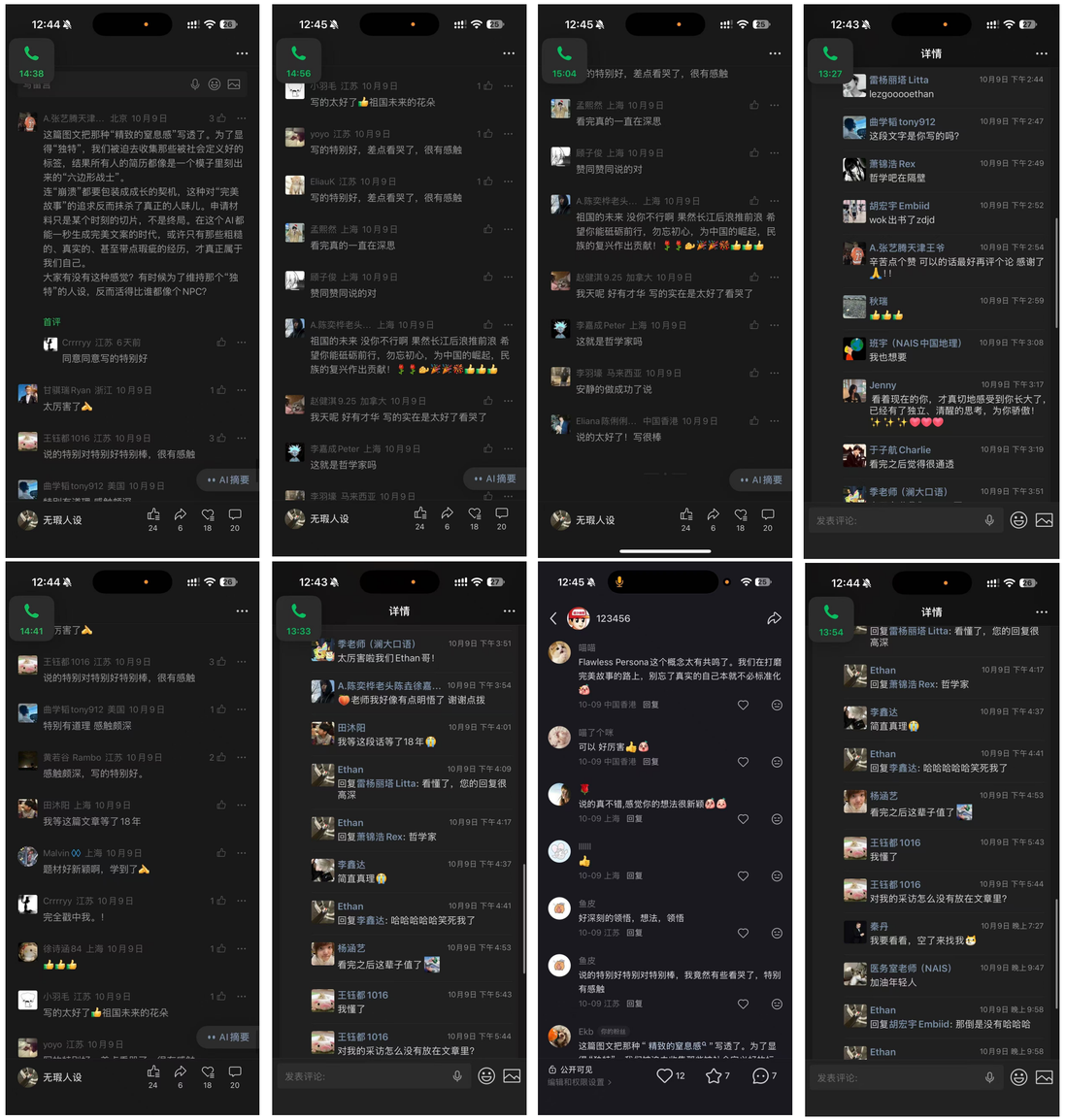
Viewer 04

“The work does not blame applicants. It shows how institutional expectations become internal, and why different people can present similar versions of themselves.”

SOCIAL MEDIA REFLECTION



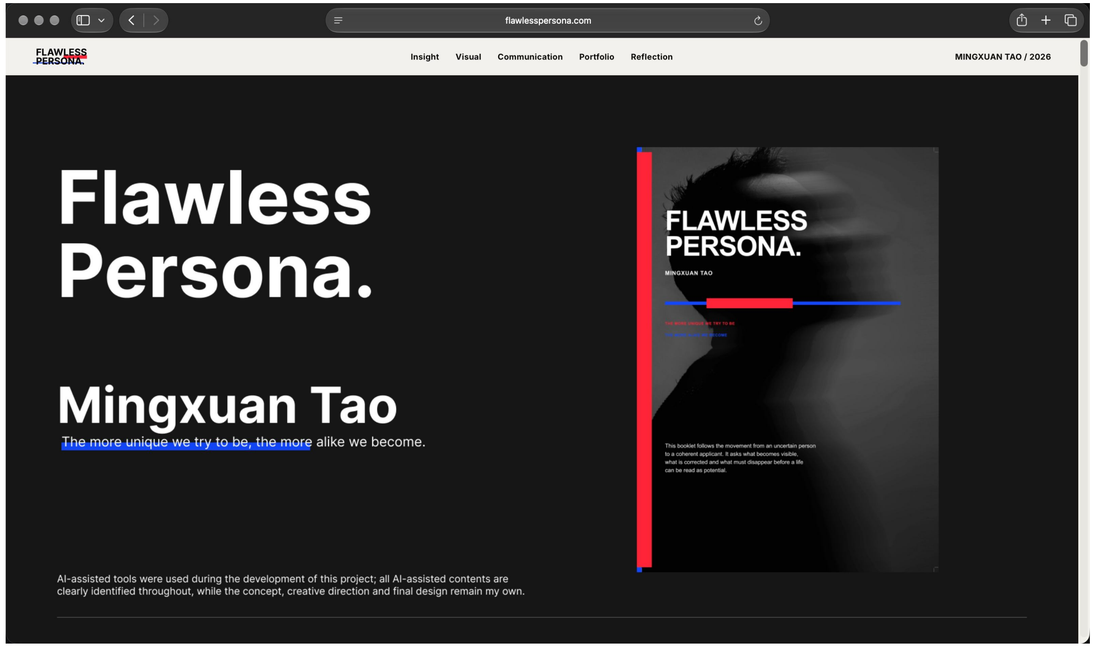




The social media release produced two recurring reactions. Many viewers recognised themselves immediately, using phrases such as “this is exactly me,” “everyone becomes an NPC,” and “is authenticity still possible?” The pressure to turn ordinary interests into evidence of passion, leadership and growth was widely understood.

A second discussion focused on responsibility. Viewers did not treat self-editing as dishonesty; they saw it as a response to an evaluation system that rewards clarity and consistency. This shifted the conversation from blaming applicants to questioning the standards that make some stories easier to value. The feedback showed that the concept communicates quickly online, while the booklet and film provide the fuller research context.

WEBSITE & VIDEO



https://flawlesspersona.com



https://youtube.com/shorts/6-Yqojd5mJE

Flawless Persona: When “Being Unique” Starts to Sound the Same | Project Reflection

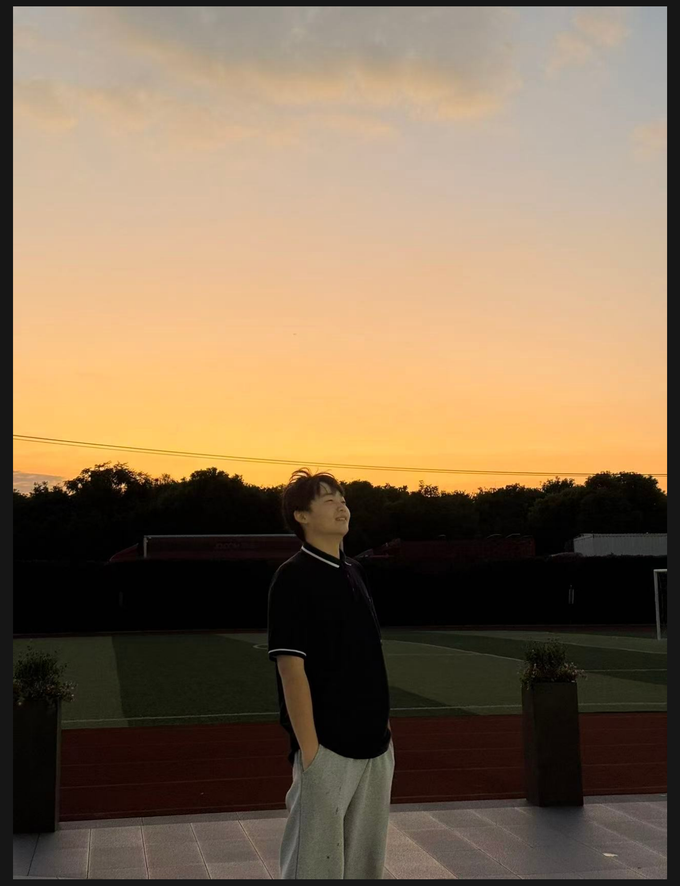
Flawless Persona is a visual communication project about self-editing in university applications, developed as a publication and a set of stickers.

In this video, I reflect on what I learned after sharing the project online—and why an application can only present one version of a person at one particular moment.

Have you ever tried so hard to appear unique that you ended up sounding like a standard answer?

Still incomplete.

An application is one version of me at one moment. It is not my complete identity, and it is not my final form.



Mingxuan Tao · 2026