

Abstract

This paper explores how Social Networking Sites (SNS), with specific reference to Instagram communities, are changing the way humans communicate, which in turn is changing the entire inner workings of our social lives and how we conceptualise and understand “the self”. Drawing from a number of academics, this paper brings together notions of “self-promotional behaviors” and ‘narcissism’ (Moon et al., 2016), how Instagram is serving as a new platform for “creative self-enterprise” (Duffy and Hund, 2015), the reflection of capitalist ideals through the notion of “self-branding” (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2016) and lastly, the influence of social media’s fitness culture on perceptions of beauty and body image (Norton, 2017), all of which are deeply affecting young women’s expectations around happiness and success through self presentation which largely emphasizes living the “ideal” life.

Keywords: Instagram communities, self-branding, capitalism, self-esteem, young women, expectations

Introduction

Over the past 15 or so years, a great number of academics and industry researchers have begun discussing the affects of Social Networking Sites (SNS) on social life and human communication. SNS, as we know them today, came to fruition in 2004, when Mark Zuckerberg (founder of Facebook) launched his soon-to-be billion dollar site at Harvard University (Thompson, 2008, p.1). Since then, SNS have provided a new platform and space for a new form of self presentation, as well as forming and maintaining relationships (Moon, et al., 2016, p.22). One study suggests that users of the SNS, Instagram, tend to post photos of their “ideal” self, always looking photo-ready whilst out enjoying leisurely activities, which is inherently problematic as it creates unrealistic expectations of day-to-day activities and duties, as well as what it means to be happy and successful (Moon, et al., 2016, p.22). In this paper, I argue that Instagram *communities* shape young women's expectations and understanding about happiness and success through self presentation which largely emphasizes living the “ideal” life. Firstly I will discuss Moon’s (2016) article around the self-promotional behaviour of Instagram users and its connection with narcissism which will help in providing an understanding of the dominant demographic of Instagram users. Secondly, I will be introducing Duffy and Hund’s (2015) ideas around Instagram serving as a new platform for women to create income streams while maintaining their femininity and sense of empowerment. Thirdly, I will be introducing the significance of Capitalism in the context of the “self-branding” phenomenon seen on Instagram through looking at an article by Khamis, Ang and

Welling (2016), and lastly, I will be discussing Norton's (2017) analysis of Instagram's fitness culture and how it affects body image and self-esteem. Furthermore, the discussion will include the limitations to each of these articles in hope of providing a holistic argument.

Literature Review

As mentioned in the introduction, Moon et al. (2016) discuss the self-promotional behaviours of Instagram users and the suggested correlation with the personality trait narcissism, a term which refers to inflated self image and feelings of superiority over others (Lee, 2004, p.4). The study shows that people who show a higher propensity for narcissism spend more time in online communities participating in self-promotional activities for example, posting "selfies" (Moon, et al., 2016, p.24), a colloquial term referring to the "self-portrait photograph" coined in the early 2000's in Australia (The Guardian, 2013). This study helps to create an understanding of the sorts of people who are the dominant users of Instagram. We can see how these people form a "distorted self-concept" in an attempt to elevate their perceived status (Moon et al. 2016, p.22). Moon et al. (2016, p.22) highlighted that this was seen to be driven by feelings of low self-esteem which is particularly interesting as one would think that low-self esteem would not be closely associated with narcissistic behaviours. Moon et al. (2016, p. 22) propose that their research shows that close to half of the photos posted on to Instagram are "selfies" or photos of the users with their friends. The study found that the frequency at which the photos were posted lead back to the link between people spending

significant amounts of time in online communities on social media, and narcissism. I argue this highlights the problematic nature of the influence of Instagram communities on self esteem and body image. This particular analysis of the personality trait narcissism and its close relationship with promotional online behavior could be used as a way of understanding what is at the core of what is shaping young women's expectations about body image and beauty. In addition, Linnebach (2004, p.3) uses the term "socio-cultural epidemic" to refer to unrealistic beauty standards which are affecting how women perceive themselves in relation to this beauty standard. I argue using the term "epidemic" is powerful in understanding the magnitude of this issue in today's society.

Similarly, Duffy and Hund (2015, p.1) look into the notion of "having it all" and how Instagram has become a new platform for women, in particular, to create income streams through "creative modes of self-enterprise" for example, the rise of micro-celebrities and fashion bloggers. They argue that Instagram has evidently been a place where women can build lucrative careers, based at home, whilst maintaining their femininity, sense of individuality, and empowerment; however, the enterprise has done little to reconcile or tackle issues on the gender and race inequalities prevalent on the app (Duffy and Hund, 2015). This was noted by there being a serious underrepresentation of "women of colour, Lesbian, Gay, Bi, and Transgender (LGBT) individuals, as well as plus size models" in photos (Duffy and Hund, 2015). I would argue that these issues of gender and race inequality, all add to the pressures which exist because of the Western hegemonic heteronormative expectations in these online communities. Anecdotally, I can attest this through my own observations of the popular images on Instagram being white,

straight, skinny and attractive individuals. Furthermore, Duffy and Hund (2015) argue that there are limitations to consider in the analysis of the rise of “creative self-enterprise” and that individuals must be critical when thinking about online SNS such as Instagram. Their concluding thoughts also suggested that these women, and the content of their blogs and profiles, are inherently driven by the capitalist agenda, constraining them by ensuring that they maintain the role of the blind consumer (Duffy and Hund, 2015, p. 9).

As we can see, Capitalism thrives, still, as the under current of even the most creative and independent careers. Khamis, Ang and Welling (2016) address this by seeking to conceptualize the term “self-branding” within the bounds of the Capitalist system. The term “self-branding” refers to the idea of selling one's public image for commercial gain and/or social/cultural capital (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2016, p.123). Like Duffy and Hund (2015), the authors make connections between the idea of advanced consumer capitalism, marketing, and “self-branding” in these online spaces, such as Instagram. The paper looks at the rise of term “self-branding” as a reflection of the “uncertain labour markets” and a way in which neo-liberal governance encourage people to see themselves as entrepreneurial, money making subjects (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2016, p.201). I would argue that this correlates with what Duffy and Hund (2015) suggest as being essentially just another form of consumerism in an advanced capitalist society. Moreover, Ziolkowski (2004) writes on the topic of the commodification of social life and in particular, Marx’s introduction of the term “commodity fetishism” which he used in reference to the commodification of the workforce (2004, p.387). I believe there can be

a connection made between Marx's theory of "commodity fetishism" and the aforementioned notion of "self-branding". Lastly, I would like to bring in an article which provides a good example of how influential Instagram communities can be in shaping the expectations of young women's ideas about beauty and success. Norton (2017) addresses this issue by analysing social media's fitness culture and the effects it has on body image and self esteem. He begins by highlighting the fact that on the surface, "fitspiration" and motivational health blogs do exactly what their names entail, inspire fitness; however, "like everything in the media" (2017, p. 6), there is always a person behind the message who may or may not be taking into account social and cultural diversity. Norton (2017, p.6) argues that this can create feelings of low self-esteem and negative body image among, particularly, women (even those who are not categorised as belonging to a minority group). However, this can also be seen in Instagram communities with predominantly men as members (bodybuilders), which Norton (2017, p.6) suggests is due to feelings of inadequacy and discouragement which is seen as a natural response to the unrealistic facade many people create. Following on from this, Social psychologist, Leon Festinger, proposed that people will build perceptions of themselves by comparing their image and their "success" to others, which can be problematic as this is generally done in a way of "upward social comparison" (Norton, 2017, p.16). This type of comparison, that encourages an individual to compare themselves to someone who they perceive to be better, is certainly not uncommon on social media, despite being seriously damaging (Norton, 2017, p.17). Norton (2017, p.7) uses examples such as people obsessing over their body image for the sake of appearance in the form of self-destructive

eating and exercise habits. Conversely, the article also mentions that “fitspiration” does allow for people to connect with one another in online communities which provides a level of social support as well as encouragement and motivation (Norton, 2017, p. 27). Despite this, the repercussions (negative effects on body image) must be accounted for. Norton (2017, p.26-27) makes quick mention of how this can be done through “media literacy”, which “aims to educate people on how to better access, analyze, evaluate, and create media”, something that I would argue could be a useful focus for further research into how we, both as individuals and as a society, can be better equipped in dealing with the effects of social media and online social networks such as Instagram.

Discussion

All four articles raise some important questions around the SNS Instagram and its effects on how young women perceive beauty, happiness, and success. However, there are some limitations to each of these studies that are certainly cause for further questioning. Before going into the technological constraints, demographic factors, and issues of modality, I would like to make note of a shared limitation that I came across in all four articles; information inadequacy. Although the scope of research into the effects social media and new computer mediated technologies is expanding, there is certainly room for further research into how the younger generation are being impacted and how the “context” and “affordances” of these technologies are changing the way people develop their “self-concept” (Moon et al. 2016, p.22) and identity (Brown, 2016).

Technological limitations. The Moon et al. (2016) and the Norton (2017) studies both collected their data via online surveys, in comparison to Duffy and Hund (2015) who developed a varied data collection method. I would argue that limiting oneself to only one form of collecting data/information would in turn impede the research parameters and sample size, providing limited data for discussion. Duffy and Hund (2015); however, used a variety of different methods including: the coding of “about me” sections, “strategically” gathering photos and conducting in depth interviews, all of which make for a more holistic analysis and conclusion.

Demographic limitations. Again, the Moon et al. (2016) study was conducted in Korea, which very quickly narrows the scope of the research and lessens the validity of the findings. Furthermore, the only research conducted where there was mention of the affects on *men*, was the Norton (2017) article. The other articles focused solely on women, as a demographic, when the issue is not confined to women but can affect men as well.

Modality limitations. The Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2016) article did not provide any quantitative data which I would argue had an influence on the impact of their argument. The other articles provided both qualitative and quantitative data which further reinforced their argument, for example, the collection of both interview and survey data as well as a foundation in academic research.

Conclusion and Future Study

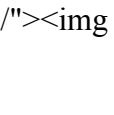
Throughout this conference paper I have discussed *Instagram* as a space for a new form of self-presentation. I have critically analysed four academic articles which have helped in developing my argument further and reinforcing ideas on the influence of the Instagram community in particular. The first article by Moon et al. (2016) discussed the role of *narcissism* in Instagram users, they concluded that the more frequently people post photos, the higher the levels of narcissism; however, the motivation for posting photos frequently, was to receive positive feedback and to elevate one's own perceived status as compensation for low self-esteem. The second article by Duffy and Hund (2015) highlights the fact that Instagram has allowed for women to work in lucrative careers through self-promotion, based at home. The authors then go on to explain that although this may seem like a “win” for feminism and women in general, there is an obvious agenda which is driven by capitalist ideals, which keeps the women ignorant to their own oppression, grounded in consumption. Khamis, Ang and Welling (2016), further reinforce this notion by looking at how even the language used e.g. “self-**branding**” could be seen as way the neo-liberal agenda has crept into the social media discourse, making sure people remain ignorant and unconcerned with the power of consumption and the influence it has on their day-to-day lives. Lastly, Norton’s (2017) paper highlighted the affects of fitness blogs on self-esteem and body image. This article was particularly interesting as it not only provided a take on “fitspiration” that underpinned the negative aspects and influence it can have, but also touched on the ways that people can avoid developing negative feelings about their body image or self esteem. All four articles raised some important points surrounding the volatile and highly influential nature of the

app. Moreover, they all reinforced my argument by providing evidence which suggested that Instagram communities *can* shape young women's expectations and understanding about what it means to be beautiful and live a happy, healthy, and successful life. Finally, as I discussed briefly above, there were evidently some limitations to each study that I argue could certainly be improved on for future research, an example of this could be expanding the data collection parameters to gain a broader understanding of the SNS.

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