

Assignment 1

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Title:

The Formation of Online Identities in Young Girls through Self-Presentation

Name: Fatima Tanana

Student Number: 15362818

Unit Name: Social Media, Communities and Network NET 204
School of Media Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

Email Address: Fatima.tanana@student.curtin.edu.au

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The Formation of Online Identities in Young Girls through Self-Presentation

Fatima Tanana

School of Media Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

Curtin University

Abstract

This paper considers the implications of Instagram for the identity formation of young girls as they adjust their self-presentation to meet expectations and feel accepted by online communities. Physical appearance, beauty, body image, poses and selfies, are just some of the aspects of self-presentation that this paper will explore and how they are affecting young girl's confidence, insecurities and self-doubt over their real identities. Readers will discover how the amount of likes, comments and followers affect young girls and how they are transforming and recreating themselves to seek approval from their audiences. The results of a study conducted in Singapore to determine the reasons why girls engage in self-presentations, and how social comparison is stirring up girls to own new proclaimed online identities will be closely examined into. Readers will gain more awareness surrounding the construction of online identities in young girls and how they are controlled by a powerful social media tool such as Instagram.

Keywords: Instagram, self-representation, online identities, social influencers.

The Effects Instagram Is Having On Young Girls to Form Online Identities through Self-Presentation.

It must be extremely exhausting for young girls who are growing up in the digital era. Not only are they inclined to deal with real life matters such as puberty, relationship issues, self-esteem, school/tertiary education, body issues and the usual every day dramas; but they also have to create an online identity for themselves that will make them worthy in society. The world now has applications such as Instagram that have encouraged young girls to be submissive to the expectations, desires and pressures of owning an online identity. The idiom “Looks can be deceiving” can genuinely apply to Instagram as forging personas has become a norm and deception and lack of honesty has driven young girls to act entirely different to their offline identities. Identity has somehow become questionable and self-representation has somehow become vague. Instagram has become a platform that unintentionally encourages young girls to modify their identities so they can earn a desired amount of likes and comments; establishing approval from online communities. Hence, the codes of self-presentation found in online communities on Instagram have largely influenced the identity formation and expectations for group acceptance in young girls.

Struggling to fit in the reality world and trying to figure out who they are as individuals is already conflicting for many young girls; thinking of what kind of identity to self-present through Instagram can be seen as an extra burden. Goffman (1959)

emphasises that individuals whilst they are in the company of others engage in a selective self-presentation, that aspires to control the situation and impressions made by the audience. Therefore, self-presentation is sincerely about “impression management”, that requires young females to learn about how to deal with the audience response and maintain control of their profile by putting on a “face” (Goffman 1959 & Mascheroni, Vincent, & Jimenez, 2015). Many young girls feel socially accepted when they have approval for their online self-presentation, even if it is not a true version of themselves (Mascheroni, Vincent, Jimenez, 2015). It reconfirms their status amongst peers just to be part of social inclusion and avoids them from being marginalised even though they are conforming to beauty standards (Mascheroni, Vincent, Jimenez, 2015). It is tough as it is to make an impression in the real world but now with the introduction of Instagram, young girls are facing many hurdles and challenges to try and fit in both the real and online world.

Many young girls Instagram profiles give them the feeling of empowerment through the amount of likes and comments that they receive. Unfortunately, there are also many other girls who feel deflated due to the lack of likes or comments they might not receive. Instagram profiles form online identities whether it is a true self-presentation or not of the actual individual; they also provide girls with the flexibility to modify and present themselves to feel accepted by online groups by posting anything they desire, so long as they feel adequate (Boyd, 2007). Clearly, identity on social media has become a performance that can be categorised into two stages: the front-stage and the back-stage. The back-stage consists of individuals who are less articulated and prefer privacy, intimacy and own a familiar identity performance (Pearson, 2009). The front-stage

involves individuals that 'play their part' because they have constructed an identity that is displayed to numerous followers and are conscience they are in the 'spotlight' performing their online identity (Pearson, 2009). They are the individuals who own public profiles and give (followers) young girls access and awareness of what types of presentations are socially appropriate, and what kind of cues they can gain to present in their own profiles (Boyd, 2007). The issue with having notifications on public is the unknown audience that consist of strangers that bear witness to every post uploaded (Boyd, 2007). According to Boyd (2007, p.7) 'Friends are publicly articulated, profiles are publicly viewed, and comments are publicly visible'. Consequently, this can give trolls an invitation to retaliate and verbally attack girls, and the self-presentation that they have formed to reflect their online identity can be dampened in a matter of comments.

The emergence of trolls can be quite surprising and disheartening for many girls who are trying to create identities for themselves online. According to Pew Research Center, a survey administered exposed that young females are more likely to experience online harassment and that there are numerous cases of targeted, repetitive online abuse addressed to females (Nagel & Frith, 2015). Trolling known as a game based on identity deception which does not have consent from all the players; involves followers who pass as legitimate participants that jump at the opportunity to disgrace, shame and ruin the reputation of the individual posting (Donath, 1996). But why does trolling occur? The answer is simple: Females are easier to hurt, are weaker and generally react out of anger to what is being posted (Gorman, 2015). So how does trolling begin? Trolling commences with social or micro influencers; females that have many followers that promote aspects of their lifestyle that the average young female cannot have but wish she

did have (Chae, 2017). These influencers gloat about their designer fashion items, exotic holiday locations and expensive dinners at famous restaurants while displaying an immaculate body that any young girl would dream of (Chae, 2017). The self-presentation they are promoting through their profiles does not necessarily mean it is a genuine perception of who they are, sometimes it is cry out for attention and acceptance. Nevertheless, social comparison is creating envy and envy is sometimes creating trolls whom are tarnishing others online identities and unfortunately mostly their very own.

Many Instagram followers do not see beyond what is depicted in a post. They are easily impressed and at times extremely gullible to the different identities owned by other females who may be considered leaders, role models or just famous influencers that promote a lifestyle that is captivating for many followers. Unfortunately, it causes issues especially for the parents of these young girls who want to impersonate and imitate these influencers but cannot afford to own such lifestyles. What many young girls do not know is that many social influencers glamorous lifestyles are not effortless. In fact, their self-presentation is based on calculation, management, energy and time (Chae, 2017). The selfies and the poses do not come without professional expertise and they require hours of sitting in a makeup chair, carefully chosen clothing, poses that are practiced endlessly before uploading, and lighting and photo-editing applications that make that one picture worth a million dollars (Chae, 2017). Therefore, girls feel envious towards something that really does not exist because many females are actually getting paid to endorse a fancy lifestyle (Chae, 2017). On the contrary, there are young girls who go out of their way to imitate social influencers. They spend hours achieving the perfect pout, selfie, or flat stomach and unlike social influencers- they do not get paid to do so. As MacMillan

(2017) states in Time magazine “Instagram easily makes girls and women feel as if their bodies aren’t good enough as people add filters and edit their pictures in order for them to look perfect”. Society has succumbed to the pressures of owning a materialistic online identity and young girls are wasting a lot of time preparing for their next post- a post that will entail a jury whom will communicate their verdict through “comments” and “likes”.

The phenomenal aspect of Instagram is the ability to change between identities while self-promoting a range of self-representations. Constructing an autonomous identity is considered an individual accomplishment amongst females on Instagram and is comprehended as a social and rational process (Mascheroni, Vincent, Jimenez, 2015). In addition, (Buckingham, 2008; Corsaro & Eder, 1990) confirms that identities are constituted due to interactions through identification and differentiations from the peer group. To some extent, possessing an Instagram account lets a girl live in a fantasy world in which they have the choice to erase any bad history of online photos of themselves, which may have possibly attracted any negative reviews (Turkle, 1997). For instance, a natural brunette dying her hair blonde may have many followers who disapprove of the new look and made it obvious through the “comments” or “Instagram poll”. Thus, Instagram is unconsciously controlling the online identity and for this reason girls can recreate new looks or selfies to feel acceptance and hopefully double the number of likes or followers (Turkle, 1997). Turkle (1997) believes it is a chance to self-transform in an environment that allows experiences to occur that may be hard to come by in real life. Admittedly, Instagram has the power to explode authorship of a post and as result the individual can be multiplied without limit as other strangers can see posts that are

commented on (Turkle, 1997). It is granting individuals a deliberate online performative space in which young girls are delivering self-representation and implementing identity claims of themselves that may resemble or insanely differ from reality (Pearson, 2009). In retrospect, this can cause anguish amongst young girls as they need to sort out what identity is acceptable enough for the many followers on Instagram.

A study conducted in Singapore consisted of 24 interviews with secondary school girls to clarify their engagement in self-presentation through posting selfies on social media, and how peer comparison is causing controversy. Results indicated that participants yearned for peer attention and a desire to look as pretty as other girls, confiding that insecurities are driven by fear of having “ugly” or “lame” pictures judged by others (Chang & Chua, 2016). All participants in the study revealed that feedback on their posts are delivered through the number of likes and followers which is apparently more significant than comments (Chang & Chua, 2016). Participants also disclosed that negative health consequences such as unhealthy dieting, harm to self-perceptions, low self-esteem, feeling worthless and insecurities are all a result of peer comparison which can eventually create a vicious circle of antagonism (Chang & Chua, 2016). Selfies on Instagram are persuading girls to negotiate their self-presentation efforts to attain the standard of beauty schemed by their age group (Chang & Chua, 2016). The hashtags that come along with the selfies such as #selfie #tagforlike#thighgap#pretty#instaselfie #selfietime #followme #instalove #likeme #selfieoftheday reveals the desperation for acceptance and attention (Instatag, 2015). Hashtags increase engagement through followers and most importantly allow young girls to gain new followers (Loren, 2017). However, this does not necessarily mean it is a positive concept as followers may view

this as a chance to destroy a person by negatively commenting about their physical appearance. For instance, if a girl states she is #pretty# and #likeme# in the hashtag; this can attract trolls to disgrace and damage the girl through comments such as “you have a big nose” or “don’t like you”; which inflicts more harm than good. Hence, young girls need to be mindful of what they post because a hashtag can have reverse effects and may receive unwanted feedback. This can result in self-destruction as young girl’s physical appearances- a sensitive subject for many girls becomes the topic of conversation amongst many followers.

Nowadays, Instagram gives no options but to compare and judge girls based on their physical appearance and the girls that are judging are the same girls that are engaging in self-presentation. The study in Singapore confirms that “selfies” and “outfit-of-the-day” are frequently uploaded so young girls can observe and compare themselves with the rest of their peers (Chang & Chua, 2016). Scholars such as Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010, p.4 cited in Chang & Chua, 2016) acclaimed that when individuals use Instagram as a channel to articulate their identities, they tend to present a “highly selective version of themselves”. Young females should be aware that their actions are in fact damaging their own and others mental health through a simple post or story on Instagram. A survey conducted from the Royal Society of Public Health in the United Kingdom questioned 1,500 young people (aged 14-24) on which social media tool impacts on their health and wellbeing (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). Out of all of the social media applications available; Instagram turned out to be the worst for young people’s mental health (Fox, 2017). In fact, the Royal Society for Public Health has requested that all social media platforms take action in preventing young users to feel

inadequate and anxious by placing warning images that have been digitally manipulated (Fox, 2017). Maybe then, young girls will think twice before uploading fake posts and hopefully this move will eliminate social comparisons and rather promote genuine real diverse identities online.

The qualitative research methods that have contributed to this conference paper includes surveys, interviews, focus groups, and facts from The Pew Research Centre. They have been the core of providing information in regards to the influence Instagram has on identities and self-presentation in young girls. The Quantitative data from The Royal Society for Public Health gave reliable and accurate statistics of the impact of Instagram on young people. In fact, the report concluded that 9 in 10 girls are unhappy with their bodies and 70% of 18-24 years olds would contemplate having cosmetic surgery (The Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). Such staggering results are evidence of the damage Instagram can have on mental health (The Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). Sociologist Erving Goffman has also explained his stance on self-presentation and identities throughout this paper and most of the supporting articles back his theories. The limitations noted throughout the literature reviews include the lack of information on how girls are keeping identities a mystery and as a result create anonymous identities. Relationships is another issue that could have been considered, such as young couples flaunting their relationship online and the effects it is having on identity and self-representation. Most importantly, discussion concerning the positive influences of constructing online identities and self-representation was absent from most of the content accessed. All in all, there were similarities across all content retrieved in reference to the negative impact Instagram is having on young girls.

To be able to construct an online identity and to have the flexibility in advertising that identity through different codes of self-presentation, is clearly taking over young girls Instagram's profiles. Editing, packaging, prepping, filtering, countless practices of poses and selfies; to perfect the self before heading out into the spotlight for the audience to critique, has become the norm amongst many young girls. The mental health of these young girls is being affected as they voluntarily play characters trying to fit into an online community that is causing more harm than good. The need to impress an audience that is giving them feedback through comments, views, likes and followers is more of a reason why these young girls are being pulled into an online environment that continuously adjusts their online identities.

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