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Social media and its negative impact on the female identity.

Abstract:

The purpose of the following paper is to showcase social media as a deterrent to authentic online identities for female. The link between social media and identity has been studied and its negative influences on women have been highlighted. The focus will be mostly on Facebook and Instagram for this study. Research undergone for this paper has demonstrated that social media actively influences the way women choose to represent themselves online so as to be socially accepted. The paper will explore social media as an advocate for patriarchal ideologies and unrealistic body and beauty ideals which in turn affect the female sex as they actively use their profiles. Online cultural trends and their influences will also be discussed. The conclusion will also demonstrate that social media will persist and its sexist influence on women will not subside until media channels and audiences stop seeking the post-feminist model of feminine desirability.

Introduction:

For years, laymen conveyed their identity in face-to-face interaction through their body-language, way of speaking or their reaction to situations. Most people had their own individual identity which would occasionally be influenced by celebrity trends as famous personas were the ones in the public limelight. However, as web 2.0 became increasingly prevalent globally, social networks and spaces also grew exponentially giving users opportunity to put themselves online. People created and projected themselves onto these networked spaces for an audience, composed of their family, friends and a few strangers, to witness and communicate with. (Livingstone, 2008). The use of social media was, at first, essentially for occasionally communicating with one's entourage but progressively the global technological situation bettered. Consequently,

social platforms and mobile communications have stretched the array of social spaces where individuals inventively participate in their self-presentation by shaping and constructing their identity in order to fit the social norms (Arnett, 2000). Social media has helped many people reach astronomical fame and success namely, the Kardashian-Jenner clan. Kardashian is a world-renowned family, mostly famous for its involvement in numerous scandals and shocking beauty trends. Over the years, social media has mutated from being a useful tool to one with negative impact upon women and their identity.

Goffman and Identity

Firstly, Goffman's take on identity will be explored as it will lay the foundation for the upcoming arguments involving the online persona and identity. In his book, Goffman (1956) explains the concept of impression-management as a way to shape and maintain identity. It is a process of performing, interpreting, and adjusting one's social behaviour and identity by analysing the contextual cues during a social interaction. These indications help in defining the social situation so as for a person to then present the apt behaviour in order to control the impression that the society will have of them. Similar to social media users who display their tailored identity through the customised profiles so as to fit the preponderant social environment and culture on each specific network. (Lincoln, 2012). Additionally, by adapting their behaviour in ways they desire, people can create a new aspect of their identity. Essentially, the objective behind impression management is to create an identity which fits social conventions and expectations and which is not embarrassing.

The above further pertains to Goffman's dramaturgical theory which explains social interaction as a theatrical performance and identity as a performance. A person will take on different roles in different situations and in front of varying audiences with the most crucial aspect being "the sense he provides them through his dealing with them of what sort of person he is behind the role he is in" (Goffman, 1974, p. 298). By

extrapolation, there are two different spaces where individuals act differently; the front stage and the back stage. Both spaces are equally important in the life of a person for identity creation as the latter influences the former and vice versa. The former is the observable environment where performances are customised and adapted for demonstration which means that this identity is constructed. In the backstage space, a person's identity is most authentic and less articulated as there are less strictures and strain on behaviour due to intimacy. In the current era, social media is considered as the front stage whereas the real and physical word has been relegated to the status of 'backstage'. Goffman's approach to identity will be used to make sense of females' behaviour on social media and how their identity is affected with external influences, specially from media and celebrities.

Social Media Nowadays

Social media has become an inherent part of mostly everyone's life. It has allowed individuals to "construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). The mass commercialisation and affordable distribution of internet as well as mobile devices has made social media highly populated and the preferred means for communication among many of its other uses. Meraz (2009) explains that social media has been ''architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration, and community'' (p. 682). With a majority of 52% of users being female according to Statista (2019), Instagram is the perfect example to support Meraz's claims relating to participatory culture. Users of both genders not only collaborate to generate activity on the platform but are mutually dependent for directing traffic to one another's profiles or pictures through likes, shares or comments.

People using social medias are exposed to publics who carry out a critical role in the growth of people for, as Nancy Fraser (1994) states, "they are arenas for the formation

and enactment of social identities". Similar to the concept of Multi User Dungeon (MUD) in gaming, social media allows role-playing to its audiences in order for them to test out different identities due to parallel narratives. (Turkle, 1997). Thus, there is no coherence in the identity of users as they tend to perpetually switch and adapt. The publics that are users of social platform and may consist of friends, family or peer groups who are directly connected to one's profile. Livingstone, in 2005, as cited by Boyd explains the concept of 'publics' as being a group of people that is unknown to each other but hold "a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest" (2007, p.7). Thus, the user is not only exposed to her closed ones but can be searched and viewed by strangers as well which can be an incitement to construct a fake identity.

Moreover, Facebook has established itself as the leading and dominating social networking site since years but Instagram, founded in 2010, has also quickly risen in popularity. It is the second most famous social site with 500 million active monthly users of which 59% of online adults are aged between 18 to 29 (Pew Research Center, 2016). Instagram has facilitated the sharing of snaps of a person's life along with following that of peers and unattainable celebrities. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) also explain this as a similarity between the use of bedroom spaces and social media networks whereby the lines of private territory, intimacy and personal control have been blurred. Considered as a mere leisure activity for long, social media has now become a complete and integral part of everyone's life to be able to go to the extent of even affecting a person's identity. Its salient place has reinforced pressure on women to conform to certain trends which have been ferociously proliferated through social media and endorsed by their famous personalities and friends.

Social Media, Feminism and Sexualisation
Peer culture, trends and normativity of practices have a strong impact during the construction of identity. In recent times, a new hybrid of celebrity has cropped up which

is referred to as an 'Instagram Star or influencer'. They gained fame and have a big following on Instagram and are handsomely paid for regularly posting. A majority of them are women and have their biggest following base within the female gender who admire them and try to replicate their posts and pictures.

In 1997, Frederickson and Roberts came up with the term 'objectification' which pertains to the way women are considered and treated as sexual objects which in turn influences them to present themselves as such (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Although social networks have eased the access to women to state and control the making of their 'self', societal influences still exert pressure on them by actively leveraging dominant ideologies against them and also through mainstream media that still tend to be sexist. Women consciously present themselves in ways depicted by media so as to be socially accepted and to conform to ideals set by years of patriarchal reign. The act of self-objectifying to embody themselves as being marginalized further indoctrinates the hegemonic ideal of femineity (Thøgersen-Ntoumani, Ntoumanis, Cumming, Bartholomew & Pearce, 2011). As Pearson (2009) explains; social networking sites performances are easily accessible by everyone and are usually "coded with open symbology" that is; it is understood and has meaning to the targeted and any extended audience. Therefore, by presenting themselves in a manner compliant with the male gaze, women further reinforce prevailing sexist beliefs.

Two decades earlier, obtaining photographs was a lengthy and tenuous process which restricted people in their way of using images in their social relationships. (Tinkler, 2008) However, since mobile technology equipped with internet emerged, 'selfies' have been turned into a mainstream cultural practice. As a result, clicking intimate and seductive pictures are now very easy. Drawing from Groffman's theory impression-management, some women use objectification on social media so as to build a feminine and female stereotypical identity of themselves. As Mascheroni, Vincent and Jiminez explain; posing in a seductive manner can be interpreted as a rebellion against peer-induced morality

and is very often perceived as being "inappropriate, unsuccessful, and [a] problematic means of gaining social acceptance by conforming to a pattern of adult femininity" (2015). By commodising themselves for the public, women are viewed as an easy target to be subjected to patriarchal laws as their character and self-respect is negatively and wrongly perceived by their audience.

Beauty Standards, Body Ideals and Identity

Women have been socialised towards a post-feminist model of feminine desirability by the media which leads them to having specific standards for the ideal body which further influences the way in which they depict themselves. Sarantakos (2005) highlights that men have perpetually been in positions of authority thus having the liberty and power to dictate standards and morals for the society. Consequently, gender has been principally viewed through a conservative male gaze (Owen & Spencer, 2013). Women have always had to conform to the beauty, behaviour and academic ideals set by men.

Louis Althusser (2008) argues that identity is a cultural construction relying on the active process of people being socialised into specific social roles such as women being socialised in rigid and inflexible beauty standards and body ideal in this case. According to Cohen, Newton-John & Slater (2017), "young women are higher in thin-ideal internalisation". This suggests that they are more prone to self-objectifying and sexualising themselves through photo activities on social media which may reinforce body image issues and concerns as they grow older. These women also follow appearance-centred accounts of celebrities or fitness influencers which further reiterate their issues with their self.

Women who do not fit in the strict characteristics of the 'perfect women' are often subjected to trolls who bully them. As Donath (1999) explains, trolling is a kind of identity fraud, albeit one that is carried out with the other plays agreeing to it. Similarly, on social media, trolls are individuals with fake profile who leave unpleasant comments

under the pictures of other users. Dissatisfaction with one's body usually arises from comparing with other users. Festinger (1994) devised a theory named the social comparison theory to explain how humans have an intrinsic urge to measure themselves with others in order to evaluate their own capacities and sentiments. Body issues also entail an impact on identity whereby an individual either projects a more vulnerable image seeking for constant validation on social media or they endorse an insensitive and unfazed role.

As explained above by Goffman, identity is not an intact and constant thing. It alters along as other contextual factors change (Velez, 2014). The "self" is not fixed and thus when going through body image concerns, women accordingly adapt their identity and the role they will lead in front of their audience, that is in the frontstage, while being of an entirely different perspective in the backstage which is shielded from all audiences (Van Der Nagel & Frith, 2015). They will tend to imitate other female figures who are popular and highly valued by their audiences so as to mimic their behaviour. They are inclined to portraying themselves as a hypersexualised persona online although they might not feel comfortable endorsing the same persona in real life.

Conclusion:

This paper has explored the effect of social networking sites on female identity in relation to Goffman's theories on identity and dramaturgy. The extent in which social media, as a global connected network, has seeped into the lives of users to become an integral and indispensable part of it has also been explored in detail above so as the gravity of its impact upon women's identity can be gauged. The paper explores how the golden beginnings of Web 2.0 as the most admirable tool for participation and collaboration has transformed into toxicity-inducing social media platforms for the female gender. The key conclusion from the paper would be that while there is a blurry boundary between the virtual world and physical world, the same cannot be stated for online and offline identity. Identity online is excessively constructed due to global

influences and trends; to sometimes even be detrimental to the years of progress first started by the suffragettes. Even worse, social media exerts psychological pressure upon young women in order to fit unrealistic standards so as to be socially accepted which then leads to deep insecurities and body image issues affecting their self-worth. The need for validation and gratification and the hyper sexualisation of females have replaced meaningful relationships and interaction. Until hegemonic ideologies are abated and materialistic and superficial identity stop being admired, social media will keep negatively affecting women and the way they portray themselves.

Limitations:

It is important to note that there are a few limitations to the generalisation of this paper. Firstly, the paper has been written completely based on secondary data from other authors which limited the various perspectives in which some arguments could have been analysed had there been primary data collection. Longitudinal effects refrained from the conduction of surveys and primary data in order to write a paper focused on Mauritius and social media users here. There is possibility of cultural and gender bias in some parts of the paper as the arguments pertain to a global pool of solely female individuals.

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