**The Toxicity of Online Networks and one’s Identity Behind a Screen. How the Online World Normalizes Bullying.**

Online communities based on social media apps allow for fake identities to be created and anonymity to be seen as protective when it can be manipulated to bully others. Bullying on social media whether it’s done from individual to individual or group to group has been normalised through certain social media features which make victimisation acceptable and even encouraged when backed by others. It can create a community but can also tear some apart through trolling others. This has been seen as a growing issue throughout online communities, yet nothing has been done to stop them as the normalisation of bullying, disguised as comedy, satire or constructive criticism.

The online world is growing every day with social media, in its peak form, being a catalyst to creating online networks and communities which can serve as a strong form of identity for some. It is seen as a way to create a persona on how people wish to be seen and for others it’s a way to express themselves artistically, emotionally, verbally, etc. However, with freedom to share things on the internet, also comes the opportunity to criticize. The online world allows for cyberbullying which has become normalized through the use of fake identities/personas and lack of repercussions and social peer pressure. By empowering a community by its sense of identity and belonging, it also brings some individuals or other groups down through lack of support when everything is presented in a back handed way. With the rapid growth of users on Instagram, TikTok and Facebook, they have been known to be the largest and most toxic home to online communities.

Over the past 10 years, beauty standards online are showcased and set predominantly through Instagram. Instagram is a social media app which is mainly used for sharing photos and videos about your personal interests. It is also a place where many people create a false sense of identity just for others approval and to fit into a certain community. Social media influencers have been able to grow their image on Instagram with the focus being on, make up, fashion, travel or even as simple as comedy skits. Over time it has grown to become a place full of communities where people who share a specific niche like a hobby or interest, can come together. One of the biggest communities on Instagram is the beauty community which involves models, fashion icons and makeup and hair artists. This particular community has been ripped into my other communities for promoting false body types and overall unrealistic appearances. Beginning as constructive criticism, it has now turned into bullying and online harassment. Many profiles that are actively partaking are anonymous account with under ten followers, who are mainly bots, and has been seen as an abuse of technology (Nasaescu, E., et al, 2018). A form of bullying that some specific communities partake in is trolling. Trolling is creating controversial comments or posts to provoke a negative reaction, bothering those who interact with it, sparking an argument. It is seen to cause amusement to the individual who is “trolling’ rather than causing harm to another (Gavin, L., et al, 2019) which means that the troll can defend themselves by claiming to be making a joke without harmful intent. A recent influencer, Lil Miquela, who recently grew rapidly on Instagram with now over three million followers has been a focus of the beauty standard and how online communities form to attack and break down the confidence of those who work hard to inspire others. Miquela Sousa also known as Lil Miquela is a digitally animated character who started to gain the public’s eye in 2016. She has been praised for her fashion and positive lifestyle, but many criticize her for not having a realistic body shape, lacking acne and any imperfections whatsoever. Although that her followers and others on the app where aware that Miquela was a fictional character, they still chose to leave threatening comments towards the people who created and manage her, breaking down their personal appearances and bullying them to no end. They claimed that younger children would look up to her and they didn’t want them to hate themselves if they didn’t look like her. Although their reason for being upset for creating Miquela to fit an unrealistic beauty standard can be reasonably supported to a degree, it does not validate their reason to bully. The realm of Instagram quickly became toxic with many leaving nasty comments on others posts without consequence as their anonymity shelters them from other taking personal jabs. Some Instagram profiles would be made where the account was focused solely on bullying a specific person or group of people, creating a network of hate and negativity. Trolling can be done in the form of vandalism (Cruz, A. G. B., et al, 2018) and in this case, some started trolling Lil Miquela’s Instagram account in hopes of damaging her brand. This shows how the internet is aggressive and powerful in terms of bullying others online when it’s anonymous and they have a whole network of people to defend them as they would to others.

Online bullying isn’t always just typing a nasty comment on someone’s post; sometimes it can be done visually with even a simple facial expression made to create a reaction. TikTok, formally known as Musical.ly, has risen in popularity over the last four years with over 689 million users from all age ranges. Viewers can film a video up to 60 seconds and post it for anyone to see and interact with, if they chose to do so. However, whenever someone uploads a video, there are two specific add on features called duet and stitch. The features have been used negatively to bully and make fun of the creator of the post for other users on the app to see. This involves stitching or duetting a video, mimicking someone. TikTok is full of naïve children who are easily influenced by what they see (Weimann, G. et al., 2020) and sometimes cannot understand satire. This increases the vulnerability of bullying to others as children cannot comprehend right from wrong in certain situations, especially in their younger developmental stages. A particular community that is popular on TikTok is the alternative community, also known as ‘Alt’. This online network group comprises of people of all sexual and gender orientations and is generally an unproblematic group as they all post videos for the purpose of their own personal entertainment. The clash between them and the rest of TikTok starts with the difference in appearances as the ‘alt’ community dresses in multiple layers of black clothing with heavy eye makeup and chains on their neck. They produce content that tends to spark anger with other communities as some find them “annoying” when they aren’t provoking anyone or being controversial in the slightest. Bullying in private settings, such as online, have been seen to be more severe (Hellström, L., et al, 2020). In 2018, it was found that 44% of people were less likely to give personal information on websites (Statistica, 2019) which increases anonymity between communities. Anonymity doesn’t always mean that no one can see any information on you when they click on your account; TikTok has a feature when someone leaves a comment on a video, anyone can ‘like’ the comment, and you can see how many likes it has. From liking someone’s comment, no one can see it was you but can see the number of likes go up. Bullying can also be done through liking a demeaning comment. Most comments tend to be disguised as backhanded compliments with some of the most popular being “That was good! Now don’t do it again” or “You gave it your best shot! But it really wasn’t good enough”. The anonymity of liking a comment which supports it, shows the toxicity of online communities but how normalises their behaviours are as some comments can reach hundreds of thousands of likes as private comments are known to be the most frequently used way to cyberbully someone (Brody, N., et al, 2017).

Facebook is an app where many people click on at the end of the day to wind down with as they can see what their friends are doing, share what they’re doing, watch entertainment videos or even read the news. It is not a place that you enter, going in with the mindset that you’re going to be cyberbullied. Facebook is home to many online communities where people can make their own group or join a pre-existing group. When posting something in an online group, whether it’s a video, photo or simply text, there is the option to post anonymously so no one can see your name or identify you. This feature is available to protect people’s privacy or embarrassment if, for example, they wanted to post in a self-help group or ask a question they feel humiliated by. However, some have taken advantage of this feature. When trolling a group online, the admin or moderator may not be able to kick or ban someone if they cannot tell who posted or commented something demeaning. This can also be used to one’s advantage as there are multiple communities online whose purpose is to ‘roast’ or pick on a person. Whether that be an image or video of someone. These groups were made for others to anonymously make fun of people for a laugh but quickly escalates to bullying. Similar to Reddit’s subreddit of r/RoastMe, when trying to keep the comments as light-hearted passing comments, it can so easily take a turn when people say what they want, as it is not being said directly to the other person’s face. This can also be done within some groups that share overall ‘gossip’ within the public interest. That may involve sharing their thoughts on a couple in a fictional show or giving their opinions on what a celebrity wore to a red-carpet event. However, this can also take a turn when people start to personally bring others down. Many use the ‘gossip’ groups to post their fights with their friends, asking the community members to take a side. When the other person involved in the fight reaches the post, it breaks out into a back and forth fight but this time with an entire online community bringing each other down. Although Facebook’s target audience is adults, many children aged 12-15 create an account and are very impressionable. By children seeing adults partaking in bullying, it becomes normalised and dismissed as the children think that it is okay. The toxic online communities normalise bullying as their behaviours are conventionally condemned (Allison, R. K., et al, 2019). With having the constant bullying going on in online groups, it becomes normalised as targeting each other is seen every day.

Online networks on social media specifically, can be toxic not only others but themselves as they raise the platform for bullying throughout their anonymity and lack of direct repercussions towards themselves. With anonymity being easily achievable online, it is difficult to put a stop to bullying as they are untraceable. With micro bullying also growing in online networks, the toxicity of communities only grows stronger. With anonymity and fake online identities being used by many, it leads to the normalisation of bullying due to lack of consequences. By taking a step back from social medias communities and creating new ones in person it can create a rapid decline with these issues.

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