DIGIPHRENIA AND THE INSTAGRAM VERSUS REALITY MOVEMENT, AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY ON IDENTITY CREATION

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Abstract - "Digiphrenia," which is characterised as the experience of trying to exist in more than one incarnation of yourself at the same time is an unintended after effect of the presentation of one's ideal self, online. These fragmented identities often manifest as warped representations of the real self. Online movements such as #InstagramVSReality have however subverted this narrative. A desktop content analysis on a sample group of these images is indicative of how Instagram users are increasing self-awareness in terms of their online identity creation and are striving for authenticity in an online world.

Index Terms - Instagram, Online Identities, Digiphrenia, Social Media, Online Movements, Reclaiming Authenticity

I. INTRODUCTION

An investigation into the social networking patterns of "digital natives," a new generation who have only lived in a society where connection is as immediate through the press of a button, as through the ringing of a doorbell, is crucial to uncovering what Sherly Turkle's groundbreaking "Alone Together" [1], touches on regarding how technology has shaped us thus far, and what our future social media interactions will be. Instagram is the tool of choice for this new generation and was conceived of, and launched, in a post-Facebook, post iPhone moment. It flips the reality/fantasy dimension where the best version of the self is presented as a constant reality. This results in a warped state of "Digiphrenia," which is characterised as the experience of trying to exist in more than one incarnation of yourself at the same time [2]. Online movements such as #InstagramVSReality have however subverted this narrative. A desktop content analysis on these images highlights how social media is creating multiple identities. In order to truly grasp the effects of this transformative communication tool which, with its emphasis on aesthetics, coupled with textually supported user-generated tags, has altered not only the creation of the self, but also social interaction, a thorough investigation is needed.I nstagram – Resocialising Through Social Media Instagram falls within the broader context of social networking sites which are defined as network communication platforms in which participants have uniquely identifiable profiles and can publicly articulate relations that can be interacted and viewed with via online streams of user-generated content [3]. Social media has saturated the cyber social scene with different platforms for every purpose: Twitter for micro-blogging, Pinterest for inspirational photos and DIYs, LinkedIn for professional networking, Tumblr for blogging and Instagram for instant photos [4]. A warped concept of self is thus created which has further far reaching effects on social interactions which are often occurring over a keyboard, rather than a cup of coffee. In the United Kingdom, 60% of Internet users are members of a social network site, while one out of every 12 people on the planet has a Facebook account [5][6]. This is most prevalent in the "digital natives" generation who have only experienced a world in which "being plugged into technology is a way of life" [7]. This is reinforced by the fact that 11-to-18 year olds spend on average over one and a half hours a day using a computer and 27 minutes per day visiting social network sites, more than one fourth of their daily computer use with Instagram being the core interaction tool among this age group [8] [9]. Due to the fact that we are accustomed to being connected with each other continuously, our yearning for immediate relationships has increased, and resultantly, so has the amount of time that we seek such interactions online [10]. According to a recent study on German teens, it was found that the amount of time spent online has increased 37% since 2012, to about four hours a day [11]. There is therefore a rise in a generation who are fluent with technology but have new interaction insecurities; who have communicated all day but wonder whether true connection has occurred [1].

II. ONLINE IDENTITY

The most prevalent platform for online identity creation in this younger group is Instagram which has a reported user base of more than 150 million international subscribers, 90% of whom are under the age of 35 [12]. The application was first launched in October 2010 and enables users to upload and edit photos, which other users can then view, like and comment on using accompanying tags [13]. By September 2012, the New York Times reported that 5 billion photos had been shared through the application [14]. As a media, Instagram emphasises the creation of aesthetic material with visually stimulating photographs. On Instagram, to exist is to post, to take, crop, filter, like and comment [15]. The problem, then, is that one's existence is defined, not simply by "being," but by "being seen" by others, and

can no longer be truly authentic [16]. The emphasis on Instagram as a more visually based communication medium makes its user interaction stand out from other platforms [17]. Photography has always demanded and documented certain performative behaviours of its subjects, such as "the pose, which then alter social norms about how to not only behave in front of a camera, but how to behave in general as well" [18]. Instagram therefore operates on the principle of a visual representation of self which is "self-imposed" [19] [20]. Instagram welcomes users by proposing that the platform is a way to "share your life." One shares one's life, one 'Kelvin' filtered image at a time. The deception of Instagram is that it employs an author upon its inception [15]. You are you, if in image only. As a result, there is often a discrepancy between the reality of the situation being photographed, and the photo taken to represent this moment. A figurative "Instagram versus Reality" moment. Some scholars have argued that engaging in such impression management is not manipulative or deceptive, but rather a natural aspect of human relationships, that in many ways can make interactions flow more smoothly. Technology has thus become the facilitator and "architect of our intimacies," with the visually driven Instagram replicating our visually driven reality [1]. Through the process of posting, users are searching to be validated by their peers and to gain social status because as a rule, people want to create positive impressions [21]. Profiles constitute invitations to social interaction in much the same way as offline self-presentations do. With comments and 'likes' quantifying influence and success on social media, seeking affirmation is hardwired [22]. Popularity is therefore not just "assumed" but is quantifiable and explicit, with the number of followers being the first noticeable information one sees after viewing one's handle [23]. Based on this formula, one's personal life becomes a capital to be shared with others in return for cyber reactions, such as likes and comments, in the same way that sharing stories in reality would be exchanged for facial expressions and two way physical communication [16].

III. INTRA – AND INTERPERSONAL

The creation of a profile on social media is the commencement of the blurring of solitude and intimacy, where performances of identity may begin to be experienced as identity itself [1]. At its simplest form, the term "online identity" implies that there is a distinction between how people present themselves online and how they do offline, establishing an "identity laboratory" [24]. The result is a carefully curated "veneer of self" that one can attach one's name to [25]. Ee edit our messages until they project the self we want, thus creating an identity that is essentially typed into being. The devastating effects of this, is that we remake ourselves and our relationship with each other through our new intimacy with machines, because there are inherent human interactions that can never be replaced by the cyber simulated options [26]. An example of this is "asynchronicity" which refers to the time delays inherent in many forms of mediated communication that give individuals more control over the messages they construct [3]. The reduced cues available in Computer Mediated Communication and delayed reactions, do away with authenticity. Authenticity itself is never absolute, and is always positioned in distinction to something else thus creating an "intangible and visceral quality" for many young people [24]. We are conditioned to project only our best, albeit unrealistic, selves on our social media profiles as a modern way of virtually keeping up with the Joneses. The desire to be seen positively has taught us to silence our troubles and we now have no idea how to express inner turmoil [27]. One factor for the high rates of depression seen in social media users, is the discrepancy observed between their ideal cyber self and their reality based self-image. People feel let down when moving from the virtual to the real world [1]. Technology therefore not only effects the self, but as a result, curbs meaningful interaction, as one cannot fully and holistically engage in a group with fragmentary identities of the self. When technology engineers intimacy relationships are reduced to fleeting connections [1]. The typical Facebook account holder has an average of 130 friends, but regular interaction only occurs between 5 of them [10]. As the amount of time users spend on social networking sites continues to grow, their interactions with others offline tends to decrease, meaning that most of their socializing and socialization occurs within the glow of a computer screen. The user seeks social networking to substitute those interpersonal interactions and based on the feedback, can create a more extroverted identity that in turn becomes an extension of this created identity [28]. It is this "feedback" (likes, hearts and comments) that gives technology the ability to offer the illusion of companionship, without the demands of friendship, as at the robotic moment, the "performance" of connection seems to suffice [1]. "Context collapse" is the process through which various connections representing different aspects of one's identity are flattened into a uniform, one-dimensional group such as "friends" or "contacts" [24]. With each technological advancement we paradoxically simultaneously "make the world a smaller place," yet increase the distance between us. We gain convenience, efficiency, speed while sacrificing community and physicality [29]. We are drawn to the comfort of connection, without the demands of intimacy, where a double tap on a photo is a means of sending a "heart," instead of showing "love" in reality. We learn to celebrate this emotional dumbing down, purposefully turning away from

complexities of human partnerships, towards a world in which a yellow handed high five provides the same sense of accomplishment as a physical contact version thereof. This is most apparent in the #InstagramVSReality (20,782 posts) and #InstagramVSRealLife (8,520 posts) movement where users are actively posting the "before" and "after" effects of the staged performances that have littered Instagram feeds. Some scholars argues that the impressions formed in reality and online are not that radically different, suggesting that those with online profiles are providing relatively accurate portrayals of their offline selves [8] [15] [16]. Regardless, the fact that some discrepancy, no matter how small, is evident, is still an issue worth exploring.

IV. RESEARCH

A. Research Methodology

Content analysis as an unobtrusive and nonreactive method, was employed, as it is commonly used by social researchers and applied to all types of media content [30]. Examining these images through this lens allowed for a measurable examination of impression management. Content analysis investigated both the visual self-presentation styles of users, as well as the main differences between the presented "Instagram" photo versus the "Reality" photo. Although a "post" consists of both an image and caption, this research analysed only the image, as Instagram as a medium is focused on the visual item and most captions consisted mainly of the appropriate hashtags linking to the social movement. The process followed included the researcher becoming immersed in the data through an initial active reading of the photographs, thus allowing for identification of possible patterns to emerge and producing initial categories of coding. Thereafter development, clarification, and refinement of categories continued until new observations did not add substantively to existing categories [31].

B. Data Collection and Sampling

In selecting photos for analysis, the top 4 photos found on Instagram using the hashtags #Instagram VSReality and Instagram VSRealLife were used, thus producing a data base of 8 pictures to be analysed in depth. Each photograph was coded for the following 8 items: 1) number of people in the photo (solo or group); 2) gender (male, female); 3) structure (split image, is there text on the image); 4) race (White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, other); 5) clothing (unrevealing, slightly revealing, revealing, bathing suit/lingerie, naked); 6) pose and stance (upright/active, suggestive, overtly sexual/normal, posed knee/body arched, sitting/lying on floor); 7) type of shot (selfie, head shot, half body, full body); 8) tone (humouristic, mocking, serious awareness-based).

C. Findings

All photos were solo photographs of white females. This is a reflection on the demographic users of Instagram, but also indicative of white females having more confidence in reclaiming the reality of their identity. Each of the images used a split-screen, collage structure. This is reflective of the "split personality" that social media has structured users to have. If not binary personalities, then at least binary representations of ourselves. These split screens also all have the "Instagram" version on the left and the "reality" version on the right. This can be seen to subvert traditional views of "before and after" photos, where the more glamorous photo is presented last on the right. In this case, the glamorous image is presented on the left at the beginning of the gaze, indicating that the true journey of transformation is in the acceptance of the reality of the image. The majority of the photos framed the user from a distant perspective, with 2 out of the 8 images being mirror selfies. The fact that all of the photos show off the entire body and that all photos have some element of body revealing (with half in bathing suits and the other half in athletics gear/crop-tops), indicates the underlying message of body positivity. This was a consistent theme in each image where the reality of non-conventional bodies were celebrated in favour of the contortioned version women try to present online. This was further communicated in the contrast between the Instagram pose which was flexed, sexual posed knee, body arched and seemingly uncomfortable on the one hand, and the Reality pose which was sitting down, slumped, unbuttoned, casual and comfortable, on the other. What was clear from the tone of the images was that even though all had an element of humour/mocking of both themselves and the presented situation, there was a deeper message of understanding the discrepancy between who we are and what we post.

CONCLUSION

The online world as an external factor has the ability to affirm one's existence, regardless of whether that existence is physical or virtual [32]. In this context, it can be said that it is the social other and not a material existence, that is the authenticating factor in identity formation. Although Instagram and other social media platforms have become embedded in our society as "identity laboratories," scholars point out that when it comes to positive outcomes of Internet use, the "rich get richer," where those who are already prone to feelings of inadequacy may have these feelings amplified by viewing the overwhelmingly positive posts of their friends [5] [33]. Instagram therefore not only alters our social communications online, but in an off-line context as well, as people are constantly on their phones even when in the presence of other social beings, and where every real-life experience is documented to be

shared online. This paper has proven that movements such as #InstagramVSReality are aiming to subvert these effects. It is clear that the time has come to question to what extent we are allowing Instagram to infiltrate our lives, and how much authentic identity we are sacrificing as a result.

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Addendum A



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

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