Social Media is Not Real

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**Introduction**

Social media has soared to immense popularity over the past decade. While many assumed this new form of media was merely a fad in its early days, it has become increasingly apparent that this is not a fad but a revolution. As social media becomes the new medium in terms of receiving news, communicating with others, and building relationships, it is becoming more and more important to study the impact social media is making in our society. The development of relationships have intrigued communication researchers for years and human relationships are of utmost importance when looking at the grand scheme of communication scholarship. A topic that is relatively new to the communication field is the consideration of this new technology in our social relationships. Social information processing theory discusses this precise topic: the development of online relationships. Cultivation theory also discusses the impact of media on our perception of reality which is very relevant to social media. This paper will discuss the relationship between social media and discuss its connection with our relationships, perception of reality, and image through the perspectives of these two theories.

**An Inside Look at Social Media**

Essena O’Neill was 16 years old when she began to receive a massive following on many of her social media accounts. Her accounts contained multiple photos of her in bikinis, trendy outfits, and even sipping fruity drinks. As Essena racked up thousands of likes, shares, and favorites of her photos, she soared to social media popularity. She even began to market the products of dozens of companies and began to make a living off of her social media posts. It was not until October of 2015 that Essena began to speak out about the false perception of reality that her posts and pictures portrayed. She released a 17-minute long YouTube video that highlighted the pseudo reality of social media and why she decided to quit it all together. While many see Essena’s video as a publicity stunt, this video raises many questions about how people’s views and perceptions of reality are molded by media rather than real life. Ms. O’Neill also brings into the light the dark side of social media and how the image you put out there on this new media can be falsified. This topic is important to cover as millions of millennials flock to social media to discover the latest trends and popular culture and this has a great effect on their realities.

**Social Information Processing Theory**

Social information processing theory was developed by Joseph Walther during 1992 and 1993, long before the influence of the Internet was truly even considered. It was developed more in depth in 2008 and has been discussed and researched by many scholars ever since. The premise of this theory is that relationships are not as traditional as they used to be and that they are able to begin, develop, and thrive without the necessity of face-to face interactions. Impression management, the strategic or unconscious effort to influence, is a pivotal characteristic of this theory. Along with this theory is self-image and three distinct facets of it: actual self, ideal self, and ought self. Edward T. Higgins management, the strategic or unconscious effort to influence, is a pivotal charactertic of this theory without the ne discussed these three types of selves through psychological research he conducted almost thirty years ago (Higgins, 1987).

This research on the self was later used by communication researchers who applied Higgins research to communication behavior in online environments. Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) discussed this significance of the self in managing one’s online identity. CMC (computer-mediated communication) is another important aspect to this theory because social information processing centers around this form of information exchange that occurs on expansive telecommunication systems. For this research, the different types of self will be used to explain the phenomenon of social media and how it has specifically impacted Ms. Essena O’Neill.

**Cultivation Theory**

For years scholars have also studied the effects of television on society’s perception of reality. Through the work of George Gerbner and many other communication experts, cultivation theory has been used to explain this very phenomenon. This effect of television and other media was the hot topic in the 60s, but how does this theory apply to a very technologically advanced society whose primary source of news is no longer the television? Social media has now become the primary route that millennials take to receive the news and information about society. Because it has become such a powerful media source, it is worth looking into just how cultivation theory can be applied to the realm of social media. This research will also cover how social media has changed society’s sense of reality when it comes to image and beliefs.

**“Why I am *Really* Quitting Social Media”**

As mentioned earlier, Essena O’Neill was a social media sensation since the time she was sixteen years old. The now 19-year-old has begun to speak out about the dark side of social media and how the image you present is far off from reality. Essena introduced the video by making it evident that she has had an inside look at social media that not many people have the chance to see. The purpose of the video, according to Ms. O’Neill, was to be a wake-up call to her followers and to inform them that social media fame is not all that it is cracked up to be. Although not everyone enters into this world with horrible intentions, it was easy for O’Neill to get caught up in it.

At sixteen years old, all Essena wanted was to be recognized on social media. She wanted more likes, more followers, and more praise on her social networking accounts. She would spend hours upon hours stalking popular people on social media with hopes that she could embody their image, and she succeeded. As she began to soar to fame, many companies reached out to her to promote their products, such as clothing and drinks. This was a way for Essena to both get the praise she sought out and also make an income. However, it became clear to Essena that “having it all on social media means absolutely nothing to your real life” (iKaryn, 2015).

**The Self, Hyperpersonal Perspective, and Warranting**

Essena became very vulnerable in the video and she began to dive into the topics of this ideal self that she was portraying on her social media platforms. O’Neill did not like her actual self, the attributes she possessed in real life, and worked to build up her ideal self and began to take on the attributes that were ideal in accordance to the media and “famous” social media users. She even opened up about how she did not even know who her real self actually was, which is a struggle very concerning to the social media star. This struggle was very apparent as well as Essena opened up about the severe depression that she felt despite “having it all.” Many scholars have done research specifically on social media as a factor in furthering symptoms in depression and even being a direct cause of it. Mikel Theobald (2014) discusses how “social media can actually become a root of unhealthy emotions” such as loneliness, a major symptom of depression, and decreases in social bonding. The classic symptoms of depression (isolation, loneliness, etc.) are very evident throughout the monologue in Essena’s video.

Ms. O’Neill addresses another part of the social information processing theory, which is the hyperpersonal perspective. This topic is an extension of SIP and suggests that people are able to develop more intimate relationships than those that are face to face. O’Neill speaks against this perspective as she highlights that she felt as if she had no real relationships with anyone online. Even in times that she would interact with other social media stars in real life, she could see the depressed state they were in as well. Obviously, this perspective does apply to many people, especially in online relationships, but Essena says that the relationships she had with people online were all based upon lies, mainly resting upon her ideal self that was portrayed. Ms. O’Neill’s experience does seem to align with the idea of warranting, which is “the perceived legitimacy and validity of information about another person that one may receive or observe online” (Walther et al., 2011). Essena sees that many of followers may actually believe the legitimacy of her photos and posts but says that there is not much validity to them. In a related post about her quitting social media (Imgur, 2015) Essena captions a photo of her posing in a bikini with the following:

NOT REAL LIFE – took over 100 [pictures] in similar poses trying to make my stomach look good. Would have hardly eaten that day. Would have yelled at my little sister to keep taking them [the pictures] until I was somewhat proud of this. Yep so totally #goals.

In the plethora of other photos, she edited the caption to debunk the falsity of her photos. Essena informs her followers of the illegitimacy of her photos and how many of them were just focused on hypersexualizing herself, promoting products, and going to extreme levels in order to get a good picture.

Overall, social information processing theory is extremely relevant when evaluating Essena O’Neill’s experience. It is of such value to the field of social media communication that someone was willing to basically give up her “career” in order to reveal the truths behind the screen. Essena brings up a call to action at the end of her video for people to live into their actual self. She says that “when you let yourself be defined by numbers, you let yourself be defined by something that is not pure, that is not real, and that is not love.” She encourages her followers to break out of the pseudo-world of social media and embrace having real, intimate, relationships with people in their tangible life.

**The New Media**

A video produced by the YouTube channel “Buzzz Social Media” highlights how social media can no longer be considered a fad because it is a medium that has completely changed the game in terms of receiving news, communication, and connecting to others. It is apparent that social media is becoming a lifestyle as “ninety-six percent of millennials have joined a social network” (Buzzz Social Media, 2011). Now, instead of television, social media is becoming the major medium that millennials utilize to get their news and overall perceptions of reality. This technology has many benefits in terms of its timeliness and ease-of-use but it has also been questioned by many in its legitimacy and bias.

The truth is that many people get their information from mediated sources instead of through personal, direct experience, which can be a dangerous endeavor.

Mass media… explicitly or implicitly include these attention-getters in their programming … Mass media thus exploit areas of strong emotional arousal to help shape our knowledge and opinions – such as with our rapid media-driven increase in knowledge of the terrorists and their victims (Sylwester, 2001).

This perspective is evident in other areas of the media, such as in police brutality, refugee crises, and even in the recent tragedy in Paris. Cultivation theory investigates the use of mediated sources and how they shape a person’s sense of reality. Although this is in regard to television, this theory can also directly apply to the world of social media.

**Mainstreaming, Resonance, and the Three B’s**

According to the American Press Institute (2015), eighty-eight percent of millennials [those born between the early 1980s and 2000s] get their news from Facebook. In addition, thirty-three percent get their news from Twitter, twenty-one percent from Tumblr, and thirty-six percent from Pinterest. Over half of those who use Facebook as a news source do so at least one time per day, and a little under half of these users get news from this platform several times a day. This activity obviously varies according to age in addition to other demographics. Not only are millennials using social networks to get news, but they are also actively interacting with it.

When looking at the effect of social media on “Generation Y”, two important concepts relating to cultivation theory are significant to discuss: mainstreaming and resonance. Mainstreaming is the tendency for heavy viewers to perceive a similar culturally dominant reality to that pictured on the media although this differs from actual reality. Research conducted by Crowdtap shows that out of the 18 hours (on average) that millennials spend with media per day, 30% of that time is spent with user-generated content found on social media. By these numbers, it would be safe to classify the majority of millennials as heavy viewers of this specific media. In accordance with this idea of mainstreaming, social media will dominate other informational sources, including personal experience, for this group of people.

Although mainstreaming has a lot to do with our perceptions of discrimination, corruption, and violence, it also affects the ways in which people construct their reality. In regard to Essena O’Neill and other famous social media models, consumers of their content may see their lifestyle as the norm. Therefore, instead of relying on other sources that say that having a perfect body and wardrobe is *not* the norm, they will believe what is portrayed through this user-generated content. This can be dangerous because if someone only exposes themselves to the social networks definition of “perfect” models, they are perceiving a very “false sense of self” (Green, 2013).

Resonance is the behavior that occurs when a viewer’s lived reality coincides with the reality pictured in the media. This concept is something Essena seems to strongly oppose and urges her followers to do the same. In many instances, what is shown in the media actually happens in the lives of the people who see it. For example, if violence in urban settings is displayed in the media, someone may be able to resonate with that portrayal if they live in a similar environment. For Essena, she did not resonate with the glamour and beauty of social media stars, which led her to want to try to create resonance. For the most part though, Ms. O’Neill fought against the notion that the things on social media are actually a reality.

The Three B’s in cultivation theory tackle the idea of media being a gradual, but powerful force. Social media in particular can often blur traditional distinctions of people’s worldviews, often creating a gray area between their values and what the media says. Reality can also be blended into the cultural mainstream, so that many people will essentially agree on what constitutes as “real.” Lastly, media can bend the mainstream perception of reality to benefit media’s interest. For Essena, posing in a designer dress next to a pool played on this idea of “reality” while simultaneously promoting a product.

Social media has an extremely significant influence on the ways that society perceives reality. Unfortunately, consumers of this media are often tricked into believing that what is displayed in social media is actual reality. This was in fact the intent of user-generated content in the first place: to give normal people an ability to share their lives with others through opinions and multimedia. However, just like “reality” television, social media is no longer as real as it was once intended to be.

**Weaknesses, Strengths, and Outcome**

Essena O’Neill provided a compelling argument rallying against the falsity of social media and many people have stood behind her since she released her video just a month ago. There are several weakness behind her arguments though. For starters, the proposition that everyone should just up and leave social media is just not probable. In our society, millennials are extremely connected to their social media networks; they grew up in this social media age. While those on the older side of Generation Y may consider giving up social media, those on the younger side probably will not. Personally, I have no problem giving up social media, or at least being conscious of how “real” I am being on it. The hard truth though is that social media is a part of the fabric of our society that many just will not be willing to cut out.

There are many strengths to Essena’s video however, such as her call to action for people to live their real lives. Face-to-face communication has dramatically suffered with the popularity of social media which is a detrimental part of our relationships. While the social information processing theory speaks of online relationship being more intimate, I have to disagree. They may seem more intimate and meaningful, but that is because there is more time to think out and filter what you want to say. I think Essena is right in saying that these online connections can never compare to physically sitting with someone at a cafe, hearing their real voice, and sharing stories over a piping hot cup of coffee.

When looking at the outcome of Essena’s video it is apparent that many people thought negatively of her “activist” standpoint, but many began to see the legitimacy of her take on social media. Ms. O’Neill, after deleting all of social media, started a website to share her real life and encourage others to do the same. The site “Let’s Be Game Changers” includes different articles and multimedia concerning addiction, social media image, and activism.

This event really opened my eyes to how depressing social media “fame” can be. I find myself actually becoming excited when I get a lot of likes or shares on my social media posts, but I am seeing that that is a fleeting feeling rooted in my want for approval from others. What I would recommend for this is event is for Essena to continue to post different videos revealing the secret world of social media fame. Specifically, I believe she should post more about this idea of body image on social media. I think this would really help to teach young girls especially that they do not need a #WomanCrushWednesday or shares on their photos to feel beautiful and worthy. As for the video itself, I think Essena did a wonderful job at giving a raw and transparent view of the difficulties she has been having ever since she became a social media celebrity.

**Conclusion**

Judah Smith, a pastor at The City Church in Seattle, described the situation of social media pseudo-realities in his sermon “Instagram Isn’t Real.” Judah described how with all the cropping and filtering, that Instagram simply does not depict real life. He explains this idea of FOMO (fear of missing out) we feel when we see our friends post certain things on social media. A simple picture of a scenic beach, cruise ship, or new outfit can leave us feeling restless, jealous, and dissatisfied. He talks about how social media actually makes us very discontent with our real lives. He puts this into a biblical perspective quoting 1 Timothy 6:6 in the Bible which states “godliness with contentment is great gain.” Even outside of the biblical narrative, contentment is something we should seek as a society and simply does not happen when we live our lives in constant comparison to what is perceived as “reality” on social media (Smith, 2014).

Social media has been one of the most influential media outlets in American society. It enables us to connect with others and share our lives in just seconds. But is what is being posted on social media a true picture into reality? Are people actually displaying their true selves, or just an idealized version of they want to be? For Essena O’Neill, social media helped her to create a life that just was not real. With the growing influence social media has on millennials especially, we have to be aware that social media is not always as authentic as it may seem. It has the ability to blur the lines between human experience and glorified lies. Social information processing theory and cultivation theory together seem to be getting at similar ideas: what is portrayed on social media is not always as real and believable as it may seem.

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