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INSTAGRAM AS A SITE OF QUEER SUBJECTIVATION: PRELIMINARY CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study, as preliminary as it seems, attempts to conceptualize the relationship between the individual, social and digital by critically reading the practices of “coming out” on Instagram by individuals who identify within the spectrum of the sexually and gender queer in Sri Lanka. The next stage of this study will attempt to make theoretical inquiries into the changing socio-cultural, political and economic contexts which have, in recent times, enabled the “increasing” visibility of Sri Lankan gender and sexual non-conforming identities on the digital space, this study will further discuss the ways in which Instagram, as a social media platform, reinforce/sustain these changes. For the purpose of this study, around ninety Instagram profiles will be analyzed qualitatively. Even though many research have been conducted on the visibility of the sexual and gender queer on digital platforms, little or no research has been conducted on this area in Sri Lanka; therefore, this study will make an attempt to theorize the above areas of focus with reference to theoretical frameworks such as Truth and Subjectivity by Michel Foucault (1980), and the Posthumanist concept by Donna Haraway (1984).

Keywords: Digital space, Gender and sexual nonconformity, Instagram, Visibility

INTRODUCTION

There is an emerging body of scholarship which seem to argue that the digital provides “democratic architecture” (Perera, 2018) for the expression of marginalized subjectivities (Goby, 2003; McLean 2013; Craig et al, 2014, 2015; Nip, 2004; Lucero, 2017). Accordingly, the digital is perceived as a space which facilitates “freedom”, “agency” and “autonomy” of self-expression of marginalized subjectivities such as the queer. However, in a previous study, we have argued that rather than providing such conducive environment for the expression of marginalized identity, digital media platforms such as YouTube (re)produce the dominant socio-economic, political, cultural and historical narrative (Prasadika & Kadugodage, 2018, pp. 62-69). Accordingly, by “challenging the (neo)liberal, first-word understanding of the digital space as a “smooth space”, (Prasadika & Kadugodage, 2019, p. 63) the aim of this project, broadly, is to lay the groundwork to conceptualize the mutually complementary, yet seemingly contradictory relationship between the individual, social and the digital, and specifically, to explore digital platforms such as Instagram as sites which symptomatically foreground the above.

Hence, to this end, we ask the following questions;

1. How does the digital enable a platform, if at all, to complicate the individual and the social?

2. What do the practices of “coming out” and “visibility” of the queer connote about the relationship between the individual, social and the digital?

For the purpose of this study, we have observed and collected data from ninety Instagram profiles of Sri Lankans who seem to identify within the spectrum of marginalized sexuality. The data is analyzed qualitatively, using critical content analysis. The ethical concerns of using publicly available data such as Instagram profiles seem to be divided; however, we have used such data by ensuring the privacy of the users. Even though, the analytical rigor of this paper is premised on Michel Foucault’s (1980) conceptualization of Truth and Subjectivity and Donna Haraway’s (1984) Posthumanism, this project, in the long run, aims at conceptualizing a framework to explore the subjectivation of marginalized identities on the digital in geopolitical contexts such as Sri Lanka.

DISCUSSION

The posthumanist thought, championed by Ihab Hassan (1977), and Donna Haraway (1991) conceptualizes the digital as an embodiment of the social and physical. It is the conviction of Bolter (2016) that “Posthumanist theorists make a convincing case that digital communication in the 2000s is not a refuge from the physical and social world, but fully implicated in it” (Bolter, 2016, p.6). Hence, rather than offering a “displacement of subjectivation”, in Foucault’s terms, the digital, in fact, is a modus operandi for the dissemination of the truths produced in the market, in mainstream media and other social

institutions. Therefore, the social which is being (re)produced in the digital and/or vice versa, requires the participation of the individual – be mainstream or alternative-; therefore, the digital provides a platform to explore the subjectivation of individuals. According to Bolter (2016),

“In contemporary media culture, users are not autonomous actors; instead, their identities are defined by the performances that they give in their almost constant interaction with social media and entertainment applications. Furthermore, users could be said to perform their identities according to discursive frameworks constrained in part by the social media applications themselves [...] As such, social media provide opportunities for redefining the subject” (Bolter, 2016, pp. 6-7).

In spite of the social and cultural stigma which the act of “coming out” or self-disclosure entails in a context like Sri Lanka, there is an upsurge of individuals who identify as “Lesbian” or “Gay” coming out on platforms such as Instagram. In this light, this study attempts to engage with the acts of “coming out”, in relation to the embodied relationship between the individual, social and digital, and to inquire, if at all, as the emerging scholarship suggests, whether the digital “smoothen” the moral ruptures between the individual and the social. The mainstream narrative of queer subjectivity is shaped in such a way that, this paper argues, “coming out” is endorsed as a liberating practice. As much as the political potential in such acts of claiming space and identity can be acknowledged, it is necessary to critically engage with the regime of organized practices which construct the queer identity within the mainstream queer discourse by endorsing such “confessions”. According to Foucault, “Unlike other interdictions, sexual interdictions are constantly connected with the obligation to tell the truth about oneself” (Foucault, 1988, p.

17). Hence, it is possible to argue that the production of gender and sexually non-normative identities on platforms such as Instagram, which are predicated on the political economy of liberalism, is for the most part, determined by the practices disseminated in the market. At present, the “becoming” of a subject for the popular is marked by their investment in self-improvement projects. Platforms such as Instagram promote this idea of the self-improving subject, namely the subject who is constantly seeking to fashion themselves as happy, normal and productive. Hence, practices of “coming out”, “claiming identity/space”, which are undoubtedly performative acts which unsettles the dominant socio-cultural and historical narrative, is, however, a product of liberal socio-political economy of today’s world.

CONCLUSION

This is a preliminary account of an ongoing project which is attempts to conceptualize the seemingly contradictory yet complementary relationship between the individual, social and the digital. This project is working its way towards an understanding of the liberal political culture which shapes the individual, social and the digital, and produces subjectivities (mainstream or “alternative”) which perceive obedience to the “truth” about oneself as an avenue to escape oppression. In as much as the negotiation between the individual and social is an interplay of the social, historical, cultural, political and economic discourses, the digital too is an active player of such discursive “truths”. The queer subjectivity, in this case provides a keyhole to fathom such interplays between the individual, social and the digital.

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