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The Social Media Paradox: An Examination of the Illusion Versus the Reality of Social Media

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Introduction

The Internet has opened up a world of opportunity in terms of various social media outlets. Over the past decade, society has witnessed a surge of these outlets, allowing one to assume that social media is undoubtedly evolving and advancing. Resulting from the advent of social media, creating online representations of one's "self" has become a dominant social behaviour in our contemporary society. Inherent to all social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn is that they each involve the sharing of personal data. One could infer that the evolution of social media outlets, from earlier platforms such as Friendster and MySpace to current platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, has allowed for greater customization and "freedom" in the way that users can represent themselves. It appears, that as social media advances, users are able to create profiles and "identities" that more personally and accurately represent their "true self".

However, a critical analysis of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault's theories, suggests that this is not the case. Foucault's theory of power/knowledge offers substantial insight for the topic at hand. Foucault sees power as an everyday, socialized phenomenon. For Foucault, power "is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society", in this case, social media (1990:93). Understanding social media through Foucault's notion of modern power, we begin to view social media as institutions whereby individuals are shaped and constrained to specific structures, ultimately limiting their ability to "freely" represent themselves. Foucault's theory of power/knowledge is also apparent in the work of Judith Butler. Like Foucault, Butler (1992) argues that power pervades every day life, and thus theories, concepts, subjects and the like are always implicated in power. As a result, Butler argues that there is no subject or category that is distinct from power relations. Foucault's notion of power/knowledge is also inherent to Butler's theory of performativity. Both theorists essentially illuminate the idea that there is no "true self" prior to power and social relations. I will utilize these theories to argue that though social media gives the illusion of agency, there is no "true self" that is distinct from the identity presented in social media. Individuals using social media believe they are free in creating and presenting their identity. On the contrary, individuals are very much locked into the design of these

outlets and limited to its range of choices and predefined format. In addition to creating the illusion of agency, the structure of social media also prevents its users from recognizing this illusion. Further, as a result of the operating discourses of power, I will utilize Butler's theory to argue that individuals *performatively* constitute their identities on social media.

Power-Knowledge and the Structure of Social Media

An analysis of Foucault's work prior to Butler's is necessary, as Foucault's work strongly influences and inspires the work of Butler. Central to Foucault's work, is his notion of power/knowledge. This concept emphasizes the way that these two elements, power and knowledge, depend on one another (Mills 2003). Foucault argues, "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations" (1995:67). Foucault's notion of modern power is distinct as it departs from previous notions of power. Rather than viewing power as concentrated, coercive and possessed, Foucault sees power as an everyday, socialized and embodied phenomenon. Further, power is not deployed onto subjects, but rather *constitutes* these subjects. For Foucault, power exists everywhere, and thus this modern form of power is much more pervasive than its original concept. Through his notion of power/knowledge, Foucault focuses on the institutional processes at work in a society, that allow for fact or "truth" to be established (Mills 2003). He argues that power operates in the processing of information, which results in something being labeled as fact. Moreover, for something to be considered a fact, Foucault states, "it must be subjected to a thorough process of ratification by those in positions of authority" (2003:72).

Foucault's concern regarding how truth or knowledge is established has important implications for the topic at hand. There are indeed power-relations operating amidst the division between those who *own* and those who *utilize* social media outlets. According to Foucault, where there are imbalances of power relations between groups of people, there will be a production of knowledge (Mills 2003). In addition to *owning* social media outlets, these owners have the power of structuring and designing the outlet the way they choose. This ultimately constrains its users to specific options and a predefined format they must work with. As previously stated, one could argue that the advancement of

social media has resulted in a more personalized and customized fashion of creating "profiles", and thus a more accurate depiction of one's "true self". However, an analysis of earlier platforms versus current platforms seems to prove otherwise.

Comparing earlier platforms, particularly MySpace, to current platforms, such as Facebook, illustrates this point quite effectively. Both outlets allow its users to share photos, videos, and "pages" relating to interests in music, movies, books and the like. In addition, both sites allow users to display personal information such as age, gender, location, occupation, schooling, sexual orientation and relationship status. However, MySpace differs from Facebook as it offers many "artistic" features that Facebook does not. For example, MySpace allows its users to choose from custom "skins" or background images, along with a personalized top image. Further, MySpace users have the ability to customize their font *type* and *colour*. In addition, users have the option of playing music on their given "profile page". It seems then, that these earlier platforms offer more room for creativity and give its users much more control over how they present themselves. This reduction in creativity and loss of freedom ultimately prevents the user of social media from acting as a "free agent" when constructing their "identities".

Judith Butler and the illusion of agency

Akin to Foucault, the power/knowledge discourse is very much vested in the work of Judith Butler. Butler utilizes notions of power/knowledge to conceptualize some of her most significant ideas. In "Contingent Foundations", Butler explores the concept of "postmodernism", questioning its very existence, and what exactly constitutes the term "postmodernism" (1992). Butler mentions Jean-Francois Lyotard, who "champions" the term postmodernism. However, Butler notes that to group together a set of positions under one mastery concept and call it "postmodernism" is paradoxical and problematic. Lyotard's concept of postmodernism is very much at odds with Derrida, who does not support the notion of postmodernism. Butler understands this is problematic because if Lyotard's notion is used to represent postmodernism, we assume that it stands for the entire phenomenon, and that "the structure of 'these' positions can be properly and economically discerned in the structure of one" (1992:5). Thus the paradox is that the

only way to group these positions under one mastery concept is by excluding and dismissing other positions that may very well also represent the concept.

With this paradox and arbitrary use of the term postmodernism, Butler aims to discover what authorizes the assumptions of concepts from the very start. It is here, that Foucault's notion of power/knowledge is apparent in Butler's thoughts. For like Foucault, Butler (1992) acknowledges that power is a pervading social phenomenon, and further, that theory and philosophy are always implicated in power. Thus, Butler argues that power-relations are always operating where norms and universals are established. Further, Butler (1992) essentially believes there is danger in creating such norms and universals that both *authorize* and *exclude* concepts as the result of its establishment. Butler utilizes the United States' war against Iraq to illustrate the problematic nature of "universal categories". Butler argues that there is no single "universality" out there, and cultural conflict can be understood through the clashing of "universalities". Butler suggests that the Arab "other" is understood to be "outside" the universal structures of reason and democracy that characterize the United States. Therefore, Iraq's democratic principles of free speech and political sovereignty need to be removed in order to revert them to the "democratic universals" of the United States. Butler ultimately argues that this "violent move reveals such notions of universality are installed through the abrogation of the very universal principles to be implemented" (1992:7).

The example of the US war against Iraq, illustrates the danger Butler perceives in using "totalizing universalities". The US War against Iraq illustrates how the "universalities" of the United States, imposes a culturally hegemonic notion onto the social field. In this case, power/knowledge is apparent, as the hegemony of the United States and its cultural ideals and "universals" are imposed on Iraq. As a result, Butler believes it is essentially important to understand the categories of "universals" as ones that can be contested or challenged. Ultimately, Butler (1992:8) views "universalities" as a philosophical instrument that will negotiate between conflicts of power, and subsequently, "safeguard and reproduce a position of hegemonic power". That is, as the hegemonic culture (the United States) imposes these universals and installs it onto the "other" (the Arab), they ultimately reproduce and verify their position of power. Again,

the paradoxical theme is present, as notions of "universalities" can only exist at the cost of excluding other notions.

In regard to social media, Butler's logic appears to be evident as well. There exists a conflict of power between the owners and users of social media. The hegemonic nature of social media is one whereby its users seem to abide by the "rules" or "universals" imposed by the owners. Looking at Facebook in particular, the "universals" of Facebook could be understood as the normalized and standardized format that one must abide by when creating their "profile". As previously mentioned, these predefined formats limit and constrain its users to what is requested by the owners. Thus abiding by these "universals", that is predefined formats and a limiting design, ultimately benefits the owners, and serves to reproduce and verify their position of power. As a result of the "hegemony" of social media, and the "universals" imposed on its users, the illusion of agency is created, but agency indeed does not exist.

Agency as a false figure and the representation of one's "true self"

After discussing and examining Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, and its subsequent influence on Butler's theory of "universals", it is evident that understanding social media in the light of these theorists posits social media as an institution whereby its users are subjected and submitted to specific structures. This ultimately creates an illusion of agency, where individuals cannot truly represent themselves "freely" in which they falsely believe to be doing. Through a deeper examination of Butler's theory, the illusion of agency is further highlighted. Butler ultimately argues "agency" is a false figure. That is, there is no "true self" or "agent" prior to social and power relations. Thus, according to Butler, there is no "true self" that is distinct from the identity presented in social media which has very much been subjected to social and power relations.

In "Contingent Foundations", Butler (1992) continues to explore how "positions" come to be established as a result of certain authorizing power. In particular she discusses the concept of the "I", and the extent that it is able to preside over pre-existing positions. Butler argues that the "I", is unable to select between these "positions", as the "I" is already *constituted* by them. In regard to these "positions", Butler argues that they are "fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements" (1992:9). Butler's logic can once again be applied to the subject of social

media, in particular the extent that the "I" or user, is able to preside over the preexisting "positions" and act as a "free agent". The "positions" that exist within social media are its predefined format and limiting structure. Similar to Butler's description, the predefined formats and structures of social media are fully embedded organizing principles in the institutional arrangement of each given outlet. Through Butler's perspective (1992), an individual on social media is ultimately unable to present an "I" that is distinct from social media as "matrices of power and discourse" are what produce a viable "subject".

In addition, Butler argues, "No subject is its own point of departure" (1992:9). In relation to social media, this once again exemplifies the illusion of agency that is created. For constructing one's "identity" does not begin with the given individual who wishes to do so. Thus the illusion of agency occurs as the individual creates an account, logs on to their account, and believes that he or she can begin to construct a profile that represents their "true self". But as Butler notes, their point of departure does not begin with themself, as the range of choices that have already been established limits their options.

Butler mentions Foucault in "Contingent Foundations", who also explores how a subject's intentions are limited by conditions of power and discourse. Similar to Butler, Foucault argues that a subject's actions are the result of prior actions.[1] Expanding on Foucault's thoughts, Butler concludes, "the horizon in which we act, is there a constitutive possibility of our very capacity to act, not merely or exclusively as an exterior field or theatre of operations" (1992:10). In relation to the topic at hand, our ability to act on social media is limited by our very capacity to act, depending on which options are available to the user.

Performativity and the construction of "profiles"

Examining Butler's theory of performativity offers significant insight in regard to social media and the way individuals construct their "identities". In "Gender Trouble", Butler explores the category of gender, recognizing how power pervades and operates in the classifying and categorizing of this concept. Referring back to Foucault, Butler proposes, "juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to

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[1] Butler refers to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, 102. New York: Random House, 1980. ; Similar to Butler, in "The History of Sexuality" Foucault also utilized examples of war to illustrate how modern power relations displace a subject's intentions. In particular, subject's who *act* are already previously constituted by prior actions. The "prior actions" represent modern power relations, which as a result, undermine the subject's intentions.

represent" (1999:4). Not only do power relations influence the representation of subjects, but they do so negatively, by limiting, regulating, and controlling what can be seen as acceptable in these categories (Butler 1999). Butler argues that this is fundamentally important for the category of women and the subject of feminism, as they are very much restrained by structures of power. In addition, it becomes "politically problematic if that system can be shown to produce gendered subjects along a differential axis of domination or to produce subjects who are presumed to be masculine" (1999:5).

Similar to the danger of "universalities" in the example of the US War against Iraq, Butler argues that having a "universal" category of gender and feminism is problematic. Butler argues that gender cannot be seen as a "universal category". Further, Butler suggests that "gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (1999:6). Therefore, a "universal" or stable subject of feminism is challenged by the discourses of race, class and ethnicity, in which it functions. Thus the assumption that there exists a universal identity that constitutes "women" is indeed an assumption. As such, Butler (1999) believes that a radical rethinking of how identities are constructed is necessary.

However, Butler (1999) also argues that there exists controversy over the word *construction*. The controversy is whether gender can be constructed differently, or if *construction* implies some sort of social determinism. If the latter is true, this rids the possibility of agency in the way "an individual" can construct their "identity". Butler's logic is that just as *sex* is said to be biologically determined, *gender* can be understood as culturally or socially determined. Thus if gender is culturally constructed, it suggests a certain amount of determinism, where the bodies are passively molded by culture. She argues, "when the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destined formulation" (1999:12).[2] Once again, the illusion of agency is apparent. For if gender is *constructed* as Butler believes, then agency cannot exist.

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[2] The "biology-is destiny" formulation refers to the idea that your sex determines your gender. Thus if you are born a *male,* your gender identity will be *masculine*. Here Butler is arguing that to say gender is *culturally constructed*, follows the same logic as the "biology-is-destiny" formulation. In this case, not biology, but culture becomes destiny.

Gender cannot be constructed by choice. Rather, gender is constructed by the culture it is subjected to, and the individual is ultimately passive to this construction.

The concept of power/knowledge is again inherent to Butler's theory. Discourses that exist within a culture subsequently influence the culture that is produced. These discourses are inevitably responsible for the way gender is constructed as it authorizes certain concepts, while simultaneously restricting and limiting others. Butler states, "These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal morality" (1999:13). Once more, the paradoxical theme of "universalities" appears, as the universal category of gender only exists by excluding what does not constitute as the presumed domain of gender.

If it is understood that one's gender or identity is culturally constructed, then agency is also understood to be impossible. Therefore, according to Butler, what constitutes "personal identity" does not rely on internal features of the person, but rather features *external* to the person. With this reasoning, Butler sets out to answer, "To what extent is 'identity' a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience?" (1999:23). It is at this point that the concept of performativity in introduced. Butler explains that gender, or identity is *performative,* in the sense that it constitutes the identity it is supposed to be, as a result of the given discourses. She states "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (1999:33). Further, she argues there is no "being" behind doing. Illustrating the recurring illusion of agency, she suggests, "'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed-the deed is everything" (1999:33).

If social media is understood in light of Butler's theory, it can be recognized that a person's "identity" on social media faces the same issue that Butler proposed regarding the construction of gender identity. As discussed, the structure of social media is established through discourses of power-knowledge. As a result, the subject on social media is constrained by the structure, and is subsequently constituted by its structure, ultimately leading to the illusion of agency. As a result, identities on social media must be performatively constituted. Just as Butler explains argues that a person's "identity"

cannot be understood as an internal feature of the person, the same logic can be applied to recognize that identities on social media also do not reflect an "internal personhood" (Butler 1999).

As previously mentioned, Butler argues there is no "being" behind doing. Thus to say that gender and identity is performative is to argue that gender is "real" only to the extent that it is performed. In terms of social media, if there is no "doer behind the deed", there ultimately cannot be a "true self" behind the "identity" presented on social media.

The inability to recognize the illusion of agency

Foucault and Butler have established that the illusion of agency indeed exists. Further, it has been identified that social media also gives rise to the illusion of agency. Butler expands on the illusion of agency by suggesting that not only does it exist, but also, individuals are unable to recognize that their "agency" or ability to freely act is an illusion. In regard to social media, the illusion of agency not only prevents users from constituting "identities" that are said to represent their "true self", but they are also incapable of realizing it.

Again, Butler utilizes examples of war to illustrate this point. Referring back to the US War against Iraq, Butler notes that there appears to be a celebration on the part of the US government, against the Arab "other". For example, at the start of the war, news broadcasters seemed to celebrate the US' capacity to act instrumentally on the world, by destroying its opposition and controlling the consequences of this destruction (Butler 1992). Yet the US was unable to see the consequences of their effective intentions. Referring to Foucault, Butler states, "the subject is itself the effect of a genealogy which is erased at the moment that the subject takes itself as the single origin of its action, and that the effects of an action always supersede the stated intention or purpose of the act" (1992:10). Thus since the subject is constituted by discourses of power, their initial intentions will be undermined by these effects.

Butler uses the example of the "smart-bomb" to further clarify this point. The "smart-bomb" is a bomb with a camera attached to the front, that records the target as it moves in to destroy it. Further, the recording is relayed back to a control centre where the recording is re-filmed and aired on television (Butler 1992). Yet the irony is that the screen conveniently destroys itself prior to the actual destruction, which prevents the

viewers from ever realizing its true effects. Thus, the viewers celebrate military triumph and the effectiveness of the bomb, while remaining distant and unable to recognize the true intent of the bomb and destruction caused by it. Butler states, "although it was made to see that this was a humane bombing, one which took buildings and military installations as its targets, this was, on the contrary, the effect of a frame which excluded from view, the systematic destruction of a population" (1992:12).

The "frame" of the smart bomb that conveniently excludes viewers from seeing the destruction of the population, is comparable to "frames" that operate on social media. For example, the "frame" on Facebook can be understood as its predefined structure, format and range of choices the user must abide by. When the owners create this "frame" or format that users must work within, the users are ultimately excluded from realizing the true effects that it causes. Just as the smart bomb causes its viewers to believe it was a "humane bombing", Facebook's "frame" causes its users to believe they are autonomous in creating their "identities". Butler argues, "in a sense, the subject is constituted through an exclusion and differentiation, perhaps a repression that is subsequently concealed over, by the effect of autonomy" (1992:12). An individual's autonomy on social media exists to the extent that users are able to choose from the choices offered to them. But as Butler argues, the fact that they are given this autonomy to choose, conceals the fact that their autonomy is limited. Subsequently, this little amount of autonomy prevents the users from ever realizing that "agency" on social media, is indeed an illusion.

The theories and logic of Foucault and Butler offer an interesting way to look at social media, in particular the way "we" as users, believe to be creating our "identities" or "profiles". Creating "identities" on social media has become a popular and dominant aspect of today's contemporary society. It is likely that social media's popularity will endure, and that new forms of social media will continue to be created. As demonstrated in this essay, this would have significant consequences for its users. Foucault and Butler's perspective offers a way of looking at social media that cannot outwardly be recognized by its users. Their theories essentially allow us to recognize that social media creates the illusion of agency, whereby its users falsely believe to be constructing their "identities" as they choose. Operating relations of power are what create this illusion, and in addition, prevent users from recognizing its existence. Consequently, there is no "true

self" that is distinct from the "identity" presented in social media. Rather, individuals performatively constitute their "identities" as a result of the operating power relations. Though users of social media may be unaware, and thus be content in "presenting themselves" in a way that restricts their agency, it very well occurs. Regardless of the fact that users may or may not be aware of underlying relations of power and its effects on its users, Foucault and Butler's theories offer a refreshing way to look at social media, perhaps causing avid users to rethink their use of these outlets.

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