Blasé Attitude, Hyperreality, and Social Media

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Abstract

Though there is much to gain through technological development, it is also necessary to critique the ubiquitous presence of devices in social life and the overstimulation they bring. The increasing mediation of reality through applications such as Instagram could blur the division between the 'real' world of everyday life and a 'hyperreality' fostered by such applications. Using concepts from theorists Jean Baudrillard and Georg Simmel, this paper presents a critique of the overstimulation of information through social media. With continuous and repetitive material being recycled online, it is discussed how a *blasé* attitude is used to protect oneself from being informationally overwhelmed.

Introduction

Unquestionably, societies around the world have dramatically changed since the beginning of this century given the spread of information and communication technology (ICT). There is a huge difference in the way people live their day-to-day lives, especially considering the development and distribution of smartphones and the use of social media. Cellular devices have shifted from being an instrument solely for contacting others, to now being an extension of individuals themselves.

With the addition of social media apps, people have become heavily reliant on their phones. They have become a portal through which people look for social meaning and connection through social media apps such as Instagram. In a world suffering from significant problems of social isolation and loneliness, the virtual world of social media provides a sense of connection, meaning, and quantified gratification. For example, when posting a photo on Instagram, many individuals would watch and count how many people like it. The more 'likes' on a picture, the higher self-esteem and better we feel about ourselves (Hawi & Samaha, 2017). Thus, we are constantly looking to others online for validation and acceptance.

In this context, using concepts from theorists Georg Simmel and Jean Baudrillard, this paper will analyze the encroachment of subjective experience by the distant and autonomous objective culture of social media, arguing that the use of apps such as Instagram create a continuous cycle of hyperreal overstimulation that parallels the *blasé* attitude that Simmel described for the urban dweller of late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Georg Simmel's Perspective of Modern Society

Georg Simmel was born on March 1, 1858 in Berlin. He attended the University of Berlin and eventually received a doctorate in philosophy (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.223). Simmel, a good friend of Max Weber, focused on the relationship and tension between the individual and culture, and the. More specifically, Simmel looked at how individuals act meaningfully as they are impinged by the abstract force of society. He claimed that individuals meet their needs through social interactions and social forms, however, these patterned forms of interaction can lead to alienation (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.224)

Simmel describes this alienation through the "tragedy of culture", a modern process in which objective culture dominates subjective culture. On the one hand, subjective culture refers to things that are closely linked to meaningful experience, things we can relate to in our day to day lives in our "psychological experience of the

world" (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.226). Objective culture, on the other hand, is general and abstract; it challenges meaningful experience in our experience of the world.

For Simmel, modernity was characterized by the increase of urbanization, division of labor, and the use of money as the main social connection that detaches individuals from the context of their social relations. This leads to the development of an objective culture and a *blasé* attitude that helps the individual psychologically manage these social forces (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.224). Urbanization, for example, is marked by an intrinsic tension that allows individuals the freedom to choose their own lifestyle and group affiliations at the same time as their relationships are rationalized and thus lose intensity. Social relations and interactions, consequently, become "to the point" and highly individualized.

Blasé means "to be uninterested in pleasure or life" (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.235). It is the idea that in a city full of continuous external and internal stimuli, individuals develop a protective layer against being overwhelmed. According to Simmel, the "urban dweller" becomes emotionally paralyzed and psychologically develops a sense of meaninglessness. Due to being used to a urban experience full of people and lights, the individual becomes numb and indifferent to what happens around them. Simmel believes that the blasé attitude is the "typical emotional state of the modern dweller" (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.235). He connects this apathetic state to the increase of emotional work that comes with group memberships and the continuous flow of information in modern society (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.235). Thus, the overstimulation of the modern city is too much for individuals to handle, hence their emotional withdrawal and *blasé* attitude towards everything.

Social Media, Modern, and Postmodern Society

The addition of networking apps onto cellular devices has greatly affected people's everyday experience. Everywhere you see people walking on the streets, staring at their phone screens and occasionally looking up to see where they are going. Since the development of social media, people have become heavily engrossed and attached to their cell phones. It is safe to say that

social media has become a huge part of today's experience of the world, where most people look to these apps for entertainment and self-validation.

Social media apps and virtual experiences can be scrutinized using Jean Baudrillard's concept of *hyperreality*. Hyperreality relates to a preference of stimulated experiences over real ones in what Baudrillard one of the most important characteristic of postmodern society. He argues that our cultural world is no longer reality, but rather virtual, and thus real experiences have lost all meaning and authenticity through the proliferation of simulacra (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.242). To put it differently, in postmodern culture, people strive for emotional and stimulating experiences through media and images instead of 'in person'. However, these images of reality are often exaggerated and distorted through digital editing or physical enhancement (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.242). For example, popular social media app Instagram is a battlefield filled with unrealistic images of ideal body types, relationship goals, homes, or lifestyles—images that are carefully curated and do not reflect reality; they are hyperreal.

Furthermore, research has shown that the growing addiction to social media has negative consequences such as the decrease of self-esteem. Hawai and Samaha (2017) conducted a study to determine the relationships between social media addictions, self-esteem and life satisfaction in University students. They conducted a generic online survey questionnaire at Notre Dame University-Louaize in Lebanon and found that that social media addiction is correlated with low self-esteem, which then is associated to mental disorders. They also found a strong, negative correlation between self-esteem and satisfaction with life (Hawai & Samaha, 2017), which could be analyzed through the notion that social media's hyperreality fosters unrealistic expectations and experiences. Even though there are several negative attributes linked to social media apps, people tend to ignore them because social media has become intertwined with modern society. The fact is that it is difficult to stay up to date and in connection with peers without the use of social media apps today.

The *Blasé* Attitude and Social Media Apps

The *blasé* attitude is the result of being overstimulated in a modern city. For Simmel, the blasé attitude was represented in most, if not all city dwellers, as they are continuously being faced with stimuli. This is due to the increase of urbanization as a result of the rise of industrialization (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p.230). As people moved from rural to urban areas, their group membership changed from organic to rational. In other words, individuals starting having much more freedom of choice, which led to rational decisions rather than emotional ones. As individuality and unique personalities were on the rise within growing cities, so was loneliness and the *blasé* attitude; the urban city which offered individual freedom, became dominated by a sense of alienation.

This phenomenon can be translated to social media apps today. Originally, social media apps were used to share photos with friends and family. However, within the 21st century, the use of these apps became widespread and more specialized. Currently, it is common to upload photos or stories daily to allow your followers to see your experiences and regular lifestyle, for example, by posting your personal struggles online. However, social media apps are used to solidify social standings through online interactions. For example, in Instagram, the more followers you have, the more well-established you are perceived. Thus, social media has become an objective goal; it is all about numbers: how many followers, how many likes, etc. In this sense, a quantified objective culture dominates subjective culture, and consequently there is a lack of meaningful ties and connections in the world of social media. In addition, people begin to edit their photos to appear as an ideal type of beauty and portray a perfect lifestyle, which creates a continuous cycle of unrealistic content being uploaded daily by millions of people.

Instagram also allows you to easily connect and follow anybody in the entire world. It is not limited to just family and friends; therefore, many people follow individuals that they admire. This generates a platform that effortlessly causes people to become overstimulated with unnecessary information. In Instagram, many people post advertisements or endorsements for things such as weight loss products, they will often attach a photo with a drastic change, etc. These types of photos have become so repetitive that many people just scroll past them. They develop an emotional paralysis where nothing catches their attention because they have 'seen it all'. As the supply of apps such as Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat, increase, eventually, the user becomes dull to everything. There is a sense of "boredom and lack of concern" (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 235) while strolling through social media apps. This is because each individual can only care so much and invest their emotions in so many things. At one point, people develop a protective screen and block out any unnecessary material; otherwise, they become emotionally overwhelmed and exhausted. Simmel's concept of the *blasé* attitude, used to describe life in a metropolis, expands into the 'place' where millions of people currently live: social media.

Conclusion

The use of social media has well expanded past its originally goal. What was once a virtual tool to connect with friends and family has now become a hyperreal stage. Many people manipulate their photos, enhancing certain body parts or even using fake ones. It has become the norm to use filters and edit photos to become more likeable online. This reinforces an objective culture where there's a sense of inauthenticity and no meaningful ties. Everything is reduced to the amount of likes and followers rather than the story and background of the individual. Thus, in order to survive in a competitive platform filled with unrealistic photos, people have to adhere to majority and modify their posts and stories to fit the ideal. Being overloaded with these altered posts, prompts an individual's ability to be indifferent and apathetic. They develop a *blasé* attitude in order to protect themselves against the continuous cycle of being overstimulated online by hyperreal content.

References

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