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Exploring Social Media as an Ideological Apparatus for Sexualization and Cultural Shifts

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Author's contribution

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ABSTRACT

In this digital age, social media has a ubiquitous presence and an ineludible impact. Unlike conventional media, it is promptly and instantly accessible and has a consistent uninhibited access to our brains and, thus, a magnum impact on our worldviews and our culture. This study, first, dwells on the well-established link throughout the literature between media, in its conventional forms, ideology, and cultural change. Then, fixating on social media per se, it reveals how social media in its design and algorithms is an ideology-loaded and driven tool that has more momentum in impact on culture than simple forms of media. Moreover, this article provides ample evidence on how the ideologies that lurk and drive conventional media are the same for social media. Those perennial ideologies are consumer culture, the objectification of women, and the sexualization of children. Furthermore, this article illustrates how such ideologies manifest themselves on social media and how they impact culture by altering people's outlook on the world. At last, this paper reports some of the studies, western and non-western alike, that associate social media and the ideologies imbedded in it with moral decadence and cultural alienation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A simple, yet extremely reductive, definition of media would be an apparatus or a tool for creating and transmitting a message to an audience (Pearce, 2009) [1]. This simple apparatus, however, lends itself to being a subtle platform for different ideologies. Those ideologies contend for power and hegemony (Thompson, 1990 [2]; Fairclough, 1995 [3]; Kellner, 1995 [4]) and shape and reshape culture, locally and globally, as they see fit and profit (Miliband, 1979 [5]; Postman, 1993 [6]; Chomsky, 2001 [7]; Chomsky & Herman, 2008; Curtis, 2016 [8]). Hence, there is nothing simple and crude about media. Rather, it is an integral element of a powerful connected triad: media, ideology, and culture. In plainer terms, media is a powerfully ideological subtle vessel to prime and mold our tastes, preferences, worldviews, way of life, and values; thus, effectuating change to culture (Henslin, 2008 [9]; Orbe, 2013 [10]; Lule, 2015 [11]; Havens & Lotz, 2017 [13]).

Social media shares the same features and is part of the same triad as media, just with a lot more subtlety and aptitude in impact. Although it is challenging to have a definition that survives the changes it has been undergoing, social media “can be broadly defined as the set of interactive Internet applications that facilitate (collaborative or individual) creation, curation, and sharing of user-generated content” (Davis, 2016, p. 1 [13]). Those applications and their algorithms, multiple researchers assert, are ideologically fine-tuned and oriented, just like the Radio, the TV, and the newspaper. Lanier (2010) [14], for instance, states that a “software expresses ideas about everything from the nature of a musical note to the nature of personhood” (p. 1) and that those algorithmically-coded ideas or thoughts “are solidified into effectively permanent reality” (p. 10). The same researcher, also, points out how politicians influence information technology and how algorithms can be tools for political ideologies and agenda.

In a similar fashion, Fuchs (2015) [15] highlights how profit is one the main ideologies behind the addictive design of social media applications. This profit is made within the attention economy where “users’ attention and personal data is objectified” and used by algorithms to feed in ads that target the user’s interests when scrolling

through social media (Fuchs, 2015, p. 181 [15]). This is the capitalist aspect of social media, Fuchs (2015) [15] argues.

Body culture, the objectification of women and the sexualization of children are other ideologies for which social media is the most ethereal, yet plainest means. This has become a blatant fact about social media in the scientific community. Lanier (2010) [14], Engeln (2017) [16], Davis (2018) [17], Feltman (2018) [18], Zuo and Wang (2019) [19], Kennedy (2020) [20], Yang (2020), Catherine (2021) [21], Guo (2021) [22], and multiple other studies from various cultures attest to this body and sexualization mania incurred and propagated by social media and its users. This mania has a toll on everybody worldwide in this pronto hyper entangled world.

2. CULTURE

Academically, the term culture has proven to be quite slippery, and a multitudinous definitions are found throughout the different literature. Most of those definitions boil down to the conception of culture as the sum of language, ideas, beliefs, behaviors, and norms particular to a group of people occupying a particular territory. A remote, yet archetypical, definition of this sociological phenomenon is provided by Tylor (1871) in his seminal work *Primitive Culture*. In this work, he defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society” (p. 1). In a similar fashion, Lederach (1995, p. 9) [23] states that while culture has been defined in different ways, the most common is that it is “the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacted human beings”.

Recent definitions of culture do not deviate from those main hallmarks of a culture. Spencer-Oatey (2008) [24], for instance, argues that it “is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but not determine) each member’s behavior and his/her interpretation of the meaning of other people’s behavior” (p. 3). Varnum and Grossmann (2017) [25], on the other hand, share a more classic view of culture, and define it as “a set of ideas, beliefs, norms, and behaviors shared by or common to a group inhabiting a geographical location” (p. 2).

Those are the basic elements that make up the matrix of a culture. What is left to add is that those elements are not static, but rather susceptible to various degrees of change or shifting (Tylor, 1871; Malinowski, 1935 [26]; Escobar, 2001 [27]; Spencer-Oatey, 2008 [24]; Salawu, 2009; Crane, 2011 [28]; Varnum & Grossmann, 2017 [25]; Pandia, 2018 [29]).

3. MEDIA

The definition of media has been subject to various adaptations on account of the technological advances that has changed its form and content throughout history (Henslin, 2008 [9]; Pearce, 2009 [1]; West & Turner, 2010 [30]). It can be argued that the most adequate and thorough definition is provided by Pearce (2009) [1]. He defines media as “the process by which a person, group of people, or large organization creates a message and transfers it through some type of medium to a large, anonymous, heterogeneous audience” (p. 622-623). From a sociological perspective, media is viewed differently. It is considered a powerful socialization apparatus or institution that significantly influences our ideas, self-concept, and our worldview (Henslin, 2008) [9]. West and Turner (2010) [30] and Orbe (2013), also, accentuate the evident impact of media on people: once exposed to media, you can’t avert its influence. That is “an impossible thing to do” (Orbe, 2013, p. 236) [10].

3.1 Media, Ideology, and Cultural Imperialism

Most conceptualizations of ideology are in association with power. Thompson (1990) [2], for instance, defines ideology as “meaning in the service of power” (p. 7). For Fairclough (1995) [3], it has a political function: it “involves the representation of ‘the world’ from the perspective of a particular interest” (p. 44). Kellner (1995) [4] takes ideology in relation to culture and media. He postulates that media culture is a dynamic terrain in which different ideologies vie for dominance and for maintaining or reshaping relations of power. The means of this ideological struggle are “images, discourses, myths, and the spectacles of media culture” (Kellner, 1995, p. 2) [4]. Throughout history, the dominant ideology has been the ideology of the ruling class, or the ideology that this class wants to disseminate (Miliband, 1979; Postman, 1993 [6]). The group that owns the money and possesses the means of material production owns and manages the

means of thought control (Miliband, 1979; Postman, 1993 [6]; Chomsky, 2001 [7]; Chomsky & Herman, 1988), or of awareness management, as the CIA calls it (Curtis, 2016). Having illustrated that, it follows that the collusion of media and ideology is solidly-founded and evident.

Media and ideology do not operate separately from culture. Quite the opposite, culture is the field of work and the playground of media and ideology, be it local culture or other cultures. To start with, Chomsky and Herman (1988) affirm that the commercialized media has managed to metamorphose the American culture into a different culture: consumer culture. This organic ability to affect change on a large scale, Russo (2020) [31] affirms, has been the feature of media since the introduction of the radio networks. He asserts that “mass advertisement, national news and shows” broadcast on the radio between 1924 and 1940 “played a key role in breaking down geographical and cultural barriers to create a common national identity around white native culture” (Russo, 2020, p. 40) [31]. Aside from the inherent ability of media to propagate a certain way of life or ideology instead of another, what has fortified media influence, as Chomsky and Herman (1988) elaborate, is that media companies have “diversified beyond the media field, and non-media companies have established a strong presence in the mass media” (p. 12). In other words, media companies have become business companies that promote their own interests and ideologies, or that of their owners and shareholders (Chomsky & Herman, 1988; Havens & Lots, 2017 [12]).

This powerful interconnected triad - media, ideology, and culture - does not just operate on local culture. The fact that the world’s top 10 media companies and top 10 news companies are in the U.S.A (Seth, 2022) [32] has its tremendous bearings on non-American and non-western cultures. Those media giants that control the means of information and information itself are the “cultural gatekeepers” of the world: “they groom our tastes and shape the programming we enjoy” (Havens & Lots, 2017, p. 186) [12]. To elaborate on this, Havens and Lots (2017) [12] state that the production and, particularly, distribution circuits of global industry decide on what form of music, movies, series to export to other cultures. A concrete example, given by the two researchers in their seminal book *Understanding Media Industries*, is why the

distribution of Rap, instead of another form of music, in foreign cultures.

Such distribution decisions do not just have commercial reasons, but, ideological motives and consequences as well (Chomsky & Herman, 1988; Havens & Lots, 2017 [12]). The commercial reasons are plain: making profit. The ideological ones are more insidious and inconspicuous: “to redefine people’s needs, encourage their wants and offer solutions to them via goods produced by corporations” (Ewen, 1976, p. 70 [33]). Those good are not just consumer goods, but all what media can offer and advertise from food, to entertainment, shrinks, power of attraction, and astrology. On a deeper level, as mentioned earlier, the prime ideology behind media is to draw and regulate the framework of people’s thought, while giving them the illusion of free thought or free choice (Chomsky, 2001 [7]; Curtis, 2016) [8].

Such an ideology and its distribution worldwide has, to a considerable extent, a detrimental impact on other cultures. Havens and Lots (2017) [12] emphasize that being frequently exposed to entertainment outputs, particularly television programs, that “incorporate foreign styles and production practices” has caused “the loss of one’s distinct national culture and its replacement with global commercial culture that values consumption over anything else” (p. 239). This leads to, what many researchers call, cultural imperialism. A concept that has emerged with colonial times, but in the globalized age can be defined as the domination of local cultures by the American culture and its values and lifestyle (Phillipson, 1992 [34]; Pennycook, 1998 [35]; Havens & Lots, 2017 [12]; Hsu, 2017 [36]).

It can be argued that media has always had this cultural-shifting feature in it, especially since the introduction of the radio and the TV technology. This is due to the simple fact that “a new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything” (Postman, 1993, p. 18) [6]. This technology logic tells us that the emergence of series and movies platforms, like Netflix, “have only sped up the process of change” and added more momentum to it (Havens & Lots, 2017, p. 239) [12]. By the same token, it is evident that social media has changed everything and taken the process of cultural change to an unprecedented alarming pace.

This is a concise account on media and its solid association with ideology and cultural change, or

cultural imperialism. This account was necessary as it serves as prelude to the main focus of this article: social media and cultural shifts.

4. SOCIAL MEDIA

Several researchers argue that social media is slippery and challenging to define. This is due, according to Fox and McEwan (2019) [37], to its rapidly evolving feature. Despite that, it is evident that most definitions share the same broad view of social media as an internet-based applications that allow for people to interact in various ways. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) [38], for instance, define it as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61). A similar definition is provided by Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) [39]. They state that social media “employ[s] mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content” (p. 241).

A more thorough and specific definition is given by Fox and McEwan (2019) [37]. They base their definition on the affordances that set social media apart from other forms of media. According to them, those social media-specific affordances are many, the most important of which are: interactivity, accessibility, visibility and personalization. First, social media offers two layers of interactivity: interacting with a responsive interface, or application, and interacting with others using this application; second, it is ubiquitously accessible and functional, irrespective of time, place, or any other particularities; third, it offers visibility to users’ shared content with the ability to control their audience; and fourth, social media enables users to personalize their content and messages in different ways (Fox & McEwan, 2019) [37]. Other social media-specific affordances, highlighted by the same researchers, include: anonymity and identifiability, synchronicity, editability, and persistence of messages and content. It should be accentuated, in alignment with what Postman (1993) [6] has noticed, that social media as a new technology has changed everything.

4.1 Social Media and Ideology

It can be argued that the meshing of ideology into programs and softwares has been first

brought into attention by Wendy Chun (2004) [40]. Chun (2004) [40] argues that a “software is a functional analog to ideology” and that “computers understood as comprising softwares and hardwares are ideology machines” (p. 43). The same applies for the algorithms that basically hold the strings of social media. A simple definition of algorithms is that they are “programs that size us up, evaluate what we want, and provide a customized experience.” (Lazer, 2015, p. 1090) [41].

That is in fact a mild definition, as several researchers have emphasized on the ideological aspect and function of social media algorithms. Flisfeder (2021) [42], for instance, affirms that the ideology that drives and impels social media is the neoliberal capitalism ideology. Aside from shaping people’s opinions, tastes, desires about everything in life from the social, cultural, the political, and even the economic (Steiner, 2012 [43]; Lazer, 2015 [41]; Diakopoulos, 2016 [44]; Beer, 2017 [45]; Orlowski, 2020 [46]), Flisfeder (2021) accentuates that the antisocial spirit of the neoliberalism is the underlying ideology of social media. He states that, on the surface, social media “is ruining our lives and is making us *antisocial*” (p. 56), but the truth is that “capitalism is ruining our lives, not social media; capitalism is making us antisocial” (p. 56-57), because it is the one pulling the strings, i.e. algorithms, of social media (Flisfeder, 2021) [42].

In not so much a different fashion, Beer (2017) [45] views social media and its algorithms as having social power. He postulates that algorithms are “taking on some constitutive or performative role in ordering that world on our behalf.” (Beer, 2017, p.4) [45]. Constitutive social power of algorithms is not ideology-free; quite the opposite, it has “outcomes in mind, outcomes influenced by commercial or other interests and agendas” (Beer, 2017, p. 4) [45], and that are attained via the control of information feeds that shape our desire and choice (Beer, 2017 [45]; Flisfeder, 2021 [42]). Thus, ideology stirs the wheels of algorithms and the social media platforms within which they operate.

The same is accentuated by Orlowski (2020) [46] in his eye-opening documentary: *The Social Dilemma*. In it, he illustrates how algorithms are purposefully designed to gauge users’ preferences, adjust their social media feeds to those preferences, and make users hyper-dependent on their accounts. Pointing to darker reality of social media, hotshot Silicon Valley

techs, interviewed in this documentary, affirm how algorithms can be effectively utilized to ignite social unrests and even civil war in a country. In other words, they are quite susceptible to political agenda and propaganda. This high susceptibility to serving political ideology is affirmed in *The Great Hack* documentary by Amer and Noujaim (2019) [47]. In it, Brittany Kaiser, a former business development director for the big data company Cambridge Analytica, blows the whistle on how the company used facebook users’ data and certain algorithms to manipulate the 2016 presidential election and to tilt it towards Donald Trump.

4.2 Social media and Culture

Just as media is perceived as a socialization tool and a powerful apparatus for effectuating cultural shifts (Chomsky & Herman, 1988; Postman, 1993 [6]; Curtis, 2016 [8]; Havens & Lots, 2017 [12]; Russo, 2020 [31]), so is social media viewed as a hyper-socialization tool that has ultra-powerful impact on culture. This is, first, due to the idiosyncratic features of social media. Aside from the insidiously intelligent nature of its algorithms, social media is more ubiquitous, always accessible, and has all sorts of content (Fox & McEwan, 2019) [37], unlike conventional media which is more localized and restricted in terms of accessibility. Simply put, it is a new technology, and a new technology, as postman (1993) [6] affirms, changes everything. A hint on this change is given by Pew Research Center in their 2022’s survey of News consumption across platforms. This survey demonstrates that 82% of American adults often and sometimes got their news from a smartphone, 64% often and sometimes from TV, and 47% and 33% from Radio and printing publications, respectively. According to Forman-Katz and Matza (2022) [48], the researchers carrying the survey, smartphones and other smart gadgets had metamorphosed the news consumption landscape and continue to outpace conventional media as a source of news. The younger the category, the higher reliance on social media and other smart means to get the news (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Oliphant, & Shearer, [49]).

4.3 Social Media and Body Culture

The fact that social media is a continuation to the objectification of women and the sexualization of children as part of the prevalent body culture initially established by conventional media is

undisputable among researchers. Engeln [16], Davis (2018) [17], Feltman (2018) [18], Paasonen, Attwood, McKee, Mercer, and Smith (2021) [50], and Venditto, Set, and Amaambo (2022) [51] accentuate the objectification of women aspect in social media. The same researchers and others, like Llovet, Diaz-Bustamante and Karan (2017) [52], Catherine (2021) [21], and Van Oosten (2021) [53], emphasize on the sexualization of children that is omnipresent on all social media platforms. As mentioned earlier, this sexualizing ideology and agenda of social media is not the offspring of social media, but rather of conventional media (Bessenoff, 2006 [54]; Zurbriggen, Collins, Lamb, Roberts, Tolman, Ward, & Blake, 2007 [55]; Ward, 2016 [56]; Engeln, 2017) [16]. Social media platforms have just given the sexualizing and objectifying hallmark of media more intensity, influence and momentum (Engeln, 2017 [16]; Kennedy, 2020 [20]; Paasonen et, al., 2021 [50]).

Instagram, Tiktok and Snapchat hold the beacon of today's body culture (Feltman, 2018 [18]; Kennedy, 2020 [20]; Van Oosten, Vandenbosch & Peter, 2020 [53]; Paasonen et, al., 2021 [50]). Simply, they are "platforms in which both the exposure to and the production of sexual content take place" (Van Oosten et al., 2020, p. 149 [53]). Not only do they set and promote unrealistic standards of beauty, which sends women into a goose chase of beauty (Engler, 2017) [16], but they, also, sexually objectify them: women only exist to be looked at, to be evaluated by her looks, and used by others (Engeln, 2017 [16]; Feltman, 2018 [18]; Paasonen et, al. 2021 [50]). Furthermore, Engeln (2017) [16] accentuates that all women and girls are influenced by this social media body culture: they are all beauty sick. This is simply due, as highlighted in previous studies by West and Turner (2010) [30] and Orbe (2013) [10], to the unavoidable impact of media. Engeln (2017) [16] affirms this impact by stating that we "cannot pretend that what we see in the media doesn't shape our thoughts and behaviors" and that "We are *all* affected by these images. Their influence is insidious, and there is no magic force field to keep it out." (p. 121).

4.4 Social Media and the Sexualization of Girls

Social media sites are typically sites of youth culture, with a hyper focus on young girls (Engeln, 2017 [16]; Feltman, 2018 [18]; Zuo &

Wang, 2019; Kennedy, 2020; Catherine, 2021). What is grim and alarming regarding those young girls is that they are quite often sexualized on social media, especially teen girls (Engeln, 2017; Feltman, 2018 [18]; Zuo & Wang, 2019 [19]; Kennedy, 2020 [20]; Van Oosten et al., 2020 [53]; Guo, 2021 [22]; Paasonen et, al. 2021 [50]; Yang, 2022 [57]). Most of the research investigating this issue focuses on Instagram and TikTok as the two most popular visual-based platforms where sexual content is traded. Feltman (2018) [18], for instance, investigates Instagram use for 549 undergraduate girls in relation to self-objectification, and he concludes that his study "extends and supports objectification theory by demonstrating that use of an image based social networking site is linked to more self-objectification and body surveillance" (p. 33).

In her seminal book, *Beauty Sick*, Engeln (2017) [16] argues that social media, particularly Instagram, has alarmingly intensified the beauty sick culture for American girls and women. She remarks that adolescent girls tend to more self-sexualize and self-objectify themselves on Instagram, just to get the outer validation of being beautiful. This beauty sick culture, which is given a big thrust by social media, "teaches young girls that learning to apply make-up is a more important skill than learning to do science or math" (Engeln, 2017, p. 18) [16]. Tweens, Engeln (2017) [16] accentuates, are taught the same thing by social media: what matters is self-presentation, getting accepted by peers, and the most effective way to do this is to self-sexualize and self-objectify oneself. This is plainly noticed in girls' online reaction to the photos they post: "By watching patterns of likes and comments, young girls learn quickly which photos are acceptable to their peers. Tween and teen girls report frantically deleting pictures that aren't getting enough likes, determined to post something better another day" (Engeln, 2017, p. 148) [16].

Catherine's (2021) [21] ideas on the impact of social media, namely Instagram, on young girls provide ample support to Engeln's (2017) [16] findings. She asserts that social media has managed to make the sexualization of young girls a reality. This sexualization of children, Catherine (2021) [21] points out, in agreement with several previous researchers, is not the genuine product of social media, and that it has been going on for many years in conventional media. What is novel is that Instagram and its

likes possess the magic algorithmic formula that rendered childhood sexualization “rationalized and accepted into nearly every young girl’s life” (Catherine, 2021, p. 34) [21]. Moreover, Catherine (2021) [21] stresses that this body culture, or sexualized body culture, is insidiously confusing and dilemmatic for both young girls and grown women. While the former “are expected to appear older, more mature, and sexy”, the latter “are expected to appear youthful and hairless” (Catherine, 2021, p. 34) [21]. This, according to the same researcher and many others, boils down to one conclusion: young and sexy are the only metrics of beauty.

On TikTok, several researchers affirm, the young and sexy body culture is more strikingly plain. This short video-based application (Zuo & Wang, 2019 [19]; Kennedy, 2020 [20]; Van Oosten et al., 2020 [53]; Yang, 2022 [57]) has changed youth culture by establishing new terms to self-concept, or self-presentation (Yang, 2022) [57]. It has rendered constructing and expressing self-concept more complex because of its direct live feature; unlike image-based apps, like Instagram, TikTok does not have non-verbal cues filters to use (Yang, 2022) [57]. This unfiltered direct form of communication, as Kennedy (2020) [20], Van Oosten et al. (2020) [53], Stuwe, Wegner, and Prommer (2022) [58], and Yang (2022) [57] note, has propelled explicit and uninhibited expression of thought and ideas among TikTok users, particularly girls. Those thoughts and ideas are mostly communicated with a spotlight on the body (Kennedy, 2020 [20]; Van Oosten et al., 2020 [53]; Guo, 2021 [22]; Stuwe et al., 2022 [58]; Yang, 2022 [57]).

Being “an app with a strong focus on bodies” (Stuwe, et al., p. 34) [58] makes TikTok the typical tool for the objectifying and the sexualizing of girls and women (Kennedy, 2020 [20]; Van Oosten et al., 2020 [53]; Dekhil & Sarnou, 2021 [59]; Liu, 2021; Stuwe et al., 2022 [58]; Yang, 2022 [57]). To start with, as a prelude to sexualization, Kennedy (2020) [20] notes that most girls’ videos on TikTok are in the bedroom dancing, with girls’ clothes, shoes, and dressing table in the background. This unconventional new trend of private content video can be looked at as a novel discursive construction of normality. This normality is based on diluting privacy and promoting “TikTok’s particular aesthetic of goofiness and relatability” (Kennedy, 2020, p. 1072) [20].

The bedroom videos, along with other girls’ videos, are sexualized in different ways. One of

the unsophisticated sexualization tools for girls is their clothing and body exposure. Stuwe et al., (2022) [58], in their examination of German girl TikTokers, state that many German female TikTokers “present themselves in skimpy clothing (e.g. with their stomach and legs exposed)”, as opposed to 97% of men who dress casually in their videos on TikTok (p. 34). The same researchers, also, reveal that girls and women tend to self-sexualize themselves by the employment of sexually suggestive body and facial movements and gestures. Female TikTokers, namely girls, Stuwe et al. (2022) [58] register, are famous for their S body posture, their hip movement, and pouting lips. The last means “for the alluring presentation of bodies is also reflected in the use of make-up” by the vast majority of female TikTokers (Stuwe et al., 2022, p. 34) [58]; a skill that young girls cannot do without amidst this social media mania.

This self-sexualization of girls and women is definitely not TikTok exclusive. Researchers, like Diaz and Llovet (2017) [60], Englen (2017) [16], Llovet et al., (2017) [60], Davis (2018) [17], Fletman (2020) [18], Catherine (2021) [21], and Van Oosten (2021) [53], who investigate women and girls’ behaviors on social media, also, establish the sexualization of teen girls and women on Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. This self-sexualization, commodification and emphasis on body culture explains why girls are by far the most followed on social media (Engeln, 2017 [16]; Kennedy, 2020 [20]), and why they make up the absolute majority of influencers on all social media platforms. As Kennedy (2020) [20] simply puts it, using their sexualized content, “teenage girls rule the internet right now”, i.e. social media (p. 1071). Those assumptions are given ample support by statistics. To start with, the analysis of 50.000 influencers accounts in North America in 2023, the U.S and Canada, reveals that 79% of Instagram influencers, 76% of TikTok influencers, and 69% of YouTube influencers are female (Influencer Market Report, 2023). On a global scale, a report by Statista website demonstrates that 84% of influencers worldwide were female (Distribution of Influencers Creating Sponsored Posts on Instagram Worldwide in 2019 by Gender, 2019). A quick glance at those top influencers’ accounts, either on Instagram or TikTok, ascertains their hyper focus on body and showcases that they were hyper-sexualized. Having noted that, it can be safe to assume that there is a positive correlation between being sexualized and being famous: the better you are

at self-sexualizing, the more famous you become. Hurwitz (2016, p. 44) [61] states it more aptly “we live in a celebrity culture now. Or a wannabe-celebrity culture. The name of the game is visibility. If you aren’t tweeted, liked, YouTubed, or Instagrammed, you don’t exist”.

4.5 Social Media and Other Impacts on Culture

Aside from propagating and perpetuating the sexy body culture, social media has other detrimental impacts on girls and women, in general, and on teenage girls, in particular, across culturally. Guo (2021) [22], in his examination of TikTok influence on teenagers in China, has concluded that TikTok distorts teens’ perception of important values, like happiness. Happiness, for teenagers, has become equated with possessing things and leisure pursuit (Guo, 2021) [22]. This perception is “in line with the ‘beauty, fashion and funny’ of TikTok platform” (Zuo & Wang, 2019, p. 5) [19]. Another gloomy and insidious impact of TikTok, pointed to by (Guo, 2021) [22], is aesthetic fatigue. Technically, aesthetic fatigue means that when exposed to the same stimulus repeatedly, familiarity takes matter and boredom kicks in (Xu & Zhao, 2023) [62]. On TikTok, via its algorithms that ensure that users are watching videos that correspond to their ‘likes’ patterns, “users get exposed to identical content of video over and over again”, which eventually shuts down their interest and enthusiasm (Guo, 2021, p. 1392) [62]. Thus, they scroll up to other videos of other content, get excited, then get bored, and move on to another video (Guo, 2021) [62].

In more technical terms, social media platforms are designed with a slot machine in mind. They “produce the same neural circuitry that is caused by gambling and recreational drugs to keep consumers using their products as much as possible” (Cheik, 2022, p. 1) [63]. This dopamine driven feedback loop, created by social media apps, “continues as the addict seeks out the source of his addiction, and the brain responds by producing less and less dopamine after each hit” (Alter, 2017, p. 57) [64], or after each notification, video, or post. Alter (2017) [64] further explains by citing Tristan Harris, a design ethicist, who states that it is not that users lack the willpower to break this loop, but that “there are a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job it is to break down the self-regulation you have” (p. 10). From another perspective, Mujica, Crowell, Villano and Uddin

(2022) [65] draws attention to the link between the “compulsive engagement with social media apps” and the financial incentives behind their addictive design (p. 7). They plainly state that when “users spend more time on the platforms, more advertisements are shown, and more revenue is generated” (Mujica et al., 2022, p. 12) [65]. This is called the attention economy: making profits from users’ attention (Fuchs, 2015) [15].

Back to the impact of social media on culture, Radwan (2022) [66] investigates the impact of social media on 360 rural Egyptian people. His analysis of the respondents’ replies to his questionnaire interestingly reveals that 40% of them report a significant change in their cultural identity since their use of social media. The most significant cultural identity changes include: the use of Franco-Arabic in writing increased, a decrease in attending social events and in exchanging visits with friends and relatives, less eagerness to eat with family and to allot time for discussing family matters, and less attention to check on family members (Radwan, 2022) [66]. Those newly-adopted cultural values, Radwan (2022) [66] notes, are in opposition with the Egyptian cultural values: they promote individualism and separateness in a society that has been built on connectedness and community values for centuries.

In another study, Dekhil and Sarnou (2021) [59] have examined the impact of TikTok’s non-verbal language on Algerian adolescents. This non-verbal language basically includes smirks, winks, facial expressions, pounding lips, tongue and cheeks gestures, and hip movement. They have concluded that the proliferation of those non-verbal gestures have banefully influenced teens’ local cultural values and behavior, because most of which do not align with the Algerian culture (Dekhil & Sarnou, 2021) [59]. In fact, as Van Oosten et al. (2020) [68] and Stuwe et al. (2022) [58] affirm, most of the non-verbal cues on TikTok and other social media apps are impolite, vulgar and sexually suggestive, in congruence solely with one type of culture: the sexy body culture. Hence, it is safe to assume that social media can be a tool for precipitating moral decadence in societies.

In low context western cultures (Rosenberg, 2004) [68], Diaz-Bustamante-Ventisca and Llovet-Rodriguez (2017) investigate, via a structured online survey, how Spanish adults perceive the sexualization of girls on social

media, particularly on Instagram. The uncomfortable gist of their analysis is that “the sexualized photographs of girls damages and undermines the general image that society has of childhood” (Diaz-Bustamente-Ventisca & Llovet-Rodriguez, 2017, p. 83) [52]. In other words, young girls are no longer looked at innocently with an innocent eye. This cultural shift in how girls dress up and in how they are perceived by men, as highlighted in earlier sections, is initiated by conventional media, but amplified and fine-tuned by social media. Furthermore, Diaz-Bustamente-Ventisca and Llovet-Rodriguez (2017) [52] accentuate that this unnatural accelerated transition from childhood to adolescence can lead to some serious mental health damages and disorders for young girls, because they “are neither physically nor psychologically prepared for it” (p. 79).

Reverting to high context cultures, Chima and Oneyima (2019) [69] and Mukhtar O. and Ganiyat K. (2022) [70] have looked into the impact of social media platforms on Nigerian culture and value system. The two studies have yielded to similar results. They both affirm that those platforms are threatening the cultural, social, and ethical fabric of the Nigerians. Chima and Oneyima (2019) [69], for instance, assert that it is because of social media that the family value system is diluted and distorted in Nigeria. The father figure is ripped of its deference, reverence, and authority, and family and decency values have lost the ground to promiscuity (Chima & Oneyima, 2019) [69]. In a similar fashion, Mukhtar O. and Ganiyat K. (2022) [70] accentuate the moral decadence that social media has brought about on the Nigerian culture. According to them, social media platforms promote pervert sexual conducts that are alien to and completely rejected by the Nigerian culture. Such conducts include ‘lesbianism’, ‘homosexualism’ and pornography, as the two researchers state. In short, what the two studies are asserting is that high context cultures and their family-based values are the goat slaughtered in the altar of social media neo-liberal values.

Multiple other studies confirm this cultural shifting impact of social media platforms. To start with, Peters (2013) [71] argues that Namibians tend to extend the western online content of Facebook to local culture, introducing new social and cultural norms. In Pakistan, Bhatti et al. (2016) investigate the impact of mass media and social media on Lahore colleges’ students. They argue

that social media is the driving force in propelling students to adopt western fashions and trends. In a similar fashion, Melaku and Kirubakaran (2021) [72] state that social media plays a pivotal role in forcing western values and beliefs on Ethiopian and African students and youths [73-79].

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study, by initially reviewing the most pertinent literature on media, ideology, and culture, has established the solid interplay this triad has throughout time been engaged in. It has expanded on how media, in its conventional and simplest form, is a vessel for ideology and power, and, consequently, a tool to shape culture or to effectuate change in culture. In a more elaborate manner, this study has elucidated how western media giants design ideology-based information, control it, and regulate its distribution locally and globally to shape people’s framework of thought and consciousness. This culture shifting hallmark of media has been given more pace and momentum lately by the proliferation of series and movies platforms. In short, this article advocates that media has been taking an imperial role where “rich nations continue to dictate the tune while we play the piper” (Langmia, 2016, p. 60).

Pertaining to social media, the crux of the matter of the study, this article has unearthed how social media, continuing the legacy of conventional media, is an insidious magnum force for effectuating cultural shifts. Preliminarily, this study has shown that social media as a ground breaking technology has changed everything, and that, like conventional media, it is not ideology-free. Its algorithms are ideological codes designed by engineers, dictated and funded by capitalists to incur more profit within the attention economy, and to cunningly shape and reshape people’s preferences in all aspects of life; thus, shifting cultures. In other words, social media comes with a subtle slot machine in mind that renders it an incomparably stealthy mighty tool for affecting shifts in culture and for hypernormalizing with those shifts. It examines users’ predispositions, tilts their behavior toward a particular pattern, conditions it, normalizes it, and unconsciously substitute their culture with another one. Having said that, it is safe to argue that, similarly to conventional media, social media is not a culture-shifting tool, but, also, a hypernormalization tool. As a matter of fact, there is no cultural shock or value contradiction experience by both western and non-western users.

To expatiate on this, I can add that because of social media, "the disorientation that people experience when they come in contact with a fundamentally different culture" (Henslin, 2008, p. 39) [9] is remarkably diluted and almost completely gone. What the west promotes and propagates by its influencers and algorithms easily finds its ways to the users' mind and it is smoothly incorporated in their framework of thought and behavior, as if social media deactivates cultural defense systems and shrewdly breach them. What facilitates this deactivation and breach of local cultures is the 'treachery' of their influencers, intellectuals, or elite. If those people, who are supposed to be the cultural guardians and custodians, are in collusion with western ideology, the abatement and erosion of local cultures becomes an inevitability, and they transition into an unauthentic replica of the western culture. Of course, this cultural treachery, also, has an institutionalized genesis, like the design of educational systems that propagate and popularize anti-local-culture western practices and values.

More significantly, one of the things largely agreed upon by social media researchers and culture is that what influencers and algorithms are trying to feed and normalize into the world is a body culture, a sexy body culture that has become inseparable from the sexualization of children. This trend of the objectification of women/girls and the sexualization of children, this study reveals, is not the raw or genuine product of social media. It is, in fact, a continuation of the ideology and agenda initially set by conventional media; social media has just given this ongoing trend more thrust and momentum, making it more visible and a reality in western and beyond western societies.

Amidst this fine-tuned mayhem of sexualization of children, girls, and women, several researchers from both hemispheres raise an alarm about the moral decadence caused by social media. From one perspective, they argue that social media perversely changes how boys and men look at teen girls and women. From another front, namely the non-western front, researchers stress that social media with its focus on sexualization threatens the very fabric of family and society. It simply, according to them, promotes alien values and patterns of behavior that are alienating local cultures.

On a final note, I would say that the grim epitome of the sexualization of girls and women on social

media is the proliferation of the Only-Fan platform. This is a platform where girls and women show their body strictly to their fans for money. This, along with the long history of the objectification of women and girls in western media, in particular, calls into mind the question of how western media and western society has always been looking at women as a sexual thing or object. This question, or conclusion has certain bearings on western culture as the holder of the beacon of enlightenment and empowerment.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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