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Prof Sarah Edge (Ulster), Dr Helen Jackson (Ulster) & Dr Caroline O'Sullivan (DKIT) - Young People Mental Health and Modern Media

Introduction

This paper is based on research undertaken by three academics from the discipline of media studies. Media studies is a subject often derided in the popular press as 'easy' or non-academic a '*mickey mouse*' degree. The different research projects presented in this paper aim to challenge this popular understanding by revealing just how important this area of academic study is for our understanding of contemporary society and in particular the health and wellbeing of young people. It does this by identifying the power that mass media representations plays in organising our social and cultural identities. Recognising how, what we might call our perceptions of who we are and who other types of people are, has been formed via our engagement with media messages. The paper does this in order to identify the very real effects and affects this has on how we live our lives in contemporary society.

It is clear that contemporary culture is becoming increasingly aware of the power of the media industry and media representations in relation to how we understand others and ourselves. In which the most recent disclosure of the sexual harassment and abuse women face in the film industry (exemplified in the case of Harvey Weinstein and the subsequent #MeToo movement/campaign) has resulted in unprecedented public awareness of the difficulties women face in an industry heavily based on patriarchalⁱ ideas of male and female behaviour. The story has propelled into popular culture complex questions about how we view or understand 'natural' masculine or feminine behaviour and what is innate and what is learnt?ⁱⁱ Questions, which as this papers reveal have long been the remit of media studies.

Concurrently recent 'mistakes' in advertising such as the Dove campaign where a black woman's skin is washed whiteⁱⁱⁱ or the H & M advert picturing a black child in a sweatshirt with a slogan that uses the term monkey^{iv} have instigated important debates on our lack of awareness of the often overriding historical meanings of language and imagery. Again highlighting the significant place media literacy and awareness should play within the advertising and media industries themselves.

Media Messages and the Organisation of Gender for Young People

These media stories and others, designate the importance of Media Studies as an academic discipline in understanding how powerful media messages can be in limiting or liberating human behaviour. The three research projects in this paper acknowledge the complexities of media messages in constructing what we might term the stereotypes by which we live out our lives. Turning their attention to the role media representations play in the organisation of young peoples lives in terms of gender and its linked to the social inequalities of patriarchy. It is important to identify that all three research projects employ an anti essentialist understanding of gender. They all approach gender and gender inequality as something created via the cultural representations of gender (masculinity or femininity) circulating within society because as the theorist Chris Weedon notes the power between men and women is not innate but rather ‘rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference’^v. This offers a liberating approach to gender inequality by identifying the role mass media representations take in recirculating oppressive ideas of gender as well as offering new and liberating ones. It also offers the potential for change. Gendered behaviour, as media analysis notes is not fixed but changes in different locations, cultures and historical moments. For example pink the key signifier of ‘girliness’ in our current culture employed to ‘help’ little girls signify correct femininity was in the 1920s the colour used to signify manliness^{vi}

Media theory and research reveals not just how children learn to become men or women, but it also confirms that we never stop learning via the changing and shifting popular mass media representations of gender. In this context media analysts look at and study the changing representations of gender in order to determine the effects or affects these changing learnt behaviours might have on the lives of young men and women.

Contemporary Representations and Questions of Mental Health and Well being for the Young Audience.

The research in this paper examines contemporary representations of masculinity and femininity in relation to the cinema and the Internet as a new site for the sharing of media images directed at and made by young people. This has been undertaken to ascertain if there are links between the detectable rise in mental health issues and feelings of well-being among young people in the reports cited below and the modern media. The significance of starting such an informed conversation between media academics and policy makers has recently been foregrounded by the Children’s Commissioner report of 2018 which is summaries as ‘the transition to secondary leaves pupils ill-equipped for the demands of social media children are starting secondary school unprepared for the social-media “cliff edge” they are about to fall over. As a result, they become dependent on "likes" and comments for personal validation’. The Children’s Commissioner Anne Longfield suggest that it should be compulsory for schools to teach digital literacy and online resilience to prepare pupils when they are in Years 6 and 7^{vii}

As noted above this paper uses both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to confirm a rise in bullying, anxiety, body image and mental health issues for young people within the UK and Ireland using evidence from the findings of #StatusOfMind, May 2017 report commissioned by The Royal Society for Public Health; the Irish Charity Reachout April 2017 report; and the IPPR thinktank findings on the significant increase in suicide rates in UK students. These reports also raised significant concerns about the behaviours of young people using social network sites (e.g. Facebook, SnapChat) and the inter-related emotional affects.

The research projects are linked through their concern with gender in particular what has been identified as the ‘sexualization of contemporary life’ for young men and women^{viii}. Edge examines the ‘sexualisation’ of young women via popular narratives visible in the female genres of melodrama and romantic comedies during the late 1990s and early 2000s. These she reveals can be linked to the negative backlash against feminism. Her research examines how these representations impact on how young women feel about themselves as well as how they are treated by others. O’Sullivan examines the impact of “Reality TV” on the identity formation, perceptions of relationships and of self on teenagers particularly in the context of the ubiquity and online reach of this content. Jackson present the findings of her recent research project that uses the ‘selfie’ as a means

of examining sociological knowledge and feelings. The Self[ie] Reflexive Project explores the processes of self-reflection created by novel forms of convergence, to identify habitual behaviours in young people, and to map the interconnected and competing personal and emotional issues that dominate these behaviours.

Post feminist Film and Excessive Femininity.

To illuminate further the research presented by Sarah Edge, is based on her ongoing research on how changing representations of masculinity and femininity in popular films can be seen to respond to the second wave feminist movement and the demands and challenges to patriarchy it fashioned. This research has been wide in its application moving across how such discourses informed the Peace Process in Northern Ireland (Edge 2009,2014) ^{ix} to how young women have responded to the negative portrayal of the feminist career women as articulated in films such as Fatal Attraction 1987 and it is this latter research that is referenced in this paper. The work emerged from some rather anecdotal research undertaken over twenty-five years of teaching gender and feminism on a Media Studies degree at Ulster University. Students had been asked to interview three people to ask them what is a feminist and what do they look like. Various stereotypes appear each year, 'the suffragettes, women fighting for equality, the lesbian, the man hater, ugly' and so on. However in the late 1990s this activity revealed the emergence of a new stereotype 'the ball breaking feminist career woman/boss'. Edge's research began to look back at film and media representations in an attempt to rebuild where young women had 'learnt' to connect this negative stereotype to feminism. The research began to plot changing representations of the feminist woman across a number of very popular mainstream films in the genre of melodrama and romantic comedies identify changing messages from: Kramer versus Kramer (1979) Fatal Attraction (1987) Miss Congeniality (2000) Legally Blonde, What Women What (2000), Devil Wears Prada (2006), Sex and the City (2008) The Proposal (2009) Up in the Air (2009) The Intern (2015). Across these films the research identified how a new stereotype emerged in which the feminist career woman was constructed as a heartless, un-sisterly, career orientated, anti-domestic 'bitch' that fails in both love and marriage because she is harsh and unfeminine. In these stories the narrative and visual representations of both masculinity and femininity suggest to young women that in order to achieve in career and love then the old sexualized signs of femininity need to be restored. Creating a culture that emphasizes women feminized appearance within every walk of life from yummy mummies to successful entrepreneurs ^x. These 'enjoyable' films offered representations that alienated younger women from the previous generation of feminist women while also reinstating an all encompassing emphasis on women's worth as defined by their (sexual) appearance. In this respect Edge's work on film can be linked to the rise of younger women's anxiety over appearance and self worth identified in the reports already cited. Within the context of teaching young men and women, Edge's research discloses how skills of media literacy can empower young people to understand why they feel and behaviour in certain way importantly shifting away from an individual and personal problem to a shared societal and cultural one. This research has been presented at various industry and training conferences and also informed Edge's involvement in the highly important training initiative Be Seen Be Heard^{xi}.

Teenage Identity and Reality Television

Caroline O'Sullivan's research on televisual media is part of a wider project on teenage identity and representation and popular culture. She is deeply interested in the everyday life of teenagers particularly the impact that popular culture is having on how teenagers perceive themselves and others. Reality Television is one of the most popular television genres across the United Kingdom and Ireland. Programmes such as Googlebox, Strictly Come Dancing have become mainstay family viewing but it is the sub genre of 'Scripted Reality' that are particularly aimed at teenagers and young adults such as Geordie Shore (MTV, 2011-present), Love Island (ITV, 2015-present) and Ex on the Beach (MTV, 2014- present) that this research is focused on. As this research outlines, these programmes, that feature cast members of young adults from places such as Belfast, Newcastle and Dublin are having a profound impact on young people's perception of themselves, their

relationships and the acceptance of ‘drama’ in their lives. Douglas (2013^{xii}) suggested that most people view this sub-genre through the prism of ‘ironic viewing’ arguing that shows such as these demand that you simultaneously mock and distance yourself from the cast members, yet the viewer has a hunger to know what on earth they might do next. This is how many adults view such programmes and by extension they presume younger adults will do the same. There is an assumption that teenagers and young adults are both discerning and media literate and therefore understand that the scenarios are written, directed, produced and edited in a manner similar to a Netflix drama. For this reason, adults are often very quick to dismiss programmes of this nature which as O’Sullivan argues when you examine their reach and popularity with their target demographic this can be highly detrimental. For example, if we take the two most popular programmes of the genre *Geordie Shore* and *Love Island*; *Geordie Shore* the programme based on the American show *Jersey Shore* which follows the ‘lives’ of eight housemates living in Newcastle, debuted on MTV UK and Ireland in 2011 has aired 16 seasons with an average 800,000 to 1.1 m viewers per episode. *Love Island* which in its current format has run for three seasons is set on the island of Mallorca and sees young people from across the UK and Ireland ‘couple up’ with a stranger and then compete via a public vote to win a prize of £50,000. In its third season which ran over the summer of 2017 it had an average 1.7 million viewers per episode with its live final attracting a viewership of 2.6 million viewers. They had an additional 2million full episode views online and 280 million short-form video views across all platforms including the dedicated *Love Island* app, Youtube, Facebook and the ITV website. It is clearly evident therefore that these programmes have a highly dedicated and engaged following. What is confusing for their viewers however is the blurring of the tv programme and the real-life persona of the cast members and their lives. Gerbner’s (1969) cultivation theory states that the more time people spend “living” in the TV world, the more likely they are to believe social reality is congruent with TV Reality.^{xiii} For young adults, the fact they can follow a cast members every move on their Snapchat and Instagram and even interact directly with them on Twitter can make them feel uniquely attached and involved in this person’s life. This attachment can make it very difficult for them to separate fiction from reality. O’Sullivan has found that the ability to separate fiction from reality becomes a critical concern when you conduct a close thematic analysis of the content of these programmes. Her findings that without fail they are weighed down with stereotypes that are damaging to young men and particularly young women are particularly important. Some of the most prevalent stereotypes that exist within the narrative of this ‘scripted reality’ that impact both sexes are ones that place an emphasis on the ‘perfect’ body, hypersexuality, that sex in public is normal and that men and women simply cannot have platonic relationships. Young women are also presented as untrustworthy and always rivals in terms of the affections of men therefore making it impossible to have true female friendships, the female characters are also presented as overly emotional and clingy. Stereotypes such as these even when they are presented as fiction have impact particularly when they are continuously reinforced, however, as these are presented as reality it can be argued that they can have an even greater impact. Swantek in 2014^{xiv} found that American reality TV programmes display a cultural message to viewers that it is appropriate to over-sexualize your lifestyle as well as revolve the majority of your life around dating and intimacy. The same can be said of those that emerge from this side of the Atlantic. The impact of these types of cultural messages is one that is of critical concern to O’Sullivan’s ongoing research with teenagers and young people, she has presented her findings so far to the Belfast Film and Media festivals which has enabled her to open a dialogue with the producers and commissioners of such content and is now moving on to the second phase of the research which will involve qualitative research with young people directly.

The Selfie and Reflective Practice

Helen Jackson’s Self[ie] Reflective Project, explores how representations and descriptions of the self, captured and circulated through social media platforms, can provide useful insights for understanding how students are connected to, and engage with, their learning. Student engagement has become one of the indicators on which the quality of teaching provision in Higher Education is measured. To capture authentic student engagement

data, students need to reflect on past activities and behaviours in the learning environment and feed forward the result of this reflective operation. However, studies on reflective practice reveal that students lack the skills required to effectively carry out the self-reflective process (self-awareness, critical analysis, synthesis and evaluation). Without these skills, those that participate in the process are unable to identify what works well for them; convert experiences into appropriate verbal propositions; or produce adequate accounts of their past behaviours (Reece Jones 1995^{xv}; van Manen 1995^{xvi}; Harford and MacRuairc 2008^{xvii}; Schon 1987^{xviii}).

To develop reflexive skills, pedagogic research as shown that using drawing and other visual artifacts to challenge our sense of knowing and being, has very effective results (McIntosh 2010^{xix}, Grushka 2010^{xx}). Thus, leveraging this potential of the visual to act as a form of sociological knowledge, the Self[ie] Reflective Project positions the 'selfie' as the reflexive visual stimulus to unlock students' understanding of their role in their learning. The photographic image has always been an important artefact upon which acts of remembering are performed (Spence and Holland 1991^{xxi}), and has contributed to notions of personhood, self-knowledge and the truth (Pink 2001^{xxii}, Rose 2016^{xxiii}). Deploying selfies to stimulate reflective practice in this project is further underpinned by the way in which the photograph of the self when enfolded into the dynamic interfaces of social networks, requires the author of the selfie to enter onto a negotiation with the image in order to add annotations and descriptions for the purposes of distribution and communication.

Students involved in the project captured a selfie during class, reflected on the image captured in relation to the experience of their learning at that moment, and then posted the selfie with the annotated reflective description to Instagram. Jackson's study found that collectively, the reflective descriptions tagged to the selfie image, reveal a student body that has a very clear understanding of what is expected of them within a learning context. The annotations communicate an effort by the students to deliver work on time and of a high standard, and an ambition to succeed on their course of study. What is compelling in these reflective statements is how the individual narrative of the self attributes the responsibility for achieving these positive learning outcomes on individual, rather than the institution. This reflexive process presents a mode of knowing oneself in which the emotions that are expressed operate under a taxonomy of control (Skinner 1996^{xxiv}). For example, where the student reports an anxiety connected to their learning, the student proposes actions that will create new conditions in which they will be able to succeed, (*"Trying to get more research done for my first mini project, slightly lacking it motivation but plan is to work hard to get everything done"*). This type of extrinsic motivation becomes part of the strategy by which the student is attempting to overcome the behaviors that are hindering their academic performance, thus demonstrating a clear willingness to take personal responsibility for academic preparedness.

It is noted in Jackson's study that when female participants performed negative anxieties, these were more likely to be subject to a taxonomy of control, providing for these female learners a strategy by which they can move from a place of negativity to a condition that may be perceived as more positive, hopeful or confident. In contrast where male learners constructed negative visual and/or textual messages, they were less likely to frame the negative emotions within a control mechanism. Where anxieties are reported but are not subject to a determination to intervene in the negative emotion reported, a sense of hopelessness is inferred, (*"Feeling anxious and confused for this year's modules"*).

The occurrence and intensity in which anxiety is communicated in Jackson's study, does reveal a body of students for whom the significant emotional indicator for how they perceive their learning, is negative. This is in contrast to the easy smiles that are observed in a significant number of the selfies posted. Furthermore, while happiness and enjoyment might be interpreted from these positive visual messages, enjoyment of the subject as a learning indicator does not reveal itself in any of the textual descriptions. Where more positive annotations are reported, this is in relation to an anticipation that more positive emotions may be felt once the coursework has been completed or when the semester is over.

Jackson's study reveals that each student through the course of their studies, experiences a variety and diversity of competing emotions. Across the semester, individual students communicated a range of messages including anxiety, aspiration, a sense of belonging, and withdrawal. These reflections construct multiple stories about the priorities and meaningful experiences of the student at the alternate moments of image capture. Therefore, while this clearly indicates that any quality assurance metric applied at a specific moment within the academic calendar would be unable to capture student behaviours that operate as something more multidimensional, the methodology deployed in this instance could provide a method of observation and surveying for instructors upon which evidence for improvement activities can be realized. The selfie reflection provides a platform on which time-relevant data on student engagement could be used diagnostically by instructors and course teams to identify individual student's immediate emotional response to their learning, and enable them to create transformational interventions that resolve, regulate and promote the dynamic process that is student engagement.

To conclude this paper identifies for policy makers the tools required to delve underneath the more negative statistical findings in order to better inform and develop strategies that empower young people via media literacy awareness to allow them to move beyond personal feelings through the recognition that our gender base feeling are not natural but learnt to collective empowered understanding

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- ⁱ “Patriarchy refers to the power relations in which women’s interests are subordinate to the interests of men” (Weedon, Chris. (1987) Feminism Practice and Poststructuralist Theory Cambridge MA& Oxford UK: Blackwell) 1987:2)
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/14/french-feminists-catherine-deneuve-metoo-letter-sexual-harassment>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/08/dove-apologises-for-ad-showing-black-woman-turning-into-white-one>
- ^{iv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/08/business/hm-monkey.html>
- ^v Weedon, Chris. (1987) Feminism Practice and Poststructuralist Theory : 2
- ^{vi} ‘There has been a great diversity of opinion on the subject, but the generally accepted rule is pink for the boy and blue for the girl. The reason is that pink being a more decided and stronger colour is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.’ Ladies Home Journal, June, 1918
- ^{vii} <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/schools-failing-prepare-pupils-social-media-cliff-edge>
- ^{viii} Mc Nair, B. (2002) Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the democratisation of desire (London: Routledge)
- ^{ix} Edge Sarah (2009) ‘Negotiating Peace in Northern Ireland: Film, television and Post feminism’ in Visual Culture in Britain Vol 10 no 2 July 2009. Edge, Sarah (2014) He’s a Good Solider , He cares about the Future ‘ Post- feminist Masculinities , The IRA Man and Peace’ in ed Holohan and Tracy Masculinities And Irish Popular Culture Palgrave Macmillan
- ^x see BBC 1 The Apprentice
- ^{xi} <http://politicsplus.com/event/be-seen-be-heard-launch-event/>
- ^{xii} Douglas, SJ 2013, Jersey shore: Ironic viewing. in *How to Watch Television*. New York University Press, pp. 148-156.
- ^{xiii} Gerber, G.1969. Toward ”cultural indicators”: The analysis of mass mediated messages. *AV Communication Review*, 17, 137-148.
- ^{xiv} Swantek, S, 2014 Stereotyped: Women in Reality TV, The Artifice <https://the-artifice.com/sterotyped-women-in-reality-tv/>
- ^{xv} Jones, Peter Reece. 1995. “Hindsight Bias in Reflective Practice: An Empirical Investigation.” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 21: 783-788 doi: 10.1046/j.1365-2648.1995.21040783.x.
- ^{xvi} van Manen, Max. 1995. “On the Epistemology of Reflective Practice.” *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 1(1): 33-50 doi: 10.1080/1354060950010104
- ^{xvii} Harford, Judith and Gerry MacRuairc. 2008. “Engaging Student Teachers in Meaningful Reflective Practice” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 24:1884–1892.
- ^{xviii} Schon, Donald A. 1987. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner; Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- ^{xix} McIntosh, Paul. 2010. *Action Research and Reflective Practice: Creative and Visual Methods to Facilitate Reflection and Learning*. Abington; Routledge.
- ^{xx} Grushka, Kathryn. 2010. “Conceptualising Visual Learning as an Embodied and Performative Pedagogy for all Classrooms.” *Encounters in Theory and History of Education* 11: 13-23
url:<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/encounters/article/view/3167>

^{xxi} Spence, Jo and Patricia Holland (Eds.) 1991. *Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography*. London: Virago.

^{xxii} Pink, Sarah. 2001. *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. London: SAGE

^{xxiii} Rose, Gillian. 2016. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. Los Angeles; London: SAGE

^{xxiv} Skinner, Ellen A. 1996. "A Guide to Constructs of Control." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71: 549-570 url:

<https://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu.psy/files/A%20guide%20to%20constructs%20of%20control--Skinner--1996.pdf>.