



Performing Gender and Sexuality on Instagram

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Abstract: Social media is a useful medium in dissemination and construction of social and collective discourses of performative gender and sexuality. The social media space, occupied by the top celebrities, especially via Instagram, serve as a forum in furthering performative gender identities. World famous celebrities were both – body and slut shamed. This paper attempts to explore how modern celebrities use Instagram as a medium in normalizing certain performative gender roles and social identities. Judith Butler is crucial to this project. On Instagram we find these celebrities performing the complex task of challenging conventional gender norms at the same time we find that they unknowingly engage in consolidation of certain gender constructions that they profess to retaliate against. The paper also discusses the manner in which masculinity/femininity is constructed on Instagram.

Keywords: Instagram, gender, body shaming, slut shaming

Introduction: Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as the Instagram are a great way to connect oneself to people around – known and unknown. The only way one can get networked is by letting others know about yourself and sharing bits and pieces of one's life with the people around. This sharing of information has resulted in a culture of photo and video sharing that give the followers a direct peek into the lives of the SNS user. Instagram is thus used for creating one's virtual self through images and reels. This paper critically analyses Instagram pages of nine international celebrities that top the list of followers: Cristiano Ronaldo (@cristiano) with 520 million followers, Lionel Messi (@leomessi) with 402 million, Kylie Jenner (@kyliejenner) 375 million, Selena Gomez (@selenagomez) 365 million, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson (@therock) 354 million, Ariana Grande (@arianagrande) 345 million, Kim Kardashian (@kimkardashian) 336 million, Beyoncé Knowles (@beyonce) 287 million and Khloe Kardashian (@khloekardashian) 283 million followers. Apart from international celebrities the paper also critically analyses Instagram pages of twelve Indian celebrities that top the list of followers – Virat Kohli 229.8 million followers, Priyanka Chopra 84.28 million, Shraddha Kapoor 77.06 million, Alia Bhatt 73.83 million, Neha Kakkar with 73.21 million followers, Deepika Padukone with 70.81 million, Katrina Kaif with 69.58 million, Jacqueline Fernandez with 64.57 million, Akshay Kumar with 63.63 million, Anushka Sharma with 61.74 million, Urvashi Rautela with 60.59 million and Salman Khan with 56.77 million are also studied.

Creation of Femininity: The manner in which one portrays or projects oneself on the SNS platform is crucial to the formation of one's identity. One look at a few posts of Kim Kardashian at @kimkardashian makes us scintillatingly conscious of the repetitive visuals that Kim presents on her Instagram handle. Each of her post highlights a certain aspect of her body – aspects of her 'slim thick' body are splashed all over her Instagram pages thereby endorsing the feminine Kim as "a curvier or more full body type" with a "small waist and flat stomach but large butt, breasts and thighs" (McComb and Mills). Her profile photo sets the tone of her Instagram handle – a sexy feminine picture that highlights her curvy breasts and full "Spanish lips". Her posts, whether she is cuddling her daughters or posing with a group of people from the Alexandria House LA, a non-profit organisation, the camera is focused on the flawless face of Kim, highlighting her luscious lips, her thick and wavy blonde hair. The post that reads "Looking back at '22" is a self-absorbed, backward looking, bikini-clad selfie-clicking Kim, with her heart shaped buttocks in total focus. Numerous posts highlight her curvy behind, even though she is clad in a full-body black figure-hugging outfit. Her Instagram abounds in pages that highlighted her body in obvious ways. The "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 519), the varied poses that highlight prominently the sexualized performance of the body has effectively managed to create Kim Kardashian

as a sexualized feminine entity, one that is envied worldwide and emulated by thousands of fans to the extent of being harmful of their own identity creation, The repetitive “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments” (Butler 519) that the posts enact have endorsed the patriarchal notion of the woman as a body, a physical entity with alluring parts of the body, and when thousands of other women compare their own selves, their bodies, with that of Kim they are made party to the consolidation of this masculinist notion of “women as bodies”, they are meant to be “seen” and thus the sexualized body of Kim thus garners a lot of interest.

On one hand the gaze-worthy body of Kim is adored, while on the other hand when women who do not fit the “gaze-worthy” norm, they are heavily trolled. Selena Gomez for because of fluctuations in weight, Ariana Grande for her petite body structure; Kylie Jenner for her post pregnancy body, Kim Kardashian for her body posts during her pregnancy. Beyoncé retaliated to being “fat-shamed” during her pregnancy with a “Fabulous Maternity Photo Shoot”. Priyanka Chopra was body-shamed on Instagram for “spilling out” of the dress. (Mahale). That a pregnant Alia Bhat was fat shamed live during an interview by her husband Ranbir Kapoor is testimony to the manner in which patriarchal notion of woman as the body is firmly entrenched into the male psyche.

Slut shaming is another arena that female celebrities have to face the flak. Slut-shaming is a term that denotes the practice of disparaging women, largely, for “for acting in a manner that violates “norms” regarding sexually appropriate behavior. These denigrations, which are often double standards, range from criticizing women for wearing sexy clothing or having multiple sexual partners to blaming sexual assault and rape survivors for their attacks” (<https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/slut-shaming/>). Fatima Sana Shaikh, Deepika Padukone, and Priyanka Chopra were shamed for the clothing they had worn, for the viewers felt were inappropriate. The double standards are evident as we find nasty backlash that derided Fatima Sana Shaikh for posting a photo in a swimsuit during Ramzan, while another trolled Sana Khan for being completely covered up. Priyanka’s showing of her legs, which otherwise are highly admired, did not go well with the patriarchal mindset as she was in the presence of the Indian Prime minister Narendra Modi. Though Priyanka Chopra hit back at her trolls by posting another leggy picture of herself and her mother; the comments still poured in berating her and her mother as well. One of the commentators vociferously took upon the mantle of safeguarding the Indian culture of “respect”, “*adarsh*” and “*maryada*” from the American cultural onslaught.

Masculinity on Instagram: It is not that men are not body-shamed, celebrities especially have been publicly shamed on social networking sites. Rob Kardashian was fat shamed for not being able to lose weight even after hitting the gym; his travails with not being able to maintain his former body image has cost him dearly. He has been through bouts of depression, has shied away from the media in all ways, so much so that he did not attend his sister’s wedding for fear of being fat shamed. Leonardo DiCaprio was called “Leolardo DiFlabrio” as he sported a paunch rather than the much sought after six-pack abs. Vin Diesel, Wentworth Miller, Val Kilmer, Sam Smith, Jay Cutler, Aaron Carter, David Harbour, Sam Claflin, Grant Gustin, Ben Affleck, Jonah Hill, Richard Madden and Jason Momoa had their tryst with body shaming (Boucher).

Instagram, at the same time, becomes a space for performance of masculinity. Instagram for Dwayne Johnson “The Rock” is a space wherein he plays out his masculinity in ways which also plays out his soft side of being a father as he posts his interactions with his daughters – be it the post in which he untangles Tia’s hair that render comments such as “Rock is soft by heart,” “Best father,” “Cuteness overload,” etc., or the post that depicted a powerful skin to skin bonding moment with his newborn daughter, Jasmine. In a recent video post of December 2022, we have Dwayne getting a makeover, complete with lipstick and blush put on by his daughters, as he wears a multi-coloured wig. The Christmas makeover video went viral and garnered more than 66 million views and over 6.4 million likes and loads of positive comments. Comments such as “Best father in the world,” accompanied with a heart emoticon and “This is gold @therock,” with heart emojis speaks volumes.

Dwayne Johnson the iconic wrestler and actor; known for his athleticism through his Instagram handle gives his fanbase a glimpse into his personal and professional projects while posting content that is equally entertaining and educative regarding fitness. The otherwise strong macho look that he is known for is all the more admired for his comments and posts along with his daughters and his cute dog that establish him as a doting loving soft individual with a “rock like “exterior. Through constant repetitive acts, his image of the “alpha male” is consolidated not only by the raw muscular display of his body but he flaunts his “cool” personality by wearing a read floral shirt with equal elan. His posts reiterate the premise, “He’s relatable and human. He’s able to laugh about his weaknesses and mistakes, and shares struggles he’s had because they may help his followers” (Dean).

Hollywood with its emphasis on the ideal body image, for men as well as women, increases the stress levels for both. Instagram abounds with photoshopped images with jawlines chiseled, “broad shoulders, bulging biceps and triceps, a flat chest, a V-shaped torso, a narrow waist, well-defined core muscles, developed leg muscles, and sculpted calves” thereby sporting the “ideal masculine body” (Gupta). Thus, it becomes imperative for Instagram users to cross check their posts for anomalies in their body structure, skin colour and parts of their body. “Over the years, Kim and her famous sisters have been caught digitally tweaking their appearance — often trimming their waistlines, airbrushing their skin, and accentuating their curves” (Soteriou). Fans do cry hoarse of being fed with manipulated photos, yet we also have them ranting/body shaming when they find these celebs not close to the picture-perfect bodies they expect, as in the case of their disapproval of Priyanka Chopra’s colour of legs in a particular post with Nick Jonas. Thereby, it is this pressure that forces Instagram users to edit the photos before they are posted. Instagram thus becomes a medium that normalizes certain performative gender roles and social identities. The celebrities that have performed their picture-perfect identities earlier are therefore, even later, forced, due to public pressure, to maintain the performance; any deviation from the performance results in negative comments and body shaming. Though the celebrities that are being studied here are iconoclastic in their own ways and profess to defy the constraints of patriarchy; through their constant performance of “looking their best” they end up endorsing the same patriarchal constraints which they profess defying. Though many a times we have them challenging conventional gender norms, they eventually end up consolidating certain gender constructions that they profess to retaliate against.

Ariana Grande’s strongly asserted, “I am tired of living in a world where women are mostly referred to as a man’s past, present, or future PROPERTY / POSSESSION. I do not. belong. to anyone. but myself. . . .” (Lara). On another occasion she reiterated, . . . diversity is sexy! Loving yourself is sexy! . . . “You know what is NOT sexy? Misogyny, objectifying, labeling, comparing and body shaming!!! talking about people’s body’s as if they’re on display ASKING for your approval / opinion. THEY ARE NOT!!!! CELEBRATE YOURSELF. CELEBRATE OTHERS. The things that make us different from one another make us BEAUTIFUL. BODY BOUNDARIES. LOVE LOVE LOVE ONLY (Lara) .

We have had Ariana making bold statements regarding loving one’s body and not giving in to social pressures. Though she alleges that she loves her body there were allegations made recently, regarding she having some cosmetic work done to her face as they noticed in her photos, “some changes done to her face, especially with her lips and cheeks” (Cassidy). It is not uncommon for celebrities to go under the knife and change their looks though they may not accept that it is because of the pressure of a certain body image that the media has generated about the “perfect nose” and “the ideal abs”. Thus rhinoplasty, liposuction – fat removal, Botox, face lift, chest reduction, dermabrasion – face smoothening, are common cosmetic treatments that have helped perpetuate the wish of looking picture perfect; and if that wasn’t enough photo editing tools are user friendly and can be downloaded for free luring all users to edit their photographs before being posted on the social media.

Sports and Masculinity: The most popular Instagram celebrities are either related to the world of glamour or of sports. Cristiano Ronaldo has the highest followers - 520 million, followed by Lionel Messi who has 402 followers, while Virat Kohli with 229.8 million followers tops the list of most followed Indian celebrity on Instagram. The “practices of sport are still distinctly bound up with the production of masculinities” (Whannel ix) and the Instagram pages maintained by sportsmen validate the premise.

Cristiano Ronaldo’s Instagram with 3,420 posts, is an absolute masculine space; very little space is occupied by the other gender; to be precise we have a single photo with his grandma, few with his mother, only 2 photos with Alessandra Corine Ambrósio the Brazilian model, one with Irina Shayk, a Russian model with whom he was in a relationship, only four photos showing him indulging in public display of affection with Georgina Rodríguez, occasional photos with his children and family together; but numerous photos with his son, male friends, teammates, and himself.

Sports is a game of masculinity and sportsmen portray a disciplined life of fitness and practice, camaraderie with fellow teammates building a narrative of masculinity which has very little place for femininity. The masculinity-making practice seen on Instagram makes allowances to include for the feminine occasionally, to prove the sportsman’s heterosexuality or to establish him as a family man who loves relationships. The mother figure, as in the case of Ronaldo is very prominent among the feminine figures on his Instagram.

Berger once famously said, “Men act and women appear.” Ronaldo’s Instagram has a collection of photos all showing him in “action”. We find a variety of exhilarating moments on the football field capturing his kicks,

his camaraderie with teammates, the revelry they share after a victory goal, the anxious moments as he contemplates a kick, fans cheering in the background while Ronaldo regaling in his victory, even pensive moments captured on the camera speaks volumes for the inner aggression and virulence that Ronaldo and his game stands for. The posts that show Ronaldo in a relaxed mood are those showing himself pampering his body – Ronaldo getting a massage, in a sauna, having a haircut or relaxing as he gets a facial, or being brushed with makeup getting ready for a photo shoot – the entire focus is on Ronaldo, the sexualised hero. Even when his posts depict him sleeping or relaxing; the camera lingers and focuses on his well-toned body as if out on display.

The Instagram of Ronaldo tells the narrative of the masculine Cristiano Ronaldo being built through images and reels; from a skinny eighteen-year-old boy that Ronaldo was to that of the brawny prototype of a complete athlete. Instagram “in selecting, in framing, in focusing, and, above all, in narrativizing” the life of Ronaldo effectively engages in construction and production of the macho hero, thus, “Meanings emerge precisely from the productive representational practices of the media, and not simply from the inherent characteristics of the star represented” (Whannel 51). Thus the pages engage in repetitive reenacting of the heroic. When the focus is not on his practice sessions, we see him flaunting his gym routine. His flexed well chiseled muscular body and the disciplined routine of an athlete is made visible through his posts. His fans get a close-up glimpse into the “hero-matter” that he is made of. The hero-worship is summed up in a particular post wherein a small boy held up a placard on the football field that read, “Who needs Superheroes when we have CR7”. The cultures of sport still depend in part upon a constant reenacting of the heroic (Whannel 46). In comparison to Ronaldo, we have Lionel Andrés Messi posting more occasionally about his family, his wife and children. Though there are a lot of similarities between the posts of the two footballers who place a lot of importance for the sport, practice sessions and fitness we do not find the Instagram handle of Messi overloaded with brawny muscular photoshoots. He represents what Anderson calls “inclusive masculinity” wherein multiple masculinities can co-exist, people like Dwayne Jonson and Virat Kohli, as through their posts, we find them unconcerned about whether people perceive their actions as masculine or otherwise.

Conclusion: Men’s bodies like those of the women, are now objectified in representation, and there is a greater sexualisation of these bodies with the recent fixation with fitness. With social networking sites the objectification is not through the “other”, but ones’ own self. Disseminating one’s own body images through Instagram we have celebrities setting the standards. Through social media, sport stars are turning themselves into familiar figures, and household names, but at the same time this does not take away their heroic, mythologised position. With the increase in the immense public desire to know the ‘real’ person and the lives they live, the likes of Dwayne Jonson, Virat Kohli, Shraddha Kapoor, Alia Bhat and other celebrity handles studied here, offer the so called uncensored immediate tidbits on social networking sites in the form of tweets and Instagram images and reels for public consumption.

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