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“I RAN TO THE COMMENTS”: SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURE, HATE-SPEECH, AND HYPERREALITY

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While social media has allowed our world to become more interconnected and informed on global issues than ever. It has also aroused much criticism in the way it facilitates unrestricted hate-speech and violent rhetoric, especially towards historically oppressed groups. While the abundance of hate-speech online may be credited to the facelessness facilitated by internet profiles that negates accountability, this essay argues that there is a more cognitive and deeper explanation for how people are able to engage so violently with one another online. It will explain this through the framework of Baudrillard’s “Simulacra and Simulation”, elaborating that this discourse on social media exists within a hyperreality in which people are trained to jump to comment in a discriminatory way as soon as they witness the existence of a represents historical traits of otherness. The essay situates this idea of otherness in literature concerning the social architecture of gender, race and sexuality. Due to this process of reproduction of information, people are able to comment so aggressively as they are not witnessing another human being but instead, through the hyperreality they are only witnessing an image of a historically category of other, and thus they do not authentically engage with what they see but instead play into the simulation.

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Introduction

Social media has maximised the possibilities of global communication; in many ways, it has allowed people all over the world to see and connect with one another (Gonzales, 2017). This is especially noteworthy when it comes to marginalised peoples such as women, racialised people and queer people. These groups are able to better spread their message or connect with others via social media than in the real world despite a lack of diversity in the world around them, and the internet acts as a portal for meeting others with similar experiences (Gonzales, 2017). However, these marginalised groups are also much more likely to be the victims of internet harassment like cyberbullying or trolling (Llorente et al, 2016).

Social media has facilitated an immense rise in the spread of hate speech and harassment (González-Esteban et al, 2024). This is often attributed to the anonymity that social media provides users, which protects them from the consequences that would arise from this sort of behaviour in the real world (Mondal et al, 2017). However, this assumption suggests that users with provided anonymity have the potential to attack or be attacked, which suggests that an insidious agenda exists within them already and it only needs an excuse to arise. This essay will argue against this idea and use the framework of Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulation" to situate social media culture and hate speech within his idea of "hyperreality". This will demonstrate that hate speech is facilitated by the continuous distorting reproductions of historically patriarchal and colonial narratives within modern discourse. As this discourse is continually reproduced, it is ingrained into our culture and becomes difficult to release. This renders an instantaneously hateful reaction on social media when a historically or demographically marginalised person is scrutinised by commenters.

Simulacra, Simulation, and Social Media

In Jean Baudrillard's 1981 treatise, "Simulacra and Simulation", he discusses the four stages of Simulacra that are present in the world; simulacra are copies of existing or non-existing things, and represent aspects of the real world but hold the possibility of morphing into their own object. He discusses four stages of Simulacra that are present in the world; and these stages can be observed throughout the complex structure of modern ssocial media and the culture it inhabits, despite being a concept created before the invention of social media. While Baudrillard used art, advertisements and media to discuss his perception of simulacra, these can be easily transferred onto the world of social media. The first stage of simulacra is that which clearly and accurately represents something found in the real world (Baudrillard, 1981, p.6); an example on social media would be an unedited photograph that has been posted. The second stage is something which has been distorted from reality and often harbours an "evil" agenda (Baudrillard, 1981, p.6). This stage can be associated with the editing of photos on social media, with the agenda of looking "better" within patriarchal and Eurocentric standards. The third stage is that which masks the lack of reality around it (Baudrillard, 1981, p.13); online profiles on social media constitute an example of this, as their existence suggests that our real-world personas are real in contrast, which in Baudrillard's argument cannot be seen to be the case due to the fourth stage. The fourth and final stage is when the simulacra have no relation to reality at all, and simulacra are just reproductions of previous simulacra- this constitutes part of "hyperreality" (Allan and Daynes, 2017, p.242).

Baudrillard argued our society no longer could be connected to a natural reality. When he wrote "Simulacra and Simulation", he argued that society was so inundated by symbols and reproductions of symbols and the discourse spun off by all these inauthentic reproductions that we no longer had any reality left, only hyperreality (Allan and Daynes, 2017, p.242). Within hyperreality, it becomes impossible to tell simulacra from reality and there is a loss of the real. Social media can be argued to have taken this immersion of hyperreality to the next level, as it facilitates the constant and unlimited reproduction of information, symbols and opinions. Though Baudrillard's work was written far before the internet it can be argued that his observation of reproductions of images and information becoming oversaturated and detached from society, this has become a process exponentially execrated by the invention of the internet and social media. Misinformation, AI generated images, satire and rumours can all spread quickly and without regulation on social media and it is increasingly challenging for the user to decipher between what is real and what is not (Mondal et al, 2017).

On social media, people increasingly interact with posts and comments that have no basis in reality, and thus a feedback loop of simulacra production and surrounding discourse is inevitable. This catalyses the creation of hate speech as discourse loses the context of its original source and historic oppressive narratives become more ingrained and harder to inspect and reject. It is important to note that oppression and ridicule towards these groups has not begun with social media but exists within this historical narrative and social media simply reproduces and aggregates these narratives through hyperreality.

From the Empire to the Comments Section

It is no secret that discriminatory language and actions towards marginalised people did not first emerge on social media. We must inspect how people came to become marginalised the way in which they are today to understand the patterns in which these groups are now approached on social media. There is a continuous theme surrounding the oppression of marginalised people and that is the labelling of them as "other" and different from the norms of their oppressors.

We can observe the creation of the woman label through the lens of colonisation and empire in the work of Maria Lugones, who identifies the "Modern/Colonial Gender System" (Lugones, 2007). She describes how the gender binary and ideas of "man" and "woman" were spread throughout the world with the work of European empires. These colonists placed their understandings of gender upon the peoples they colonised. This demonstrates how those how the binary is used to other those who it transforms into women, an idea first earlier elaborated by Beauvoir in "The Second Sex" (2015). Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí furthers this in her observations of Yorubaland pre-colonisation (Oyěwùmí, 1997). She argues that the modern idea of a "woman" was not present in this society and that modern universal ideas of gender were not present in non-colonial societies. Oyěwùmí claims that the invention of "woman" was a key tool in naturalising power hierarchies within society and helped colonisation to be better facilitated as it both naturalised men's hierarchy over women as well as the white peoples over the colonised as it stripped half of the colonised peoples of any agency at all (Oyěwùmí, 1997).

The mission of colonisation targeted gender constructions, but also led to the advent of the creation of "race" as a social label to control; Anibel Quijano described race as, "the most efficient instrument of social domination invented in the last 500 years" (Wynter, 2003, p.263). "Race" as a concept was cemented and defined during the European Enlightenment when scientists were attempting to use science (incorrectly) to define different "races" as biologically different and assert white supremacy through this (Wolfe, 2016, p.17). We see similar ideas in Edward Said's "Orientalism" wherein he observes how European thinkers "othered" what they defined as the "Orient" and constructed images of what life was like in this part of the world (Said, 1978). This constructed image of the primitive and uncivilised Orient was spread and is still prevalent through the reproduction of this produced knowledge today and is used to justify ongoing racism in modern-day social media discourse (González-Esteban et al, 2024).

Said's analysis of the production of knowledge as power is inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, who used this framework to understand the moralisation of sexuality. In "The History of Sexuality", Foucault outlines how, historically, discourse surrounding sexuality was produced in order to control a population and gain power over those who are "othered" by the process of normalised heterosexuality and classing homosexuality as "deviant" (Foucault, 1978). In suppressing one group in society, a system of knowledge is also produced; one that encourages a society that needs to know what everyone's label is and thus judge them when they are seen to be the wrong one. This is advanced through Foucault's concept of Biopower, whereby the state or authority uses ideas around the body to assert what is healthy or normal for it to do, through this it creates a division between those considered normal and right, and those who are other and strange (Foucault, 1978). This concept can be tied back to the othering of women and racialised peoples as state institutions like medical practices historically have treated the white man as the standard and other bodies have suffered at their secondary class within medical practices (Johnson et al, 2004).

These frameworks are important to acknowledge when discussing marginalised peoples' experience today on social media as the harassment and hate speech that is targeted towards them has not come out of a vacuum. Instead, as this essay has outlined, there has been a

historical narrative created to "other" certain groups that has been a project of power. It is especially important to consider these different historical narratives together as they are interconnected . As identified previously, the colonial mission was a patriarchal one too, so we must inspect these power systems with reference to intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" coined the term intersectionality and demonstrated how, within legal systems, sexist and racist frameworks of discrimination were not enough to understand the intersectional way that black women were treated by their employers which was different from white women and black men. This same pattern is prevalent on social media as people who occupy multiple spheres of historical oppression are often more exposed to hate speech than others, and there are different elements of oppression that touch each identity too. Furthermore, an intersectional lens shows us how different narratives are related such as fatphobia, which is largely related to colonial racism towards non-European bodies; especially women's (Strings, 2019), and fatphobia is also common within hate speech on social media (Kamiński et al, 2024). Taking these historical narratives, and looking at them together intersectionally, demonstrates what has happened to form ideas of marginalised peoples' as less than or deserving of hatred, we can see that over time as information is reproduced it becomes entrenched in society's way of thinking and patterns of knowledge.

Especially on social media, because knowledge reproduction is possible so quickly and without limit, reproduction of these kinds of thinking happens in a way that is inauthentic to the knowledge before it and becomes purely symbolic and untethered from the history of what led to the conversation. Because social media exists within a hyperreality that is no longer connected to an authentic reality, racist, sexist and homophobic thought is a given and a "natural" reaction to people who fall outside perceived patriarchal and colonial standards. This discrimination becomes hard to question or fight back against since it is separated from reality and exists as its own entity, as a simulation within hyperreality. For instance, with diverse casting in film and theatre productions, such as Halle Bailey in the 2023 Little Mermaid adaptation, and Francesca Amewudah-Rivers in the 2024 West-End production of Romeo and Juliet, there has been an influx of very reactionary racism towards women of colour. A further hyperreal element of this discourse was when false rumours were spread that American actress Avantika, who is of Indian descent, was going to be cast in a live-action adaptation of "Tangled" in which the original character was white with blonde hair (Flam, 2024). This false rumour led to increased racist discourse, both around Avantika, as well as people of colour in general as critics would argue that these characters had no place being people of colour. Leading to some people of colour to argue that white people should be chosen for these roles as they were tired of the discourse (favoreden, 2024). It shows how increasingly hate speech is so confused with both "real world" colonial legacies and hyperreal discourse that it is hard to know what is real anymore and discrimination is easily rapidly escalated.

Furthermore, because social media is now etched into everyday life, it has become the language of our society so the need to comment on social media posts becomes the new way to interact with the world, but it is not an authentic interaction with the world. Because of this all discourse becomes reproductions of previous discourse, and social media is often defined as an "echo chamber", simply a device to facilitate the reproduction of opinion, and when this opinion is supported by the global patriarchal and colonial order, this inevitably leads to hate speech towards marginalised peoples under this order. It becomes second nature, so as marginalised peoples are witnessed, they are often immediately othered.

Hyperreal Hate Speech

As previously mentioned, this essay does not support the idea that hate speech is an inevitable part of social media given the ability to be anonymous. Instead, it identifies hate speech as being linked more to apathy than to pure malice. Social media is so immersed within hyperreality that users increasingly become less attached to the real world and real interaction with other human beings. This is because as they interact with videos and comment sections, they are not seeing real people or hearing real discussions and opinions. Instead, they are witnessing the inauthentic reproduction of other human beings and their voices which creates a cognitive

dissonance between them and those on the other side of the screen. In effect, this breeds mass derealisation, the feeling of detachment from oneself, body, surroundings and the world around one (Ciaunica et al, 2022). This process has been linked to increased use of social media, especially in young people (Ciaunica et al, 2022). This has developed an increasingly apathetic population with a seemingly blasé and unempathetic attitude towards others and their crises or challenges (Le, 2020).

This cultivation of derealisation creates a population that is more susceptible to the practice of hate speech as users increasingly approach videos and their comment sections as though playing a game, detaching from the individual humanity of their solely digital victim (Pradhana and Tania, 2021). Users attempt to receive numerically large responses through interactive actions like comments, duets, remixes, polls, likes, and dislikes. Algorithms promote a user's controversial videos or comments for more to see, rewarding this behaviour through instantaneous wider exposure. Furthermore, feeding the internet information by commenting or producing content that is based on existing narratives of oppression is reproduced through AI programmes. This has been observed in chatbots who recreate racist stereotypes to form their identities for user "entertainment" (Attiah, 2025). In contrast, private interactions are rarely rewarded at all. This causes people to approach the platform as if they are a person interacting with others, social media becomes a platform in which inauthentic interaction is the goal, in order to gain the most attention or even monetary gain.

This process that rewards controversy on social media leads to more and more discourse surrounding hate speech itself, whether it is contributing to it or arguing against it (Romaine, 2021). As people reperform and recreate the hate speech it becomes more and more ingrained in the cultural consciousness, and it becomes a given within the hyperreality. Now, when those who are the regular targets of hate speech (the marginalised peoples who were outlined previously) engage in social media and allow themselves to be witnessed by others through reproductions of themselves and their image on social media, they are very often met with a ready supply of hate speech (Romaine, 2021).

This hate speech is widely normalised on social media as it becomes a given within the hyperreal. Users often comment the phrase, "I ran to the comments" (niki_patton, 2020) when they witness someone who is observed to be outside the norms of patriarchal and colonial standards; someone who intersects the marginalised peoples as outlined earlier. This phrase is used to indicate the user knows that the perceived person within a video is going to receive hate speech because they do not exist within social norms, and so they "run" to the comments section to witness and further perpetuate this hate. Furthermore, this phrase is very apt in demonstrating the hyperreality of social media as it shows that users know that this inauthentic reactionary hate speech will always exist - it is a given within the space of the internet. In fact a trending phrase that users have placed over their videos is, "when someone posts the cringiest video so u run to the comments but all of the comments are nice and u realize u might be the problem.", if this phrase is searched on TikTok dozens of examples can be found (Anthonypert, 2024, Avaminaa, 2024, and Camfant, 2024). This trend demonstrates the reactionary element to witnessing "cringy" content, which generally can be demonstrated to pertain to people not deemed societally acceptable. Users are so used to reacting quickly and negatively to this content that they know others will feel the same, and they even know what insult or comment hate speech to use towards those they are witnessing. These videos have comment sections full of other users confirming this negative rhetoric commenting, "sometimes I get disappointed when they're all nice." (Camfant, 2024). This demonstrates how reactionary this hate speech is becoming in the digital hyperreal world. This hate speech is especially common as a reaction to the physical image of the rejection of patriarchal and colonial norms such as people whose gender is hard to place within the binary to the observer, or people who are racialised and also do not comply with Eurocentric beauty ideals (Llorent et al, 2016).

Conclusion

Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulation" provides an interesting framework to understand how hate speech and harassment towards marginalised peoples became so entrenched and rife within social media. It demonstrates that the discourse that this hate speech constitutes does not represent authentic interaction with reality but instead demonstrates that our society has become so inundated with symbols and discourse and

their inauthentic reproductions of themselves that there is no longer a connection to the real natural world and instead we live within a hyperreality.

However, it must be noted that Baudrillard himself may not agree with the nature in which this essay situates his thesis as he would argue against the importance of power placed within the frameworks of understanding the oppression of marginalised peoples. This can be demonstrated in his tract "Forget Foucault" where he criticised Foucault for the same thing in his works (Baudrillard and Lotringer, 1987).

Despite this, Baudrillard did not experience the current social media experience, nor was he a marginalised person. To this, this essay concludes that Baudrillard's framework can be used to understand real-world oppressions and help us understand the fragilities of our labels within society and the lack of reality that oppression and specifically discriminatory social media content roots itself within.

This hate speech exists within what we have identified as a hyperreality, however, there are real-world consequences to it as violent rhetoric can turn into violent acts with hate crimes and violence also increasingly linked to online discourse (Castaño-Pulgarín et al, 2021). Consequently, this essay advises that social media does have some merits; that is, in bringing together marginalised peoples and facilitating activism amongst them, and that this should be encouraged. Movements like the hashtags: "blacklivesmatter", "metoo", "stopasianhate", and "freePalestine" have all been credited with raising awareness and reclaiming the internet space that is so often hateful of people who these movements are concerned with. However, we must be careful we engage with simulacra and social media discourse that does not link substantively to reality. In the real world, many people are discriminated against and face persecution because of who they are; we look to understand them, not just what is being said about them.

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