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Reconstructing Gendered Narratives Online: Nudity for Popularity on Digital Platforms

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The focus of this paper is on how young female internet users in Africa, with emphasis on Kenya, are constructing their own gendered narratives online. The emphasis is on how they are appropriating social media by posting controversial and often nude pictures of themselves online, a major shift in the production and consumption of such images in a patriarchal culture, which is driven by mainstream discourse that often assumes that the patriarchal culture exploits the female body in mainstream visual cultures. Today, we are witnessing female internet users carefully manipulating social media whether in a bid to feed into the patriarchal dominated culture that exploits the female body, or as a method to exploit that very patriarchal culture that draws its life from visuals that exploit the female body.

Regional framework

In Kenya, most young people access the internet widely for social networking activities more than academic, entertainment and any other activity (Kendagor, 2013). Today, people are constantly logging into online sites to meet new people or reconnect with old friends; chat with friends and keep in touch with family; or access information on issues such as fashion, health, finances and politics. Consequently, interaction with the internet in Kenya is now a daily affair for most Kenyans, especially young people, with 62% of its users using it up to 5 times a day (Kariuki, 2010). The mobile phone has revolutionalised the ICT sector in Kenya, and often when we talk about Kenya being a hotbed for ICT in Africa, most of it has been enabled by access to cheap mobile phones. Statistics show that 50% of Kenyans who own a mobile phone access the internet through it. This is because of its portability; therefore most people can access the internet from any location (Wachira, 2010). Research conducted by Kariuki (2010) showed that among social media users in Kenya, 89% use it for messenger chats, 85% visit social networking sites, 72% for uploading and downloading of photos, 65% become members some of online groups, 58% visit a blog, 48% post comments in other peoples' blogs, 47% meet someone new via the internet, 47% make or receive an internet phone call, 36% visit dating sites, and 33% play online games. However, a look at social media use in Kenya reveals that Facebook is one of the leading social media sites used by young people in Kenya, and among the users of social media, it also emerged that women use social media more than men (Kendagor, 2013).

Theoretical framework

This paper is based on a theoretical framework of social capital and its relevance as a resource for online users in a postmodern setting. The first systematic contemporary analysis of social capital was by Pierre Bourdieu who defines social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance (Portes, 1998; Bourdieu, 1985). The core intuition guiding social capital research is that the goodwill that others have toward us is a valuable resource and a user's network of social ties creates opportunities for social capital transactions. However, like physical and human capital, social capital also requires maintenance, and social bonds have to be periodically renewed and reaffirmed or else they lose efficacy (Adler and Kwon, 2002). Users adoption of the internet to create varied networks has been enhanced through Web 2.0 which is today one of the global platforms of communication. This has been promoted through social media contributions such as quick feedback, levels of openness, two-way conversations, quick formation of communities and its level of connectedness by making use of links to other sites, resources and people (Kendagor, 2013). The concept of social capital focuses attention on the positive consequences of sociability while putting aside its less attractive features (Portes, 1998). Social capital is a long-lived asset into which other resources can be invested, with the expectation of a future flow of benefits (Adler and Kwon, 2002). Social capital is the goodwill available to individuals or groups, in this case female users on social networking sites. Its source lies in the structure and content of the user's social relations, and thus one can argue that women therefore tend to have more social capital on social media. For example, one study on the use of Facebook in Kenya revealed that women spend more time on Facebook than men (Kendagor, 2013). However, this social capital often accorded to users has been exploited both for good or bad intentions. For instance, initially, when female users upload nude photographs of themselves, they often receive negative coverage from the media. See here. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCKKb1raBfk) Ironically, the negative publicity also serves to increase the individual's fame, which then becomes a key driver for their social capital. The effects of the mainstream media coverage "flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor" (Adler and Kwon, 2002:23) and her followers. Therefore, one can argue that negative publicity of online users places positive consequences in both online and offline frameworks of discourses for a broader discussion of capital and calls attention to how such nonmonetary forms can be important sources of power and influence (Portes, 1998). However, while it takes mutual commitment and cooperation from both parties (the online user and social media followers) to build social capital, a defection by one party

will destroy it (Adler and Kwon, 2002). [soundcloud url="https://api.soundcloud.com/tracks/142372479″ params="auto_play=false&hide_related=false&show_comments=true&show_user=true&show_repost width="100%" height="150″ iframe="true" /] Social capital is appropriable and convertible. It is appropriable because an actor's network of friends, for instance, can be used for other purposes such as information gathering or advice, while it is convertible in the sense that it can be converted to other forms of capital, such as the advantages conferred by one's position in a social network being converted to economic or other advantages (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu 1985). For instance, Huddah Monroe (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNQ010hXsBA) is quick to point out that depending on an individual's connections, one can make a decent amount of money by being paid to attend events. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNQ010hXsBA) However, while social capital sources lie in the social structure within which the actor is located (Adler and Kwon, 2002), the acquisition of social capital requires deliberate investment of both economic and cultural resources (Portes, 1998). For example, through investment in building their network of external relations, users can augment their social capital and thereby gain benefits in the form of superior access to information, power, and solidarity (Adler and Kwon, 2002).

(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Monroe.png)
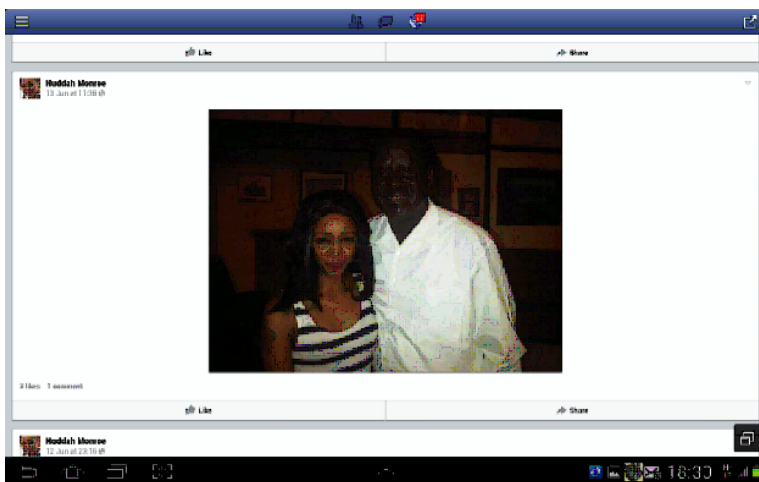
What we are witnessing today is a trend towards female African social media users appropriating social networks to reconstruct their own narratives online by carefully creating an online identity or persona that they can strategically use to achieve their needs. This has been witnessed among young female users who aspire to be like Kim Kardashian or Paris Hilton. However, it is important to note that African cultural settings are still patriarchal and the general gender constructions are therefore in conflict with the emerging gender constructions as construed in online settings. While in "offline settings" women often behave in ways that they interpret as being determined by the gender constructions as dictated by the patriarchal culture, in contrast, "online settings" afford them an opportunity (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCKKb1raBfk) to adopt varied

identities in virtual environments. However, differences in norms and contexts of interactions in virtual and physical space remain and these variations affect the multi-dimensional nature of identity construction and reconstruction (Agunbiade, Obiyan and Sogbaike, 2013). For example, not all women use social media the same way. Online female users are driven by varied needs and preferences. In addition, their uses are determined by the fact that African cultures and communities have various expectations from girls and women with regard to decency, modesty and ethos of hard work, yet the postmodern is centered on leisure time, appearance, image, and consumerism and is based on producing an image (Damean, 2006) that is hinged on commodification of the human self. For instance, a look at the top three social media users in Kenya, who often upload nude photographs of themselves on social media and consequently have risen to fame, also reveals that they have achieved quite a lot **economically** (http://www.trending.co.ke/top_three_kenyan_socialites_an-213365583.html) . For example, Huddah Monroe on an Alfajiri, K24 interview indicates that she gets paid around Ksh. 160,000 ($1,860) to attend an event and she stays "as long as her moods will allow her."

In contemporary societies, identity is strongly mediated by images provided by the mass culture, and the scenes, stories and cultural texts provided by the media are meant to offer individuals a variety of attitudes that can shape their personality (Damean, 2006). For instance, social media offers young people both mainstream and alternative cultures. Young people are thus able to appropriate alternative expressions and images to mainstream discourse. For instance, western personalities such as Kim Kardashian have become role models for young female users who are keen to embrace their lifestyles and create a brand for them locally. A case is Kenyan "socialite" Huddah Monroe whose real name is Huddah Njoroge and who adopted the Monroe name in a bid to emulate Marilyn Monroe. Consequently, users in emerging economies are also embracing social networks and emulating the lifestyles of western personalities such as Kim Kardashian who have a huge following on social media and are always updating their social media profiles with their "selfies," often controversial and nude. In Kenya, "socialite" Huddah Monroe is often known for uploading her controversial nude photographs. Monroe is unapologetic about her self-construction even though the photographs in an African setting raise questions from other Africans about the appropriateness of sexually graphic images in public spaces. When asked by a host on Kenya Television Network (KTN) during a show why she poses nude, she responds that it is because she is comfortable with her body. Another case in point is when a Twitter user asked her why she always posts naked photographs of herself. Her response was a

rebuff to the Twitter user. In addition when Jeff Omondi, a Kenyan journalist wrote in the mainstream *Nation* Newspaper a feature **article** (http://www.ghafla.co.ke/news/tv/item/10035-huddah-monroe-hits-out-at-buzz-writer-for-going-in-on-kenyan-socialites) about what it takes to be a socialite in Kenya and how they rise to fame, Huddah Monroe was quick to respond to the journalist.

Another case is Vera Sidika, a university student who rose to fame after being featured on a music video by a Kenya-based artist. The video became a hit because of the visuals which were construed to direct the viewer's gaze with emphasis on Vera's body and the size of her posterior. Consequently, she became a subject of discussion and was propelled into fame. She is now a common face at various entertainment spots and is often paid an appearance fee. This has led to her leading a lifestyle characterised by flashy cars and apartments in the leafy suburbs of Nairobi. She is commonly referred to as the **Kenyan Kim Kardashian** (http://www.ghafla.co.ke/news/tv/item/15392-take-a-peek-inside-vera-sidika-s-bmw-x5-photos) .

In 2014, Vera Sidika went public on mainstream television by admitting that she was bleaching her skin, and ever since she became light skinned, she has gotten better job offers. These images provide social role models for female users, appropriate and inappropriate patterns of behaviour, style and fashion and a subtle impulse that the way to succeed as a woman is by imitating and identifying with certain western models (Kim Kardashian) and local identities (Vera Sidika). However, individuals may choose whatever model they wish, be it a dominant or an alternative one (which will often be less popular) (Damean, 2006). An alternative identity, for instance is Vera's dark skin, and for her to conform to the dominant identity of light skinned women, she resorts to bleaching her skin to meet the expectations of her conceived reality. Another example is Huddah

Monroe who has strategically appropriated social media to create an alternative brand. Monroe rose to fame through uploading nude photos of her on social media as in the screenshot below from her Facebook page.

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Monroe.png) While a socially-mediated postmodern identity tends to be constructed mainly of images of entertainment and consumerism, the overarching assumption is that identity can be reconstructed and the human being can be changed and modelled according to personal choice (Damean, 2006). For instance, despite the negative comments from Kenyans during her stint on
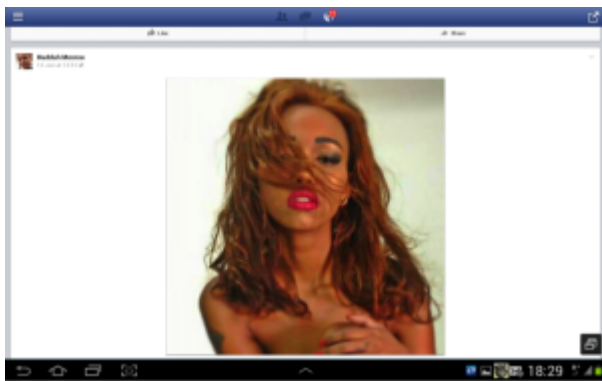
Big Brother Africa, Monroe went on to grow and expand her brand as she got more followers from the African continent. Many fans across Africa created Facebook pages in support of Monroe, and this was also key in legitimising her place as a Kenyan "socialite." However, she is quick to point out that she is not a socialite because Kenyans consider socialites to be "girls with questionable reputation" but she instead aspires to be a business woman. However, as Monroe rose to fame, she also experienced the harsh side of fame. Fraudulent users created duplicate pages for Monroe and Sidika, and consequently exploited Kenyans and event promoters who were keen on having Monroe or Sidika make an appearance at their social events at a fee. Monroe and Sidika continue to **make large sums of money** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNQ010hXsBA) , due to the fact that the more famous they become, the more money they charge event organisers to appear at a social event.

Later Monroe gained international recognition when she was selected to represent Kenya on the Big Brother Africa platform based in South Africa. Being a representative of Kenya, on an internationally acclaimed show (BBA Africa), legitimised Monroe's brand. She was no longer "that girl who uploads nudes" but became an ambassador for Kenya on a global platform. Her stint on Big Brother Africa was, however, short lived as she was the first contestant to be voted off, after one week. Ironically, Kenyans celebrated in jubilation when she was evicted. Photos and videos in mainstream media and online platforms showed Kenyans in local entertainment spots clapping and cheering as the country's representative to Africa was evicted. However, it is key to point out that while Sidika and Monroe may raise a lot of controversy with their online narratives, mainstream media has also helped to promote their image and shape public opinion towards their brand. Major media houses such as K24, Nation Media Group and the Standard Group have constantly **featured them** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNQ010hXsBA) on prime time news and on various shows. In a way, this has then made them household names for "offline audiences" who would ordinarily never have heard about them. The mainstream media houses are often adapting trending subjects on social media, for their prime time news, and this convergence of news and media consumerism has created a dream platform for online trend setters such as Monroe and Sidika.

Negotiating the new media platforms and emerging digital communities

In an era of "prosumers," the socially-mediated self-produced postmodern self is a multiple one and is more open to changes. Creation of online identities becomes a game, a theatrical presentation of the self, allowing individuals to present themselves to others in a variety of postures, roles, images, and activities (Damean, 2006). While Monroe is often known to have risen to fame by uploading nude photographs of herself, she describes herself on her official page for Big Brother as a fashion icon and entrepreneur. The page has more than 60,000 likes. However, after her stint on Big Brother Africa, Monroe is also gradually distancing herself from other emerging "socialites" keen to follow in her footsteps such as Vera Sidika and Pendo. Of interest is her Twitter page where she describes herself as "bad girl gone good" as seen in the screenshot below (accessed 14 January 2014).

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Monroe2.png)
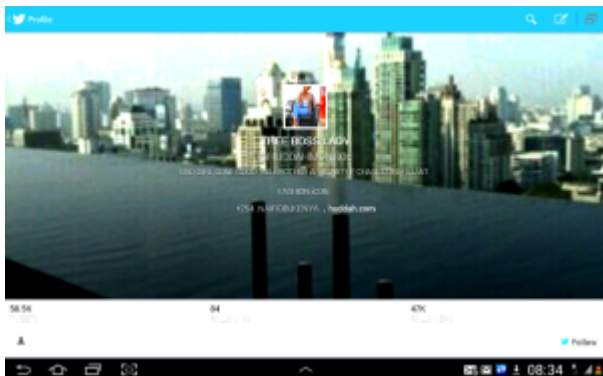
However, it is necessary to point out that social media does not so much construct a subject as it offers ready-made identities to move into, inviting individuals to identify themselves with certain figures, images or positions and imitate their practices (Damean, 2006). Technology is simply an enabler and social media users are able to select personalities that they can identify with and emulate their behaviours. On social media platforms, image is often more important than experience or knowledge. Users spend a lot of time to just get the perfect "selfie" for their social media page. How one looks on their social media page translates to money in the bank, and therefore, they are willing to spend a lot of time and money to get that perfect look for their followers. Since online users will judge the famous personalities by their outfits and products they own, the personalities adopt an over-the-top, theatrical view of their own online presence or what can be described as "performance" (Damean, 2006:90). Monroe often posted pictures of her expensive designer jewelry and shoes, as evidenced in the screen shot below where she posts images online and describes her Christian Louboutin white pumps and Louis Vuitton bag, luxury fashion items which are well beyond the reach of a majority of Kenyans struggling with the ever increasing high cost of living and resulting poverty (accessed 24 January 2014).

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Screen-Shot-2014-03-31-at-8.18.26-PM.png)

The contemporary, highly mediated world pays a great deal of attention to superficial images and impressions, to such an extent that the individuals become almost impossible to distinguish from their surface (Damean, 2006). For example, when Huddah Monroe posts images of herself with performers such as Prezzo, a Kenyan artist and a former contestant on Big Brother All Stars, it serves to legitimise her place as a celebrity. During an interview on Alfajiri, K24 Television Network, **Monroe** is quick to point out that she does not want to be termed as a socialite because in Kenya, the term socialite has negative connotations, yet ironically that is how she rose to fame. A look at her interview reveals a deliberate attempt to create an almost professional outlook to her identity and what she does to earn a living by referring to it as **modeling** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNQ010hXsBA) . For example, she is quick to dispute her **association** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNQ010hXsBA) with famous international superstars and how it impacts her.

However, the constant pressure to promote one's "brand" comes with a lot of pressure to create a particular impression for one's followers, which often leads to questionable acts. Such an act occurred when Monroe posted a picture indicating she sells gold, only for someone else to post the same picture showing the gold was not Monroe's but Prezzo's and the online user pointed out that the picture posted by Monroe had been taken at an earlier time by Prezzo. See **the following link** (http://nairobiexposed.blogspot.com/2013/11/exclusive-part-i-exposing-huddah.html.) . Munroe also posts images of herself with famous and renowned political figures. For instance, when she

posted a picture of herself with one of Kenya's legendary and most respected political personalities, Raila Odinga, there was uproar. While some online users felt it was not in good taste for Munroe to associate with such a powerful and legendary political figure, other online users envied how her fame accorded her the opportunity to meet one of Kenya's powerful political figures. Monroe4 (http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Monroe4.png)

Beyond binary oppositions in online gender construction

Looking at patterns on social media use in Kenya challenges previous assumptions that the inherently patriarchal media exploits women and portrays them as sexual objects; what we witness is some female users going online and uploading their own nude images. While we might assume that such users are victims of a patriarchal society that is male dominated and treats images of female users in a sexual nature, it is also important to note that female users who expose themselves in a sexual nature online would argue that they are reclaiming their power from a patriarchal visual culture by **flaunting their bodies** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJX5agme3sI) for their own benefit. In this case, the victim is not the female user as previously assumed, but the male audience. Consequently, the female users become predators, while the male users become their prey through what Laura Mulvey refers to as the "male gaze." However, it would be naïve to assume that only male users consume such content. Today, with a shift in binary oppositions in gender roles and responsibilities, female users are also part of the often elusive and contradictory "audience" because they too are targeted to consume these images by either making them **envy** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJX5agme3sI) the bodies of other women or their fashion and style. For instance, Huddah Monroe and Vera Sidika's followers on Facebook and Twitter are both male and female. Consequently, we witness young women who are part of a generation that is very adept at creating a brand out of their online presence. For instance, in an interview on KTN, Monroe describes herself as a **freelance model** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJX5agme3sI) . This is a generation of young people who are using their femininity and pushing boundaries between what is acceptable and unacceptable in societies by attempting to create "**professional tags** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNQ010hXsBA) " such as models, artists, and brands. The same case can also be seen in an interview that Monroe has on Alfajiri, K24 Television Network where she argues that she is a model who gets paid to attend events and is

planning on launching a clothing line so that she can be known as a businesswoman and not a **socialite.** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNQ010hXsBA)

Conclusion

While Web 2.0 has offered social media users opportunities to reconstruct their narratives online, it has also afforded them the power to use social media for other various benefits on a public and transnational platform. Instead of conforming to a patriarchal system and the gender roles defined for them by society, female social media users can select what to post online and what not to post online in an effort to create an online brand that fits their aspirations. While such users have the chance to generate their own content in ways they find appealing, we are witnessing a generation that is technologically savvy, and one that understands how to traverse and negotiate new media platforms for their own benefit. Consequently, what we are observing today in Africa are online narratives illustrated with sexually suggestive images and nudity. While one might argue that it is an attempt by women to embrace their bodies and reclaim their feminine power, this also raises questions about whether it can be considered exploitation when we have females users commercialising their own bodies in a sexual nature in order to create a brand. Given this new vision of female power, therefore, is there a need to shift towards a discourse that considers female users not as an emerging but as a dominant force in the visually dominated culture that characterises online communications?

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