

The Effects of Social Media on Personal Identity and Human Dignity: An Evaluation of the Botho Perspective

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Abstract

Over the years, social media has grown into a modern way of socializing. It has become a platform where people exhibit their living experiences and allows them to create their own community as well as enabling them to present themselves to others and determine how other people perceive their identity and that of others. It also affords them the security of showing their interests without feeling that they will be persecuted. People utilize social media in different ways for different reasons like creating online self-identity to enable them to be recognized in the society. Some may choose to use their real names while others choose to use pseudo names. The main objective of this paper is to evaluate effects of identity construction on social media from Botho perspective. Does the online self-construction limit personal identity or broaden it to an extreme point? What are the positive impacts of online constructed identity on human dignity and how does it jeopardize the dignity of the human person? Botho is a Setswana term meaning personhood or the essence of being a human person. Botho says people are what they are because of, with and through other people.

Introduction

This paper uses the moral theory of *Botho* to evaluate the effects of social media on personal identity and human dignity. The paper places emphasis on social net-working sites because they are the said media outlets used to share updates on the user's identity. The *Botho* perspective states that a person is a person because of, with and through other people. In the words of the African theologian John Mbiti, this is "I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1975:282). *Botho* reflects the essence of personhood or that which makes a person to be a person (Gaie 2007:30). According to the *Botho* perspective, a human person is a being who because of rational capacity has the ability to relate. Rationality in this regard includes the freedom and power to conduct one's life, such as, for example, to determine one's goals (autonomy). Nonetheless, according to *Botho*, personhood is a social construct. Thus, the perspective does not deny an individual the freedom of expression as a free being.

Consequently, *social media* is an autonomous social structure in which persons *construct* their identity and express their personhood. The constructions of personhood affect human dignity.

Botho: This paper employs the theory of *Botho* to evaluate the effects of social media on personal identity and human dignity. In order to do so, there is a need to give a brief overview of what *Botho* entails. I will start by discussing *ubuntu* generally in the Africa context and then narrow it down to *Botho* in Botswana. *Ubuntu* is a term that is used among the Bantu group, in particular from the *Nguni* language group in Southern Africa. Batswana, who occupy some parts of South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Namibia, belong to the Sotho-Tswana group, which is part of a larger group called the Bantu. The term *Ubuntu* is a lexeme of Zulu/Ndebele/Swati/Xhosa languages whose umbrella name is *Nguni* (Berman 2014:66-67).

The Setswana version of *Ubuntu* is *Botho*, derived from the term “*motho*.” It simply means “personhood”, but has heavy connotations of “morality.” According to Rantao (2002) as quoted by (Gaie 2007:32), *Botho* means “good personality”. *Vision 2036* document describes *botho* to mean: “A well-rounded character, well mannered, courteous and disciplined (individual) who realizes his or her full potential as an individual and as part of the community to which he or she belongs” (*Vision 2036*: 10). The Batswana’s philosophy of life is based on the moral principle of *Botho*” (Amanze 2002:125). The Setswana version of *Botho* defines Batswana, particularly how they see and understand the world, human nature and life in general. There is a rich specific meaning that the Setswana worldview brings to the understanding of human nature.

Social media: The term social media or social networking refers to internet-based applications where users create personal profiles, and through them are able to connect with other individuals or groups. These users can then communicate with each other and generate content by posting texts, pictures or videos (Alison 2019:14). Through social media, people are able to discover and learn new information, share ideas and interact with new people.

Personal Identity: Personal identity is a compound term that comprises two words; person and identity. The meaning of identity is extensive and varies depending on its usage and the study discipline. According to John W. De Gruchy, “whereas being human is a birth right, personal identity is constructed during the course of our lives, from the moment of birth until death, distinguishing each of us from everyone else” (2006:44). Personal identity is what a person identifies himself or herself with or the uniqueness of one person among others. One’s sense of personal identity consists in attributes that are perceived as being uniquely one’s own. Some

are given, whether through genetics, epigenetics or culture; others are intentional or self-determined (Cheshire 2018:135-136).

Dignity: The word dignity pertains to the worth of a human person. According to the *World Book Dictionary*, dignity is “the quality of character or ability that wins respect and high opinion of others” (Barnhart and Barnhart 1990:587). David Luban argues that “human dignity is not a metaphysical property of individual human, but rather a property of relationships between human beings; so to speak, the dignifier and the dignified” (2007:66). Similarly, Dumi Mmualefhe defines *serite* (Setswana word for dignity) as “that which has some effect on those around one, on the community, at the same time that which forms a community, which makes *Batho* (people) see value in one person....” (Mmualefhe 2007:7). In other words, human dignity is a way of being human not a property of being human. Ronald Cole-Turner concurs that ordinarily we think of dignity as something inborn, innate and endowed by nature or God, yet dignity as we actually experience it is relational. He goes on to say that “it is the experience of being treated as worthy and then incorporating into ourselves the sense of self-worth” (1997:21).

Immanuel Kant argues that “we should not treat people as means to ends to which they could not rationally consent” (Sober 2009). Human persons are free to treat other dignified persons as persons—not merely as impersonal means to achieve their personal goals. Anyone who reduces dignity to productivity turns other human beings into exploitable resources. The dignified being does not have a price, and we are all, as free and rational persons, capable of acting with our equal dignity in mind (Lawler 2017:2). Immanuel Kant connects the idea of dignity to that of freedom and autonomy of the will. Central to the concept of the autonomy of the will, he employs the idea of freedom. Kant proposes that “The categorical imperative is possible only on the presupposition that rational, willing beings are free: ‘ought’ implies ‘can’”. In this regard, the will is a sign of causality belonging to living beings in so far as they are rational. According to Kant, “what makes us persons is our rationality, and to be a person, or a rational being, is therefore an end in itself” (Barbet 1990:151).

Human dignity is integrally related to the basic freedom enjoyed by all human persons. They have the power to choose their own ends. In Setswana culture for instance, an individual is seen as having an intrinsic value. Setswana traditional politics is a politics of freedom of speech and consensus, where opposition is always granted freedom of expression as espoused in the saying “*mmualebe o bua la gagwe gore mona lentle a le bue*”. That is, literally, every person

has the right to express their views and be listened to, whether their contribution is negative, positive, wise or unwise.

Effects of Social Media on Personhood

Human persons live in a world of continuous construction. Although there is meaning and purpose given to us by our cultural beliefs and values, each individual still wants to make sense of their own personal identity; we are led from being to becoming, and social media offers people the opportunity to create their own identities. The actions performed by a human person on social media are a matter of self-affirmation and self-creation. The self is not a constant and indivisible unit but a being that is continually reinventing and reorganizing. In this self-construction, there must still be mutual interaction with the online community. Human persons develop their self-concept through introspection, feed-back from others, self-perception and even social comparison. The human person constructs and puts out to the online world the person they would want to be and the person they want to be seen as, and “..... these do not develop in an empty space, but reflect the ideals and ideas of the surrounding world” (Baumen and Raud 2015:45). In Dwight Hopkins’ words, “who I am as a singular individual embodies specificity of historical precedents, societal procedures, and psychological makeup” (Hopkins 2005:98).

People also create their own social identities by reflecting on others’ identities, whether by imitation or by avoiding a certain destructive or undesirable identity that they witnessed on social media or in other contexts. The human person’s thoughts, feelings and behavior are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others. Thus, by creating their identities, people simultaneously afford others the leverage of reflecting on their own identities. Baumen and Raud depict the human person on social media as the performing self just as an actor on stage. Actors on a stage know they are being watched and so they perform to the pleasure/satisfaction of the audience (2015). In the same way, when a human person posts on social media, they select and frame the content with the view to please or impress a certain crowd. Baumen and Raud argue that, “the production of selfhood necessarily has to involve negotiations with all the meaningful others towards whom one’s self -expression is directed, and constant correction of one’s own actions whenever something seems to have gone amiss” (Bauman and Raud 2015:38).

Moreover, social media dramatically affects personal identity and the way persons relate to each other. Thaddeus Metz contends that even though self-expression is normally understood

to be an individualistic value, it has a clear place in a communitarian ethic, especially in the Afrocommunitarian context (2015:389). He argues that sharing a way of life with others and caring for them can often require revealing one's mental properties to them (2015:397). Metz maintains that self-expression can be central to sharing a way of life with others and caring for their quality of life (*Ibid.*). Users of social media circulate information that depicts their potential, qualities, convictions, impressions, needs and concerns for the needs of other human beings. Such social information displays how people see themselves and how they want others to see and identify them. For example, when people post their so-called selfies or text for pep talk, they choose pictures and material that would make people see them as 'sexy', business-savvy, mature or socially outgoing.

Effects of Social Media on Human Dignity

Botho maintains that "a person is a person because of, with and through other people". This simply means that other people define me and I define other people and the whole community. Human beings are essentially social beings so social media allows people to revive and preserve relationships with other people. Families and friends keep in touch through services such as WhatsApp and Facebook all of which help foster relationships. People share and connect with other people of their own interest to create their own communities. For example, there are groups on Facebook and WhatsApp for various purposes like, football banter, advertisements, sharing music, entertainment, job searches, business ideas, sharpening trades skills and others. Without these connections, human persons fail to be fully human. Similarly, John De Gruchy (2006:36) opines that "sharing a common humanity binds people together rather than separates them."

These communities grow constantly because they encourage individual freedom by not placing social responsibility on their members who are strangers with a common interest when online. The personal identity of the members is globally determined rather than associated with an immediate, physical society or culture. On the downside, individualism can show online where there is no respect for the feelings, values and rights of other people. Some people may post insults, foul language, double entendre or vulgar jokes on social media. Some may offend others or write discriminatory or humiliating expressions about others. Furthermore, some stuff that is shared on social media may damage other people's reputation such as, for example, sharing another person's photos of nakedness. Sometimes other people's privacy is compromised or adversely affected, as when people discuss family or conjugal problems on

social media and then a witness exposes them to the public. Therefore, social media can easily cause individuals' rights to be violated.

Community, Freedom and Dignity in *Botho*

The right to the exercise of freedom belongs to everyone because it is inseparable from their dignity as human persons. Considering rights and freedom can enhance the person's dignity by creating favorable conditions and improving their personality. However, the rights of an individual should not be destructive to the social community. Freedom does not include rebellion, disrespect or abuse. In the Setswana worldview, human persons are advised to guard against negative words through expressions such as, "*motho o tshwarwa ka leleme, kgomo e tshwarwa ka kgole*" (a human person is tamed by the tongue and a cow is tamed by rope) and "*lefoko ga le bowe go bowa monwana*" (a spoken bad word cannot be retracted, but an accusing pointed finger can be folded back). The above sayings mean that the content of communication impacts on the well-being of speakers and listeners. An individual who behaves according to *Botho* has the ability to restrain himself/herself from talk that can destroy others, and by default, s/he speaks the truth instead of lies.

A *Botho* perspective does not restrict personal identity to communal identity. *Botho* allows individual contribution through the Setswana saying "*moremogolo go betlwa wa taola, wa motho o a ipetla*" (Moloto and Molao, 1975: 99). This literally means that the main cowrie of the divining set is carved into the shape desired by the carpenter; but the main human bone shapes automatically. According to the Setswana worldview, every human person is the architect of his/her own destiny. Society has a role to play in an individual's becoming a person, but the individual is also free and responsible for who or what he develops to become.

Social identity explains the human person's freedom in the sense that an individual is not a passive puppet; as much as an individual is defined by the community, s/he contributes to the same community that defines him/her. In this way, an individual is not only defined by his/her community but contributes to how s/he is defined. This article, therefore, holds that the *Botho* is not detrimental to personal freedom and individuality, but is an enabler to the individual's aspiration to self-improvement.

In social media, individuals are free from the chains of external sources of identity. They are compelled to give meaning to their lives, to be reflective, to examine their own lives and determine their own identities. Baumen and Raud explain that: "...the construction of my

internet avatars gives me far greater possibilities than the offline reality” (2015:45). They further argue that, “in the online world, I can cut myself a niche surrounded by impermeable walls, a feat inconceivable in the offline universe, and feel free and safe in such a shelter” (Baumen and Raud 2015:45). The online world is, therefore, a world of endless possibilities and liberation where people make choices about what they want to consume.

The human person uses consumption for acquiring or maintaining an aspect of self-concept. They manage clothing, words, and non-verbal actions in an effort to create specific impressions in the minds of others. The people who seek human interaction but are not comfortable with some aspects of face-to-face conversation may find online interaction to be liberating. However, the online world can give a false sense of belonging and connecting that is not built on real life exchanges. Furthermore, “Internet users gradually denigrate and de-learn (or fail to appropriate in the first place) the skills required to cope with offline demands” (Baumen and Raud 2015:47). For instance, social media provides people with less interpersonal skills and conflict resolution mechanisms. Moreover, the fashion world created by social media can be superficial and consequently lead people to live stagnant, retrogressive or destructive lives. Some people are pressurized to conform to false images while others have their self-esteem badly affected by negatively comparing themselves with others.

Social media allows recognition of the worth of the individual persons. Whatever actions human persons take they make a personal statement. For instance, I affirm, I share, I like. We speak to a crowd of our personal preferences, and we like nothing more than the crowd to affirm those preferences in return. “If, by performing my choice to myself, I make it possible to stand by the values and principles that I hold dear, then the little division of myself into an actor and audience serves a worthwhile goal” (Baumen and Reud 2015:55). Baumen and Reud further explain that “...the efficacy of that performance depends on the endorsement of the internal audience as much as the eternal one” (*ibid*). Every human person has the basic instinct to improve him/herself and realize their full potential. The self and other selves play a role in the construction of an individual self. Baumen and Raud contend that “self is a determinant as much as a product of interaction. That the most private of human possessions is also the one most dependent on human sociality” (2015:55). The authors share the same sentiments regarding *Botho*. According to *Botho*, every human person is defined by the community. However, an individual is responsible for shaping/constructing how the community defines him/her, and she/he is also responsible for the shaping of the identities of other human persons.

CONCLUSION

According to the *Botho* perspective, the crucial aspect of being human is intra-social relations. *Botho* acknowledges the individual, rationality, freedom, the moral nature and equal rights of all human persons. Social media is an internet-based platform for intra-social relations which has significant effects on the identity and dignity of human persons. Thus, this article sought to examine the making of personal identity on social media from the perspective of *Botho*. It must be borne in mind that there are both positive and negative aspects of social media. These depend on how the individual person uses the media. Social media can enhance the human person's connectivity and by so doing help in building communities. It allows people to share things that add value to their lives and contribute to their communities. Communication through social media enhances socialization and allows human persons the freedom to share who they are without violating their personal space or that of others. Human dignity lies in the rights to freedom; individuals' freedom expression, association, self-definition and a redefining of the world around the self. When people present themselves truthfully with prudence, it enhances their dignity as persons. On the other hand, some people may use social media for bullying and trolling others. The abuse of information can cause unnecessary trouble for some users and the violation of privacy for others. Further-more, some content shared on social media exacerbate peer pressure and social pressure on other people.

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