Posting for Peace: Investigating Youth, Social Media & Violence in Trinidad

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Abstract

This paper is based on qualitative data from our Posting 4 Peace/Publicar para la Paz (P4P) study on youth, social media and violence in Trinidad, which took place over 2016-2017. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the team, led by Dr. Hernández-Ramdwar, collected 15 peer-to-peer youth/child interviews and 5 interviews with key

adults in Trinidad as its pilot study. In 2018, the study expanded to include Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and these countries' diasporic communities in Canada. The methodology and emerging themes from 15 youth interviews in Trinidad are reflected here. The data reveals what young people are doing and seeing on-line, and how this relates to their cultural identity. We describe their views about violence and how they use social media towards negotiating part of their cultural identity, with a focus on a constructivist sociological field research approach conducted with and by youth.

1. Introduction

a. Research Context

The research project Posting for Peace (P4P) was developed to address the minimal amount of scholarship on youth and digital media in the global South generally (Rivera, 2016; Atienzo et al, 2017; ECLAC, 2014), and in the Caribbean/Trinidad more specifically. This is a challenge for parents and guardians, educators, policymakers and those who work closely with youth and children in other capacities in the Caribbean region. What is posited in this study is the need for a youth-led approach to the issues surrounding social media and violence as it affects and manifests in the lives of youth and children in Trinidad and the wider Caribbean. The pilot study consisted of interviews with 15 youth/children and 5 key adults in Trinidad (only) in 2017. The young people spoke about the extent of violence online as well as the meanings and actions they take in distributing and responding to violent content on social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat and Instagram.

Specific forms of violence have emerged in mediated spaces that youth are very much engaged with. Some of the violence distributed online mirrors local social context; this is not surprising since the internet is recognized as a "natural" extension of the off-line society (UNESCO, 2017).

Alarmingly, for many youth, this off-line world is increasingly violent. Additionally, Online violence brings concern for their psychological well-being since youth can fail to distinguish between online and offline actions and responses (Pantic, 2014).

The focus of the pilot project was to increase knowledge about the ways in which children and youth engage with social media and ICT in Trinidad; why they utilize these media, and what sort of content are they encountering, participating in and actively creating in relation to violence. Furthermore, what are their thoughts on their own agency in regards to social media/ICT as tools of expression, both present and future? More pointedly: does the creation/dissemination of violent material via electronic sources by children/youth contribute to other forms of violence, and if so, how? Can technology such as social media/ICTs be utilized as a preventative to violence and if so, how?

b. Blended Methodological Approach

We felt it was necessary to include a methodology that would allow us to examine context and content analysis alongside personal narrative in order to glean a more wholistic picture of who our Caribbean participants were. This is especially crucial given that there is a lack of substantial scholarship on the mediated lives of youth in the Caribbean.

Field research methodology: Socio-constructivist approach, youth as researchers, peer-to-peer data gathering processes.

Our field research methodology reflected the desire to understand the relationship of media to violence from the youth's perspective. Video game violence studies suggest that media violence researchers, like all humans, tend to disproportionately seek out and value evidence that supports

their point of view (Olson & Kutner, 2015). This bias inherent to researchers was an element we wanted to address.

We also wanted to understand the unique way these youths use social media. European and North American empirical research have emphasized the ability of people to resist media messages (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Jenkins, boyd and Ito, 2015), the ability of young people to make their own creative media texts (Ito et al, 2009; Boyd, 2014, 2009), and the ability of audiences to make television programmes relevant to their own lives (Gauntlett 1996; Ito, 2009). Part of our enquiry was to understand whether digital media reinforces local violence and/or whether Trinidadian youth were creating different narratives unique to their own values.

We designed a socio-constructivist field research methodology. The aim was to offer a glimpse of the situation for some of the youth in Trinidad. We focused on a qualitative methodology that utilized a small sample. We wanted to keep the sample small to allow us to learn how to help youth become the researchers and conducted open ended peer-to-peer interviews, while the researcher conducted interviews with adults that were semi-structured. After the interviews were conducted, members of the research team read the interview transcripts and watched the videos. These were coded to look for overarching themes that emerged and prominent themes were highlighted in the data.

Analytical Methodology: Socio-Economy and Discourse Analysis

To understand the role of mediated violence in youths' lives, our data analysis had to consider a complex interplay between multiple factors. Our analysis focused on a form of discourse analysis that examined the role of violence (both offline and online) in the youths' social life.

An increasing number of studies that examine potential contributors to violence suggest that personality characteristics and direct physical abuse significantly predict violent crime while

exposure to television and video game violence are not significant predictors of violent crime (Ferguson et al, 2008; Olson & Kutner, 2015). As such, studying online violent messages and images implies examining how violent content fits into the social lives of users and whether violence contributes to their online cultural identities.

While digital social/cultural identities are accomplished practically through our ongoing interactions and negotiations with other people (Buckingham, 2008), they are also potentially influenced by and/or mirror mediated cultural messages. Therefore, our data analysis had to consider potential media effects of both mass and participatory media.

On one end, we know that mass broadcast media are important hegemonic ideological tools that can reinforce the values of a dominant cultural/institutional force (Bal, 2005, 2008) and that stereotypical cultural representations are distributed via mass media and other hegemonic institutions. We also know that stereotypes influence personal notions of identity (Silver, 2012) and that media distribute many stereotypes through their various narratives.

But social media are also sociological spaces of social action (Bal, Nolan & Seko, 2014) where digital natives' footprints are an important social capital resource. Social capital is a form of economic and cultural capital central to social networks that implies that social actions are resources that facilitate individual or collective action. Social media can be used to craft a digital identity that increases social capital (Ellison et al, 2014).

Social capital is one of the most intangible forms of capital (Bebbington, 1999; Moser & McIlwaine, 2000, 2001), as it refers to the often invisible networks of relationships, reciprocity, trust, and social norms embedded in social relations, social structures, and societies' institutional arrangements that enable its members to achieve their individual and community

objectives' (Narayan, 1997,1999; Bourdieu, 1993). Social capital is useful in a multitude of contexts, such as the reputation economy. The reputation economy relates to the notion of reputation as valuable. Self-branding becomes an investment in social relationships with expected return for the acquisition of a reputation. In the case of the youth participants in Trinidad, social capital is instrumental to secure not only employment (Gandini, 2016) but also to maintain a good reputation in the community, family and other social groups.

Social media users, and particularly teens, tend to craft and manage their online presence (Vitak, 2012). These mirror offline dramaturgical social actions (Goffman, 1959) designed to represent a version of self that is designed to be seen by others and improve one's public image and, as a consequence, their reputation. This form of "impression management" is tied to existing cultural and social norms. Individuals behave in ways that enable them to achieve their goals while participating in a matrix of other's impressions which form collaborative performances. Goffman distinguished between "front-stage" and "back-stage" behaviors. When "on stage," for example in a workplace or in a social gathering, individuals tend to conform to standardized definitions of the situation and of their individual role within it, playing out a kind of ritual; in the case of Trinidad and Tobago, violence is central to this ritual. Back stage, individuals have the opportunity to be more honest: the impressions created while on stage may be directly contradicted, and the team of performers may disagree with each other.

Social media platforms recreate this offline social structure. One's profile and newsfeeds act as the front stage, while private messaging acts as the backstage. This need to develop an on-stage identity explains why recent studies on teens' online identities noticed that American teenagers stay closer to reality in their online expressions of self than has previously been suggested (Huffaker & Calvert, 2017).

2. Discussion: Violence and Social Media in Trinidad And Tobago

We posited that to understand the role of mediated violence in youths' lives, we needed to examine its relationship to their digital identity. Digital identity exists at the junction of mediated cultural stereotypes, as well as personal and community values as they relate to increasing one's social capital. Thus, our data analysis approach had to be a broader analysis than just discourse analysis; it had to understand the social life context of the youths' we worked with. Consequently, we will begin discussing our findings by examining the local context of the youths interviewed.

    a. Trinidad's Local context

i.   Relationship to digital media

The online revolution has opened new doors to designs and platforms that can fuel forms of online violence as much as act as digital echo chambers that mirror the local violence youth witness and experience on a daily basis. The Rights for Children and Youth Partnership (RCYP) project (of which this study is a part) examines the degradation and protection of youth rights in the Caribbean and Central America. Digital divides and inequalities in Latin America and the Caribbean are an important aspect of this research. At present, not all children are media-literate but social media and ICTs are still ubiquitous in their lives as 90 percent of students can access computers and the internet at school (ECLAC, 2014). In the country of Trinidad and Tobago, there are high levels of internet and cellphone use, with over 2 million subscribers in a country of 1.4 million (Kemp, 2018).

Figure 1: T&T digital profile

courtesy: https://hootsuite.com

ii.   A Post-Colonial Violent Context

The study focused specifically on Trinidad, one half of the two-island nation of Trinidad and

Tobago. Like all post-colonial Caribbean societies, Trinidad comes out of a violent past of

genocide, slavery and indentureship. Violence is and has been a part of the fabric of society for

generations, especially family violence. In recent years, high levels of childhood sexual abuse are

being revealed (Hernández-Ramdwar, 2008). Due to the increasingly high levels of violent

crime, Trinidad is a society in trauma, and that trauma is masked behind a façade of Carnival,

partying, and even data which ranks Trinidad and Tobago as the happiest country in the

Caribbean (Polo, 2018). Trinidadians also like to boast that "god is a Trini", and that Trinidadians

always escape the worst of disasters whether economic or natural (hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.) which plague other nations in the region.

Colonialism oriented many colonies towards dehumanizing social and institutional arrangements that mirrored relationships of inequality. Asymmetrically structured configurations of race, gender, and class became naturalised through everyday lived relations (Lau, 2017). In the Caribbean, a culture of violence permeated the entire colonial project, beginning with the enslavement and genocide of Indigenous people. This was followed by the enslavement and forced migration of millions of Africans, and later indentureship of Indians and Chinese, to toil away on sugar plantations. The original ancestral cultural values of Indigenous and African peoples, in particular, were destroyed, distorted, converted, banned, and transformed. Generations of Caribbean people are caught in a neocolonial nightmare of internalized self-hatred, subservience to authority figures (politicians and religious leaders), and cycles of violence and abuse. Today, the off-line society the youth from Trinidad and Tobago live in is drenched in this culture of violence, both physical and psychological. As these youths explained:

> **Interviewer**: … is there anything else you would like to add about the topic of violence and the state of the country in relation to the social media?
>
> **Marie**: I'd just like to say that, you know, it's becoming more and more prevalent and… I think… violence has increased over the years and probably at its highest now, so that is something to be aware of, you know…the place mightn't be as safe as you thought it'd be.
>
> **Anil**: And the relevant authorities or non-government agencies need to do something about this prevalent issue that is faced and that we are facing in Trinidad and Tobago.

In 2018, the country was listed as one of the top 15 countries in the world for homicide rates, (28 per 100,000 persons) outranking Brazil, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (UNODC, 2018). Youth themselves understand that this violence results from poverty and other social factors.

Interviewer: How does crime affect the community, allyuh community?

Anonymous Youth 1: Well the number one…the number one…the one I go put first, dog, is poverty.

Anonymous Youth 2: It is…it have murders. Innocent people dying.

Anonymous Youth 1: It's the government have it so. How the place is fucked today. Because at the ending of the day we ent getting no works. Nothing. Underemployment, unemployment… we having we passes, we still ent getting work. What you want we do? Drugs is the only option.

Anonymous Youth 2: It making your community get a stigma and a bad name. So when you going for jobs certain places wouldn't hire you because of the area you're from. You don't have to be in it, your family don't have to be in it…and at the ending of the day when you're going home you know your family can still pick up (get shot)…

Anonymous Youth 1: Serious…

Anonymous Youth 2: ....innocent corn (bullets). Understand? So it does that affect the community in plenty ways. You know? Businesses, you know….

Anonymous Youth 1: Plenty different ways…

Anonymous Youth 2: …businesses don't come here, you understand? To open, you understand? It ent have much….

These respondents, like many other children from Trinidad, are exposed to traumatic levels of violence on a regular basis. The youth reported witnessing a range of violence in their real life as well as on social media. Offline, they witness and/or experience and/or participate in violent activities that take place locally, at their school, work and on the streets. These events were typically recorded and posted on social media. Online, they have witnessed a myriad of violent activities, ranging from the shaming of peers via the sharing of nude pictures, robberies, school fights, girl fights, gang wars, a gang of schoolchildren beating up an individual, police abuse, rapes. Some have seen local people (women, men) being beaten up, groups of men beating up a woman, extreme acts of violence such as using steel bars or other objects to beat people (sometimes to death), killings, shootings, stabbings, choppings, and kidnappings. In addition,

some participants also reported having watched violent foreign videos posted by ISIS, or videos of children being abused in foreign daycares.

If social capital underlies both physical and online social life, it may not always be used to positive ends. Violence and criminal gang activities are both examples of negative social capital that encourages intra-group relationships that are isolated and disenfranchised from the rest of society (Ilan, 2013). This phenomenon seems to present itself in the case of Trinidad where local community violence ends up being reinforced online. As one participant explained, when asked about violence and social media: "As I said before, it is what it is. Is—if we don't get it from social media, we'll get it from somewhere else".

In addition, forms of violent behaviours unique to online spaces are also being reported. As Mary Moonan, director of ChildLine Trinidad and Tobago, a phone-in counselling service for children and youth, explains:

> **Interviewer:** Can you speak… I don't know if you can- for reasons of confidentially - but is there any other particular examples that can you give that you remember where children were um... seeking help in regards to social media? I mean there's the school fights but there's many other ways in which children um… experience violence through social media or the use of social media to create violence, cyberbullying… these kinds of things.
>
> **MM:** That is one of the main ones - cyberbullying. It is worst then physical bullying because physically bullying has to end when the person is no longer with you. When they leave if it is in the school system, when they leave the classroom and they go home, it stops. By with cyberbullying it does not stop; it continues wherever that victim is. Because they can text you. They can send emails, WhatsApp etc. and it continues non-stop. Children have called and cried and said, you know, they are thinking of suicide because it is so relentless. And it does not stop and when they complain to their parents or teachers. "Deal with it." That's the answer…I don't think many adults appreciate the enormity of cyberbullying and how devastating it can be in a psychological sense. Because as—as I said it's never ending. You can't stop it. It follows you no matter where you go.
>
> **Interviewer:** Are you aware of any children that have attempted suicide or…

MM: They have spoken about it—yes. And um… they have attempted but not successfully.

iii.   Chronic Violence & Trauma

Given the intense levels of violence they are exposed to, these youths are facing a local culture of chronic community violence. For the last 50 years, American researchers have explored the impact of chronic community violence on children and youth. The body of knowledge they developed may be helpful to understand some of what Trinidad's youth are experiencing. It is important to understand that exposure to chronic community violence is considered to be a traumatic experience of the same magnitude as those faced by children and youth in war zones (Osofsky, 1999, 2018; Robinson, 2018; Rossman and Ho, 2000; Osofsky & Osofsky, 2018). Traumatic events can include abuse, violence, war experiences, natural and human-made disasters, suicides (Ferguson et al, 2008) and other losses that can cause feelings of helplessness. While the reactions of individual youths to violence is influenced by their developmental level, ethnic and cultural factors, previous trauma exposure, available resources, and pre-existing child and family problems, researchers who have examined chronic community violence in the United States know that trauma has significant emotional, cognitive and physical consequences (Margolin & Vickerman, 2007; Singer et al, 1995) and that functioning in the family, peer group, or school may be impaired. For example, cognitive symptoms in youth exposed to violence can lead to difficulties in concentration and decision-making that have serious consequences for the youths' abilities to function in school (Rossman and Ho., 2000; Osofsky & Osofsky, 2018). This can lead to the learning of aggressive social conventions that contradict the cultural and social norm of the youths' local context, creating a faulty processing of social information, thereby

increasing the youths' risk of engaging in aggressive behaviors with peers (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, Petit & Bates, 1994; Rossman & Ho, 2000; Osofsky, 2018).

In addition, community and domestic violence exposure traumatizes victims and witnesses (Osofsky, 1999, 2004) as well as the perpetrators of violence themselves (Robinson, 2018). American PTSD research suggests that the act of killing or perpetrating violence could be even more traumatic than being a victim (Kerig et al, 2016). Some research is beginning to examine gang members' high exposure to violence and is suggesting that there is a two-way relationship between trauma and being part of a gang. Trauma increases the likelihood of joining a gang, and gang membership increases the risk of being exposed to trauma (Robinson, 2018).

The high levels of childhood sexual abuse in Trinidad and Tobago are one source of trauma, often unreported and unnoticed, taking place behind closed doors, and therefore a concerted cause for concern. Hernandez-Ramdwar (2008) posited that "increasing levels of childhood sexual abuse in the nation may be a factor in the rising rates of crimes and destructive behaviours committed by youth" (3), citing the deepening concerns of several frontline child and youth workers in the country, as well as existing American research that looks at violent and non-violent criminal behaviours among both female and make survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

In a 2010 study of students in schools in high-risk areas of Trinidad, the findings showed that gang membership was about as prevalent in Trinidad and Tobago as in similar school studies in Canada, the United States and Western Europe, but lower than other Caribbean countries such as Jamaica (Katz and Fox, 2010). This same study found a correlation between the availability of guns in a neighbourhood and a high level of residential mobility with the likelihood of joining a gang. In addition, there was a "robust relationship between gang status and early initiation of

antisocial behaviour, intention to use drugs, having antisocial peers, and having peers who use drugs" (p. 194). Parents who support anti-social behaviour was also a factor. As of 2017, gangs in Trinidad and Tobago are organized into three main groupings: 1) Islamic criminal gangs; 2) non-Islamic gangs (typically under the umbrella term "Rasta City"); and 3) independent gangs in non-urban areas or around key sites such as ports (Ellis 2017). Seepersad (2015) noted that these gangs – unlike many Central American and Jamaican gangs – did not have linkages to other gangs in the region or internationally. However, it was noted that the proportion of murders being committed by gang members over time is increasing in Trinidad and Tobago. Sadly, "suppressive and law enforcement strategies are given priority over preventative measures" in the country, which ensures that the problem of gang violence persists (Seepersad, 2015, 113).

Thus, there is a complex interplay between multiple factors related to the cause of violent crime. For some of the Trinidadian youth we interviewed, the offline violence they experience is also rooted in the neglect they have endured:

Tanisha: Um… well…well… to me I find violence to start from young right? Like it have children growing up and being neglected and growing up with a hatred and anger that could lead to violence and also violence does comes from ignorance. Like if somebody... supposed two people gambling and one take, win all the money… the next person that lost going to feel a type of way—fight start—violence comes up.

Trauma doesn't just affect children and youth. The impact of violence on parents and their capacity to parent cannot be ignored. Neglect can come from parents and other adults who themselves may be traumatized. It is crucial to recognize that when experiencing trauma, a parent's ability to play a stable role in the child's life and, therefore, support the child's resilience, may be compromised. Parents may be unable to protect their children and keep them safe, and parents themselves may be numbed, frightened, and depressed, unable to deal with their

own trauma and/or grief, and emotionally unavailable for their children (Osofsky & Osofsky, 2018).   Mary Moonan from Child Line explained:

> **MM:** there is the cry for help but… what is reflected in all this violence is really a breakdown in the family system, you know? We have seen a steady decline in the family system. We no longer have the background where in the good old days, if your parents were not there, you have the grandparents etc. Now grandparents are equally working um... you know and it's more and more the sort of single parenting family system. So when the parents are not there there's no one to supervise these children. So they are very much left to their very own fancies….
>
> …whatever they choose to do. And violence… it's almost uncontrolled because violence is very much embedded. Let's face it: even among the adults— the way we react, the way we drive, "get off my… lane, I need to overtake you because I can get there one minute before you can". So all of this is part of our culture. We really need to visit what are our value system and what are we passing on to our children. It's easy to blame the social media. Um… it is just a tool. Like so many tools. What is the value that we are passing on to our children… in the family and also even in the school system? You know I mean in the good old days one would have been horrified to think that this sort of school fighting actually takes place in the classroom. it's unheard of, but it is now the accepted norm. What has gone wrong?

One area of enquiry that has emerged from this pilot project is the impact trauma has on children and youth and whether the cognitive and emotional impairment that are created lead to a numbness to violence in both its physical and mediated forms that increase their tolerance to violent content and behaviors. Canadian researchers Kim Barthel and Dr. Lori Haskell have posited that early childhood trauma from neglect or abuse can affect brain chemistry, putting survivors in a constant state of hypervigilance e.g. "fight or flight" (Gleeson, 2018). In another study, it was found that childhood abuse actually "scars" one's DNA for life, and this damage can potentially be passed down to one's offspring (Roberts et al, 2018).

The interviews revealed a few themes that will be used to frame the rest of this discussion. It seems that the youths interviewed held contradictory emotions related to violent acts, used digital media to manage their online identity and that some forms of resistance to violence do exist.

iv. Youths' views on violence: Contradictory Emotions (Fear & Empathy)

All interviewees stated that violence was a societal problem that affected them personally. The youth participants clearly had spent time thinking about the violence in their lives and how it had affected themselves and others. They defined violence as physical, mental, emotional or verbal force or abuse; as something that could harm, damage or kill someone, or anything that hurt another person. Some described violence as linked to criminality, and others mentioned how violent acts could be linked to poverty. One respondent simply stated that it's "…what's happening in Trinidad and Tobago right now". Many youths did speak about how violence was a part of everyday life for them in Trinidad, and that is mirrored in online spaces.

> **Interviewer:** Okay. um… so when did you first start noticing violence on social media?

> **Analiesa**: Um… well you—certain things would happen in school and they would take it to Facebook. So it like that would reach far and then it would end up to the teachers. So it's like a kinda back and forth type of thing so… ya.

> **Interviewer**: Like your peers would um… videotape these things or?

> **Analiesa**: Hm.

The increasing mediation and digitalization of all dimensions of modern societies is changing the circuit of culture (Livingstone, 2015a). This can partly affect the variety of answers the youth provided us. Most of the respondents were accessing peer violence. But the online social activities they engage in and their responses to this content are heavily influenced by offline

social pressures. For some, family and other social group shaming influenced decisions to

associate with perpetrators, as reported by one respondent:

> **Interviewer:** Okay. So I would like to go back to ask you something on what you said. You said you was recorded. You saw the video online. I want to know the reaction you got from your friends from people you know. Like how you—tell me about that experience.
>
> **Hadiyah**: The reaction that I got from people…um…from family it was not a good one actually they were kinda angry at the fact that I was involved in something like that. And it was on YouTube and a lot of people was going to see it. Um… from my peers… at that time it was like ya… you know you in a video fight and something like that. Um…people around school… mixed reactions actually. Some people was just. I don't know… how to put it. It was like some people was like "hey that is the girl that was in the fight" or something like that. And others were hm kinda like "not me and she" kinda thing. Um…teachers… no they were kinda disappointed. Cause mainly because I was in school uniform. You know teachers and principals—and the principal would look at it as a big disappointment. I—I—Now I would look at it as—as a big disappointment. You know? Because I wouldn't want to be seen as that you know disgracing as I should say my school or something like that in such a horrible act.

Some respondents empathized with people affected by violence

> **Interviewer:** Or re-post. No you wouldn't? Okay. Um... so like is that like the only kind of violence you see? Or you see like I don't know abuse anything else pertaining to violence?
>
> **Analiesa:** Um… well there's um… like people who put statuses for other people and… it's just like okay…why? And like they would do it and tag the person. So everybody knows okay they're speaking about this person. They put um… their personal life online. So everybody— like if it's something that they don't want anybody to know, everybody's going to find out.
>
> **Interviewer:** Like personal problems…
>
> **Analiesa:** Yes.
>
> **Interviewer:** Ya. Okay. And how would you—how would you react to that like seeing something like that. You'd comment or Like it?
>
> **Analiesa:** Um…sometimes I'll comment and give my opinion. Because it's like not like they wouldn't want somebody to do that to them so why do it to somebody else? Even if

you guys were friend and you don't speak anymore that's between the both of you. Not everybody else.

Some respondents noted that they were afraid of being targeted for calling out perpetrators of online violence. Many were equally afraid of taping violence with the intent to report it to someone in authority. As one respondent stated "I love my life and next thing I record it and they see my name and they want to come back to attack me because maybe they was wrong".

For some youth who live in gang-controlled areas, the consequences for deviating from the group's social rule can be as serious as death:

Interviewer: Have you used your phone texting to report violence or to record violence with the intent to report it to show someone in authority?

SS: No! Well …in these kinds of places you can't do that!...you will get called an informer! You could die!

v. **Digital Cultural Identity: Managing Impressions in Coexisting Multiple Cultural Contexts**

In this theme, the team discerned a number of stories and experiences of youth that related to the use of violent digital material as relevant and repeated online activity. Posting or re-posting violent videos was seen as way to fit in, to find status and/or gain fame among the other youth. Many youth were thought to be engaging in viewing, posting or re-posting this material to gain a sense of belonging and status. The following quotes from youth speak to the need and process of fitting in and the ways in which violent material assists them:

"Everyday I get these videos, of course it is frequent"

"It's all about fame…To become popular through sharing violence"

This is a particularly interesting finding when placed alongside the fear that was detailed in the theme above. There is simultaneously a good deal of fear and empathy for violence and its victims. On one hand, there is a source of belonging in viewing and posting violence due to the potential of these acts bringing fame and status as other young people "like" the posts. The young people feel accepted and included and have a strong need to be on social media. However, these youths are quite literate and sophisticated about their digital footprint and the ways in which they groom and present their online selves. They understand that this kind of material leaves a lasting footprint that is quite negative. As a consequence, there is also a phenomenon of self-censorship, not sharing publicly nor reporting violent content for fear of retaliation by perpetrators and potential future impact of their digital footprint, in other words they are aware of their worth in a reputation economy.

> **Interviewer:** …what is your main concern then in being viewed in a fight like that. Say perhaps you were in the room. And you said that you didn't—weren't comfortable in being videotaped.
>
> **Nathaniel:** Right.
>
> **Interviewer:** If you happened to be there. So what was your main concern with that being posted on social media for you.
>
> **Nathaniel:** Hm. Right, right. Cause when I go to look for a job, I know the employers would go and search your Facebook name and—and if—if they tag you in the video… If the person who upload the video tags you in it…
>
> **Interviewer:** Hm…
>
> **Nathaniel:** And they and the um… the employer who was trying—who you're trying to get a job from they would see it and they would see that you were in a fight, you were in a fight video... and that could really set you off from your future plans.

These paradoxes suggest that the way youth from Trinidad negotiate the different emotions they express towards violence relates to how aware the participants are of the power of their online identity in a reputation economy:

> **Hadiyah:** What happened? I—I felt bad. Mostly—sorry. I felt bad mostly because of what people were saying with oh your parents didn't raise them right. Because like I said before: my parents didn't raise me like that. It's mostly the bad company, the people who I hang out with. They were the people who influence…

These youths are using social media as a communication tool that is used to craft and distribute a representation of themselves that can be used in professional contexts:

> **Nathaniel**: Cause when I go to look for a job, I know the employers would go and search your Facebook name and—and if—if they tag you in the video… If the person who upload the video tags you in it…and the employer who was trying - who you're trying to get a job from, they would see it and they would see that you were in a fight, you were in a fight video…and that could really set you off from your future plans.

These youths are very aware of the power of their online biography both in the context of school and gang violence in their community and the job market. The coexistence of many social contexts can explain some of the self-censure discussed. Some of the youths use social media narratives as tools of impression management and design their online messages and posts in ways that can give a positive impression to coexisting online audiences.

Some of these youths have mastered the importance of crafting their social media identity as a performance. A few interviews suggest that some use their Facebook public page for "on stage" social interactions that can satisfy the convention of professional cultural contexts, while private messaging is for the backstage communication that may be in contradiction with other sets of coexisting social values. When these messages do not correspond with the values of the dominant adult cultures and they know adults will take offence, they move their messages to more private channels, such as via messaging in order to keep the material hidden.

Digital natives of Trinidad seem to use social media as a professional self-branding tool. Respondents showed a sophisticated understanding of the importance of their digital identity. How Trinidadian youth construct identities, find shared concerns and express voice through their responses to media does not reinforce top-down social control but lateral participatory culture social control. They show some of the characteristics attributed to publics within the virtual public sphere: thoughtful and reflexive about the collective consequences of media engagement (Livingston, 2015b). In keeping with the findings of previous European research (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013), the young people in this study were found to be primarily engaged with social networking sites and instant messaging tools to maintain contact, develop relationships and communicate with friends and family.

vi. Impression Management and Resistance to Violence

We did notice older youths appear to have gained a much deeper understanding of the increasing complexity of their online social and emotional lives that seem to refocus the use of social media towards impression management. Their changing orientation to social networking online (and offline) appears to be shaped by their changing peer and parental relations and has implications for their perceptions of risk of harm (Livingstone, 2014).

Some participants spoke about the necessity of sharing violent content as an educational tool but also to inform/warn their peers about what was happening in the country. Others felt that there should be a suppression of online violent content.

> **Interviewer:** What do you think about really the amount of violence that is prominent right now on social media?
>
> **Jonathan:** Um... It is what is is. We can't hide from it because at the end of the day social media rules the world.

Interviewer: Okay. Um... does it—do you think it really has an affect on our daily lives? On your daily lives? Maybe your children's daily lives? Do you think it has an affect on them?

Jonathan: Um…ya. To some level because it's what they see it is what will happen. Because they will be thinking about it more than anything else.

Interviewer: And do you think there is anything we can do to kinda control the level of violence on these social media sites on these apps that people see. What do you think can be done for that?

Jonathan: Um... I think the best way to deal with that is with the people that are on Facebook...if I happen to see a video that's violent I can report it. As well as other people can report it. Thereby, I think Facebook knowing about this is inappropriate for the viewers. And well obviously people wouldn't do that because they still want to see what is going on."

While some youth are using and posting digital violence to fit into the youth culture, others want to avoid online violence altogether. They break away from the pack, and steer clear of situations where they might inadvertently be caught on video watching a fight or crime scene. Some have chosen to turn off social media in order to no longer participate to the mediated violent culture and focus their time on other activities.

Interviewer: So how come you deactivated your Facebook account?

Analiesa: Well… Facebook to me now is—it don't really make any sense. Um…it takes up a lot of time, and I just need to focus more, so getting rid of it is actually a big step in focusing."

3. Conclusion - Evaluation

Social Media Potentials

The youths interviewed made it clear that the violence in their lives has reached chronic levels.

The research team feels that social media could facilitate new possibilities for interaction and communication (Davis et al, 2015) to help these youths build communal resilience. As grief counsellor Eliza Henry-Jones explains:

> …social media can provide us with a unique opportunity to create a narrative; to tell our stories. And this is vital, when so much of trauma recovery comes back to stories – the stories we tell of our past, our communities and ourselves. Trauma recovery is about the stories we construct about what we've experienced and the stories we construct about our future, which may have been suddenly and irrevocably altered. It's about reconstructing our worlds to accommodate what we've been through. And finding others who are, perhaps, going through something similar" (Henry-Jones, 2017).

With appropriate leadership, social media can provide alternative social narratives that express solidarity, peer support and calming explanations in times of crisis. Norwegians used Twitter as a mental health crisis communication tool during terrorist attacks (Eriksson, 2015). Americans have used Twitter to address trauma among gang-involved youth (Patton et al, 2017), and collective coping strategies facilitated by Facebook have been adopted in the Philippines (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2017). The use of social media as a tool for social groups to narrate cultural trauma as well as to verify facts around traumatic events (Ushiyama, 2018) are example of participatory mental health peer to peer support to deal with traumatizing events. These exemplify how participatory culture can be levied to help children, youth and adults move towards healing of trauma. Some initiatives already are in place in Trinidad that attempt to address violent culture, and should use these existing social structures.

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