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#Gaslighting

Karissa Moody
Regis University, kmoody001@regis.edu

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KARISSA MOODY

Department of Couple and Family Therapy, Division of Counseling and Family Therapy, Rueckert-Hartman College of Health Professions, Regis University, Thornton, CO

As the utilization of social media continues to integrate itself into domains of culture, livelihood, and worldviews, the following exposition aims to introduce how such integration may pose as a new realm of gaslighting that has yet to be discussed. The progressive conceptualization of gaslighting as a form of manipulation will aid in providing readers with an understanding of this idea through a systemic lens by first, explaining underlying reasons for manipulation as an all-inclusive concept. The value of explication will serve in identifying plausible reasons of manipulation which pertain to the concept of gaslighting within social media. Within this perspective, the features which define social media as a virtual form of connection are presented to exhibit how different elements of online communication support the multifaceted presence of gaslighting seen within social media. Such information allows for deeper exploration in demonstrating how the impacts of social media, which perpetuate gaslighting, propose relational implications for aspects of perception, connection, and validation. By developing this contemporary perspective on gaslighting, there is hope to inspire further consciousness, awareness, and recognition associated with the perceptions of self, others, and relationships with others that are influenced by aspects of social media and permit for the manipulation of reality. In doing so, the chance to enlighten others may provide new opportunities in contemplation when deliberating the inherent nature of face-to-face connections which excel in authenticity, validation, and appreciation, to the inner world of social media which warrants for gaslighting.

KEYWORDS: family therapy, gaslighting, gratification, manipulation, perception, social media, validation

Online Gaslighting

More and more, the term 'gaslighting' is seen sparking conversation as it has unveiled a topic that sadly, so many can relate to. As somebody who has experienced first-hand what it is like to be gaslighted, I can say that my ability to recognize manipulation was only made possible when I began to understand the reasons for manipulation in the first place. During this process, I began to question where else this type of manipulation exists in culture and why it continues to be so easily disguised. Then as I opened up Instagram, scrolling through the assortment of posts that filled my personal feed, I had a 'gaslight' epiphany. I began to realize the powerful nature of social media that continually influences perceptions of reality and how I had become a casualty in the pool of online gaslighting. In writing this, my hopes are to enhance awareness, to allow for normalization, and to create additional space in the ongoing conversation about gaslighting to further consider social media.

Influential Power of Social Media

The modern "world" of social media is fascinating as it presents with great complexity when considering how it is regarded by the larger population and how it is used by its consumers. The initial development of social media as a platform for communication and information has radically transformed into becoming one of the most prominent domains regarded for its influential

power (Westaby, 2012). A study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2016) indicated that eighty percent of all internet users in the United States currently use Facebook as a social media platform. On a global scale, a recent press release from Facebook (2019) reported that there are approximately 2.41 billion active Facebook users worldwide, representing about one third of the world's population. These statistics are substantial as they resemble macro-level trends of Facebook as a single entity. The relationship between the growing accessibility to technology and global perceptions specific to Facebook as an established medium for information, communication, and networking echoes greater meaning when considering the expansive range of other social media platforms which have also been successful in perpetuating similar results.

Acknowledging the expansive nature of social media, whether it be Facebook or any other leading competitor, is to identify an overarching disposition of inclusion which continues to reinforce the preservation of such a global market. The perception of being involved, included, and informed about *whatever, whenever* provides a great sense of empowerment to the individual consumer as they are granted the virtual ability to "socially" engage how they want, with whomever they chose, at any given time. When considering the level of empowerment that this may serve for those who habitually utilize social media, there becomes implicit concerns as it relates to the manipulation of different social behaviors and impacts thereof.

Social Behaviors and Manipulation Within Social Media

To understand the social behaviors which may permit for manipulation within social media, I began to explore different reasons for sharing online. Some of the most prominent factors are as follows: to promote a specific cause or issue of personal interest, to share valuable or entertaining content, to nourish relationships with others, to gain self-fulfillment, and as means to foster, elicit, or define one's identity (Seidman, 2013; Carr & Hays, 2015; Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Based off this information, I then attempted to deconstruct the underlying meanings of such factors to acknowledge their importance as it pertains to manipulation.

Verbiage used to describe the motivational factors, such as to "promote", "nourish", "gain", "foster", "elicit", "define", and to "share" all indicate components of intentionality that may nurture internal desires or yearnings. In the context of sharing information, each word may also indicate an intention meant to express a specific perception, identity, belief, or value that contribute to the experience of self. From this deconstructed view, I questioned whether such motivating factors resemble a broader theme of self-endorsement; if sharing information is driven by the perceptions of self in relation to others, what are the implications that this may have for negating a manipulated reality consistent with one's intentions to be seen by, or interact with others in a particular way? Though this question may not be generalizable to all social media users, this deconstructed perspective will serve as useful when considering the presence of gaslighting in social media moving forward.

Intertwined Perceptions of Self

Within this view, I also considered the internal perspective of self as this is what initially influences the perceptions of self in relation to others (Deetz, 1973). On social media, there is the ability to customize one's profile which is intended to promote individualization and self-expression. Yet, when one's identity becomes intertwined with perceptions of self in relation to others, there may be potential risk in fostering an image or representation which caters to an

internal, *desired* perspective of self. One study found that those with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to have a more "elaborate and riskier" presence online meaning that they were more likely to share a greater amount of personal information and appeared as socially involved through pictures, groups, and number of friends (Krämer & Winter, 2008, p. 114). Given the increased level of control that one has over self-presentation online versus face-to-face interactions, self-efficacy is an interesting factor to consider as other aspects of oneself may be more consciously shaped through social media as well. Therefore, it seems possible that, in the attempts to communicate a desired representation of self, the individual possesses a power of choice in being able to mold or manipulate their online presence in order to seen by others through a specific, desired lens.

The presence of an online interface may then act as a mechanism which dilutes the organic process of connecting as individuals lean on aspects of social media that tend to induce feelings of gratification rather than that of validation. The fundamental components which make social media *social* allow for individuals to post online knowing that what they share may be reacted to, engaged with, or further shared by others. Under such premises, there is a tendency to evaluate impressionability or influence by the amount of *likes* or reactions that a specific post may receive (Guadagno, Muscanell, Rice, & Roberts, 2013). Within this perspective, the reasons for seeking out gratification and obtaining gratification may come from perceived impressionability or influence (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Research has also shown that there are various avenues of gratification both sought out for and obtained through social media (Kircaburun, Alhabash, Tosuntaş, & Graffiths, 2018), pointing to a saturation of potential issues which may result if gratification becomes an alternative to validation. This poses concern as the decisions made in networking, sharing information, or self-image may become convoluted by gratification, consequently placing the presence of authenticity and validation into question. With an innate desire for belongingness, we can be susceptible to conformity within the realm of social media if the power of gratification mistakenly continues to replace the meaning of validation.

Gratification Disguised as Validation

The temptation to conform for reasons of social value, acceptance, or status indicates how the desire for validation contends with gratification in the context of social media. While validation is the experience of being seen, heard, and understood in the authentic presence of another person, gratification is pleasure that comes from the satisfaction of a specific desire (Satir, 1964; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Comparatively, gratification is an experience that is much more attainable online as it is derived from personal desire and can be experienced in isolation, yet the universal yearning for validation is commonly sought after through social media (Guadagno et al., 2013). Again, the relationship that we have with social media must be evaluated as gratification continues to disguise itself as validation and in turn, mystifies the authenticity of experience.

R. D. Laing (1965) conceptualizes mystification as dynamic in nature, consequently functioning to corrupt the validation of another's experience and shadows the authenticity of connection. The contemporary term for mystification, known as gaslighting, is defined as a form of psychological manipulation that impedes the self-perceptions, worth, or identity of another for the purpose of sustaining power within a relationship (Stern, 2007). When conceptualizing the relevancy between these two terms as it pertains to shadowing authenticity and corrupting the validation of one's experience, it starts to become clear how social media can create endless opportunities for gaslighting to exist!

Manipulated Views of Reality

In the presence gaslighting, perception is dictated by one's desires or motives through means of manipulation and restriction of another's experience (Stern, 2007). Through the continuation of prioritized motives or desires to be seen by others in a preferable manner, the goal of the person in control is to delegate another's experiences so that power, status, or reputation are maintained. On social media, the ability to gaslight others increases dramatically as people attempt to create manipulated views of their own reality. Whether it be to portray a desired perspective of self, obtain or seek out gratification, or the underlying need for validation, gaslighting functions to manipulate a view of reality in order to meet such objectives. Have you ever found yourself trying to "read between the lines" of somebody else's post, wondering what the intention *truly* is? Or, if you have reflected on some of your own motivations behind sharing online, have you wondered what it was that you were *truly* trying share with others? If you answered yes to either of these questions, you are not alone in having such thoughts. The aspects of social media that feed off of gratification provide the ideal environment for duality between being gaslighted, which questions our own perceptions of reality, and the act of gaslighting itself which comes from personal desires to be seen in a preferable manner. Of the aspects which permit for gaslighting, I believe that photography is worth further attention as it presents unique implications for non-verbal and verbal means of online manipulation.

The phrase, "a picture can say a thousand words" commonly refers to the endless amount of interpretations that can be made from one picture alone. In this way, photos can provide opportunities to intimately express, evaluate, and interpret worldviews through artistic means. The relationship between social media and photography has revolutionized an aspect of gaslighting in different ways, including how consumers and social media platforms decide to utilize this feature.

The use of imagery on social media has become an effective business tool for marketing as it plays off of the fact that 90% of the information we process is visual (Hyerle, 2000). For this reason, photos increase the ability to persuade and influence consumers through ways of endorsement, support, or advocacy. Even more so, companies have begun to pay those considered as "social media influencers" to advertise their products as the level of established credibility and substantial number of followers that these influencers have assists in the increased likelihood of further endorsement (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). This piece alone is alarming when recalling the elements of persuasion and influence which define gaslighting.

As consumers of social media, not only is there the possibility to be gaslighted in terms of marketing, there is the possibility of being gaslighted by one's personal social network as well. To understand this idea in greater depth, it is important to remember the implications of gratification which contend with validation and instead, cultivate satisfaction in personal desires. Think about some of the pictures that you most commonly see being posted online and reasons therefore: birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, professional accomplishments, personal achievements, grieving the loss of a loved one, introducing a new addition to one's family, crisis or disaster, "selfies", travel, friendship, celebration and so forth. What many of the aforementioned reasons share in common is the urge for connection. Whether it be a positive or negatively perceived event, there is the desire to share specific moments with others as means to connect or to communicate (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011). However, the normalcy and gratification that may attributed to sharing one's experiences with others has begun to change the application and rationalization of using photographs overall.

While visual content may be used to communicate with others through self-expression, symbolism, and the subjectivity of experience, photos can become a major source of manipulation that alters the perceptions of another's reality. In addition to the tools that can be used to edit or filter pictures themselves, there are ways that photography may be used in portraying certain, desired perceptions (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012). Online, there may be somebody who chooses to share a picture of their most recent family gathering, yet in reality this same person experiences contention, distance, and animosity within their family system. Though what this person experiences in reality is much different, the underlying reason for sharing a family photo could be an attempt to portray one's desired perspective of self, to obtain or seek out gratification, or possibly, to communicate a masked need for validation. Here, the manipulation of photos to be perceived in a specific way resembles the incongruence that is created through gaslighting as others are made to believe the perceptions of one's reality in order to seen in a preferable manner.

This incongruence seen in photos further reflects how the decision-making process within the choice to share certain photographs may become tailored by the inner constructs of social media which ultimately urge people to be seen in a preferable manner. On a deeper level, the constructs of social media which instigate preference may also enhance one's temptation to conform when it concerns different cultural beliefs deemed as important, such as the value of family. Though more research is necessary in order to fully support the underlying reasons for using photography on social media, I believe that these explanations provide plausibility and can help to enrich further speculation when considering the variety of justifications that may exist for such gaslighting.

Blurred Lines of Connection

In its primal development, social media was intended to provide platforms which create, instill, and prolong connections. However, when aspects of business begin to intersect with innate qualities of connection, the lines of authenticity and validation become blurred. Detached from the consequences that this may have on our abilities to nurture genuine connection, social media platforms have fabricated conditions which permit manipulation to circulate through ways of altering perceptions while exploiting the awarding effects of gratification.

Gaslighting in the context of social media is paramount to those who choose to use social media in hopes to cultivate connection and appreciation as its presence may be robust, yet shrewdly disguised. From a spectator's point of view, there will never be an ability to fully grasp what the true value is behind another's intentions or motivations online as the deepest meanings of behavior can only be explained by the individual on the other side of the screen. Thus, in accepting the implications that this may have on the perspective of self, one's relationships with others, and one's perception of reality, it is equally a choice and a risk when subscribing to social media.

With the progressing amount of attention given to gaslighting seen in culture, in relationships, and in our daily lives, social media is an aspect that only builds upon what is already being accounted for. As the rate of social media consumers continues to increase, it is essential to bring awareness to the ways in which gaslighting exists, how it continues to persist, and the potential impacts that this may have on the power of influence. Within the power of influence, one must then consider how the perceptions of self, self in relation to others, and relationships with others may be persuaded by conditions of gratification, preference, and conformity.

Acknowledging the Importance of Face-to-Face Connection

In relationships, the willingness to seek out connection is an act of compassion, vulnerability, and courage. In a culture filled with high levels of isolation and relentless, unapologetic misinterpretations, social media deceitfully instills such hopes for validation and connection. With this information, I hope to inspire consciousness in others to see the faults of social media which gaslight us into believing that somebody else may be more attractive, successful, or more valuable than we are. By gaining more consciousness around this issue, there is the possibility to inspire change in the perceptions of social media and how consumers choose to use it moving forward. With such consciousness, there is also the necessity to recognize how social media influences worldviews of reality and the ways in which we relate with one another as we have become so heavily dependent on its connective properties.

By obstructing the opportunities and motivation to foster connections in real life, there has become a culture of disconnect where the attempts to make conversation with others in places like coffee shops or supermarkets are found to be anxiety-provoking, intrusive, or daunting. Recognizing the purpose of social media and why we choose to endorse it provides room for positive growth in our abilities to look beyond what can be accomplished online and into acknowledging the importance of face-to-face human connection. In closing, it is important to remember that the real-life relationships we choose to create and those that we already have with others, hold such greater worth as they provide us with the utmost experiences of validation, authenticity, and appreciation that social media will never be able to truly fulfill.

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