

The Impact of Social Media on Gender Inequality

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ABSTRACT

With the development of information communication technology (ICT), social media has experienced a dramatically increasing use in recent years. There are many arguments on social media claiming women contribute less than men in the workplace, or it is a bad thing for women to be educated well. Thus, it is necessary to explore the impact of social media on gender inequality. This essay aims to explore the impact of social media on gender inequality in both national and individual dimensions by reviewing the literature. There are three guidelines for this review essay while reviewing the literature: the development of social media, the importance of gender inequality, and the impact of social media on gender inequality. Based on the literature review, this essay finds that women are less likely to take part in political activities due to gender discrimination, no matter through social media or other types of media. Such a result indicates the negative impact of social media on gender inequality in the dimension of politics and nationality. In terms of the individual level, this review essay finds that the contents of social media can influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors related to gender. Underpinned by the impact of gender stereotype opinions in social media, individuals would gradually change their own perceptions and behaviors related to gender issues. The limitations of this literature review essay have been concluded as well. One limitation is that this literature review fails to apply a meta-analytical or systematic method to analyze literature, leading to the ignorance of statistical data. The other limitation involves the impact of social media, which is divided into national dimension and individual dimension rather than positive and negative influences, which may cause some problems in clarifying the impacts of social media. These two limitations of this review essay indicate the future direction of conducting research to explore the impact of social media on gender inequality further.

Keywords: Social media, Impact of social media, Gender inequality.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of information communication technology, social media, a way of information transmission, has experienced a dramatically increasing use in recent years [1]. The youth is one of the groups who regard social media as a way of living and a way of organizing personal activities [2]. There are many arguments on social media claiming women contribute less than men in the workplace, or it is a bad thing for women to be educated well. Thus, it is necessary to conduct research to explore the impact of social media on gender inequality.

Social media is defined as online platforms which provide users to create and share their opinions with their friends or other individuals through pictures, videos or texts, including Wechat, Weibo, and Tik Tok [3]. It plays a more and more critical role in our world today, and the

number of its users has been increasing rapidly in recent years [4]. It even becomes a daily routine for many individuals who might spend most of their time a day using those social media apps [4].

Due to the importance of social media, it is necessary to explore the impact of social media on other aspects of our society, such as gender inequality. Several researchers have identified the impact of social media on gender inequality in their empirical research essays. Some of them concentrated on the academic field of such an impact. For instance, Rosa, et al. paid attention to the phenomena of gender inequality in EU universities [5]. In the same vein, Casad, et al. narrowed down the idea of Rosa, et al. and conducted a study to illustrate the problems and solutions for gender inequality in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects [5,6].

This essay aims to explore the impact of social media

on gender inequality through a literature review. This essay is divided into five sections. The first section is an introduction, providing the context and background information of this review essay. Secondly, the development of social media is demonstrated from a historical perspective. In the third section of this essay, the importance of gender inequality is illustrated through the analysis of literature. The impact of social media on gender inequality is critically analyzed and illustrated in the fourth section. Finally, the conclusion is in the final section.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

This section aims to articulate the development of social media from a historical perspective. After clarifying the definition of social media, the development of social media, as well as its impact on social behaviors and perceptions, is articulated in chronological order.

As mentioned in previous section, social media can be regarded as online platforms that can provide its users with opportunities to share their daily life [3]. Other researchers provided a more detailed definition of the term social media. For instance, Carr and Hayes defined social media as the following [7]:

Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others [7].

The definition of social media from Carr and Hayes is selected from several different definitions due to its advantage, which is articulating and clarifying the key elements of social media and its subsections [7].

In the late 1990s, the origin of social media is linked to the development of technology and information technological communication, as well as the theoretical development of communication theory and practical development of these two things [7, 8]. In the dimension of practical development, electronic devices, especially the appearance of personal electronic devices, such as personal laptops, iPad, iPhones and iWatch, have increased rapidly in recent years [9]. The way of social interaction and the way of social communication have been influenced by the appearance of personal electronic devices mentioned before. As Marwick and Boyd mentioned, the way of communication has been changed online and socialized by this development [10]. Social media apps, such as Twitter and Facebook, show their impact on our society through their influences on individuals. Individuals, or in other words, audiences, are able to communicate with key opinion leaders through social media apps directly and show their influence on others through messages or follow- unfollow behaviors [10]. In the dimension of theoretical development, the

building of theories also shows their impact on the development of social media [7].

By the late 2000s, the application of social media had been widespread, and the functions of social media apps had been innovated [8]. According to Ortutay, there have been one billion users worldwide in the social media app Facebook, which is a huge number compared to the total population of the whole world [11]. In the same vein, another social media app, Twitter had announced that the number of its users was 517 million, and showed its influence on detecting the public health trends [12].

Nowadays, there are many studies presented on the development of social students' usage of social media and its impact on their perceptions and social behaviors, as well as the positive and negative impacts and factors that influence their perceptions and behaviors [13-15]. Chukwuere and Chukwuere conducted a quantitative study and measured the impact of social media on social lifestyle, indicating the impact of social media on social behavior [15]. Except for social behavior, social media can also influence students' perceptions [16]. Previous literature has shown the impact of social media, especially on students' behaviors and perceptions. Thus, it is essential to take into account these two aspects while measuring the impact of social media on gender inequality.

There are some similarities, as well as some differences, between traditional media and social media. Similar to traditional media, social media pays much attention to appearance. Such an appearance-focused dimension can be reflected in users' actions, such as focusing on the attractive and good body image on both traditional and social media platforms [17]. As a new invention, social media is different from traditional media in several aspects. The most significant difference could be the role that users played in the process of using media platforms. Users, or in others words, audiences, can only passively accept the information provided by traditional media platforms, whereas they could share their own standpoints with others in social media [18]. Above all, the critical role that users played in media has been enhanced due to the development of social media. Thus, it is necessary to explore the impact of social media on gender inequality.

3. IMPORTANCE OF GENDER INEQUALITY

Gender inequality is a significant issue that has been discussed by many studies, including political issues in our society, and other issues in the field of academic and individual issues in our daily life [14, 19-21]. The importance of gender inequality has been analyzed from previous literature in three dimensions, which are the political dimension, academic dimension and individual dimension.

In the dimension of political issues in our society, gender issues are significant topics of political democracy and political engagement, especially in the twentieth century [22]. The importance of women and their rights had not been realized until the 1960s and early 1970s, when the economic growth and live conditions relied much on the status of women due to the second world war [22]. Compared to the key contributions of women in economics, their rights to vote and other aspects of political issues were ignored and limited by governments in different countries. Thus, numerous movements were held to strive for women's political, economic and social rights in order to reduce gender inequalities during the 1980s and 1990s [23]. Unfortunately, albeit the representation of women in political engagement has arisen due to the legislation of women's rights in many countries in recent years, their engagement in political affairs and issues is still much less than men, even in high-income countries [22].

Although the outcome of the women's rights movements was not as good as expected, those actions have raised peoples' awareness of women's rights in the field of academics. It has been proved that there is gender inequality in the academic field, especially in the subject of STEM [6]. In the same vein, gender inequality has become an essential issue in EU universities [5]. Researchers have conducted several studies to prove that the promotion and the support of female academics were not progressing "at the same rate" as their male colleagues, indicating gender inequality in higher education institutions [5]. Meanwhile, females tend to have fewer opportunities to be hired by academic institutions than men. Even though those women academics were hired by universities, they were paid less than their male colleagues [5]. Those implicit discriminations against women in the academic field have led to the decrease in females' willingness to continue their careers in the field of academics and even caused the premature leave of well-qualified female researchers [5]. Thus, it is significant to explore gender issues in-depth and find a way to solve problems associated with gender inequalities.

When it comes to the dimension of individual, gender inequality is not unnormal in the daily life and workplaces of individuals. In terms of daily life, gender issues show their impact on their interactions with peoples' perceptions and behaviors. According to Lorber, gender is constructed by social interactions and cultures in society, including gender signs and gender signals [24]. Meanwhile, the social interactions, individual behaviors and perceptions are also underpinned by the construction of gender issues and media [24]. In other words, the gender divisions in our daily lives, such as the notion that girls should wear clothes in pink whereas boys in blue, are determined by society and media rather than by nature [25]. Blue color can be regarded as a more powerful color than pink, which is suitable for

"powerful" boys. In contrast, pink color can be regarded as a softer color than blue, which are usually wore by girls in order to show their meekness. Such a regulation of clothes colors can be regarded as an indication of gender inequality in daily life, because most cultures and societies believe that the blue color is stronger than the pink color [26]. In terms of workplaces, the gender inequality can be reflected in a less rate of getting a job, getting promoted or occupying a leadership position for female individuals than male ones, which may cause a poorer working and living conditions, as well as gender inequality issues, of women [27]. In addition, individuals, especially female ones, would suffer from gender inequality, gender discrimination or sexual harassment in their workplaces, indicating gender inequality in workplaces [28].

These pieces of evidence listed in this section indicate that gender inequality is a critical issue in our society. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the topics of gender inequality in detail and clarify the impact of social media on gender inequality.

4. IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON GENDER INEQUALITY

There are pieces of evidence that can illustrate the relationship between gender inequality and social media. In order to explore and clarify the impact of social media on gender inequality, this essay has analyzed previous studies and concluded two aspects of the influence of social media on gender inequality. One is the national aspect that involves political and economic issues. The other is the individual aspect that involves individual perceptions and behaviors.

Ahmed and Madrid-Morales have proved the impact of social media on gender inequality in the field of political engagement [21]. UgurCinar articulated the impact of social media on gender inequality through the analysis of media images of First Lady [29]. In traditional media, First Lady is mainly regarded as the appendage of her husband [29]. Meanwhile, her domestic features or images have been emphasized [29]. The meaning of the First Ladies' life has been shaped and constructed by traditional media, such as newspapers, as sacrificing all their lives to their husband and kids, indicating a subordinate position of women and a dominant role of men at the national level [29]. Similar to the impact of traditional media on gender issues, social media shows its impact on gender inequality as well. In their mixed-method research, Vashistha, et al. identified that female individuals in India and Pakistan seldom participated in political activities on social media [30]. Such a low rate of political activity participation was not linked to the lack of political awareness but the low systemic discrimination of women in these two countries [30]. In the same vein, Ahmed and Madrid-Morales demonstrated the impact of social media on gender

inequality in terms of political engagement [21]. By comparing three different countries, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, Ahmed and Madrid-Morales concluded that there was gender inequality in the political engagement through social media [21]. Meanwhile, the gender difference also played a significant role in online political engagement among the well-educated and less-educated groups. Accordingly, the gender inequality issue at the national level is still a common problem in many countries [31]. Thus, actions should be taken by governments to improve the political participation of female individuals and reduce the gender inequality in the national level [30].

The impact of social media on gender inequality is reflected in the perceptions and behaviors of individuals. Trolan has demonstrated the impact of media on gender inequality within sports [14]. From the perspective of Trolan, gender inequality has existed for a long time and will still exist in the future unless media and media platforms pay more attention to the description of female athletes and the issues of gender inequality [14]. In the same vein, Miller, et al. have articulated the change in our abilities to identify the gender differences and social stereotypes brought by social media [32]. From the perspective of Nova, et al., Bangladeshi individuals are easily to be harmed by gender discrimination comments on social media, especially when those anonymous comments [33]. Anonymous and semi-anonymous users tend to be more aggressive and less responsible for their comments or arguments than those whose names are not [33]. The reasons why anonymous and semi-anonymous users are less likely to take up their responsibilities is that anonymity means comments are untraceable [34]. Therefore, the anonymity of social media can negatively impact our society and increase the negative behaviors of expressing gender inequality arguments.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this essay analyzed the development of social media, as well as the difference between social media and traditional media. After illustrating these two important things from a historical perspective, this essay articulates the importance of gender issues in two dimensions, which are the national or social dimension and the individual dimension. Finally, the literature review discusses the impact of social media on gender inequality through these two dimensions as well. This review essay concludes that the impact of social media on gender inequality at the national level is mainly related to political engagement. According to the review result, this essay finds that women are less likely to take part in political activities due to gender discrimination, no matter through social media or other types of media. Such a result indicates the negative impact of social media on gender inequality in the dimension of politics and nationality. In terms of the individual level, this

review essay finds that the contents of social media can influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors related to gender. Underpinned by the impact of gender stereotype opinions in social media, individuals would gradually change their own perceptions and behaviors related to gender issues.

Although this literature review essay contributes to the impact of social media on gender inequality, there could be some limitations of this literature review. Firstly, this literature review fails to apply a meta-analytical or systematic method to analyze literature, leading to the ignorance of statistical data. The other limitation involves the impact of social media, which is divided into national dimension and individual dimension rather than positive and negative influences, which may cause some problems in clarifying the impacts of social media. Therefore, several further studies could concentrate on these two aspects and contribute to this research topic in depth.

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