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Single Stories in the Media Landscape: The Layered Impacts of Media Narratives on Women's Self-Perception and Africa's Global Image

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Abstract. In today's media context, narratives have a substantial impact on both individual and collective identities. This paper examines the multiple influences of "single stories"—reductive and stereotyping narratives—through two parallel case studies: the construction of femininity via social media, and the representation of Africa in Western media. Drawing on Stuart Hall's representation theory, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, and Teun A. van Dijk's discourse analysis, this study argues that the media world does not merely produce one single dominant story, but likely constructs several overlapping single stories that intersect in complicated ways and create multiple impacts. The first case study examines how layered ideals of beauty across social media platforms have created a limited aesthetic regime for women and contributed to women's body image concerns. The second case study discusses the long-standing single narrative of Africa which continues to shape a reductive narrative of a continent on the global stage. A comparative analysis emphasizes the dual role of media as a site of constraint and resistance and note that even counter-narratives may solidify into new stereotypes if still ignoring the internal complexity. By introducing the concept of "layered single narrative", this study provides a more refined framework for understanding how media narratives accumulate, interact, and exert influence at multiple levels.

Keywords: Single story, social media, representation, femininity, Africa

1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media has deeply integrated into daily life, becoming a core domain that shapes cognition, identity, and cultural understanding [1]. On these platforms, narrative —a specific way of portraying people, places, and events—holds tremendous constructive power. Among them, the "single narrative" phenomenon is particularly prominent, where complex individuals or groups are reduced to a single image through simplistic and stereotypical narratives [2]. From the uniform female aesthetic standards worldwide to the fixed descriptions of "poverty and instability" on the African continent, single narratives have been widely spread through media. However, the contemporary social media environment presents a more complex phenomenon of "layered single narratives". New narratives do not always replace the old ones; instead, they often overlap with the

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old narratives, forming a cumulative narrative structure. This phenomenon brings complex psychological and social impacts, which shapes individual self-identity and aesthetic pressure while influences the establishment of a global image of certain regions. Therefore, exploring the hierarchical influence of single narratives constructed by media has important practical and theoretical significance.

This study explores how layered single stories function in different media contexts, influencing perceptions of gender and race. Using two case studies, one centered on the construction of femininity through beauty ideals on social media, and the other focused on representations of Africa in Western media, this paper aims to assess how these multiple, overlapping single stories shape an accumulative psychocultural influence. This analysis will illustrate that while the gendered and racialized narratives are using similar means of reductive simplification, these portrayals have different effects: in the first, only limit women to see themselves in a particular way at an individual level; the second, reassert structural inequalities and reflect stereotypical group identities at a socio-political level. Ultimately, this study demonstrates media as both a site of containment and a site of resistance, while also indicating counter-narratives can become re-constructed stereotypes through the failure to account for internal difference.

2. Literature review

Nowadays, the pervasiveness of media has been greatly discussed by scholars. As Deuze emphasized in his work, people are "living in media". That is, media is more than external tools that people use, rather integral in everyone's life, which is constantly shaping individual behavior and perception, social interaction, and cultural understanding in subtle but also significant ways [1]. Studies increasingly emphasize that artificial intelligence and social media are no longer merely reflecting or disseminating existing aesthetic standards, but rather systematically "creating" and "standardizing" a completely new, global digital aesthetic [3]. To understand how media involve in the process of shaping experience and recognition, the studies of representation and narratives in earlier media forms provide a crucial theoretical foundation. As Stuart Hall theorized, meaning is constructed through system of representation, where mass media actively produce, circulate, and negotiate social norms [4]. Representation is thus a central mechanism through which perceptions of reality, identity, and culture are mediated and reinforced.

Building on this, the concept of "dominant narrative", or "single story", has been widely discussed. Just as Adichie criticized in one of her speech, single story, as a kind of reductive portrayals of individuals and communities, often simplify complex realities and perpetuate stereotypes. She pointed out if people attempt to understand an individual, a nation, or a culture solely from a single perspective and through a single narrative, people are likely to form stereotypes. Such stereotypes are not merely one - sided but also perilous [2]. Furthermore, van Dijk's work provides the theoretical foundation of understanding that the dominant narratives are often naturalized and accepted as truth by both media producers and audiences [5]. These studies collectively provide the theoretical lens for examining how media can reproduce, challenge, or complicate simplified representations of people, places, and identities.

While the "single story" concept has a wide applicability, its influences are particularly evident in gendered media narratives. In terms of gender, Butler's famous theory of gender performativity demonstrates how repeated cultural narratives produce and reinforce norms of femininity [6]. Gill builds on this argument through noting that digital media is promoting self-surveillance and aspirational self-presentation, which in turn exacerbate body image concerns, self-objectification, and anxiety [7]. Together, these frameworks provide critical insight into how repeated portrayals of

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femininity on social media shape female's self-perception, guiding both behavior and self-evaluation with the realm of social media.

When moving on to a broader perspective, the single-story framework also can help explain how social media's representations of certain country and ethnicity have historically caused internal conflict and influenced the global image. Fittingly, Nothias provides a systematic review, showing that Western media consistently simplify African cultures and histories, shaping global perceptions in ways that ignored complexity and diversity [8]. Massive scholarships also criticized the stereotypical portrayals which reduce Africa to a continent of poverty and suffering, arguing that the single stories reinforce existing inequality by constructing dominant perceptions of marginalized groups. Taken together, these studies highlight the role that media—whether traditional or digital—plays in constructing reality through narratives that can be reductive and strengthen stereotype. The "single story" emerges as a useful concept to capture this dynamic, particularly when applied to concerns related to gender and ethnicity. However, there still remains several gaps. Firstly, most literature examines one dominant story, with little analysis explaining how single stories overlap and construct a more complex situation, which could be described as "layered" or "multiple single narratives". Secondly, there is limited comparative analysis on the impacts of media's single narrative approach from different perspectives and aspects. This research seeks to intervene in these gaps, for instance by investigating how the media of all types, traditional and digital, construct, perpetuate or contest single stories, examining how these added layers of overlapping narratives cumulatively work to create complex situations, and seeking how the effects of these kind of single story similar among or different among distinct perspectives.

3. Case studies

3.1. The layered single narratives of femininity and body image on social media

In the modern world, online platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and Twitter have become the main media where ideals of femininity are constantly produced, consumed, and circulated. According to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which states that gender is not something people are given at birth or a stable identity that people hold, but is performed in new ways continuously as people enact culturally sanctioned behaviors [6]. The ideals of femininity are thus produced and continually reinforced through social practices and representations. In the case of social media, each post, picture, or video can act as a performance of gender—a sign of what is attractive, desirable, and acceptable in terms of gender performance. These digital platforms embody sociocultural ideals while actively create and amplify certain images of an attractive, desirable female body, appearance, and lifestyle. Consistent exposure to these images can shape both the public's perception and individuals' self-perceptions, inciting repeated comparison, mimicry, and active pursuits of the ideals. As demonstrated in Giulia Fioravanti's study, which powerfully proved that the idealized images of beauty that flood in social media are a significant risk factor for body image issues among users, especially young people. Their effects are mainly achieved through two psychological mechanisms: social comparison and internalization, and are influenced by personal traits and the type of content [9]. These frameworks suggest social media does not simply produce a reflection of beauty ideals; rather, it creates standards and limitations, with individual users becoming agents who consume and produce up-to-date measures for expectations of beauty while involved in the co-generating of a system of rules.

In this setting, the notion of a dominant aesthetic ideal gradually becomes layered, as successive trends and influencer-driven aesthetics introduce multiple, overlapping "single stories" of the ideal

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female body and lifestyle. Specifically, Rosalind Gill argues that postfeminist media culture introduces these narratives as emancipated and diverse; that women have choices about their "femininity" [7]. These choices, however, usually serve as additional prescriptions rather than liberation from aesthetic constructions: each new emergence of ideal adds an entirely new addendum to body rules for women. For instance, the concept of "Power Femininity" is a cultural image that combines "feminine qualities" (beauty, softness, care) with "strength" (confidence, independence, success) [10]. However, although it promotes female independence, freedom and confidence on the surface, the nature of it is to maintain traditional gender roles through consumption and appearance management. Various ideal images gradually shape and solidify women's aesthetic perceptions and thinking. These ideal images are often not chosen by women themselves, but rather conform to the desire or purpose of a "third party". Thus, instead of subverting a singular beauty ideal, these choices expand the existing regime of rules that determine the acceptable and desirable female body. This phenomenon—seemingly plural yet ideologically uniform—can be understood as a layered form of single story, or " layered single narrative", as social media appears to democratize beauty standards by offering an illusion of diverse possibility about femininity but actually remains remarkably uniform narratives about the body, appearance, and desirability.

3.2. The enduring and evolving single narratives of Africa in Western media

Extending beyond gendered ideals, the single narratives constructed by media can further lead to the reductive representation of a whole continent and ethnicity—with Africa as a prominent example. Both traditional media such as newspapers, television documentaries, and social medias have long mediated the global perception toward Africa, which often tends to emphasize aspects such as famine, conflicts, and family separation while ignoring the complexity within this continent. The behavior of emphasizing poverty and helplessness in a voyeuristic, aestheticized, and simplified image to provoke pity or curiosity from a viewer outside of Africa is commonly termed as "poverty porn". This kind of media narrative reduces public perceptions of dignity, resilience and agency of African people, turns viewer's focus from systematic factor of povery to individual factor, such as laziness, and ultimately weakens public support for broader welfare policies aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty [11]. While the exaggerated constructions of wilderness, brutality and immorality of literature writing about Africa reinforced racialized stereotypes, they also provide a justification for Western paternalistic rule and humanitarian intervention by denying Africa's own agency. Nevertheless, many scholars have argued that newer narratives are also emerging. Media increasingly feature discussions about entrepreneurial activity of Africa—an "Africa rising" narrative. However, this seemingly new narrative still has noticeable flaws. Although the narrative of "Africa rising" seems positive on the surface, it implies that Africa was a problem before, while improved "governance" has changed this situation [12]. This is not a fundamental paradigm shift, but rather a "renewal" of discourse. Although this "new" narrative is wrapped in an optimistic external package, it still adheres to Western centrism and is deeply embedded in the ideology of Neoliberalism—a political and economic ideology emphasizing market freedom, privatization, reduced government intervention, and global trade integration [13]. It has created an image of Africa that conforms to the interests of Western capital and is easy to understand, but it does not grant Africa and its people the power to express themselves and define their own future [13]. It masks the persistent inequalities and problems: while celebrating the "rise", many deeply-rooted structural issues, such as the wealth gap, political instability and new forms of dependency, have been deliberately or inadvertently overlooked [13]. In other words, notwithstanding newer narratives

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emerged, the “single story” paradigm continues to frame expectations, inform stereotypes, and produce social outcomes and psychological consequences for the people depicted. The emergence of new narratives became a renovation of stereotypes rather than a fundamental change, as both kinds of them simplified the complexity of Africa, serving specific political or economic interests, and reflected the persistent power inequality in the global information production and dissemination system.

4. Findings

By linking both examples back to the framework of representation and performativity, this article illustrates how layered single stories function across multiple scales and creates a comparative way to consider the entanglement of media, identity, and power.

In both gendered and racial or national representations, social media and other media settings use reductive narratives which reduce the complexity of an individual or group. These reductions restrain possibilities for understanding, acting to consolidate existing stereotypes. In both instances, media do not simply reflect social norms, but rather work to create them, constructing a context where identities and representations are performed, judged, and normalized. This is aligned with the meaning-making work in Stuart Hall's notion of representation and van Dijk’s theory about naturalizing the dominant narrative.

However, despite that the media’s narratives in both cases share a broader mechanism of simplification, the effects are different, particularly in what is prioritized in the narrative. In the case of female’s self-perception, the effect is primarily individual. Female users are exposed to layered, or overlapping, beauty narratives on social media that are based on the illusion of choice, while simultaneously constraining a sense of self, identity, and behavior. The layering of these narratives can lead to women investing in self-objectification, concerns about body image, and increased anxiety. Ultimately, individuals are attempting to negotiate these narratives by adopting personal styles or alternative performances of femininity. Still, individual women remain subject to the overall system of aesthetic rules.

In contrast, the reductive narratives that emerge about Africa and other marginalized groups primarily function at a group level. Simplified representations of these groups, particularly poverty narratives, or what is referred to as “poverty porn”, also shape how people view the whole groups and add to systemic inequality, such as through the reinforcement of racialized or national stereotypes. Further, these narratives shape how communities view their identities, often internalizing other assumptions while struggling to navigate the cultural and historical complexities of their normative. Thus, in this case, the narratives act collectively to reinforce socio-political hierarchies as well as reinforcing the limitations of self-representation.

However, media narratives do not operate in a single direction. Social media, in particular, operates simultaneously as a site of constraint and resistance. For the gender case, female users actively challenge prescriptive notions of beauty by playing with aesthetics, producing new forms of expression, and counter-narrative content production. For example, the rise of the #bodypositive movement on social media, which promote acceptance of all body types and self-care, appreciate functionality over appearance, and challenge unrealistic beauty ideal, serves as a counterforce to mainstream aesthetic ideal [14]. These kinds of activities indicate how social media could function to allow for self-determination and identity exploration through confinement. Thus, social media can be an environment where there is both harmful content that increases the risks of physical dissatisfaction and eating disorders, as well as positive forces that promote body acceptance and diversity [15]. Similar to this case, marginalized people, for instance, African communities and

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diasporic people, position themselves through social media, literature, and art to reclaim and reconceptualize cultural and historical complexity. The Black Lives Matter movement serves as a prime example of how once marginalized groups construct and authorize content in digital spaces to challenge reductive narratives.

It is still important to notice that resistances, too, risk re-involve in the circle of “single story”. For example, though Hall praises the political necessity of early Black identity movements, he also cautions about their shortcomings: that resistance narratives, which empowered Black subjects, could become “positive single stories” that fix identity within a singular, inclusive category and create oppression by negating diverse subjectivities and social experiences which constitute the category [16]. It is important for individuals to understand that “Black” is not a singular identity or fixed, essential, or transcendental racial category [16]. It is a politically and culturally constructed category which contains tremendous internal differences (class, gender, sexuality, specific ethnic heritage, etc.) [16]. In the same way, a film, artwork, etc. cannot be deemed “right-on” or useful just because it was produced by Black people or focuses on the Black experience [16]. Judgments of political and aesthetic worth are more difficult and contested [16]. Stuart Hall’s idea of new ethnicities advocates for a politics of difference, advocating multiplicity rather than essential unity [16].

5. Conclusion

This study, through theoretical analysis and case comparison, delves deeply into the hierarchical influence of "single narrative" on social media. The research confirms that social media serves as a channel for the dissemination of single narratives as well as an important domain for their generation, accumulation, and complexity. Whether it is the aesthetic narrative targeting female bodies or the global narrative about Africa, the core mechanism lies in simplifying and repeating to reduce complex realities into easily disseminated but distorted stereotypes, and making them accepted as "truths".

Through the comparative analysis of the two cases, this study reveals the differences in the impact of a single narrative. In the case of female self-perception, the influence of the narrative mainly manifests at the individual psychological level. The layered beauty ideals on social media, disguised as “choice” and “empowerment”, actually construct a constantly tightening aesthetic rule system, causing women to fall into self-objectification, body image concern, and continuous social comparison. In contrast, the single narrative about Africa mainly functions at the collective and social-political levels. Simplifying Africa into “poverty”, “barbarism”, or a one-sided “rise” narrative reinforces stereotypical and nationalized impressions, not only affecting the views of the outside world, but also possibly distorting the self-perception within the African community, thereby exacerbating global structural inequalities.

Furthermore, this study also points out that social media can serve as a space for resistance. Both females and African communities are using these platforms to create counter-narratives, challenging dominant stereotypes and exploring more complex expressions of identity. However, the act of resistance also needs to be cautious of creating new “positive single narratives” that break the old shackles while unintentionally suppress the diversity and differences within the group.

This research presents “layered single narrative” as an important theoretical perspective for study in media research. It moves scholarship past merely identifying isolated stereotypes, to understanding narratives, which possess an emergent impact across multiple media, as dynamic and collective. This perspective is important to assess how hegemony adapts and sustains itself in a fractured media environment.

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The study also suggests that our social action toward media literacy and resistance must adapt. The critical issue is not just to identify a single harmful narrative, but to deconstruct an entire stratigraphy of narratives. Consequently, social action must no longer only seek to create counter-narratives but to actively develop a public consciousness that questions any single, unified narrative, even ones that are empowering, and that begins to see the value of ambiguous, situated versions of themselves.

Future studies might consider employing this media layering framework to investigate other marginalized groups. A particularly intriguing method would be a discourse tracing study that follows a particular story, such as African tech innovation, as it flows from a mainstream news article to a Twitter thread to a TikTok video, and tracks how the story is altered, established, or challenged at each stage of the media landscape.

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