Shame in a Digital Age
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Shame has been widely recognized as a failure to live up to an idealized self in front of an audience. With a growing mediated community and overconsumption of media, being in front of an audience is something many people cannot control anymore. As digital media technologies function as surveillance, there is a level of disciplinary power embedded into social standards online. This power has the ability to completely alienate members of society, breaking one's spirit and spoiling their identity entirely. Having media so easily accessible, shame has become the most used punishment against those breaking social codes set by the large online community. But, shame plays a complex and multifaceted role in contemporary society, containing more attributes than just the negative connotation of the word. Humiliation can work in ways of helping or harming a society, usually intersecting these two. I will discuss the consequences of mediated shame in the entertainment industry through examples of reality television, commodification, stories of those in the spectacle, as well as deterrence and social control, including other elements that are prominent through shame.

Mediated shame is not a relatively new phenomenon, but it has different implications varying from genre to context. Investigating journalism and news reporting have reinforced journalistic ideology by investigating and exposing "shameful" or wrong acts of organizations or individuals (Hirdman, 2015). Meanwhile, media platforms online such as reality television use shame to set a narrative and use it for inner revelation as well as otheringness, helping people feel mentally or physically superior to those they are viewing. Turning towards shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, we can see an exploitation of the lives of those who are overweight. Contestants on this show are pushed to limits they've never reached in order to lose weight, all while being filmed for television. Every weigh in they give, food they eat, and workout that they do is broadcasted to an audience to watch (or mock) their transformation. While being documented for this, they are also able to earn advantages by eating junk food (which is used entirely for shame, as this goes against the whole point of the show) (Gilbert, 2020). These vulnerable individuals were also coaxed into confessing their secrets to the camera, as this show alludes to obesity being a form of

mental weakness (Gilbert, 2020). These contestants' private lives with food consumption is exposed, as each person has a fridge with all their favorite snacks in an attempt to get them to "crack", thus further humiliating them. *The Biggest Loser* presents itself as helping people integrate themselve back into societal norms of health, but in reality present a goal to them that they will be shamed for not reaching, and while trying to reach it. This show pushes humiliation to fully break ones spirit before they can be fixed. Shame, being a societal trait, requires community and visibility, and reality shows such as *The Biggest Loser* puts one in the center of community and visibility.

Shame in the media is extremely prevalent when looking at those in the public eye. One of the biggest setbacks of mediated shame is that it has become a commodity. Humiliation as entertainment is the main source of profit for tabloid celebrity gossip websites such as TMZ. Greater constraints on social behavior are reinforced as these sites' whole platform is broadcasting celebrities in demeaning situations, oftentimes including those in trouble with the law (Kohm, 2009). Physical characteristics displayed by shame are extremely suited for tele-visuality, which is telling of the overconsumption of this media. Shame is evident in facial and bodily display, showing a strong desire for concealment, and also displaying emotional authencitity through easily read corporeal signs (Hirdman, 2015). Seeing how social ingrained this feeling can be upon breaking social norms is almost felt by the viewer, bringing upon discourse of the norm broken. Empathy from an audience can transpire from one's shame, but usually audience members experience emotional distance towards members on these shows. People are not likely to experience empathy when a behavior is portrayed as outside the social norm, as non-empathic emotions are formed from a disposition of disliking (Hirdman, 2015). But, a sense of in-betweenness is felt by a viewer to a broadcasting of human emotions, driving one towards thought and movement away or towards others. This sense of thought pertaining towards an event can keep a viewer consumed, generating more profit towards companies who commodify shame.

All of this was seen in the case of Monica Lewinsky, whose shame was greatly commodified by numerous media platforms. Lewinsky's most private moments were broadcasted to the world, as she was stigmatized for her affair with Bill Clinton. Lewinsky's story was pulled into a culture that encourages and rewards those who humiliate others, causing for not only gossip blogs and news reporting, but numerous songs and comedy sets as well (Lewinsky, 2014). Lewinsky's shame was used as a punishment, and as we discussed in class, she was faced with mob justice that created a spoiled identity. One of the biggest consequences of being shamed online is creating a spoiled identity. She was punished for who she was rather than the act she did, creating an unreliable future for herself. This form of punishment from the public was considered to express its most basic values, to not sleep with a married man (Nussbaum, 2009). Risky was the word one company used to describe her when she entered a job interview, while another denied her due to not wanting her at public events (Lewinsky, 2014). Lewinsky, being so alienated from society, became suicidal, being watched by her mother relentlessly. Lewinsky was able to overcome this, but the downward spiral effects of mediated shame can cause those to harm themselves, as they feel their worth is ruined. This can be seen in the case of Tyler Clementi, a freshman at Rutgers who committed suicide after being exposed online for kissing another man (Lewinsky, 2014). He was completely humiliated and degraded on social media, ultimately causing him to take his own life. Using shame as a punishment can severely impact the mental health and identity of an individual.

Although shame can severely spoil an identity, it can also be a form of deterrence from breaking social norms. Without any shame, society would not be able to hold accountancy of individuals' actions on a wider scale. This includes crimes in which the gaze of others would have more of an effect than paying fines or serving a little jail time, such as public intoxication or exposure (Nussbaum, 2009). Having an identity tied to an action causes someone to prevent doing something, as they could have an unknown audience watching. Public humiliation in this sense can be displayed in the case of Kerry Ann Strasser, an Australian football fan who was publicly shamed online after a video was released following a football match in Brisbane. A spectator of the game seated behind her recorded a video of her urinating on her stadium seat near the end of

the game and uploaded it to *YouTube* where it went viral (Hess et Waller, 2013). Numerous other medians joined in on broadcasting this story, and she was publicly named while the case developed. With the easability of digital tools and publishing platforms, anyone can be broadcasted breaking laws. Secrecy in public is over, thus pushing those to deter from these acts to avoid public humiliation.

Looking further into this idea of deterrence, we can look towards the show *To Catch A Predator,* which exposes adults with the intention of sexual deviance toward minors. This show used shame as a punishment for this crime, showcasing the predator's name and city in which they were in (Kohm, 2009). This show did not stop all predators, but it was a huge scare factor to those who thought of committing these acts. Many people featured on this show stated they were scared they would be on a television show prior to showing up to minor's homes. The thought of this humiliation, and being tied to this act publicly can be seen worse than serving time in prison. A big reasoning behind this is the idea of an unknown audience. Walking down the street, people can tie this deviant crime to face rather than having to look up a police record. Shame and humiliation in these cases are inherently linked between emotions and the enactment of criminal law (Kohm, 2009). The penalty to this crime, going to jail, does not seem rational enough, causing a re-emotionalization of law to tie the feelings of the public towards their punishment (Kohm, 2009). This level of displinary power is used as displaying the morals of a society.

While these all create a form of deterrence away from these actions, these can have a further impact on child development as well as those close to this person. While shame is a form of social control, shaming actions rob people of a "primary good", creating a substandard identity for those close to them as well (Nussbaum, 2009). With children involved, there is a display of moral failures of the parent attached to the child, as well as an effect to a facilitating environment. The demands a child is influenced by as they mature, such as the desire to be surrounded by "normals", is influenced by their surrounding society (Nussbaum, 2009). When their society is already othering them as they mature, their emotional health can be severely impacted. While an individual is on public viewing rather than being offered treatment for an

underlying problem, those within their private speare are once again affected (Nussbaum, 2009). By punishing acts through visible media shame, more families are exposed to alienation rather than help.

The consequences of mediated shame in the entertainment industry can be exemplified through reality television, commodification, stories of those in the spectacle, as well as deterrence and social control, including other elements that are prominent through shame. The level of disciplinary power expressed in mediated shame proves that one's whole identity can be morphed from an action that they commit, or how they are perceived online. Mob justice contributes to this power, upholding and reinforcing social norms and further othering an individual from society. Anything done in public now has an invisible audience, and the outcomes of these documentations can be seen in the case of Monica Lewinsky as well as Kerry Ann Strasser. Despite mediated shame contributing to all of these negatives, deterrence is crafted by the physical viewing of this shame and can cause a higher level of accountability to be given to an individual. With individuals seeing shame towards someone publicly urinating and all of the repercussions of it, they may refrain from doing it themselves. Knowing that there can be an opportunity for public humiliation to happen to anyone, people may follow more of a social code. Seeing the vast shared opinions of child predators broadcasted online may push for one to receive help on their issues to prevent it from happening to them. On the other side of this issue, this could also affect a child's development who is attached to an individual as well as push for mockery rather than help. When it comes to mediated shame, there are a mix of positive and negative consequences resulting from this phenomenon. Some form of shame is required for social control, but maybe not as commodified to help prevent a spoiled identity.

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